

FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

HOLLOW WORLD



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE FUTURE IS COMING...FOR SOME SOONER THAN OTHERS

Ellis Rogers is an ordinary man who is about to embark on an extraordinary journey. All his life he has played it safe and done the right thing, but after contracting a terminal disease, he's willing to take an insane gamble. He's built a time machine in his garage, and if it works, he'll face a world that challenges his understanding of what it means to be human, what it takes to love, and the cost of paradise. Ellis could find more than a cure for his illness; he might find what everyone has been searching for since time began...but only if he can survive *Hollow World*.

Welcome to the future and a new science fiction thriller from the bestselling author of *The Riyria Revelations*.

We are honored that *Hollow World* has made a number of "Best of" and "Most Anticipated" lists including:

- Ranting Dragon's 30 Most Anticipated Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels for 2014
- The Book Probe's 2014 Most Anticipated Sci-Fi Novels
- BiblioSanctum's Top 10 Reads of 2013
- Fantasy Review Barn's Barney Award for 12 outstanding reads of 2013

HOLLOW WORLD

Hollow World
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Cover Design: Michael J. Sullivan

Learn more about Michael's writings at www.riyria.com.
To contact Michael, email him at Michael.Sullivan.DC@gmail.com.

PRAISE FOR HOLLOW WORLD

“This is a clever and thought-provoking story, with loads of interesting ideas, some adrenalin-pumping action, and plenty of humour...overall an entertaining read with Pax being one of my favourite characters of the year.” — **Pauline M. Ross, *Fantasy Review Barn***

“Michael J. Sullivan has made a name for himself with his excellent series of fantasy novels and *Hollow World* proves he can deftly tackle science fiction just as skillfully. The ideas are big and the future plausible, this is one of those rare gems you’ll be thinking about long after you put it down.” — Bryce Lee, **Only the Best Science Fiction & Fantasy**

“This is social science fiction that H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov could have written, with the cultural touchstones of today. A modernized classic, *Hollow World* is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers.” — **Justin Landon, *Staffer’s Book Reviews***

“*Hollow World* is a must read for all those who have enjoyed the Riyria Revelations and are looking for something different. Engrossing, imaginative and incredibly awesome—*Hollow World* may be one of the best books of the year.” — **Bane of Kings, *The Founding Fields***

“This book made me laugh. It also made me cry. And in the end, it made me think. I highly recommend *Hollow World* for anyone looking for a book that brushes on and plays out some political and social issues we face today.” — **N. E. White, *SFFWorld.com***

“I fully expected this to be a good speculative read, I had not expected it to be one of those rare literary gems that exceed the speculative genre to become worthy of any English literature class.” — **Stephan van Velzen, *The Ranting Dragon***

“I’m happy to report that not only does *Hollow World* establish Sullivan as a force to be reckoned with in any genre he chooses to ply his talent to, it also is a prime example of one of the reasons speculative fiction is so important...Sullivan questions our assumptions about our society as a whole that makes this one of the best novels I’ve read this year.” — **Matt Gilliard, *52 Reviews***

“*Hollow World* is a character-driven story packed with intensity and emotion...*Hollow World* was easily one of my top reads of 2013.” — **Stephenie Sheung, *The Bibliosanctum***

WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains *The Crown Conspiracy* and *Avempartha*)

Rise of Empire (contains *Nyphron Rising* and *The Emerald Storm*)

Heir of Novron (contains *Wintertide* and *Percepliquis*)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

Blood of Thieves (contains *The Crown Tower* and *The Rose and the Thorn*)

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

Antithesis (forthcoming)

A Burden to the Earth (forthcoming)

Anthologies

Unfettered

The End—Visions of Apocalypse

Triumph Over Tragedy

Help Fund My Robot Army (forthcoming)

Unfettered II (forthcoming)

Short Stories Released as Standalones

The Viscount (a Riyria Short)

The Jester (a Riyria Short)

Greener Grass (dystopian science fiction)

Short Stories Pending Release

The Thieves (a Riyria Short)

Traditions (traditional fantasy)

Autumn Mists (contemporary fantasy)

Burning Alexandria (post-apocalyptic science fiction)

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A NOTE ABOUT PIRACY

Some readers are curious regarding an author's policy toward piracy. Each person has their own perspective, so I thought I would make my feelings known. I think it is folly for me, or any publisher to try to stop piracy. It's impossible to prevent—period. DRM is easily strippable by those who pirate intellectual property, and those that buy legally are the only ones harmed by its inclusion. For the convenience of my readers, I distribute any ebooks that I retain rights to DRM-free.

I also believe that obscurity is a bigger problem than the loss of revenue from a pirated book. Therefore, the best thing I can do is think of pirated material as a kind of promotional cost. So please if you've received this ebook without paying for it, and you enjoy the read, consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or telling a friend how much you liked it. At least then you'll be making a contribution for something you didn't pay for financially.

As to those who argue that they should be able to read the entire book before deciding whether they should pay for it, I think that argument is a rationalization for something you know is wrong. Again, I can't stop the practice, but neither will I condone it. There are sample chapters freely available and I've even released an extended preview that gives you the first four chapters (about 60 pages) for free. That should be more than enough to evaluate the quality of the book's production and determine whether it would be something you'd be interested in.

For those that believe any expression of art should be freely available to the masses, and as such, you shouldn't have to pay for books, movies, and music, I feel you are working against your goal. In such an environment, you'd get a world with less art. By your reasoning, every artist must have a day job to put food on their tables and pay their bills...then create art in their spare time when they are tired and exhausted. It is extremely difficult to produce quality work this way. If you enjoy reading, then you should want your favorite authors to produce more books. The best way to ensure that is to compensate them for writing and allow them more time to create.

I have heard from pirates who say they will buy books they have enjoyed, because they want to support the author. If this is something that you do, then I ask you to please buy a paper copy, because it supports not only myself but my publisher as well. Even if you don't read paper, you'll get a legal ebook copy and can pass the physical book onto a friend or donate it to a library. I know that there are some who don't like paying money to "big faceless companies" but this book is produced by Tachyon Publications, a small, independent organization that is ABSOLUTELY treating authors the way they should. I want to do all I can to reward such right thinking behavior, and if you are a supporter of authors, then helping to make Tachyon a success is a good way to do exactly that.

Please keep in mind that writing is what I do for a living, and just as I don't expect other professionals to give me the fruits of their labor for free, my hope is that people will want to compensate me for the work I do.

Lastly, for those who read the ebook legally, I thank you for your support. It's readers, and the money they pay for books, that make my writing possible. So thank you for me and for supporting other authors. They provide us all with hours of entertainment, and that is worth paying for.

A NOTE ABOUT SWEARING

This is the first book I've written that contains "explicit language." I'm not opposed to such things, but I think context is important. Using the "f-bomb" in the Riyria world just didn't feel right, so it's not there. In this book, there are characters that if I omitted swearing it wouldn't be "true to their nature."

I thought long and hard about the inclusion of such language. I even polled my beta readers and those that participated in the Kickstarter. I also received my first harsh letter from a reader who, after reading the extended preview, thought my use of explicit language was a sign of me "selling out" to get more readers. She begged me to have the moral fortitude to keep my books clean. The truth of the matter is that I think by keeping the explicit language I risk losing more sales than I would gain. Therefore, I think I *am* showing a commitment to a high standard by writing the book the way I think it should be, rather than in a way to get a larger audience. To bow under her (or my own internal pressure) would be a disservice to the characters.

Still, I was concerned that there would be disappointment. Many have written and said how refreshing it was to have books free of swearing. Also, I've really enjoyed receiving letters of thanks from parents for writing books that they can pass onto their children without reservation. I was definitely conflicted about which way to go.

In the midst of all this deliberation it occurred to me that I didn't have to compromise. Because I control the ebook rights, I can do all kinds of things that other publishers can't...including having two versions of the book!

So, for those who would prefer to have a book without explicit language [here is a link to an alternate "clean" version](#). It will take you to an almost exact duplicate of this book (further down in this file), which will use a more PG-13 style language. Yes, there may be a "damn" here or there but no f-bombs lying in wait.

The only down side to this, is that the book will look twice as long as it really is. No matter which version you read, your percentage read will be off. For those reading the book as intended (explicit language) you should double whatever number you see. So when the e-reader says you are 40% done, you are really at 80%. For those in the "clean version" your percentages will indicate you've read a lot more than you have. For you, just subtract off 50%. So when you see you are at 60% complete you're really only at 10%. I realize that doing these calculations can be annoying for some...and there are those who will want only the "clean version" (for instance to share with their children). I can understand that. So, if this is the case, just email me at Michael.Sullivan.DC@gmail.com and I'll send you either an "original" version with the explicit language or a "clean" version with it removed.

I hope this approach is viewed as a positive (and creative) solution to this problem. I'm trying to provide the best experience to as many people as I can, and I would love to hear your feedback. So feel free to drop me a line about this approach. Your feedback helps me determine whether such a thing is worth doing.

A NOTE ABOUT TIME TRAVEL TECHNOLOGY

Time travel as described in this novel isn't possible. It's important to mention this up front. I'm not saying, "Don't try this at home." I'm simply clarifying that this is as much a work of fantasy as it is science fiction—but, then again, most science fiction has a dash of fantasy thrown in, that artificial *what if* spark that ignites the chain reaction that propels everything forward.

In the classic *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells's high-tech explanation for how his device was able to skip through years was: "Now I want you to clearly understand that this lever, being pressed over, sends the machine gliding into the future, and this other reverses the motion." That's pretty much the extent of his hard science. Of course his story, while named *The Time Machine*, really wasn't so much about the machine or the science behind it, but rather speculations on the future of mankind.

So is *Hollow World*.

The Time Machine was first published in Britain in 1895. Apparently, back then, you could get away with stating that pressing a lever resulted in doing something otherwise known as impossible. Of course back then, they didn't have the Internet. The average reader today knows that you can't travel faster than the speed of light, or through a black hole. This education may be due more to the success of science fiction entertainment such as *Star Trek* than to high school teachers, but here we are. The modern-day reader is better educated and demands plausibility.

Because *Hollow World* utilizes a man from our time being thrust into the future, I did a lot of research into time-travel theory. I drew inspiration from a handful of sources, most notably *Time Travel in Einstein's Universe: The Physical Possibilities of Travel Through Time* by renowned astrophysicist J. Richard Gott. Mr. Gott provided a plausible explanation for how a stationary object could move significantly forward in time by overcoming the g-force restriction of linear travel by moving interdimensionally. This is theoretically possible if you could put yourself in the near-center of a black hole while maintaining a defensive shell using electrostatic repulsions of like charges. That's the theory, but as I said, time travel isn't possible—especially not in an urban garage with common materials. I fudged the math—a lot. I aimed for a dramatic blend of façade, plausibility, and smoke-and-mirrors illusion so that if you don't look too closely, you can *almost* imagine it working.

Why am I bringing this up? Well I wanted to make it clear that this work isn't hard science fiction. I know a lot of genre readers are attracted to the technology, and if you are one, I wanted to give you the heads up so you could look elsewhere. For this book, I wanted to focus on the effects of technology on people and their culture, and I chose not to spend too much of the word count on the inner workings of the technologies in my world. Like H. G. Wells's tale, *Hollow World* really isn't about time travel any more than reality television shows are documentaries.

So, what is this story about?

Read on—a world awaits.

— Michael J. Sullivan
January 2013

This book is dedicated to the people at Tachyon Publications who are leading the way in publishing done right. I hope more organizations follow in their footsteps.

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**The following chapters contain explicit language.
A “PG-13version” can be found below.**

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The following chapters contain no explicit language.

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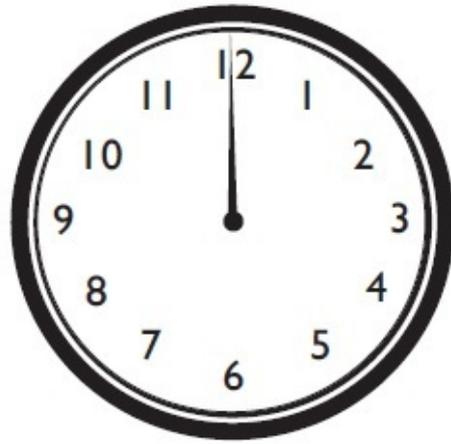
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HOLLOW WORLD



CHAPTER ONE

RUNNING OUT OF TIME

When she said he was dying, and explained how little time he had left, Ellis Rogers laughed. Not a normal response—the doctor knew it, Ellis did too. He wasn't crazy; at least he didn't think so, but how does anyone really know? He should have seen visions, flashes from his life: kissing Peggy at the altar, graduating college, or the death of their son, Isley. He should have fixated on all of the things that he'd never done, the words he had spoken, or the ones he hadn't. Instead, Ellis focused on the four-letter word the doctor had said. Funny that she used *that* word—he never told her what was in his garage.

The pulmonary specialist was a small Indian woman with bright, alert eyes and a clipboard that she frequently looked to for reference. She wore the familiar white lab coat—stethoscope stuffed deep in one pocket. She sat, or more accurately leaned, against the front of her desk as she spoke. At the start of her speech, the doctor had begun with a determined, sympathetic resolve, but that train had been derailed by his inappropriate outburst, and neither of them seemed to know what to do next.

“Are you...all right?” she asked.

“First test I ever failed,” he said, trying to explain himself, hoping she'd swallow it and move on. Given the news she had just delivered, he deserved a little slack.

The doctor stared at him concerned for a moment, then settled back into her professional tone. “You should probably get another opinion, Ellis.” She used his first name as if they were old friends, though he'd only seen her the few times it had taken to get the tests performed.

“Is someone working on a cure for this?” Ellis asked.

The doctor sighed, keeping her lips firm. She folded her arms, then unfolded them and leaned forward. “Yes, but I honestly don't think anyone is close to a breakthrough.” She looked at him with sad eyes. “You just don't have that much time.”

There was that word again.

He didn't laugh, but he might have smiled. He needed a better poker face. Ellis shifted his sight away from her and instead focused on three jars sitting on a counter near the door. They looked like they belonged in a kitchen—except that these contained tongue depressors and cotton swabs instead of sugar and flour. He couldn't tell what was in the last one. Something individually packaged, syringes

maybe, which reminded him to double-check the first-aid kit to make sure it had a good supply of aspirin. Not all of them did.

The doctor probably expected him to cry or maybe fly into a rage cursing God, bad luck, the industrial food complex, or his own refusal to exercise. Laughter and smiles weren't on that menu. But he couldn't help being amused, not when the doctor was unwittingly making jokes.

No, he thought, not jokes—suggestions. And she's right, there's nothing stopping me anymore.

He was dying from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and she had given him six months to a year. The *to a year* portion of that sentence felt tacked on in an overly optimistic manner. Anyone else might have focused on that part of the equation—the dying part—and thought about trips to Europe, safaris in Africa, or visiting neglected friends and family. Ellis was planning a trip of a different sort and began running a mental checklist. He already had most everything. Flashlight batteries, he should get more of them—can't ever have too many batteries—and some more M&M'S, why the hell not? It wasn't like he had to worry about his weight, diabetes, or tooth decay. *I'll buy a whole box! The peanut ones, the yellow bags are always the best.*

"I'm going to set up an appointment for you to come back. Two weeks should give you enough time to see someone else and have the tests repeated." She stopped writing and stared at him with her big brown eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Is there someone I can call?" She flipped through the pages on the clipboard again. "Your wife?"

"Trust me, I'm good."

He was surprised to realize he was telling the truth. The last time he felt that way was thirty-six years ago when he had sat across from the loan officer's desk and learned he'd qualified for the mortgage that allowed him to move out of his parent's home. Fear mingled with the excitement of facing the unknown. Freedom—real freedom—had all the rush of an illegal drug.

I can finally press the button.

She waited a beat or two longer, then nodded. "Assuming your second opinion concurs with mine, I will add your name to the registry for a transplant, and I'll explain the process in detail at your appointment. Aside from that, I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do. I'm really very sorry." Reaching out she took his hand. "I really am."

He nodded and gave a slight squeeze. Her smile appeared less forced then. Maybe she was thinking she'd made him feel better, made some emotional connection. That was good, he needed all the karma he could get.



"What'd the doctor say?" was the first thing out of Peggy's mouth when Ellis walked through the door. He couldn't see her. He guessed she was somewhere in the kitchen, shouting over the television she'd left on in the living room. Peggy did that a lot. She said it made her feel less alone, but she kept it on even when Ellis was home.

"She said it was nothing to be concerned about." He dropped his keys on the coffee table in the candy dish their son had made years ago.

"She? Wasn't your appointment with Dr. Hall?"

Dammit! Ellis cringed. "Ah—Dr. Hall retired. I met with a woman doctor."

"Retired? That sounds sudden. Is he okay?"

"Yeah—yeah he's fine."

"Well good for him. I'm surprised, though. He really isn't much older than we are, and I always

thought doctors retired later than other people. So this other doctor, she wasn't concerned about your cough?"

Ellis found the remote and turned down the volume until the gaggle of women arguing on the television was nothing more than a low hum. He wondered if it was the same show he always walked in on or if all the shows she didn't watch were the same.

"Not really. She said it was just a virus," he called back.

The living room was a milestone showing how far they had come. Two Williams-Sonoma mohair couches faced a big screen television as wide as the bathroom in their first apartment. On shelves near the fireplace sat his M.I.T. textbooks alongside dissertations he had bound in genuine leather. Above those were a pile of thrillers and murder mysteries by the likes of Michael Connelly, Tom Clancy, and Jeffery Deaver—his mind candy.

Photos were everywhere: hanging on the walls, propped on end tables, balanced atop the television. From each frame a sandy-haired cherub with freckles and a varying number of teeth smiled back. The one taken at Cedar Point commanded the centerpiece of the granite coffee table. All three of them had been in that amusement-park photo, but a strategic fold had left only Ellis's left hand visible where it rested on his son's shoulder.

"Did she even give you anything for it?" Peggy asked. She entered the living room still wearing her work clothes, what she called her "three Ps": power pantsuit and pearls. She glanced at the television, perhaps checking to see if she was missing anything important, then turned back to him.

For a moment he considered telling the truth, at least about his prognosis. He wanted to see what she'd say. What she'd do.

He couldn't say yes. She might ask to see the bottle. "She gave me a prescription. I just haven't filled it yet."

"Well, you better do that soon. The drugstore will be closing—at least the pharmacy counter will. She pulled a fresh pack of menthols from the pocket of her jacket and began to tap out a cigarette, then paused, looking at him. "Oh," she said with a disappointed tone and a little frown. "Aren't you going to the garage?"

"Actually, I'm meeting Warren. Just came home to get my coat. It's getting cold."

"Well, if you take any pills, look at the bottle before you start drinking."

Ellis grabbed Peggy's keys off the hall table as quietly as he could, but instead of heading out the kitchen door he climbed the stairs to their bedroom, and once inside, locked the door. His heart was pounding so loud he hoped Peggy couldn't hear it. Taking this first step made it real for him.

Jesus, I'm really going to do it.

He crept to the closet, put on his coat, then began excavating. The left side of the walk-in had always been Peggy's territory. Stacked on the floor were old shoes, the wedding photos, and God knew what else she had stuffed back there in an assortment of cardboard and plastic containers. Ellis knew what he was looking for, and after carefully disassembling a tower of shoe boxes, he uncovered the treasure-chest-shaped jewelry case. She kept it locked. The key was on her ring along with a bottle opener, flip-out nail file, coin purse, rape whistle, penlight, laminated photo of Isley, silver medallion of a camel or llama, another of a soccer ball, and a big plastic plaque that read: PEGGY. The ridiculous thing was that the Nissan had a keyless entry system and a push button start.

The jewelry box opened like a cash register with the top popping up and the drawers pushing out tiers. The thing was packed with memorabilia. He spotted a Mother's Day card Isley had made when he was around six. Just a bit of folded poster board with the word MOM scrawled in crayon. There were a bunch of letters, a few photos of Isley, ticket stubs to a play called *No Parking* that he didn't remember, and a bunch of poems Peggy had written before they got married, back when she was learning to play the guitar and planned on being the next Carole King.

And, of course, there was jewelry.

~~Old clip-on earrings, and the newer pierced ones, some dangled like Christmas tree tinsel, others were just studs. She had two strings of pearls, a choker with what looked like an ivory medallion, and a host of rings. Most of them were costume. Four pieces were not.~~

Peggy's engagement ring and wedding band were there, but he wouldn't touch those. Ellis was only interested in a pair of diamond earrings he had inherited from his grandmother. The jewelry was at the bottom, buried under the memorabilia.

Downstairs he heard Peggy move. Her footsteps crossed the living room, heading toward the stairs. He froze.

Ellis imagined her coming up and reaching for the door.

Why is the door locked? What are you doing in there, Ellis?

What would he say?

What are you doing with my keys?

He paused, listening. She had stopped.

What the hell is she doing? Just standing in the middle of the hall? Screw it.

Ellis reached in and grabbed everything in the way. He stuffed the pile in his coat pocket, then felt for the earrings.

He heard Peggy starting up the steps, and scooped up the jewelry on the bottom. He closed the closet and raced his wife to the bedroom door, opening it just before she touched the knob.

"Still here?" she asked.

He smiled. "Just heading out."

His heart was pounding as he went down the steps. He gingerly set her key ring back on the little table near the coat rack and walked out. On the porch he put his hand in his pants pocket and felt for the jewelry. Ellis sighed. He'd accidentally grabbed Peggy's rings along with his grandmother's diamonds. He'd leave them on the kitchen counter when he got back from the bar, although they obviously didn't mean anything to her anymore. She'd worn them for eighteen years but stopped about the time she started taking the real-estate seminars. Peggy mentioned that an article had said women Realtors without wedding bands consistently outperformed those who wore them regardless of whether or not they were married. Ellis never argued, never put up a fuss because he knew the real reason. She had put away her rings and started her career the same summer that Isley had hung himself in the garage with one of his father's belts.



Brady's was a nearly invisible bar on Eight Mile Road. Sandwiched between a video-rental store and a Chinese restaurant in a neighborhood of liquor stores and bump shops, it was the only building without bars on the windows. Brady's didn't have windows. The place was just a brick front with a white-painted steel door that clanged on a tight spring.

Ellis stood outside the bar, coughing. He always had trouble going out in the cold, not that it was all that cold yet. November in Detroit, with the moisture coming off the Great Lakes, was just the prelude to six months of bone-chilling misery. Still, his lungs didn't like the change in the air. These days his lungs didn't like much of anything, and the coughing came in fits of chest-ripping waves that left him feeling battered. He waited until the wheezing stopped before heading inside.

The interior of Brady's was about what the exterior suggested: a no-frills bar that smelled like fried food and still reeked of cigarette smoke years after the state ban went into effect. The floor was sticky, the tables wobbled, and the corner-mounted television showed muted football highlights while

hidden speakers played vintage Johnny Cash. Without windows, the only light came from the television and a few old-fashioned ceiling lamps, leaving the place a flickering cave of silhouettes.

Warren Eckard sat at the bar, looking up at the television screen and swirling what was left of a Budweiser. Supported by his elbows, he was hunched over the bottle, one foot bouncing to the rhythm of Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues." Warren was wearing a T-shirt that read: I LOVE MY COUNTRY. IT'S THE GOVERNMENT I HATE. The 2XL shirt was still too small, leaving an exposed band of pale skin muffining out of his jeans. Ellis was just thankful Warren wasn't letting his waistband droop any more than it already was.

"Warren," Ellis said, clapping him on the back and taking a seat alongside him.

"Hey! Hey!" Warren turned, grinning at him with an overacted look of surprise. "Well, if it ain't Mr. Rogers. Wonderful day in the neighborhood to ya, old man. How ya been?"

Warren held out his hand, and Ellis took it, his own disappearing inside that big mitt. It had been decades since the accident, but he couldn't help noticing Warren's missing fourth and fifth fingers.

"Who's the kid behind the bar?" Ellis asked, trying to catch the eye of the bartender—some young fella in a black T-shirt with a toothpick in his mouth.

"Freddy," Warren said. "He's Italian. So don't make any dago jokes, or we'll both be swimming *wit da fishes*."

"Where's Marty?"

Warren shrugged. "Day off, maybe. Laid-off likely. Who knows?"

"Freddy?" Ellis called to the kid, who was leaning back on his elbows, fiddling with the toothpick between his teeth. "Can I get a Bud?"

The kid nodded and popped the top off a tall, brown bottle frosted from the cooler. He slapped a square napkin on the bar in front of Ellis, set the bottle on it, and then went back to his elbows and his toothpick.

"Lions playing tonight?" Ellis asked, nodding at the television as he peeled off his coat.

"Against the Redskins," Warren replied. "Gonna get creamed."

"Way to support the home team."

"Well, it'd help if they had any decent players." He drained his bottle and clapped it on the bar loud enough for Freddy to take notice and pull him a new one.

"Maybe you can try out after the baby comes. What are you eight, nine months, now?"

"Very funny, you're quite the comedian. You know damn well that"—he switched into his best impersonation of Marlon Brando, which sounded more like a sickly Vito Corleone than Terry Malloy—"I could have been a contender."

"Yeah, well, shoulda, woulda, coulda. Speaking of which..." Ellis withdrew a stapled stack of paper from the inside pocket of his coat. The pages were creased, stained with coffee, and had notes jotted in the margins. The bulk of which was a lot of small text in two columns—much of it equation

"What's this?" Warren asked. "More of your geek leaking out? You bringing your work to the bar now?"

"No, this one's all mine. Been working on it for years—sort of a hobby. You know anything about the theory of relativity? Black holes?"

"Do I look like Stephen Hawking?"

Ellis smiled. "Sometimes. When you're sitting up straighter and speaking more clearly."

Warren fake-laughed. "Oh you're hot tonight." Turning his attention to Freddy he added, "You hear this guy?—a regular Moe Howard."

Freddy was pulling a pair of Miller Lites and a Michelob for three women, who had taken seats at the far end of the bar. He looked over, confused. "Who?"

"You know, the Three Stooges."

Freddy shook his head.

~~“Jesus, are you shitting me? Moe, Larry, and Curly. Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk. The greatest comedians of our time.”~~

“What time would that be exactly?” Freddy asked, with a smile that both insulted and charmed.

“Never mind.” Warren had his disgusted-with-the-younger-generation expression on, which never ceased to amaze Ellis, because he had known Warren Eckard when they *were* the younger generation.

Warren flipped through the pages, shaking his head the way a cop might at a particularly gruesome crime scene. “I can’t believe you do this shit for fun.”

“You watch football,” Ellis countered. “I play with quantum—”

“Football’s exciting.”

“So is this.”

Warren pointed at the television where a blimp’s-eye view revealed the mammoth FedExField in Landover, Maryland. “There’s more than eighty-five thousand people in those stands, and a hundred million watch the Super Bowl every year. That’s how fun it is.”

“Five hundred million watched Neil Armstrong step on the surface of the moon. How fun is that?”

Warren scowled and sucked on his beer. “So what’s with the egghead papers? Got a point or just showing off?”

“Showing off?”

“You’re Mr. M.I.T and I’m Mr. G.E.D, right?”

Ellis frowned. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Fifty-eight years of practice, my friend. Hard to turn off.” Warren took another swig.

Ellis waited.

Warren looked at him and rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay—skip it. What’s this all about?”

Ellis laid the papers on the bar. “So, there was this guy in Germany back in the thirties, Gustaf Hoffmann, who published a theory reviewed in *Annalen der Physik*. That’s one of the oldest peer-reviewed scientific journals in the world. It’s where Einstein published his theories, okay? I’m talking important science here.”

Warren’s expression was one of labored patience.

“Anyway, it didn’t get much attention. Mostly because the math didn’t hold up, but basically he tried to show that time travel is not only possible but practical. I did one of my theses on Hoffmann, applying modern quantum theory on top of his concepts. Even after I turned in my dissertation, I continued to play with the idea and tweak the math. About two years ago I figured out what Hoffman did wrong.”

“That’s...that’s great, Ellis.” Warren nodded robotically. “Twisted and sad, but if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“You don’t understand. This theory—it’s really simple. Not the math—that was a bitch—but the final equation was like all good physics—simple and perfect. The best part is that it’s applicable. I’m talking about applied science, not just theory and conjecture. You know, like how Einstein came up with a theory and the guys on the Manhattan Project built the A-bomb. Well, that took years of research and development and tons of infrastructure and resources to make it a reality. This”—Ellis tapped the stack of pages—“is much easier, much simpler.”

“Uh-huh, and so...” Warren was quickly losing interest, although Ellis doubted he had much to begin with.

“Don’t you get it? This right here is a blueprint for a time machine. Wouldn’t you like to see the future?”

“Hell no. I’ve seen enough of the present to know what’ll happen. The last good thing society did together was kill Hitler.” Warren took another swallow and wiped his mouth.

“C’mon, are you telling me you don’t want to see how everything turns out?”

“That’s like wanting to stick around to see how jumping off a cliff turns out.” Warren smirked, shaking his head. “World’s going to shit. America’s like that old Buick of mine. The old gal is rustin’ out. China is gonna kick our ass. Everyone’s gonna be eating rice and carrying little red books.”

Now it was Ellis’s turn to smirk.

“You don’t think so, huh?” Warren said. “The problem is, we’ve gotten weak. The baby boomers and their kids have had it too easy. Spoiled brats, really. And they’re making the next generation even worse. Everyone wants their big houses and fancy cars, but no one wants to work for it. Hell, the only ones willing to work these days are the damn wetbacks.”

Ellis grimaced and looked across the bar at a table of Hispanics near the door. They either didn’t hear or didn’t care.

“You wanna use your indoor voice, Mr. Bunker? And you might consider joining the rest of us in the new millennium and use the revolutionary new terms of *Hispanic* or *Latino*.”

“What?” He looked toward the table near the door, and in a louder voice added, “I’m complimenting them. They’re good workers. That’s what I said.”

“Never mind.” Ellis rubbed his face with his hands. “We were talking about the future, remember?”

“Screw that shit. It’s gonna be some sort of apocalyptic hellscape or, worse, some kind of oppressive prison-world run by Big Brother from that Orson Welles story.”

“*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written by George Orwell. H. G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine*, and Orson was a director and actor.”

“Whatever. I’m just saying the future don’t look bright, my friend.”

Ellis wondered if Warren realized he was part of that same baby-boom generation he was pinning the downfall of civilization on. He didn’t think Warren would throw his own name in the spoiled-rotten hat, and maybe he was right not to. They both came from blue-collar families whose fathers had worked themselves into early heart attacks. Ellis had been lucky, Warren hadn’t.

Warren’s dream of playing professional football had died for good when he lost his fingers. He’d cut them off in the die-stamp press at work after removing the safety cover because it *was in the way*. Warren won a lawsuit on the grounds that the cover shouldn’t have been removable. Apparently Warren felt as entitled as the next guy—felt he deserved something after losing his fingers. His friend’s personal responsibility had evaporated with the lure of a big check.

“Now, if you can send me to the past, okay then,” Warren said. “Shit, the 1950s were a fucking paradise. America ruled the world and was a beacon of hope and freedom for everyone. Anyone who wanted to could achieve their dreams. People knew what they were supposed to do. Men worked; women stayed home and raised the kids.”

“Can’t go back. It doesn’t work that way. This Hoffmann fellow says you can only go forward. Well, you don’t *go* anywhere. You pretty much stay put and let time pass you by. It’s like when you go to sleep. You lie down, close your eyes, and *poof* it’s the next day. You just skipped over those seven or eight hours. But even if it were possible to go either way I’d still like to see the future.”

“And you will. Part of it, at least. We aren’t dead yet, right?”

Ellis took another swallow of his beer, thinking how strange it was that Warren had chosen those words—almost like a sign from God. He considered mentioning his pink slip from the Almighty, but when playing out the scenario in his head, he decided to keep quiet. Life in the Motor City didn’t invite men to be lippy with their feelings. One recession piled on another created strata of cold steel in the spines of its people. Like those who came before, rust-belt folks gritted their teeth, smoked, drank, and got by. They didn’t hug; they shook hands. And Ellis didn’t see the point in telling his best friend that he was dying. Bad enough that he had to walk around with that depressing bit of trivia.

“Anyway.” Ellis picked up the stack of papers and handed them to Warren. “I want you to keep this.”

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case it works.”

“Works? In case what works?” Warren’s eyes narrowed, then widened. “Oh, wait—so what are you saying? You’re thinking of doing this? Making a time machine?”

“More than thinking. I started building it right after I figured out Hoffmann’s mistake. I have it in my garage.”

It would be more accurate to say it *was* his garage, but he thought it best to keep this simple. Warren already had that knot in his brow like he was looking at a Magic Eye image and trying to see the three-dimensional object in the pattern.

“Is it—it’s not dangerous, is it?”

When he didn’t answer right away, Warren’s eyebrows went up. “Ellis, you’re a bright guy, the smartest I’ve ever known. You’re not thinking of doing something stupid, are you?”

Ellis shook his head. “Don’t worry. Probably won’t work. It’s just that...you know how you feel about not playing on the big fields?” He motioned to the game still on the television. “Well I never got my chance to be an astronaut, to reach space, walk on Mars. This could be like that, but I’m getting old and don’t have a lot of time left to do anything *important*—anything adventurous.”

“What about Peggy?”

Ellis drank from the fresh beer that had been making a puddle because Freddy had failed to put down a new napkin. He was tempted to ask, *Peggy who?*

“It might be for the best. I honestly think she’ll be relieved. A few years ago I mentioned we might consider moving to Texas. There was a great position opening up down there, and it would have meant more money and a big promotion for me. She said she couldn’t leave what little she still had left of Isley, but I could go if I wanted. She seemed disappointed when I stayed.”

“She still blames you?”

“With good reason, don’t you think?”

“Don’t beat yourself up. I would have done the same thing, you know.” Warren shook his head, his lips pursed like he just bit into a lemon. “Any man would.”

“Drop it, okay.”

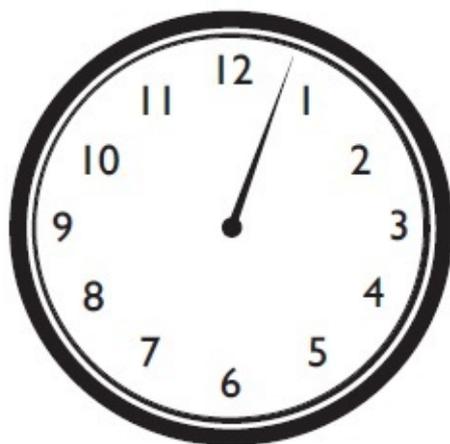
“Sure. Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it.” Raising his voice Ellis called to Freddy. “Hey, set me and my friend here up with a couple of shots of Jack. I feel like celebrating.”

Freddy poured, and when he was done, Warren raised his glass. “To a long life.”

Ellis picked up his. “To the future.”

They kissed rims and drank.



CHAPTER TWO

TIME TO GO

By the time Ellis got home, the reality of exactly what he was about to do had settled in, spoiling his initial excitement. He couldn't just leave. It wasn't right to walk out on Peggy like he was going for the proverbial pack of cigarettes. So they had drifted apart, so what? They still shared thirty-five years together and the woman deserved a proper goodbye. What if he made a mistake, if the wiring of Hoffmann was wrong and he—

What if she stumbles upon another body in the garage? I can't do that to her! Oh Jesus Christ! What am I thinking?

He needed to tell her, to explain. Maybe if he did, if she knew what it meant to him and how there might be a cure in the future, she would give him her blessing. Ellis was formulating his arguments when he realized the lights in the kitchen were still on. The grandfather clock in the hallway was just chiming eleven times. He was home earlier than usual, but for the last six years his wife had gone to bed every night by ten thirty.

So why are all the lights on?

They were on in the hall and living room too. They were on, and the television was off.

This is weird. Eerie even.

"Peggy?" he called. He peeked in the empty bathroom. "Peggy?" he called louder, and began climbing the stairs.

Strange and eerie turned into scary when he entered their bedroom, and she was still nowhere to be found. When he caught sight of the open jewelry box lying on the bed, everything finally made sense. She had discovered his little raid. Of course she had; he'd left everything out. The moment she went to dress for bed she would have seen the open box.

Oh shit! She thinks we were robbed! She's probably terrified and didn't want to be home alone. I hope she hasn't gone to the police. She wouldn't do that before talking to me, would she?

He pulled out his phone. There it was, a voicemail from Peggy. He tapped the icon and put it on speaker.

"El? Oh goddammit, El, pick up! Please pick up." Her voice quivered, and she was loud—not screaming, but frightened. *"I need to talk to you. I need to know what you're thinking."* A long pause

“I’m sorry, okay? Seriously, I am, and that was years ago. I don’t even know why I kept the letters. Just stupid is what it was. I’d honestly forgotten about them.”

“I know I should have told you. Jesus, I wish you’d just pick up. Listen, are you still at Brady’s? I’m driving over. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. We can talk then, okay? Please don’t be mad. It wasn’t Warren’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really. It just happened, and I know we should have told you, but...well...If you get this before I get there, don’t go anywhere or do anything crazy, okay?”

The message ended.

Ellis stared at the phone, his mouth open.

I don’t even know why I kept the letters.

He walked to the bed and the open jewelry box, remembering the Mother’s Day card, the ticket stub, some photos, poems, and letters. But they weren’t in the box anymore. The box was empty. He stared at it a moment, then realized he’d taken them.

Just stupid is what it was.

Ellis reached into his coat pocket.

I know I should have told you.

He took out the pile, letting the poems, photos, and even the ticket stub fall to the carpet. All that remained were the envelopes. The postmarks were from 1995, a few months after Isley’s death; the address was Peggy’s post-office box—the one she’d rented for her business correspondence; the handwriting was Warren’s.

It wasn’t Warren’s fault.

Ellis continued to stand there, stunned. After hearing a car, and thinking it might be Peggy, he took the letters and headed for the garage. Detached and set back against the rear fence of his yard the garage was a little house onto itself, the one place completely his. Since Isley’s death, Peggy never went there. Ellis needed time, and the garage was his own personal Area 51.



The interior didn’t look like a garage. With all the cables, it resembled an H. R. Giger sculpture. In the center sat the driver’s seat, which he’d torn from their old Aerostar minivan. The captain’s chair was mounted on a black rubber box with hoses snaking out of it, and the whole thing was surrounded by plastic milk crates. A dozen thick cables radiated from the shell like a spider web connecting copper plates, breakers, and batteries mounted on the walls and ceiling. What once had been a home for two cars now resembled the interior of the CERN Hadron Collider.

Despite all the equipment, a portion of one wall was left in its original condition where two ordinary-looking items hung. The first was a 1993 Ansel Adams calendar displaying black-and-white photos of Yosemite Valley. Isley had given it to Ellis for Christmas when his son had been just fifteen. Although filled with amazing pictures of waterfalls and mountains, Ellis had stopped turning the pages at September as that one was his favorite. September was also the month that Isley had died.

The second was a poster of the Mercury Seven. He’d had it since he was a boy, when it used to adorn his bedroom along with similar ones of the Apollo crews. When he found it in the attic while looking for more cabling, he couldn’t help pinning it up. A little faded, the picture showed the original seven astronauts introduced to the world on April 9, 1959, when Ellis had been almost three years old. Two rows of determined men in tinfoil spacesuits with white enamel helmets stared back. John Glenn and Alan Shepard were his favorites, with Shepard winning out not only because he was the first American in space, but also because he’d managed the feat on Ellis’s fifth birthday.

After entering the building, Ellis locked the door. He was having trouble breathing; the crackling

rustled in his chest again, only this time he wasn't certain if the difficulty was just because of his lungs. It felt like something else had shattered.

If someone asked Ellis if he loved his wife, he would have said yes, even though he wasn't exactly sure what that meant. Like trying to envision heaven, thoughts of love turned cheesy whenever he tried to focus on specifics. All those movies and song lyrics made it schmaltzy with overuse. Words like *wind beneath wings* and *completing one's self* were nice one-liners, but did anyone really feel that way? He didn't feel that way about Peggy, and he was pretty sure she didn't feel that way about him.

He had met Peggy at a party held by Billy Raymond, a friend of Warren's. They were six years out of high school, and Warren convinced him to go. His friend had been working at the assembly plant in Wixom, and Ellis just finished his first master's degree. Warren never had any problem getting girls, but Ellis always had a better chance of attracting lightning. So he was floored when Peggy talked to him. She was attractive, and it was good just to be noticed. They had seen each other on and off for a few months, then Peggy told him she was pregnant. She also admitted she was scared he would abandon her, the way Warren had left Marcia. Ellis didn't. He did the right thing—at least what he had thought was the right thing.

He and Peggy had never talked much. Ellis was working at GM, improving solar cells and battery efficiency, and Peggy devoted herself to Isley. He had been their common ground, a shared interest. But after he died, they were little more than strangers in the same house. So it came as a shock that his betrayal hurt so much.

Peggy might not have been his soul mate, but she had always been there. They counted on and trusted each other. If gravity failed, the speed of light was broken, and death and taxes disappeared there would still be Peggy, telling him to be home on time because it was Tuesday and they were having salmon for dinner. The letters in his hands were notices that the sun wouldn't be coming up anymore; the world was no longer spinning, and time had stopped.

Except it hadn't.

Peggy would be back to *talk*. He didn't want to talk to her; he didn't want to talk to anyone. He didn't want to see anyone. If anything, he wanted to disappear.

He looked over at the disembodied van seat surrounded by milk crates.

Time hasn't stopped, but it could—at least for me.

Ellis stood up, moved to the fuse box, and flipped the new custom-built breakers for each line—setting them to bypass. He could pull all the power he wanted from Detroit Edison, and it would flow until the wire melted or he tripped a safety switch at the substation, which he would do pretty quickly but not before he sucked the needed megawatts. The overhead lights dimmed noticeably as he drew power from the house's AC current. The garage hummed with a buzz similar to the noise heard when standing under a high-tension power line.

He took off his coat and stuffed it under the wrap of bungee cords. Everything else he needed was already there; it had been packed for months. He paused, looking around the garage, at the calendar—at his world. He felt alone, as if he stood in a desert; there was nothing anymore but the time machine—a single door at the end of a one-way corridor.

Ellis sat in the chair and set the milk crates in place. Through the grates, he could still make out the Mercury Seven poster. Was this how they felt climbing in the capsule and preparing to enter the unknown? They must have known nothing would ever be the same afterward, for them or the rest of the world.

He fastened his seatbelt.

Ellis picked up the tablet, turned it on, and swiped past the lock screen. He found the custom app he'd built and double-checked his numbers.

Don't go anywhere or do anything crazy, okay?

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