Alex (age 46)

April 17, 2021

Today is the day. The Last Visit. For twenty years, you've wondered: Will Casey really come? What version of themself will they be? What will you say to each other? Will it change anything?

Not many people get to know in advance when their last conversation with their partner will be. Most are left thinking, *If only I'd known, there are so many things I wish we had said, now it's too late*.

When Casey died, it was unexpected. A driver running a red light, Casey in the intersection holding a bag of takeout. Coming home to you; never coming home. The last thing you said to them? "Get extra dumplings, we can have the leftovers for breakfast."

But for you there was a date on the calendar. The Last Visit. The last round of data collection in an experiment that's been running for nineteen years—or forty, depending on your frame of reference.

Frames of reference are tricky when it comes to time travel.

July 23, 1981

For you, the story has a clear order of events. So, the beginning: The First Visit.

You were six years old, playing by yourself in the playground down the block from your apartment in Boston. Suddenly, an adult you'd never met appeared out of nowhere. You figured it was magic, like in stories.

Instead of singing a song or offering you three wishes, the person said, "I, um…..do you know who I am?"

"Rumplestiltskin?" you guessed.

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

"No."

"Oh. Okay, well. . .then I bet you didn't know that I can do. . .*this!*" they said, and walked right through the post of the swingset like it wasn't there.

You spent a wonderful while playing with your magical new friend, watching them put different parts of their body through different solid objects, giggling until your stomach ached. Until they disappeared as suddenly as they'd appeared.

A couple of months later, your visitor returned. They asked you again, "Do you know who I am?" and you said, "You're my magical friend. But you never told me your name."

"I'm Casey."

"I'm Alex."

"Yes, I know."

For the next few years, Casey would visit you at random times. They told you not to tell anyone else about them, because their visits were a secret just for you. The first thing they'd say was always, "Do you know who I am?" So you started greeting them with "Hello, Casey, I know who you are, you're my secret magical friend that nobody knows about!" Sometimes that surprised them. Sometimes they laughed.

August 3-6, 1984

When you were nine, your mother disappeared for four days. Even now, you don't know what made that crisis the worst one, or where she went. You do know it had to do with her struggle with drug addiction. At the time, all you knew was that your mother was gone and you were all alone.

The two of you had driven from Boston to your Aunt Dee's cabin in the woods in Western Massachusetts. Your father had died when you were a baby, and his sister wasn't close with you and your mom, but she let you use her cabin for a week every summer. It was a one-room cabin with a toilet you flushed by pouring a bucket of pond water into the bowl. Your mother used matches to light the propane gas lights. There were woods to play in and a pond to swim in. You used to love that place.

You were proud that Mom decided you were responsible enough to stay alone in the cabin while she drove to town. But when she wasn't back by dinner time, you got scared. If you'd been at home in the city, you could have called 911, but the cabin didn't have a phone and there weren't any neighbors close enough to walk to. You certainly couldn't walk all the way to town.

You were curled in a miserable ball on the couch when Casey's voice said, "Hey, what's wrong?"

You'd never been so happy to see anyone in your life.

Casey couldn't physically help you, of course. (You were old enough now to ask them *why* they couldn't touch anything. *Think of me like a hologram, like on Quantum Leap, wait, um, or Star Trek?* didn't really make it clearer to you.) But they did talk you through making a real dinner (tuna noodle casserole) and kept you entertained with gin rummy and cookie baking. Most importantly, they kept you company and reassured you that nothing bad was going to happen because they were there to take care of you until your mom got back.

"What if mom never comes back?" you asked.

"She will."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise," said Casey.

"Will you stay until she gets back?"

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

On the fourth afternoon, Casey suddenly said, very seriously, "I have to go now. You're going to be okay, and your mom will be okay, and you'll both make it home."

You started to cry. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go, either. I wish I could stay, but I can't." Casey looked like *they* were going to cry. "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?"

You nodded.

A few moments later, Casey disappeared.

Not long after that, Aunt Dee arrived. She told you that your mother had "gotten sick" and that was why she hadn't been able to come back like she was supposed to, and that she was in the hospital now, and that you'd be staying with Aunt Dee for a while until Mom was ready to come home.

Aunt Dee took good care of you, but you could tell that you were in the way. Casey was the only one who loved you for yourself and not just because you were their responsibility. Casey had been there for you when you needed it, had taken care of you and taught you to take care of yourself. Casey was the only person in the world you could trust.

September 12, 1988

After that, you didn't see Casey again for two years.

The cabin episode must have been a wake-up call for your mother, or maybe Aunt Dee laid down some kind of ultimatum. All you know is that your mother got medical help and got enough better that nothing that scary ever happened again. (You don't remember how or when you realized that "sick" meant "substance addiction." Honestly, it didn't matter much. Your mother was the way she was; the cause wasn't that important.) As you got older, you learned how to cope with her bad days, how to take care of her when she needed it, and how to take care of yourself. You learned not to hope for too much, and to be prepared for bad things to happen without warning.

And life went on normally. You were a good student who liked learning and spent a lot of your spare time reading or messing around with computers. You had a group of close friends who hung out together after school and on weekends. (Never at your house, though. You never knew when your mother might be having a bad day, and you didn't want anyone to know that she had bad days). You finished sixth grade. No magical fairy visits.

You didn't *forget* Casey, but you did start to wonder if maybe you'd made up a story about an imaginary friend when you were little, and maybe you'd wanted it to be true so much that you forgot it was just a story? Because there wasn't really any such thing as people you can see but not touch who appear and disappear out of nowhere, or adults who will be there for you whenever you need them.

Then one day, you looked up from your homework to see Casey's *What fun thing should we do today?* smile. It was a good thing you had your bedroom door closed and the music turned up loud, because it meant your mom probably didn't hear your happy shriek. Casey wasn't a dream or a kid's fantasy, they were *real*, and yours, and *here*.

Casey was surprised at your reaction, especially when you immediately burst into tears.

"Hey, I'm glad to see you, too, what's wrong?"

"I thought you were never coming back," you sobbed.

"I didn't know it had been so long for you," Casey said, holding out their hands to you. When you tried to hug them, they were intangible like always, which just made you cry harder. "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?*"

“You know I am,” Casey said, and then, “Shit, you really don’t know. . .yet.”

At that point, Casey kind of panicked. You had a million questions, but they would only tell you:

- they were a time traveler from the future,
- the two of you were going to invent time travel together,
- you would meet in real time at college at MIT,
- they would visit you some more times before that, and
- you really, really shouldn’t tell anyone else about this, because people probably wouldn’t believe you, and if they did, who knew how that might change the timeline?

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

“Yes,” said Casey. “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,” you said. “I’ve seen *Back to the Future.*”

September 1988 - September 1989

You had a goal now: prepare yourself to be able to invent time travel, and do all the things that had to happen for you to eventually meet Casey in real time. You devoted yourself to learning all the science you could, studying hard so you could learn the material and get the outstanding grades you’d need to get accepted to MIT. You read sci-fi novels and watched movies and TV about time travel.

Time-travel stories were all about consequences and causality. Some stories posited that a time-traveler could change the timeline, creating a new version of history. Others posited a single, immutable timeline, in which all the effects of time-travelers’ meddling had always been part of history. As for real science, it mostly seemed to say time travel is only possible in impractical ways, like traveling on a spaceship around a black hole.

Casey refused to tell you details about how time travel worked, or about the future. They obviously believed in the mutable timeline, and they were the expert, but you weren’t totally convinced. They were here, now, deciding what to tell you based on their knowledge of the future. So it was like that future was already part of the past; how could anything change it? It reassured you to think that if the future was predestined, then things could only ever get so bad, because you were guaranteed to make it to the cool future Casey was from.

Meanwhile, there were Casey's occasional, unpredictable visits to treasure. You loved talking about science and books and movies with them (they recommended many of what would become your favorites, though they didn't always remember which ones you'd already discussed). You got used to Casey's incorporality (although there were a few hilarious/alarming occasions, like the time Casey followed you onto a subway and spent the whole time frantically making sure they didn't accidentally touch any of the other passengers).

Your focus on academics got you firmly slotted into the junior high and high school social ecosystems as a nerd, which was fine by you. Your fellow-nerd friends admired your smarts and didn't think it was weird for a 12-year-old to have their sights set on going to MIT and majoring in Physics. You were the 'mature one' of your friend group: more thoughtful and less prone to emotional drama. You were often the one who listened to people's troubles. Because you didn't spill your guts about your own troubles, your friends assumed that you didn't have any. By this point, you were so used to keeping secrets—about your mother, about Casey and time travel—you couldn't imagine living any other way.

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May 12, 1990

Freshman year of high school, you made your first "best friend." You and Laura clicked immediately. You wanted to spend all your time with her, and lend her your books so you could discuss them together, and try out for the Spring play together because she loved theatre. You wanted to tell her your secrets (but you couldn't, because they were really your mother's and Casey's secrets). You were afraid that you'd drive Laura off by wanting too much from her, but she kept inviting you to do things together. Hard as it was to trust, she wanted *you*.

One Saturday afternoon at the movies, she put her hand on yours and then laced your fingers together. Objectively, it was not as intimate as the casual ways you touched each other all the time—hugging, tickling, squishing close on couches. But even a pair of nerds like you understood the symbolism of *holding hands in a movie*. She was asking, *Do you want to go out with me? Do you like me the way I like you?*

You were elated, and you were terrified. What if you had sex and you were so bad at it that she was disgusted with you? How could you date her if you had to keep important secrets from her? But maybe if you loved each other so much that you ended up staying together forever, Laura could be the one person in the world you could trust with *everything,* even the knowledge of time travel. . . But what if you dated and it didn't work out and you lost your best friend?

When the movie ended, you gently unlaced your fingers from hers. The two of you walked out of the theatre and all the way to the subway station in awkward silence.

When Casey appeared in your bedroom on Sunday night, you burst into tears, you were so relieved to see them. Casey was the perfect person to ask for advice! They were an adult, so

they should know about relationship stuff. And it was easy to talk to them, even about things you'd never have told anyone else. They always gave you their full attention when you were talking, like what you had to say really *mattered* to them.

Casey listened attentively, but when you asked them for advice, they said, "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,*" you 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 know I can't reveal the future to you like that, it's bad time-travel hygiene."

Of course you knew that, but it was so unfair! You never peeked in the back of the book for an answer you could figure out yourself, but you were *stuck* on this one, and it was *important,* and Casey had all the answers! Would it be so bad to just tell you for once?

"I promised I wouldn't," Casey said, and you had to respect that. You wouldn't want to make them break a promise.

"Look, here's what I can tell you, okay? Have you read Aristophanes' theory of dual-souls?" Casey explained that they believed that there are people that were just *right* together, and that when you found someone like that, you should keep them with you. And so, if you'd done something that might hurt the relationship—like not talking to Laura after the movie— you should do whatever you needed to do to fix it.

"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 soulmates."

You asked a bunch of questions about this taxonomy of love and attraction. It gave you a useful language you could use to talk things through with Laura. Talking to her seemed much less scary, now that Casey had focused you on the important things: the relationship you and Laura already shared was precious and rare and worth the risk of getting hurt. And because you cared about each other, you could be honest about what you each needed and figure out together how to grow your relationship to make you both happy.

You didn't know how to tell Casey how grateful you were for the advice, and for being there when you needed them.

"Wish I could hug you", you told them as they disappeared, and you heard them answer, "Me too."

After school on Monday, you apologized to Laura for leaving without saying anything. She apologized too, but you said, “No, no, I liked it, I like *you,* I just didn’t know what to do, but now I do.”

You used Casey’s attraction taxonomy to ask her how she felt and to tell her the same. You both agreed that you wanted to continue being friends, and also have a publicly-acknowledged romantic relationship, and that you were definitely interested in kissing and touching, and wanted to explore sex slowly. It was the first time you’d been so emotionally open with anyone (except Casey, but that was mostly one-sided).

You and Laura were inseparable through the rest of the spring and summer. Your experiments with physical intimacy went just a bit beyond kissing and cuddling, while you happily anticipated all the things you still had left to try together.

Then right before the school year started, her family moved to Australia. Saying goodbye was awful. You both knew you couldn’t keep up a long-distance relationship for three years of high school. (Maybe if you’d had cell phones and email and social media, you could have tried. With only paper letters sent by airmail? It wasn’t going to happen.)

You were heartbroken. Still, you eventually concluded that Casey had been right not to tell you what would happen, and not just because of timeline hygiene. If you’d known, you probably wouldn’t have dated Laura, and you wouldn’t be feeling so miserable right now, but you would never have had those precious months of intimacy. Also, not knowing the future meant you got to make your own decision instead of just doing what Casey told you to do. Maybe the future was predestined, but you *felt* like you were in control of your own actions.

At least that was something.

January 25, 1991

Sophomore year was lonely. Your other friends did their best to look out for you, but your brief intimacy with Laura had made it painfully obvious how much distance there was between you and everyone else. It had also driven home the risk of getting too attached to someone: you could lose them at any time.

The one person you could count on was Casey. They understood you (even if they didn’t always remember things you’d told them on a previous visit), and you didn’t have to keep secrets from them. Most importantly, you were guaranteed to meet them in college and then to be friends for *years.* You didn’t know exactly how old Casey was, but they sometimes slipped and said things that made it clear that they still knew you in their present.

Their visits were the best thing in your life. Even if they arrived not in the best mood, being with you seemed to cheer them right up, just like being with them always cheered you up. You just

wished they'd start treating you more like the adult partner you were supposed to become. You weren't a little kid anymore!

Then there was the visit where Casey told you about the future. They seemed agitated when they arrived, doing a bad job of acting cheerful. You were working up to asking them what was wrong when they said, "We're going to go to a concert together, you know."

Obviously, you didn't know. Casey was talking about *specific* future stuff, like they almost never did! You peppered them with excited questions. They told you that it would be a concert by Black Cat Groove, who you'd never heard of, that the band was from California but they'd do an East Coast tour, and the two of you would see them together at a club.

Casey disappeared before you could ask why they'd told you this. What about time travel hygiene? The only explanation that made sense was that they needed you to do something to make sure that this future event happened the way it was supposed to. Or, maybe they were testing you to see if you were ready to start actively helping them maintain the timeline! Either way, you were determined not to fail them.

July 20, 1991

Black Cat Groove wasn't a big name like Prince or Whitney Houston. But your local record store carried their albums, and you learned that their East Coast tour was scheduled to start later that year. There was only one concert planned in Boston. That had to be the one!

You had a mission! You'd meet Casey there and show them how resourceful and dependable you were, and they'd finally start treating you like a partner. You saved up money for the ticket and to cover a cab ride home. The concert was 18+, so you figured out how to get yourself a fake ID and dressed to look the part.

The club was dark and crowded, but it didn't take you long to figure out that Casey wasn't there. Well, of course! They would appear out of thin air at some point and find you. Their further-future self had remembered the two of you seeing the concert together, so it had to happen. . .right?

But Casey never came. You watched the whole concert, which was totally cool. The crowd started drifting out, while some people stuck around drinking and talking. It was past midnight. You were alone in a club in a kind of scary neighborhood. And Casey wasn't there.

"Hey, uh. . .you okay?"

You turned to tell the stranger you were fine, except you were crying, and you weren't fine, and you ended up sobbing out the whole story to this guy in a studded leather jacket. Well, not the

part where you were scared you'd accidentally done something to change the timeline and maybe you'd never see Casey again. You just said your friend told you to meet them here but never showed up, and the guy seemed to get how '*friend'* was shorthand for something much more complicated. He seemed to get *you*. He offered you a bandana to wipe your face, and *put his arm around your shoulders*. Nobody had physically comforted you like that since Laura.

He offered you a ride home. The responsible thing to do would have been to say '*no thanks'* and get a cab. But your mother and Casey didn't care enough to look out for you, and this stranger did, and you wanted so badly not to be alone.

He drove you home safely and asked if you were going to be okay. You said yes and thanked him for the ride, and then you blurted out, "I want to kiss you, would that be okay?"

He said, "You bet," and held out his arms for you.

You and Dan dated for three months and it was a lot of fun. You weren't always on the same wavelength, but he seemed genuinely interested in what you had to say, even if he was mystified by the more technical points of science. He obviously had a lot more sexual experience than you did, but he never pressured you, which gave you the confidence to explore beyond the boundaries of what you'd done with Laura.

(All of which was a great way to distract yourself from your misery over Casey. They'd abandoned you! Of course they had, why should they be any different from anyone else? They'd trusted you with a mission and you'd screwed up the timeline! But how were you supposed to protect the timeline if they never told you anything? Why didn't they trust you? *Why hadn't they come for you?*)

Dan thought you were over eighteen, and you didn't tell him the truth because you didn't want him to see you as a kid. Besides, he *did* like and respect you, so therefore you *were* mature enough to date him, QED. At the same time, Dan himself was a secret you kept from your mother and your friends, because you didn't want them to tell you he was dangerous and bad for you. You were pretty confident that despite appearances, Dan was trustworthy. . .And then there was the part of you that wanted to play with fire and dare it to burn you, to say, *Screw you all, you don't care about me, and you don't get to tell me how to live my life,* to your mother, your friends, and most of all, Casey.

Honestly, you don't know how long you and Dan would have lasted if Casey hadn't blown the whole thing up.

October 12, 1991

You were making out with Dan on a park bench one night when you suddenly heard Casey demand, “What are you doing?”

“Um. What does it look like I’m doing?” you blurted, which was at least better than any of the questions you wanted to ask, like *Where have you been?* or *Did I break the future?* or even *Why are you talking to me in front of someone who’s not supposed to know you exist?*

“Are you OK?” Casey asked, and Dan asked you, “Who’s this?”

You had no idea what you were supposed to say, but Casey said, “I’m Casey. A friend,” holding out their hand like Dan was supposed to shake it—and then yanking it back when Dan reached out.

“Yeah, well, so am I.” Dan sounded pissed off, and rightfully so. He put his arm around you and he and Casey glared at each other like they were ready to start a fistfight. Suddenly you got it. Casey wasn’t worried about how you were doing after they’d abandoned you at the concert. They were pissed off because you were making out with a guy who was old enough to drink legally.

You snuggled into Dan’s embrace and shot Casey a look that said, *You want to make something of it?*

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Casey asked you. “Maybe you should wait till you're older. Or with someone who has more long term potential. Or at least in someplace more private?”

You couldn’t believe that disapproving-parent tone was coming out of Casey’s mouth. Casey, who had encouraged you to know and communicate your own desires with Laura. The one person you’d trusted to be on your side no matter what.

“Why should I listen to you? You don’t know anything about him. You don’t know anything about me, either. How could you when you’re never here when I need you?” you exploded, but Casey was talking over you, saying something ridiculous and patronizing, and Dan was asking what business was it of Casey’s anyway?

In the middle of all the shouting, Casey just walked off. You didn’t know if they needed to disappear or if they wanted you to get rid of Dan and follow them, but you were too angry to care.

“Who was that?” Dan asked.

Maybe if you’d thought faster, you could have said something like *My overprotective older sibling* and salvaged the situation. As it was, you said, “I can’t tell you,” and Dan wouldn’t let it go, and somewhere in there he asked if Casey was the ‘friend’ you’d been waiting for at the concert. Panicking, you denied it, but Dan could tell you were lying and that just made

everything worse. He yelled at you for lying to him, and you yelled at him for not trusting you. Finally, he broke up with you.

It hurt, but you couldn't really blame Dan. You hadn't been honest with him, and you couldn't promise to change. You couldn't give him the kind of intimacy he was looking for, so he was right to end the relationship.

You *did* blame Casey. You had no idea whether they'd broken up you and Dan on purpose, and if so, whether it was because you weren't supposed to date Dan in the original timeline or because Casey was a patronizing control freak. And the reason you didn't know was because Casey cared more about *timeline hygiene* than about your feelings or being partners or letting you make your own choices like a normal person.

One thing was clear: no matter who you dated in the future, the secret of Casey and time travel was going to be a barrier between you. That soulmate partnership Casey had made you believe in? That was never going to be possible for you. And it was all Casey's fault.

October 19, 1991

Casey showed up again a week later to gatecrash your Science Olympiad regional competition. You looked up in the middle of presenting your team's research and caught sight of them in the audience. You finished the event shaking with anger. Casey drifted to the side door of the auditorium, getting less and less subtle about trying to catch your attention. Finally, you stormed out the door without acknowledging them until you'd locked yourself in a single-occupancy bathroom.

"Is something wrong?" Casey asked, sounding like they were offering a six-year-old a bandaid for a scraped knee.

That was the last straw. You lost it completely.

"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!"

Casey looked like you'd punched them, but you didn't care. They were an *adult*; they could face the consequences of their actions for once.

"I don't ever want to see you again! Don't ever come back!"

You slammed out of the bathroom. Casey didn't follow you.

They never visited you again.

November 1991 - August 1993

You were done with time travel and you were done with Casey. You weren't going to let either dictate how you lived your life. You wouldn't go to MIT or major in physics or do any of that stuff. And if Casey didn't like it, well, too bad.

As winter of Junior year turned to spring and then summer vacation, you started to believe that maybe Casey had taken you at your word. Maybe they weren't ever coming back.

(Maybe they'd finally abandoned you like everyone you trusted always abandoned you.)

That was just fine, you told yourself. You didn't want to be the freak who couldn't talk about the most important parts of their life with their friends, who couldn't get close enough to anyone for true intimacy.

Meanwhile, you had college to plan for. Since you weren't going to major in physics, you decided to focus on biology and chemistry instead. Maybe instead of inventing time travel, you could discover a cure for cancer or figure out how to stop global warming. You got yourself a summer internship as a lab assistant at Merck, a local biotech company.

Not even halfway through the internship, your boss told you that because of "something that had come up," he had to let you go. He wished you good luck with your studies and offered to write you a college recommendation. You were shocked and upset, but you told yourself that at least he wouldn't have made that offer if you'd actually done something wrong.

A few days later, there was a pretty serious fire at Merck's lab. (The newspapers were calling it the Fourth of July fire, although it had actually started on the third, while most staff were still working.) You called one of the lab techs you'd been friendly with. She told you that the fire had started in the actual lab where you'd used to work, and that several people had been badly injured. "*I guess you were lucky you left when you did, huh?"*

Lucky, you wondered? Or was this some kind of sign? You knew that physics doesn't send warnings to people who defy it. It doesn't make photos gradually disappear because your parents aren't going to get together and conceive you unless you fix the timeline. But. . . You couldn't stop wondering what would have happened to the timeline if you had been in the lab when it caught fire. What if you had died? You wouldn't have been alive to meet Casey and help them invent time travel. Or maybe you *couldn't* have died in that fire no matter what, because you had to be alive to invent time travel with Casey in the future.

You weren't sure which idea scared you more: the mutable timeline, which meant that a bad choice could damage not only your future but your past, or predestination, which meant that none of your choices actually mattered. You couldn't get real evidence, so you looked for signs. *If Casey visits, then I can't have changed the timeline too much yet. I'll apply to five colleges, and if MIT is the only one that accepts me, then I'm predestined to go.*

Casey didn't visit you again, but you knew that absence of proof isn't proof of absence. All five colleges accepted you and offered financial aid packages that made it feasible for you to go. If Fate or Time or whatever had anything to tell you, the message was: *Make your own darn choice, kid, you're on your own.*

You enrolled at MIT. If the future was predestined, it would take care of itself. If the timeline was mutable. . .you'd be keeping your options open.

September, 1993 - May, 1994

At MIT, you ended up in the same dorm as Casey and also in a couple of classes together. The first time you saw them, the rush of relief literally made you dizzy. You hadn't broken the future! Then relief was drowned by resentment. Here you were in the future according to Casey, still letting them control your life even after they'd abandoned you.

Well, you still didn't plan to be their puppet, thank you very much. You were at MIT to build your own future to your own specifications. Casey could just get on with their own life. If destiny wanted you, it could come and get you.

Having Casey around in real life was deeply, deeply weird. They were visible and tangible and always around, but they treated you like a stranger, while you struggled to keep from talking to them like they were your best friend. And they weren't like the Casey you remembered. They were geeky and awkward, unable to shut up once they opened their mouth, and oblivious to social cues. Everyone in the dorm ignored them as much as possible.

You felt sorry for them. That's what did in your resolve to keep your distance. Second semester, the first day of Chemistry, the professor told you all to find lab partners for the semester. You saw Casey standing off to one side, waiting to see who would be stuck with the unpopular kid. So you asked them to be your partner. Casey was surprised, but then their face lit up in this totally unselfconscious smile that made you want to give them a hug.

Casey made a great lab partner. They often had an intuition about possible ways to tackle a problem, while you were meticulous and good at following a plan. You liked a lot of the same books and movies and music; you shared a sense of humor. You genuinely *liked* them. Soon, you were sharing the kind of close friendship you'd had with Laura.

College-aged Casey was curious, enthusiastic about things that captured their interest, and fundamentally optimistic, like the older Casey you remembered. But you were surprised by their social tone-deafness and lack of interest in making friends (other than you). They rarely lied, and said what was on their mind to the point of tactlessness, which was hard to reconcile with time-traveling-Casey's closed-mouthness about the future. Maybe discretion was a skill they'd learn later?

The weirdest thing was that you were the same age, and Casey treated you like a peer. In fact, in a lot of ways, you were the more mature one now. You certainly had better social skills and more clue about the practical realities of life, though Casey still knew more about physics than you did.

They were also the kind of person who gets obsessed with something, focuses on it intently, and sticks with it forever. Prime example: time travel. They told you they'd been interested in it since middle school, when they'd wondered one day, *what if you could travel in time?* and been so fascinated that they set out on a lifelong quest to find out.

You thought hard about whether to tell them that you already knew the answer: *Yes, time travel is possible, and someday you will travel back in time.*

The problem wasn't really time-travel hygiene. Time-traveling Casey had never said anything about whether or not future-you had told them any of this stuff in advance. The problem was control over your life. Determinism no longer felt comforting; it felt like a trap. But if the timeline was mutable, Casey had made that a trap, too, by telling you that their presence in your past was contingent on you choosing to invent time travel with them in the future. And then they'd left you alone with the responsibility to make it happen. To do that, you would have to shackle yourself both to becoming a time-travel physicist, and to Casey themself. Who you hadn't forgiven.

You decided to keep your mouth shut for now. As long as you didn't do anything that would cut off the possibility of the two of you inventing time travel together later, you could keep your options open.

Keeping secrets did limit your growing intimacy with Casey. Besides the big one, you couldn't share much about your past, and you had to be careful not to mention things you knew about Casey that their present self hadn't told you yet.

For example, that time when you put on a Black Cat Groove album and Casey asked what band it was, and you realized they genuinely didn't know. You had a brief fantasy of saying, *You introduced me to Black Cat Groove, when I was sixteen and you were visiting me from the future.* Instead, you explained why the band was so great and promised to make Casey a mixtape.

In that moment that you finally realized—emotionally, not just intellectually—that *Casey, your fellow college student and friend, was not the Casey you knew from your childhood*. They hadn't played with you as a child, and comforted you when you were lonely or scared. They hadn't told you to prepare for the future while refusing to tell you what would happen, made you feel they were the one person you could trust and then stranded you in a nightclub, or told you how wonderful it was to have a partner while making it impossible for you to ever have one. This Casey hadn't done any of those things, so *you didn't need to keep resenting them*.

_____

July 15 and 16, 1995

By the end of the semester, it was obvious that Casey was interested in you romantically and/or sexually, although they hadn't said anything. You were attracted to them, too, but you had no evidence about whether or not the Casey who had visited your past was in *that* kind of partnership with the future you, and you couldn't just forget your history with their future self. So how were you supposed to judge how you actually felt about present-day Casey? It was complicated and confusing and you didn't know how to deal with it, so you were sticking firmly to realm of friendship.

That summer, while you and Casey were both staying on campus, Black Cat Groove gave a concert at a Boston club. You thought about inviting Casey, but you didn't want to send mixed signals by inviting them to something that could sound a lot like a date.

It turned out you shouldn't have worried! You ran into Casey at the concert anyway, so you sat together, and it was really nice. Casey paid more attention to you than to the concert and seemed really happy to be with you. You felt the same way. You kept catching yourself wanting to reach over and touch them. You didn't, of course—avoiding mixed signals—but you wanted to.

You were so engaged with Casey and with the music that you were back in your dorm before you realized: you had just been to a Black Cat Groove concert in Boston with Casey. *Just like Casey had predicted.* Your teenaged self had assumed Casey had meant another time-travel visit, but if they'd been talking about going together in real time to *this* concert, then. . .then they hadn't broken their promise or abandoned you at that first concert. You'd just made a stupid mistake.

Casey really was the honest, loyal friend you thought you knew—and that wasn't going to change. And you genuinely liked and were attracted to Casey here-and-now. You decided it would be another mistake to refuse to pursue a romantic relationship you actually wanted, out of fear that your decision would be tainted by time travel.

You invited Casey to breakfast-in-the-afternoon at a nearby diner. You were so nervous you could barely string together coherent sentences as you tried to open up a conversation about

what you wanted with each other. They seemed confused by your talk about platonic and romantic and sexual attraction, but then they blurted out, “I think we’re soulmates, like, we’re each other’s missing half. Like Aristophanes talked about.”

Soulmates. Just like an older Casey had told your fourteen-year-old-self. Had they been talking about their relationship with the older you after all*?* Was that what the two of you could build together? You wanted to find out, more than you’d wanted anything in what felt like forever.

Casey was looking like at you a like a puppy that was expecting to be kicked. You took their hand.

Just like with Laura, just like with Dan, deciding to date Casey felt *right*. Terrifying, yes. If they abandoned you someday. . .you couldn’t imagine how badly that would hurt. But Casey believed you were their soulmate, and Casey didn’t know when to quit. If you couldn’t trust them to love you and stick by you. . .maybe you couldn’t ever trust anyone.

You chose trust. You chose love. You chose Casey, for better and for worse. And even though your college-kid self could never imagine how bad it would get, you don’t regret the choice you made.

September, 1995 - May 1998

The rest of college flew by as you and Casey both majored in physics and spent most of your free time together. You were more inclined to make friends than they were, so you ended up in charge of your joint social life, bringing Casey to Science Fiction Society meetings and dinners with friends. You liked knowing that you were improving Casey’s life by helping them connect with other people. Casey sometimes said that you were the only person they needed, which made you feel loved and special, but it scared you, too. What if something happened to you? What if the relationship ended? Would they be able to make it without you?

You learned that the key to communicating with Casey about emotional stuff was to be explicit. They weren’t very perceptive about other people’s feelings, but they were a good listener and sincerely wanted to understand you. They often processed their own feelings by talking them through with you, which was the kind of intimacy you most treasured.

Unfortunately, you couldn’t reciprocate Casey’s frankness. Maybe you were fundamentally less open and trusting. Maybe it was all those years of keeping secrets, or maybe it was your decision to lie to Casey about time-travel that made it impossible for you to truly share the intimacy you craved.

As Casey learned enough physics to work on time travel theory for real, you were their sounding board. You loved them for wanting to share their passion project with you, and for assuming that

you were smart enough to be their equal partner in that work. At the same time, you were infuriated by their assumption that you had nothing better to do with your life than devote it to helping them invent time travel.

The thing was, if you'd made friends with Casey for the first time at MIT and they'd said, *I think time travel is possible, want to invent it with me?* — would you have signed on? You couldn't tell. You also couldn't tell whether you were actually free to choose. You sometimes wished you could just talk this all through with Casey, but of course, you couldn't do that without pushing both of you irrevocably down the path of a future where the invention of time travel itself was brought about by a causal loop.

And, to be honest, you were just as terrified by the possibility of telling Casey only to have them dismiss your feelings as trivial in comparison with the implications for time travel theory. Or they might not forgive you for having kept the secret from them for so long.

So you tried to walk the line. You couldn't claim you thought time travel was impossible: that felt like a betrayal of both science and Casey's trust. Besides, the science *was* interesting. So you let Casey draw you into late-night physics bullshitting sessions (eyes shining, hands scribbling equations, words tumbling over each other in the attempt to keep pace with their thoughts. . .Casey absorbed in science was glorious). But you specialized in other physics topics and found professors to mentor you, laying the foundations for an academic career.

When it was time to apply to grad school, despite all your insistence that time travel was Casey's work and *not yours*, they assumed that the two of you would go to grad school together, and invent time travel together, and be life partners forever, the end. They worked hard to convince you on both counts: that they loved you, and that you'd love the marvelous future they were so sure lay ahead. They didn't understand that what you desperately needed was a sign that they truly loved you for yourself, not just as an element in their ideal life. You needed to know they loved you enough to choose you over time travel, if it came down to it.

And then you were the one who figured out the central equation that made the rest of the pieces of Casey's time-travel model fall into place, and the rush of success was doubled by the pure joy of Casey's reaction. They jumped up and down, literally shouting "Eureka!" and then babbled a bunch of other stuff that you didn't hear because you were laughing too hard.

"So, you're applying to school with me now, right? Because I can't invent time travel without you!" they said.

It wasn't exactly what you needed to hear them say, but it was close. And it made you realize how ridiculous it would be to walk away from your future with Casey just to demonstrate that you had free will. You *wanted* that future. You wanted the love and partnership Casey was offering, and damn it, you wanted to invent time travel with them, too.

It all suddenly seemed so simple and so right—just like when the equation fell into place in your mind. Your laughter bubbled up again as you kissed Casey and told them, “Yes.”

(You’ve often wondered what would have happened if you had refused to follow Casey’s dream. Forced to choose between you and time travel, which would they have chosen? Would that choice have changed your past as well as your future?

Or maybe no other choices were possible than the ones you both made. You don’t know; you were too afraid of the answer to risk finding out.)

September 1997 - December 2002

Despite common wisdom about grad school, it was one of the happiest periods of your life. You and Casey matured together as your relationship deepened into the intimate partnership you had longed for since an older Casey had told a younger you their perspective on love. (Only, not *quite*, because of the secret you were keeping from them.) After living together for four years, you got married on April 17, 2001.

A load was taken off your mind when your mother remarried. Shortly before they moved to California, you and your new step-dad had a much more explicit conversation about your mother’s ongoing sobriety journey than you’d ever managed to have with her. He said he’d contact you if she had any health issues, but he wanted you to be able to focus on your own life, knowing your mother was in good hands. You took him at his word. You felt guilty, but it was a relief to stop worrying that any day you might have to drop everything to take care of her.

Now that you weren’t constantly fighting with yourself about whether to help Casey with time travel, actually working on it with them on it was exhilarating. You convinced them not to propose “invent a time travel machine” as a dissertation topic, because if the two of you *did* succeed at building a time travel machine, you would need to be careful about revealing its existence. So Casey chose a theoretical aspect of time travel, while your dissertation topic was about a related aspect of string theory. You put in enough work on those to keep your advisors happy, while devoting every spare minute you could snatch to making time travel a practical reality.

Casey had some good physics-based arguments in favor of the mutable timeline, but they were also emotionally invested in the idea because a deterministic universe would be *boring,* while mutability meant *endless possibility*. Back in undergrad, you had usually argued in favor of determinism, partly to keep them from falling into the trap of confirmation bias, and partly in hopes that between you, you’d come up with an argument that would finally convince you, yourself, one way or the other. Ironically, this meant that Casey ended up thinking you believed

in determinism as strongly as they believed in mutability, when you still didn't know what you really believed.

Meanwhile, you secretly realized that the whole project was an experiment within an experiment: a clear, concrete test of the mutable-timeline hypothesis. Because although you couldn't find any flaws in the logic or equations, the model you and Casey were developing was inconsistent with your childhood memories.

In theory, time travel required creating a connection between two people. Each would serve as an "anchor" 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 (which had to be within the lifetime of the anchor). However much subjective time the traveler spent in the past, that same interval would pass between their present-day departure time and their return. 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.

That was all well and good, but your theory said that the time traveler's body would physically travel, which was inconsistent with the way Casey had actually appeared to you as an intangible 'hologram.' Therefore, if your time machine sent Casey, in their physical body, to visit your past, that would obviously be a change to the timeline.

(You tried not to think too hard about the part where *you* were supposed to travel to *Casey's* past. In theory, it would be cool. But as far as you knew, Casey didn't remember you visiting their past. So, if you did, would that also be a change to the timeline? Or had Casey been concealing their memories from you all this time, like you'd been doing? If honest, low-brain-to-mouth-filter Casey had pulled off a lie on that scale, to *you*. . .then you didn't really know them at all.)

December 2, 2002

The day you turned on the time-travel machine, you were sick with anticipation, with the secret you were still holding inside, and with the all-consuming question: *Would this change the life you had lived up to now? Would you suddenly find yourself a different you, shaped by a different past? And if it did, would you even know it?*

You had agreed that each of you would enter some dates as time-travel destinations for the other to travel to. Casey had originally wanted to pick all of the dates together, but you convinced them that it would be more exciting for the traveler if they didn't know in advance what dates they'd be visiting. (An argument picked to appeal to Casey's weakness for *coolness*.) Of course, that meant not having to explain about the dates you knew *should* be on the list. It also meant that you had a choice to make.

You could list all the dates you remembered Casey visiting you, helping to bring about the past you had already experienced. Or you could do something else, and. . .see what would happen. Would the Machine somehow send Casey to you on those dates anyway? Or would the timeline change? And if it did, what would be the ripple effects? Who would you be, in a timeline where your mother left you alone for days and Casey wasn't there?

You really wanted to know. . .and you really didn't want to know.

You chose to enter the dates you remembered, and your best guesses for the visits you didn't know the exact dates of. You put in a few randomly-generated extra dates as well. It seemed like a safer way to test for timeline mutability than leaving out dates of visits you remembered.

The one date you and Casey picked together was a single date in the future: your 20th wedding anniversary, April 17, 2021. You had no idea if it actually would be possible to travel to the future, but Casey talked you into trying. "OK, OK" you said, "But you can't ask me to tell you about how the future comes out," and they promised that they wouldn't ask about flying cars or what stocks to place a bet on.

True objectivity was impossible, of course. You were like a couple of Victorian gentleman scientists, experimenting on yourselves. But you did what you could. You agreed in advance on an experimental protocol that included timeline hygiene procedures for visits to the past, to minimize the risk of accidental changes if the timeline turned out to be mutable.

You didn't know whether the timeline was mutable, and if so, whether a time-traveler would perceive changes caused by their actions while time-traveling. It was possible that if one of you changed history, both your memories, along with any documentation you created, would alter to accordingly, and you'd never be aware of the change. But in case some other model of time travel turned out to be the correct one, each of you would take field notes documenting each time travel visit. You would each also keep an "anchor journal," documenting your memories of the other person's visits in your past. 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.

From the way Casey talked about writing in the anchor notebooks *after* turning the Machine on, it was more obvious than ever that they had no memories of a future version of you popping in and out of their childhood. (Unless. . .No. You refused to imagine that they were that good a liar. You were the only liar in the room.) You privately wrote on the first page of your anchor notebook: *December 1, 2002: We have not yet turned on the Machine and I remember Casey time-traveling to me 28 times between 1981 and 1991.*

You should have warned Casey that your theoretical model might be wrong. You told yourself it was for the purity of the experiment. . .but you were also afraid to confess that you had lied to them for so long.

You pushed the button to initiate the time travel process. Casey turned the dial to attune you as the anchor and themself as the traveler for this first trip—and immediately collapsed on the floor. Even as you panicked, you were pretty sure you knew what was going on: time travel didn't work according to the theory. *Somewhen* out there, Casey's consciousness was being projected to some younger version of yourself, visible and audible and intangible, just like you remembered.

Yeah, great, thanks, Casey. You couldn't have warned me about the part where your physical body is lying unconscious back in your present, or how I should take care of it while you're gone?

You didn't dare call an ambulance, for fear that a hospital would pronounce Casey brain-dead or find out something they shouldn't. You clung to the memories that told you that Casey had time-traveled from the future to visit your past, and therefore, Casey must, in your future, be alive and well to travel back in time to create those memories. So you covered them with a blanket, got a bowl of soup ready to microwave and a bottle of Tylenol in case time travel caused a hangover or. . .something. As you waited for them to wake up, you worked to figure out where your calculations had gone wrong, and how time travel *really* ought to work. . .

When Casey woke up several hours later, they exclaimed "I saw you! In the past!" and started babbling about the wonder of it all, eagerly demanding that you tell them everything you remembered about their visit to your past so you could compare notes. You refused, reminding them that you had a *protocol* about this. Casey shut up, although they were obviously unhappy about not being able to tell you about their experiences.

The two of you stayed up all night reworking the equations in light of your new data. By morning, you'd figured out several things about how time travel actually worked:

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.

   Casey was very apologetic when they pointed this out. They obviously thought you'd be heartbroken to find out that you wouldn't get a turn to time-travel yourself. You were a little disappointed. . .but mostly you were relieved to know that Casey had no secret memories and hadn't been lying to you all these years. You couldn't tell them that, of course.

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 Casey had entered for you 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.

   That was consistent with your memories: it would explain why Casey hadn't always remembered things from one visit to the next.

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.

As the dawn brightened the windows, you and Casey embraced each other over your piles of scribbled notes, laughing with shared giddy excitement. In spite of the setback, you'd really done it! You'd *created time travel*! Now you were setting out together on the greatest adventure of your lives!

December 2002 - March 2004

That excitement and triumph carried you through the next few months as you figured out the practical realities of living with time travel. It turned out that Casey could sense the onset of a time jump a few minutes before it happened: enough warning to lie down so they wouldn't fall over and split their head open. But not enough to avoid falling unconscious in the grocery store, or worse, behind the wheel of a car. You talked through the ramifications with them and they agreed to stop driving and to only go out in public if you were with them. You set up comfortable places for them to crash in every room of the house.

Casey was over the moon about getting to time travel, and barely seemed to mind the severe restrictions they now had to live under. You were grateful for their nearly-unsquashable good cheer and optimism. You don't think you would have responded so gracefully yourself to suddenly having to live with the logistical equivalent of a chronic, incapacitating illness.

On the flip side, Casey was oblivious to the fact that *your* life had been completely upended. Oh, they were genuinely sorry that you didn't get to have your turn time-traveling, and that the two of

you couldn't discuss what was happening. They gave you hurt-puppy eyes every time you stopped them from telling you about their latest visit to the past. Sometimes you had to literally walk out of the house before they got the message: *stick to the experimental protocol already.*

But it didn't seem to register with them that because they were house-bound, all of the errands were now your responsibility. The two of you couldn't go out to socialize as a couple, and you didn't even dare go out much by yourself, knowing that at any random moment your spouse might fall unconscious. And whenever Casey went off on an exciting vacation to the past, you were home alone, looking after their body.

You couldn't complain about any of that, though. You couldn't dump your frustration and fear and loneliness on Casey, and most especially your guilt about not warning them that the Machine might not work the way they thought it did. You also felt guilty because you couldn't emotionally support them by listening to them talk about what they were going through, for fear of sharing details that might put the timeline at risk.

Another terrible aspect of the situation hit home for you when Casey excitedly showed you a magic trick they were learning and you remembered seeing them perform this same trick—*when you were seven years old*. That's when it truly sunk in that soon they'd finally have all those experiences you remembered sharing. But you wouldn't be there to share them—not you, yourself, now. You wouldn't even be able to talk over those times with them, to find out what they had been thinking and feeling and what those childhood memories looked like through their adult eyes.

Instead, your spouse would be walking through your most private, precious memories, the ones you'd never told anyone. Instead of the intimacy of trusting your partner with your innermost secrets, this felt like violation. But again, none of that was Casey's fault. You'd had ten years in which you could have told them everything. Now you'd just have to live with the consequences of your silence.

You weren't very good at that. As the months went by, you got more resentful, swallowing down everything you were thinking until you could barely talk to Casey at all. They eventually took the hint and stopped trying to talk to you about time-travel—or anything else. When they weren't unconscious and off frolicking with your child self, they buried themselves in their time travel notebook or their theory work (which you could no longer bear to help with). You buried yourself in your dissertation; it was the one aspect of your life that wasn't falling to pieces around you.

Sometimes, you'd catch Casey looking hopefully at you, or out of the blue they'd say something like "You don't think I'm bad for you, do you?" and you wished you could wave a magic wand and fix everything. But there was no fix for the time travel situation, and the gulf of silence between you had grown too huge to reach across.

March 10, 2004

You reached the breaking point when Casey 'left' for a time-travel jaunt and stayed unconscious for four days. They'd returned from their previous jump only a couple of days earlier and spent the whole intervening time avoiding you. It was almost a relief when they passed out again and you knew you'd get a break from them. But then they didn't wake up, and didn't wake up, and you started to worry that maybe this time something really had gone wrong, while a small, ugly part of you whispered, *Wouldn't it be a relief if. . . ?*

You had plenty of time to realize exactly which time travel visit would last so long. They were at Aunt Dee's cabin, giving all the care and attention and comfort to your terrified 9-year-old self that you had forfeited any right to in the present. They were witnessing your deepest, most shameful secret that you'd never shared with a living soul: that even your mother didn't love you enough to not abandon you. Once they came back, you'd never know whether they were looking at you with pity or disgust.

When Casey finally woke up, they looked dazed and exhausted, and when they saw you, at first they looked so blank you wondered if they remembered who you were. Then they said your name and reached for you—

"I can't do this anymore," you said.

Casey looked completely baffled. "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 didn't have the energy to argue or persuade. You just stood firm and told Casey that this was how it had to be. You were leaving. And Casey, who never gave up on anything they believed in, closed their mouth and accepted your decision.

You had a logistical plan for how Casey could manage living on their own. The two of you consulted a doctor, telling her that Casey had recently started having mysterious "seizures." After a bunch of tests that (to your relief) turned up nothing, the doctor put a diagnosis of "unidentified seizure disorder" in Casey's file and set them up with an emergency alert bracelet that would call for an ambulance if they collapsed, with instructions along the lines of "if I'm unconscious, hook me up to an IV and wait for me to wake up on my own." You made sure you were listed as Casey's medical proxy and next of kin. (You definitely didn't want Casey's parents in Oklahoma to get dragged into any potential conversations about tests and life support.)

You moved out, leaving Casey with your shared home and the damned time machine.

August 24, 2004

The next few months were miserable in a whole new way. You kept expecting to get a call from a hospital, or. . .you tried not to imagine the worst. At the same time, you were so relieved not to have to deal with Casey and their 'episodes' and their enthusiasm about time travel and their emotional needs and their disregard of yours. And you felt guilty for feeling that way.

(Was this how your mother had felt when she left you in Aunt Dee's cabin?)

Astonishingly, Casey didn't contact you once. They should have been inundating you with arguments about why you should come back to them, or at least asking you to explain *why* so they could *understand*. Were they relieved to be rid of you? (You tried to convince yourself that it would actually be the happiest possible outcome for both of you if Casey didn't love you any more. . .but it hurt.)

You concentrated as much as you could on your dissertation. You tried to reconnect with friends, although it was hard to summon the energy to talk with other human beings. You tried to figure out what kind of life you wanted for yourself, disentangled from Casey and obligation and (possible) destiny.

You missed Casey more than you'd expected to.

You missed your partner who would happily stay up all night with you mapping out a "scientific theory" that would make sense of all the stupidest Star Trek plots. You missed the scientist who thought the universe was so cool that they wanted to devote their life to learning its secrets, and who took as much delight in sharing knowledge as obtaining it. You missed the friend who cared for a lonely child and treated her like a person, and who still sometimes looked at you like they couldn't believe how lucky they were to have you as a friend.

You didn't miss the frustration of taking care of Casey while they took you for granted, but you realized that you'd been treating the situation like a hardship to endure, rather than a problem for the two of you to solve together. And wasn't that supposed to be what your partnership was all about: solving problems together, whether they were scientific, logistical, or emotional? That was what you'd promised each other when you got married.

So, when Casey finally did ring your doorbell, you let them in. And they surprised you again. Instead of a torrent of earnest, oblivious arguments, what they actually said was, "Obviously, I don't know what it's been like for you all this time. Would you please tell me? I want to understand."

It was hard, at first, saying all the things you'd been swallowing down for months, but it got easier as Casey listened with the intense focus they always devoted to things they cared about. You were crying by the time you'd confessed every ugly feeling you'd had since you turned the damned Machine on.

(But not your biggest secret: that you'd always known Casey would time travel. There was still timeline hygiene to consider, and. . .you couldn't trust it that wouldn't be the final straw that would make them turn away from you in disgust.)

When Casey finally did talk, you had a real conversation, listening and responding to each other for the first time in what felt like forever. They said the things you most needed to hear:

I didn't realize how much work you were doing to take care of me.

I wish I didn't have to leave you behind. I wish I could share it with you. I'm sorry. I'd stay if I could. I'd rather be with you than time travel.

Casey even suggested shutting down the Machine, but you argued that it wasn't worth the risk of harming them or the timeline.

Then, what if we just changed the protocol so we could tell each other things? It wouldn't be so hard if we could share what each of us is going through, they said.

But what if it changes the past? What if changing my past changes ***me?*** you asked.

Casey didn't dive into discussing time travel theory. Even though you hadn't quite spelled it out, they seemed to understand how much the possibility terrified you.

I don't want to your past or change you—I mean, not unless you want that, in which case I'd totally help. I love ***this*** *you.*

I love you, too, you said. Even then, Casey left it to you to be the first one to say, *I want us to try again.*

You were willing to try because Casey had really listened to you and then showed you that they understood what you needed them to do differently, and that they were willing to try to change. Like you had when you first started dating, you chose to trust them--and yourself.

2004 - 2012

And your trust was rewarded. You moved back in, you and Casey resumed your marriage, and life actually did get better.

You agreed to adjust the experimental protocol just a little. Talking about things that happened during the time travel visits was still off-limits, but you could share your feelings with each other, the way you had the night you got back together.

“And if one of us starts to say or ask more than they should,” Casey said, “It’s okay for the other one to remind them that spoilers are forbidden.” (“No spoilers,” became the catchphrase for you to lightheartedly stop a conversation that was straying into dangerous territory.) There were still many things you couldn’t share, but there wasn’t that horrible gulf between you anymore. And when one or both of you was feeling down, you reminded each other to look forward to the day after the Last Visit, when you could shut down the Machine and finally talk about everything.

You found ways to make the logistics easier. Thanks to Casey’s medical alert bracelet and “seizure disorder” diagnosis, you could go out for dinner with friends, or even leave town for a few days to attend a conference, not worrying too much about whether they would be okay without you. The “seizure disorder” story also let Casey socialize with friends a bit, which meant that *you* could also socialize more, which made both of you happier. It was, in fact, very much like being married to someone with a chronic illness; you accepted the limits it placed on both of your lives, and found ways to thrive and find fulfillment and even joy within those limits.

You both managed to finish your dissertations and graduate. You got a job as a physics professor. Casey happily produced a steady output of theoretical papers while privately devoting the bulk of their time to refining the time travel equations.

April 28, 2012

Then their time ran out. Casey died on April 28, 2012, ten years after you first turned the time travel machine on, eleven years after you got married, nineteen years after you met for the first time in real time, thirty-one years after the first time you saw them. They were 37 years old.

The first few months after Casey’s death are a blur of shock and grief. Then, gradually, with time and the support of your friends, you began to heal. After a year, you felt like a whole human being again.

When Casey died, the Machine went dead, too. You assume that it couldn’t handle losing the time traveler while there were still visit dates left in its cycle. You didn’t try to fix it; what would have been the point? The Machine couldn’t bring Casey back and you were done with time travel.

You’ve never stopped missing Casey and grieving their loss. But you’ve continued to live your life, and it’s been a good one so far. You’re a tenured professor and your work on string theory is building you a good scientific reputation. You enjoy mentoring students. You have a network of friends. You’ve had a couple of casual romantic and/or sexual relationships that ended amicably, which is as much intimacy as you want (at least, so far). You do miss having a life partner. You get lonely sometimes. But it’s hard to imagine sharing that kind of intimacy with anyone else. Maybe someday you’ll meet someone who makes you want to try again.

But first, you have to say goodbye to Casey for the last time.

April 17, 2021

You left Casey's journals unread all these years on the assumption that the experiment wasn't finished and time travel hygiene still mattered until the Last Visit, but you'd never been 100% positive whether Casey would arrive. But here's Casey standing in front of you.

Fortunately, you've had a lot of time to think about how to handle the Last Visit. Because, of course, it isn't the last time *Casey* will ever talk to *you.* That will happen some time in their future, when they call you to ask what you want them to pick up for dinner, and you tell them you want extra dumplings for breakfast.

Here and now, you're the one who knows things about Casey's future that they don't know. You can't tell on sight exactly when they're coming from, so you'd better find that out before you say anything that might be news to them. But then. . .what should you say? What's safe to say?

In a deterministic universe, nothing you tell Casey now can alter the past. In that case, the only thing that matters is how the conversation makes you both feel, now and in your respective futures. If the timeline is mutable, anything you say—or *don't* say—could change what Casey does in their future/your past.

- Should you tell Casey about their death? Maybe you could keep it from happening. . .but but there's no guarantee that would actually work. And if the universe is deterministic, all you'd accomplish is make Casey live for years knowing the hour of their death—and concealing it from you.
- Should you admit that the Machine is broken and you didn't try to fix it?
- Should you tell them about the ups and downs in your relationship that they don't yet know about? Same problem. Plus, you can't stand the thought of Casey going back and saying all the things past-you needed to hear, not because they truly meant them, but because you'd handed them a script. You're terrified of turning your relationship into a lie, or Casey into a liar.
- Should you ask them for their perspective on their visits to your past? Why they did the things they did? Should you share yours? (Should you admit that there's a part of you that's never quite forgiven Casey for breaking up your relationship with Dan?) You really want to have that post-experiment conversation you'd both looked forward to, but even asking those questions might give Casey information that you didn't give them in your shared present.
- Should you confess that you had time-travel memories before you met in college? You can't imagine what that could change. . .except Casey's opinion of you.

It might be easiest to do what you've always done and keep your secrets out of fear of the consequences.

And yet. . .this is your last chance to ask Casey the questions you never asked while they were alive, and to tell them the things you never had a chance to say. To find out if they could love you as you really are, with all your secrets and lies and flaws.

Is it worth the risk of changing everything—your past, your memories, yourself, Casey?

You don't know. . .but you have to choose. Now.

Alex's Time-Travel Notes

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

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