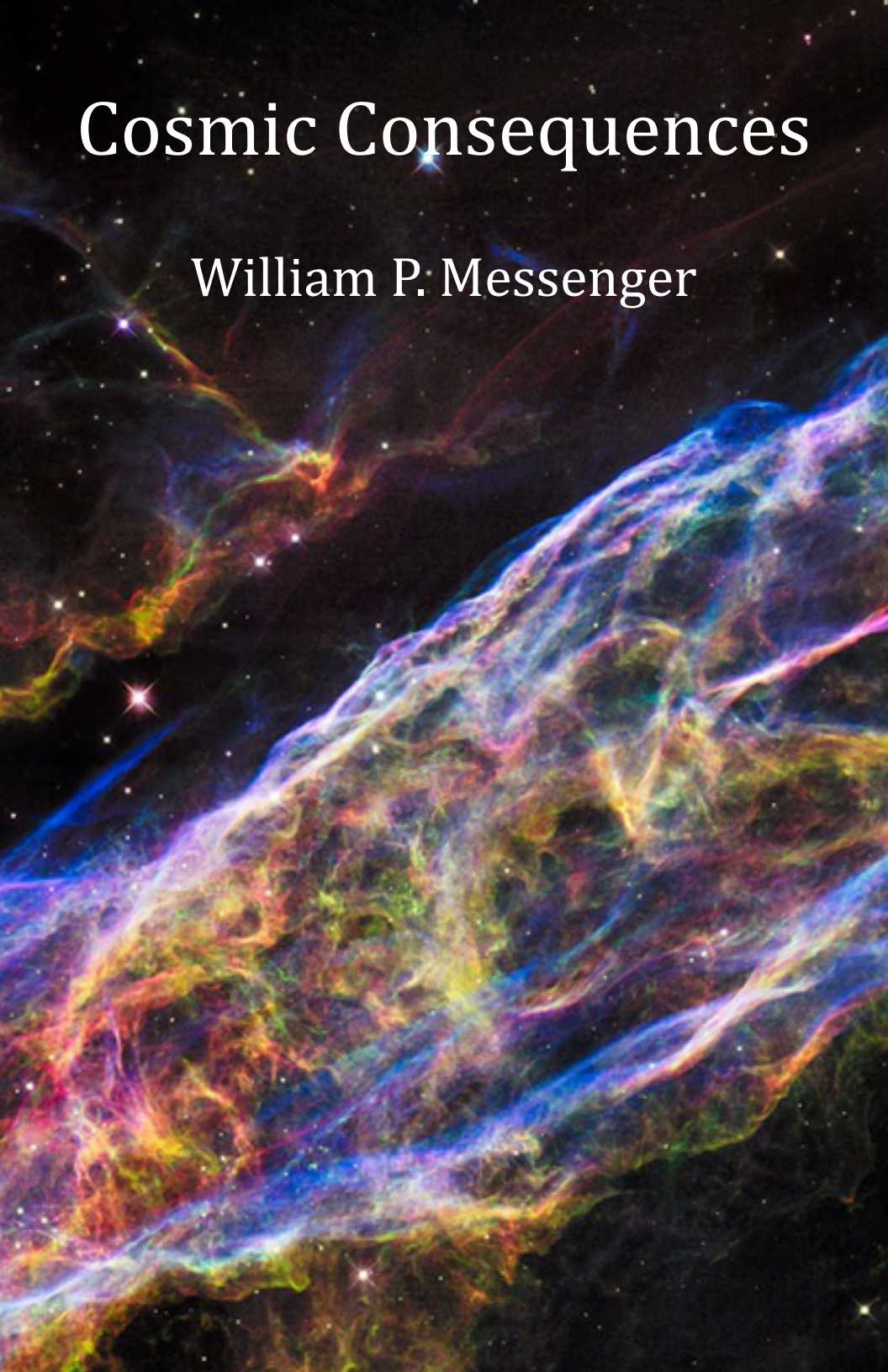


Cosmic Consequences

William P. Messenger



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First Printing

All characters in this work are fictitious.

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Dedication

Nunc scio quid sit Amor
"Now I know what love is"

Eclogues VIII

Sic itur ad astra
"Thus one journeys to the stars"
Aeneid

The two quotes above—both from the great poet, Virgil—come from different works. Linked together they suggest the power of love which is at the heart of this story: Once someone knows true love, they are willing to traverse the very heavens in its pursuit.

The task we all face is learning to recognize, know and embrace true love. I have been gifted with many wonderful people in my life who have guided me toward that recognition. It is with utmost gratitude and love that I dedicate this book to one such special person...

Edward Merchan

Not only is he a dear friend, but in writing this book he has been a muse of inestimable value. Thank you, Eddie.

Acknowledgments

The following people were of great assistance in bringing this story to a conclusion.

Marilyne Sherwood, Perry Leiker, Joe Will and David Kelsey read through each draft, proffering much appreciated improvements.

My thanks to **Barbara Fandrich** for editing this story.

Special thanks and gratitude go to **Danny Quevedo** for the Spanish translation

Frank Hicks and **The Merchan Family** who let me use their homes as writing studios.

Thanks to all of you.

CHAPTER 1

2224

My name is James and I know that however few or many, we all have regrets in life. They are a part of living, a part of learning. And if one truism emerges from all our experiences, it is that there are no do-overs. While we might seek to correct the mistakes of our past, we simply cannot undo them. Unless we can...

By the end of the last century diverse types of spacecraft had become almost as ubiquitous as airplanes were in the 20th and 21st. Although most individuals do not own their own vehicles, spaceships are nonetheless plentiful and easily available both for purchase and hire. It has become a method of travel that I am intimately familiar with, so this particular journey is not my first. But it is the longest and, more to the point, it is unsanctioned.

For the last several decades space travel has involved zipping around the Milky Way Galaxy, exploring a multitude of planets and civilizations that orbit distant stars. For most people such travels consume vacation periods and define an exciting and fully lived existence. Not for me. I want more from life. Even with 100 billion stars and countless planets, this galaxy is not enough. I dream beyond our many constellations. I dream of distant galaxies. I dream of worlds unseen. And I have been preparing to embark on a voyage never before attempted. As such I have been willing to take whatever risks are necessary. My goal? To change my outcome, my future, in another universe.

* * *

Once scientists realized that dark energy comprises 68 percent of the universe, they named it Quintessence, and the race was on to harness its power. From that pursuit the Q-Drive was born, its propulsion drawn from the tachyons that dark energy emits. It is an invention on par with the wheel, for it is foundational in enabling us to probe well beyond deep space. Its only limitation is the durability of the materials used to make spaceships, a constraint that has anchored and confined travel within the Milky Way. But research has been underway to solve that problem.

My twin brother, Spencer, is a scientist who works in a secret facility funded, in part, by the United States government. It is located at the western tip of the Mojave Desert, outside the city of Lancaster, CA. I also am a scientist. My field is theoretical physics and I teach at California Technical Institute in Pasadena, California.

Although we share many interests, Spencer is usually reticent when questioned about his job. On those few occasions when he deigns to answer my queries his responses are enigmatic. Nonetheless, in recent conversations he has felt comfortable enough to let me know that his company has been developing a spacecraft built with a material that is designed to eliminate the metal fatigue associated with the stress of FTL (faster than light) speeds. Of course, that is hardly a secret worth guarding since the general public assumes that such endeavors are ongoing at multiple facilities around the world. After all, every country wants to be the first to penetrate beyond the known reaches of space. And every aerospace company wants to be the one that builds the first ship that can get us there.

My most recent questions for Spencer were surreptitious at best. Still, I managed to learn as much as possible about his research, including the fact that the new spaceship is equipped with the latest advancements in Quintessence technology. My conversations with my brother tended to be one-sided—at least when it came to the sharing of intentions. For when determining my most personal decisions,

especially those that affect my future, I have always kept my own counsel. Having gathered the information I needed, I finally set my plan in motion—to commandeer the prototype ship called *Dauntless*.

In my sixty years I have had the opportunity to travel to hundreds of planets in the Milky Way and it never gets old. Every journey is a new adventure. Had I not concocted my current plan I might have contented myself with continuing those travels. But I looked back on a choice I made in my past that I deeply regretted. Unable to change it, I conceived the idea of altering that same decision for another me in an alternate universe. To do so I would have to travel to that other universe, to that other earth.

* * *

Spencer's job is located high in the desert—a twenty-minute drive north of Lancaster—about halfway to Tehachapi. The area was chosen because it is sparsely populated and neither Lancaster nor Tehachapi are tourist destinations. Still, the facility is rimmed with miles and miles of barbed wire fencing, to obscure its location and secure its classified status. There is only one gate for entering and exiting the facility.

I loaded my car with everything I would need for the journey and relied on my personality to get through the gate. I had only been to Spencer's office once before, and that was in daytime. Although I had never met the night guard, I had heard about him from my brother. I knew his name and that he was a very pleasant person, on good terms with all the employees. Of course, not knowing what kind of conversation took place between him and my brother, and not knowing when the last time was that they spoke, I would have to steer clear of any personal banter.

I lowered the window and greeted the guard. "Hello, Harvey," I said.

"Hey, Doctor. It's a little late for you to be working, isn't it?"

“Yes. But I forgot some papers in my lab. My project is so close to completion that I can’t afford any mistakes now.” I casually glanced around and said, “It’s awfully quiet tonight.”

“It sure is. And when it gets this way, my job is very lonely. I’m glad you came by. You’re the first person I’ve seen in more than two hours. How long you gonna be?”

“Probably not more than an hour. I need to pick up those papers and check a few calculations. Then I’ll call it a night. Other than the quiet, how are things, Harv?”

“Mostly it’s just quiet. But lately people sure have been excited about your new project.”

I corrected him. “More like exhausted,” I said. “But we’re ready to launch in the next week or so. Everything seems to be in order. That’s why there are very few people around right now. Anyway, I’d better get moving or it will be much more than an hour before I leave.”

“All right, Doc. See you later.”

My personality did not fail me and, thanks to the identical features I shared with my brother, Harvey harbored no suspicions and I made it through the gate. Still I felt bad for him. He would be looking for a new job in the morning.

Spencer was very committed to following the rules and I took care to do things the way he would. Therefore, I parked in his designated space even though there were empty spots closer to the door of his building. The facility used mostly facial recognition software for security. Even in 2224 it is far from foolproof. The engineers have not been able to program it to distinguish between identical twins. Given the number of twins in the world, that has not been a high priority. And that was fine with me. I took the items I packed for the trip and managed to enter my brother’s office with no difficulty.

What I needed were the security and command codes for the new spaceship and they would be in his safe which was locked with a password. For all his brilliance, Spencer never bothered securing his electronics with complex phrases or keys. The most important day in his life was his marriage. Knowing him as I do, I was sure that would be his password. I

input the date and sure enough it unlocked his safe, allowing me to retrieve the codes for the *Dauntless*.

Although the facility was almost empty, I took no chances. I exited another door, started up an electric cart and drove to the hangar where the prototype was parked.

I opened one of the hangar doors and had my first view of the *Dauntless*. It seemed to me that human imagination is not as unlimited as we are often led to believe. The ship was reminiscent of various shuttle craft and smaller spaceships that were depicted in science fiction movies and TV shows. But it was still unique and by any definition sleek. In some ways it was very understated. Far from cumbersome, it was so streamlined that it looked as if it could slice its way through space.

On the inside the *Dauntless* was a fully functioning prototype, spaciouly appointed, designed for a capacity of four, with plenty of room for moving around. Still, I had the distinct impression that the optimum complement was two people. In my case I was hoping that one would suffice. As furtively as possible, I fired up the engines and immediately engaged the cloaking device so that no one would see me exit the hangar as I piloted off into space.

* * *

For centuries the concept of a multiverse had been a staple of the science fiction genre, and indeed, it still is, both in books and film. When conceived as a mirror, an alternate universe proves a particularly entertaining construct, allowing actors to engage their best skills in portraying the same character with exact opposite mannerisms and personality traits. In the world of real science, however, the multiverse has been liberated from the confines of fantasy and entertainment, evolving from mere hypothesis to certainty. It is testable in the field of physics, bolstered by mathematical methodology, and is no longer consigned to the realm of metaphysics. But parallel universes are not mirrors of each other. They are duplicates in

which every action and event in one universe occurs in every other. The one distinctive characteristic? The multiverse did not evolve simultaneously.

A series of big bangs gave rise to a slight delay in the birth of each universe. But like our own, none of the origins were random. Whether resulting from a force of nature we do not yet comprehend, or guided by the hand of some deity, these big bangs occurred with remarkable precision. In cosmological time there was very little temporal delay, not unlike a string of firecrackers set to detonate in rapid, split-second succession. Measured by earth time, however, with our limited grasp of time and space, the big bangs are calculated to have occurred every ten years. At this period in human development it is impossible to discern which one came first. So, a fair assumption is that any given act we undertake has already occurred in a previous universe and will also occur in a later one.

* * *

My plan was not without complications. The first and most obvious one is that a fleet of spaceships would seek to intercept me, intent on recovering the prototype I stole. I did not think that would be too problematic, since I was counting on the advanced Q-Drive to easily outpace the pursuers. Also, I would obviously not be filing a flight plan, and no one would know where I was headed. Still, I needed to be cautiously aware.

The more serious issue was philosophical in nature. If parallel universes are exact copies of one another, what complexities would I be injecting into cosmological reality, and what impact would that have on at least the two universes I would inhabit, if not also all later developing universes?

I do not want to sound apathetic, but I could not allow myself to be deterred by such concerns. Up to now I had had a good life. I had made mistakes like everyone. Some of them were even costly. But there was one that stood out. It impacted

me in ways I did not anticipate and deprived me of my greatest joy. Since I could not change that, I decided to convince another me to make a different choice in his life. I did not want him to be dispossessed of that same joy. And after all, one person altering one decision could not be that significant to the individual universe or the multiverse as a whole. In any case, I had made up my mind.

* * *

Spencer did not exaggerate the design or abilities of the *Dauntless*. I was not fully prepared for its speed or maneuverability, but my previous experience with the Q-Drive enabled me to learn quickly. I never became aware of the pursuit that I was certain was occurring in my wake.

The Q-Drive itself was a spectacular invention. Its reality was so different from the way movies and TV portrayed super speed in previous generations. Outside the window of my spaceship was not the succession of lights that one sees in many a science fiction film—stars zipping by, trailed by tails of light as the crew passes through space at some super speed. The Q-Drive creates a very different reality. The stars do not provide a cosmic fireworks display. They disappear into blackness so that there is no light at all.

At this speed, gazing into space is a lonely call to introspection. I had experienced this many times while traversing the galaxy. But this was going to be a much longer trip, and I wondered if such extreme exposure to the dark would be difficult to endure or have a percussive effect on my mental faculties. At the end of this prolonged and blackest of nights would I still comprehend the mission I was on? Would I experience self-doubt, or would I be imbued with a deeper strength of fortitude to see it through?

I was seeking a specific, newer universe with the intention of altering a choice I had already made in my own. At the beginning of the journey I found myself asking over and over again how I was going to persuade my other self to change

his course of action. I realized I would have to frame the discussion philosophically, delving deeply into the core question of what he wanted out of life. That is a question no one finds easy to answer. But pursuing it is what refines our choices and potentially leads to gratification.

Of one thing I was certain: everyone desires happiness and fulfillment. For most of my life I had that. But ten years ago, I missed out on my greatest opportunity for love because of a nagging insecurity and subsequent blunder. I did not want my other self in this younger universe to make that same mistake.

I reflected back on the experiences of my life which, not coincidentally, were the same experiences of this other self, with the exception that I had ten additional years on him. And I wondered. If I were successful in convincing him to alter course how much different would his next ten years be? This was a journey in pursuit of love. And even though I would not experience it, my hope was that he just might.

* * *

I learned romance from my mother and father. Kind and loving toward everyone, they were also very much in love with each other. No relationship is perfect, of course, and I can recall hearing them argue—although those memories do not break through my consciousness until my late teens. Their generosity toward others was born of their love for each other. There was nothing that one would not do for the other, no matter the cost. Our family was poor, but we were embraced by the joy of love.

And yet for me, the romance I learned from my parents was complicated by the fact that I was gay, and the love I desired could never be open. At least not at the time I came to terms with my orientation, certainly not when I was young. This was what previous generations described as the love that could not be spoken. The ignorance and intolerance of society imprisoned this passion in the shadows. But there is only one love. It is at the core of one's being, and it is the same for all of us, regardless of orientation.

Gay and lesbian people are frequently queried about their sexual orientation with the interrogative, "When did you first know?" The vast majority reply, "I always knew." Some who are unprepared for the question might claim that they became aware in high school. But most people know from a very early age, long before puberty, long before they possess the language to explain it. Although they might dabble in accepted social convention, same sex attraction is inherent in who they are.

As I grew up, and especially when entering into adolescence, the signals were there. I communicated more with my mother in those years than I did with my father. Yet despite the openness of our conversations we never discussed my orientation. For a long time, I thought she did not know. But as I look back, I suspect that she both lived and died in denial. As I said, the signals were there. I went to an all-boys high school, a Catholic seminary. I would tell my mom about my friends. And even though I carefully couched my words, she must have been able to sense the romantic attraction I felt toward some of them. My parents were, after all, my role models. My mother must have seen that my experience was similar to, yet different from, my siblings. In my case it had to remain closeted. It is true that the rules of the Catholic Church preventing priests from marrying provided a convenient cover. Still, she must have suspected. If so, she never let on. Both she and my father died without ever talking about who I really was—at least not to me. After a few years of priesthood, I would leave ministry to seek a career in theoretical physics, but I would still be without the fulfillment that had eluded me through adolescence and young adulthood.

On this journey time was both friend and foe. As friend it gave me the freedom and space to recall the many good experiences of my life, especially my love for Thomas. He was the reason for this cosmic excursion. As foe, time spawned anxieties of possible failure: the fear that this quest would change nothing in the alternate universe; that I would have lost even more of my own time in pursuit of a passing dream.

CHAPTER 2

Even greater than the challenge of altering a decision in an alternate universe was the task of getting there. I would need to travel through Sagittarius A*, the black hole at the center of the Milky Way Galaxy.

At the center of every galaxy is a black hole. At the center of every large galaxy is a supermassive black hole. Regardless of size each one serves as a portal to the multiverse—a hub that enables access to the same galaxy in each identical universe. But to find the right exit point required a precise angle of entry. I kept close watch on the instrument panel as I approached Sagittarius A* in case I needed to make any last minute adjustments. If all my study and computations were correct, I would be able to use this black hole to enter the universe that began ten years after my own.

For decades disagreement existed among scientists as to what would happen if someone entered a black hole. Since there is no way to peer inside, various mathematical formulas and computer simulations were utilized to make educated guesses—all of them ending in death. For there was no escape. These theories were significantly more sophisticated than the anxiety that gripped ancient Europeans regarding the earth's surface. Magellan dispelled their fear of falling off the edge of the world when he circumnavigated the globe. Not that I consider myself a modern-day Magellan, but the reference is apt. Even with the earlier iterations of the Q-Drive, no one had ventured near, let alone inside, this stellar phenomenon. And yet, it was my only possible means of escaping this galaxy, this universe.

* * *

The first noticeable change I experienced came as I flew closer to the edge of Sagittarius A* and approached the event horizon. The darkness that had accompanied me through the vastness of the Milky Way surrendered to a strange light. It was actually more of a glow than a light. I could see stars that had drifted too close to the black hole disintegrating in its gravitational pull, their dust spinning off into a ghostly haze. As I entered, I was devoured by a darkness so intense it was off the visible spectrum. It occurred to me that in telling my story I might need a new definition of black.

As I ventured deeper into the star I was also struck by an eerie silence. Throughout my voyage, when not listening to music, only the hum of the Q-Drive kept the sound of my own thoughts at bay. Perhaps the black hole was playing tricks with my senses, but when I entered, I could no longer hear the engines of the *Dauntless*.

Deeper into darkness and silence I flew. I recalled another ancient fear: dragons of myth and legend supposedly lurking in uncharted territory ready to consume travelers who ventured too far from home. The ancients, of course, were greeted merely by an ever-receding horizon, until they once again sighted land.

My fear was not crossing the edge of the black hole. Bridging the event horizon was almost predictable. Nor was I concerned about becoming food for mythical beasts. But I did wonder. What awaited me as I approached the center—the singularity? If I were to die, I would be crushed and swallowed by a gravity far more dangerously destructive than a dragon. Still, all the speculation of science was just that. I had no answers.

I was traveling at such super speed that it was difficult to reference my experiences. In the heart of Sagittarius A*, there are no landmarks. As a result I had no specific awareness of when I entered the center of the star. But at some point, I felt like I was drifting—afloat in a vast, unfathomable existence. Even my mind became unfocused. It was as if some entity had

infiltrated my being and taken control of my powers of intellect and perception.

For some time I was not sure where I was. If I had been taken over by some alien being, I was clearly easy prey, for I had no power to resist. It seemed as if I was simply slipping into some unknown realm. When I emerged from the singularity, I checked the ship's instruments and discovered that the sensation had lasted only moments. My best guess is that the center of a black hole is a perfect demonstration of the relativity of time. Apparently, its gravitational pull is so powerful that it also speeds up time. Even more than FTL speed.

Regaining my bearings and my senses I approached the other side of the star, another event horizon, with no certainty as to what lie ahead. Where, and in what time would I exit? I trusted my calculations. Departing the black hole, I was once again in common darkness. I continued to travel for quite some time, before slowing the Q-Drive and searching the expanse of space. Relief filled me when I realized I was exactly where I expected to be. This was, indeed, another universe. More than that, I took immense comfort in the fact that I recognized the stars of my home galaxy. With confidence, I set course for a younger earth.

I had traversed an inestimable distance of space, passing beyond the boundary of my universe, into the next, to find myself in another Milky Way Galaxy where the target earth was located. Although I was traveling faster than any human previously had, it was by any measure a long journey.

I was grateful that there was no need for the hibernation pods or chambers frequently depicted in timeworn science fiction films. Advanced technology allowed for normal wake and sleep patterns even over such long distances. While I appreciated my waking times of reflection and recollection, I treasured the hours of the night and the dreams that had propelled this journey—romantic dreams awaiting fulfillment. When I reached my destination I was as alert and rested as if I had just stirred from a good night's sleep.

* * *

Los Angeles

On approaching Los Angeles, my first concern was anonymity. More accurately, it was invisibility. I only wanted to impact one life on this planet, and so needed to avoid interacting with others. One concern was that the people of this earth would never have seen a spaceship like the one I was piloting. Fortunately, the *Dauntless* was fully equipped with the most advanced technologies. Even before entering earth's solar system I engaged the newest of cloaking devices. But where to set down remained a problem. A cloaked ship might be invisible, but it was not impervious to contact. Then again, Los Angeles has a river.

The Los Angeles River contained water only in rare times of heavy rain, and I was arriving in the early spring following a very dry winter. The riverbed was not a hotspot of activity so I was fairly certain no one would detect the cloaked *Dauntless* parked right in the middle.

I found a safe place, and after securing the ship, I exited and headed to the home of Jimmy Hoffenberg. I knew, of course, where he lived. I had lived at the exact same address at the age of fifty on my own earth. Over the course of my life I had been called James, Jim and Jimmy, along with a few names that are best not repeated. He and I would need to decide how to address each other in order to maintain a helpful distinction.

CHAPTER 3

As I approached the house, I saw no reason for disguise. It was the middle of the evening, and even if some neighbors were to notice me, I would most likely not be recognized. There were ten years separating my two selves. If I were seen, chances are I would be mistaken for an older relative.

I rang the bell and could have counted, with an almost uncanny precision, the number of seconds it would take before the door opened.

Jimmy started to greet me, then caught himself, clearly uncertain of what he saw. "Who are you?" he asked.

"That's going to take a while to explain. But let me assure you that your eyes are not deceiving you. My name is Jim and I have something very important to discuss with you. May I come in?"

With understandable hesitation he answered, "Yes." Then he stepped aside allowing me to enter.

After he closed the door, he invited me to sit down. Jimmy was not the only one experiencing discomfort. As I looked around the room, a host of memories came flooding back. This had been my home. The furniture and decor were the same; the bookshelf arranged exactly the way it was when I was fifty. Even the liquor cabinet matched mine: a modest collection of single malt scotches, a bottle of Pinch, and a bottle of Beefeater gin. There was even a bottle of sweet vermouth and some cheap scotch for making Rob Roys. It was, indeed, similar to the experience of coming home after a long vacation.

I was about to continue my introduction when he spoke.

"You said your name is Jim. And you look very much like me. Are you some kind of doppelgänger?"

I had had a long time to plan this interaction. Now, in the moment, it seemed far more surreal than I had expected. Almost ethereal.

I took a deep breath and responded. "I told you it would take a while to explain. My name is Jim. Jim Hoffenberg, in fact. And I'm not your doppelgänger. I'm you. That is to say I'm you ten years from now."

"You mean you're from the future?" he asked suspiciously. "Some sort of time traveler?"

"Not exactly. I am from the future, just not yours."

"Then how?" he began to ask. But I raised my hand and stopped him.

"Tell me," I said. "How much do you know about parallel universes?"

"Well, I'm a theoretical physicist at Cal Tech. But I guess you already know that. I've studied mathematical models that indicate the existence of parallel universes, but that is not my area of expertise." He cleared his throat and continued, still a little skeptical. "If I understand you correctly, you're trying to tell me that the multiverse is not just theoretical. You're telling me it's real."

"I am," I answered. He had been watching me intently, so I said, "Don't just take my word for it. Trust your own eyes. What do you see?"

We each have the same friend in our respective universes who constantly speaks about the uniqueness of the human face, commenting on the fact that it is a relatively small palate and yet no two people look exactly alike. Other than the modest changes contributed by ten years of age, when Jimmy looked at me, he saw himself staring back.

"I'm not sure what I see," he responded. "As a scientist I know that seeing is not always believing. You certainly look like me, but we live in a world where illusion rules the day. With the right makeup, almost anyone can be made to look like someone else. The movie industry can even change the visage of an actor's age—younger or older—by decades. So seeing you sitting here is not completely convincing."

"What would convince you?" I asked.

"Tell me something about my life that no one else is likely to know."

I thought back to our childhood. Distilled through the portal of time, it is the part of life most often forgotten. “Do you remember when you were four years old and your grandmother was living with you?”

“Of course,” he replied.

“One day she was scrubbing the kitchen floor on her hands and knees. You watched closely as she worked and then said, ‘You missed a spot.’ It was hard work and she was tired. She grew angry and started arguing with you. Your mother came in and said, ‘Stop this.’ Then turning to your grandmother she continued, ‘Mom, who’s the child here? You’re an adult. Just ignore him.’”

“That’s fine, but hardly private. It’s very possible that other people have heard that story.”

“Yes. But what no one else could know is that you actually *don’t* remember that event. You only know of it because your mother shared the story with you. Another thing. That phrase— ‘Just ignore him?’ It became a mantra for your mother. She used it for years whenever you irritated someone, especially your sisters and brother. Oh, and let me add, you irritated them often.”

I could see that I was beginning to make some progress, but he remained wary. He proceeded to question me further. “As I said, the multiverse is not my area of expertise. But even if it is real, each universe is so vast, how could you possibly come from an alternate one?”

I replied, “At the center of our two galaxies is a black hole called Sagittarius A*. It is the gateway that links our universes. In your universe you have spaceships that can travel faster than light. But in mine we have a new ship that makes those look like airplanes. I used that ship to travel through the black hole.”

“Where is this ship?” he asked.

“Safe. For now. But don’t ask to see it.”

“Why not?”

"Your universe does not yet possess the requisite technology. I cannot risk exposing you to a future you're not ready for."

"Then explain your being here. What's the purpose?"

This seemed like the right time to make a request of my own.

"Your—our—favorite scotch is Pinch. Why don't you pour us each a glass? I'll explain things as we drink." Pinch was one of only a few blended scotches to survive into the 23rd century, its primary rival still being Johnnie Walker Black. But for my taste Pinch has the edge.

Jimmy stood up and walked to the bar. I could see that he still possessed a myriad of doubts, each one coupled with a question. But for the moment he was prepared to keep most of them to himself.

From the bar he asked, "If we are going to continue this conversation, what should we call each other? I presume you use the same name as I do in your universe."

God, I thought. He really *is* me. His comment carried just a hint of sarcasm. It had been a defining characteristic of my youth and I thought I had outgrown it by the age of fifty. I guess not.

"Well," I said. "Today most people call me Jim. Why not do the same? And, if it's all right with you, I'll call you Jimmy."

He poured a healthy amount into each glass—something I would have done—brought them back and handed one to me. "Here, Jim. I don't know what kind of toast to offer. I don't usually drink while looking in a mirror."

"Then let me make the toast," I suggested. He acceded and I held up my glass, looked at him, then said, "May this trip not be in vain."

We sat for a few moments in silence, taking measure of each other and sipping our drinks. Pinch was as good as ever—smooth, creamy, excellently balanced—the perfect scotch in any universe. In any time. It was clear why it had long been my favorite. As I sat there, I couldn't believe that I did not bring one with me to offer as a gift. It might have made the introductions

a little easier. Jimmy's mind was still grappling over what to make of my story. I could not blame him. To most people it would sound totally fantastic and unbelievable. We had one advantage in that we were both scientists. Nonetheless, he was being asked to accept something that did not come to him gradually, through the rigors of scientific study or experiment. This was an unanticipated shock to his reality, and I needed to give him time to process.

After a short while he asked, "Jim, just what is the purpose of your trip?"

That question brought me to the heart of the matter, but I wasn't quite ready to address it. I didn't think either of us was fully at ease yet. I also thought it was important to secure a level of trust.

"Jimmy, when I told you that the multiverse is real, you didn't seem too disoriented."

"I'm a scientist. If what you say about yourself really is true, then we both are. And as you know, scientists are trained to keep an open mind. I have always been intrigued by the possibility of the multiverse, but I have never examined it in any detail."

I started to smile, and Jimmy asked, "Did I say something amusing?"

"No," I replied. "I was just thinking about how bizarre this entire conversation is. Until the moment we met this evening, your life has been an exact duplicate of mine. If I ask you a question, I already know the answer. But if you don't mind indulging me, I do have a few things I would like to inquire about."

He cocked his head and gestured for me to continue.

"What do you want out of life?"

His gaze drifted off, a look of affection filling his eyes, a genteel smile parting his lips. Altogether a perfect picture of love. I knew why, of course. He had asked that same question of someone in his own life. My asking it caused that person to leap to the forefront of Jimmy's mind.

Before he could answer I decided to particularize my query. "What would you say is missing in your life? What regrets do you have?"

"That's a bit broad," he said. "On a superficial level, I sometimes think I would have liked to have become a professional singer. At least I wish the barbershop quartet I had in college had performed professionally."

"Like when you tried to convince the others to sing at Disneyland," I suggested.

"Yes. But Terry always said we weren't good enough. And in hindsight he was right. We were all trained in choral singing. And although our harmonies were good, we did not draw out the various notes, alter the tempos, or bring a personal interpretation to the songs the way good quartets do. And we lacked choreography, even simple movement. Still, it would have been fun."

This was not a consequential memory, but it was a start. He clearly was willing to share his recollections. And the previous wandering of his attention assured me that I could probe deeper.

I took a long drink of my scotch and said, "Jimmy, I know that the five years we spent in the priesthood were meaningful, even, to a point, fulfilling. But we left ministry when we were thirty-one to study science. In the last nineteen years, what would you say is missing in your life?"

"I guess you're talking about love. But you already know everything I'm going to say." I nodded my head. And he continued, "Then why ask?"

"I came here for a specific reason. Before I tell you what it is, I want both of us to be in touch with your deepest desires. The same ones that consumed me when I was your age."

"OK, Jim. The thing missing in my life is love. I would like to be in a relationship, one that leads to marriage."

"And you've met someone," I prodded.

"You're talking about Thomas. The most lovely and unique person I have ever met."

“Yes,” I answered. “Thank God for the internet. It’s a modern-day version of the mail-order bride—or husband. But what are you going to do about it? Are you going to pursue this relationship?”

“You already know the answer. So why are you asking?”

“Well, Jimmy, we have now arrived at crux, the very reason for my visit.”

CHAPTER 4

I suggested another drink and Jimmy willingly obliged. As he went to the bar, I stood up and walked around the room. I was captivated by the decor and overcome with a touch of nostalgia. In my own universe I had recently moved to a new house and much of my artwork was still in storage. Here on his wall was a collection of signed and framed Paul Conrad cartoons, invoking themes of justice and peace. During his time as the editorial cartoonist for the *Los Angeles Times*, Conrad won three Pulitzer Prizes and four RFK Journalism Awards. As I stood there, I recalled Conrad's passion for truth. I found it comforting that his work was powerful and evocative throughout the multiverse. A certain idealism stirred deep within me and strengthened my resolve. I was ready for the ensuing conversation.

After being handed my drink we sat down again. I gestured around the room and laughingly said, "I like what you've done with the place." Turning serious I continued, "What are you going to do about Thomas?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Jimmy, you're fifty years old, you have a good job and a nice home. By any measure you have a good life. That is something I would know better than anyone, since it was exactly my life up to ten years ago. But because we are the same person, I also know what you want more than anything else."

"Come on Jim," he replied. "If you really are me, then there is no need to be coy or cryptic. As you said, I've had a good life. I have achieved most everything that I wanted. And as you know I have only one dream left."

"Yes," I interjected. "You want to marry Thomas." I sat back in my chair, raised my eyebrows and asked, "But what are you going to do about it?"

"You know the answer without asking," he replied.

"I know *my* answer. But this is not a history lesson and I'm not looking for facts. I want you to express how *you* feel. Even if those feelings are the same as mine were at your age." I looked him dead in the eye and added a little gravitas to my voice as I continued, "It's important that you give voice to what you keep buried. Not just your desire. Your feelings. Because I think that my presence here can lead you to a different outcome from mine." I leaned forward, intensified my gaze and asked, "Tell me. Why do you want to marry Thomas?"

"Why does anyone want to get married?"

That was a non-answer.

I insisted further, "Jimmy, don't deflect. Answer me."

He took a very deep breath and said, "I want to marry him because I love him more than anyone I've ever met. Thomas delights in life and finds great joy in other people, always making them feel at ease. His world is bigger than himself and he often sees what others do not. He is particularly keen to recognize when someone is in trouble, and he responds freely with a deep and loving compassion even if it puts his own work in jeopardy." He paused and then added, "And I want to marry him because I feel differently when I'm around him. I don't care what we're doing. I don't care if we do anything at all. I just feel..."

"Complete?" I proposed.

"Oh please, Jim. You sound like Tom Cruise in the *Jerry McGuire* movie."

"I didn't mean it in the cursory way it was portrayed on film. What I mean is that Thomas really is the other part of you. He's what's missing in your life. What some people might call your better half." Then, to inject just a touch of humor I added, "Mind you. I'm saying that even though I'm sitting right here in front of you!"

"Jim, you're not my better half," he responded, somewhat annoyed. "You're me—albeit apparently from a different universe." Then with an authoritative punctuation, "It's not the same."

"Of course it's not," I acknowledged. "But it is absolutely true about him. He is your better half."

Almost plaintively, and with a distant gaze, he replied, "Yes, he is. And there's more. He makes me a better person. I'm more tender and caring when we're together, less of a smart ass. I like the way I feel, the way I am when I'm around him. I don't have any pretensions. It's the way I would like to be all the time."

"Do you make him a better person?" I asked.

"That's not for me to say. I certainly hope so. But I guess you'd have to ask him or his family and friends. I do think I've made some difference in his life."

"OK," I continued. "It's clear that you want to marry him. I think you need to voice that desire. You need to share those deepest feelings."

"I have." Jimmy said. "I've told him that I love him and that I want to marry him. I've also told my family, and some of his family. And I've told my closest friends."

I closed and squinted my eyes for a few moments before continuing, "But now I want you to express what you *haven't* said."

I could see in his eyes that Jimmy was growing frustrated. Probably more with himself than me. Still, I was the one pushing the conversation. With exasperation he blurted out, "I'm afraid. OK? I want to go visit him, but...I'm afraid."

"Ah," I responded. "Now that is something I did not say in my universe—to anyone. At least not for a few more years. But tell me. Why are you afraid? And forget about the fact that I already know. This is an exercise in the power of truth and love. These things need to be said aloud if love is going to win."

Jimmy took another drink and said, "Thomas lives in Buenos Aires. It is a place I've always wanted to visit—as a tourist. But if I go see him, I will not be on vacation. I will be staying with his family. They don't speak English and my Spanish is slightly better than pathetic."

"There's more," I suggested.

"Yes. There is. Although I'm very much in love with him, I'm not confident in myself. And I'm not convinced that he could love me enough to marry me."

"Meaning?" I inquired.

"I don't think I look good enough—physically."

With incredulity I asked, "Do you really think Thomas is that superficial?"

"Of course not, Jim," he answered. "But maybe I am. I could certainly stand to lose a little weight. Also, I'm beginning to show my age. I'm ten years his senior, and he once told me that he didn't see himself dating an older man, let alone marrying one."

"Don't believe it, Jimmy. And don't sell yourself short. Thomas hasn't been in a relationship or been with anyone for a long time. He has no idea what you have to offer him. He thinks he does. But he really doesn't." I paused for a moment and then continued, "Describe this love that so consumes you."

He let his gaze wander off again. This time as if magically invoking Thomas's presence. The same half smile I saw earlier again parted his lips, and his eyes glowed once more with the same reflection of true love. I could almost see his heart swell within him, full as it is of pride and passion. This was beyond what one would find in a romance novel or even in the profound musings of poets. In his own mind he actually *was* conjuring Thomas. This was no magician's trick. It sprang from a well of overwhelming love. Playing out before me was a scene I had enacted so many times in my own universe. This was not the emotion of fiction or infatuation. Something far more cosmic was unfolding here, as, indeed, it had for me.

Jimmy retrieved his attention from that brief distraction and said, "I have never even come close to loving anyone this much. Early in our relationship he asked me to marry him. But that was only so that he could get a green card. Of course, I said no. In the intervening years, though, I have come to realize that I do want to marry him. Not for any benefit of citizenship, but for the fulfillment of the human heart."

I was taken by his expression. "The fulfillment of the human heart," I echoed. "That," I assured him, "is a beautiful phrase. Much better than saying you feel complete."

He held up his glass. I wasn't sure if he was toasting my insight or imagining his wedding. Either way I obliged and lifted my glass toward him.

"You've come a long way, Jimmy. And I can assure you that in my universe also, Thomas is as lovely and wonderful as you say. But he is uncertain of what true love is. That's why you need to go. You have something to offer him that he won't find anywhere else. If you don't go now, he will end up searching elsewhere. And it will take a long time for him to realize what the two of you will have missed."

Just then he furrowed his brows and shot forth with a flurry of questions. "Why is this so important to you, Jim? Why are you really here? What happened in your universe? What happened between you and Thomas?"

"I can't tell you. At least I can't tell you everything."

He responded with conviction and determination, "It doesn't take any great insight to figure out that you did not go to Buenos Aires in your universe. I want to know. Did you and Thomas ever marry?"

"The less I tell you, the better," I replied. "There are potential ramifications for your universe if I let you see into your future."

"Isn't your being here already a ramification?"

"Yes. But I'm trying to right a single wrong. I just want you to change one thing. No matter what you decide, there are many possible outcomes. However, if you choose to follow my advice, I figure everything else will work out. Still, the less I tell you about what happened in my universe, the less complicated your decision will be. Let me just say that you need to go. And the reason I'm here now, is that you need to go now. You have a tailor-made opportunity. Thomas is about to have a serious surgery. Go to him, Jimmy. In fact, don't even tell him. Just show up at the hospital and be at his bedside when he wakes up."

He smiled and said, "Now that's romantic. But how am I supposed to get into his hospital room?"

"For God's sake. We're the same person. I should not have to do your thinking for you. You still have your priest's clothes. Put on a suit and Roman collar. You'll be able to get into his hospital room without any trouble."

"But why is it so critical that I go now? Thomas is just having oral surgery. It's not life threatening."

"Just oral surgery?" I asked. "You should look up what the operation entails."

"He told me about it," Jimmy replied. "He even sent me some of the pictures, outlines and diagrams that the doctor used to explain the surgery."

I started to laugh. "I can't believe that I was like you ten years ago. You speak so matter-of-factly, as if nothing is complicated, as if you have all the information. The surgery is called maxillofacial reconstruction. Don't you think that if it were a simple surgery there would be a simpler name for it? He's going to spend a few weeks with his mouth wired shut, taking only liquid nourishment. You should be there to take care of him; to blend his food and help him drink. To talk to him, read to him, sing to him. Just to be there with him."

At that moment the doorbell rang.

"You get the door," I said. "I'll pour another scotch."

CHAPTER 5

He opened the door and almost gasped. I heard him ask, “Who the hell are *you*?”

I peeked around the door frame to see someone who looked very much like us, only older.

“This must seem very strange to you,” the newcomer replied, “but I can explain everything and maybe even dispel your dismay. Do you mind if I come in?”

Jimmy stepped aside to let him enter. As he did so he said, “You are not the first person who looks like me to come here tonight. I’m not so much dismayed as I am a little disoriented.”

I returned from the bar to see this new visitor. Although I did not know where he came from or why, I suspected problems were about to ensue. The evening was certainly going to get more complicated, but I decided to take this development in stride—even to the point of trying to control how things would unfold. I was not about to surrender the influence I was beginning to develop over Jimmy.

I entered the room and said with a smile, “Well, it looks like we’re going to have a party. I’ll get another scotch. Don’t say anything important until I get back.”

It took less than a minute to pour the third drink. I walked back into the room and handed a glass to each doppelgänger. As I approached the newest member I said, “Let me guess. Your name is Jim Hoffenberg.” I stepped back and looked him over head to foot. I noticed that he also did not bring a bottle of Pinch with him, but did not comment on that. Instead I continued, “This should be quite interesting. By the way, to make things easy we already agreed that our host would be called Jimmy and I would be called Jim. Do you have a preference?”

“Call me James,” he answered drily.

Jimmy spoke up, "I can't be quite so cavalier about this. Just how many more of you are going to show up? This is beginning to resemble a narcissism convention."

So he did possess a sense of humor, after all! I thought.

I turned to the newest member of our group and motioning between myself and Jimmy said, "We know each other and where we're from. And since you look older than us, I suspect you also know who we are. Why not introduce yourself to us? Tell us where you're from."

He replied, "You already know my name. I come from a universe older than either of yours." Then, specifically addressing me, he said, "I have come here to prevent you from altering Jimmy's future."

"Oh really?" I asked. "That's not exactly why I'm here. I came here to convince him to make a different decision from one that I made, that I can assume we both made in our own lives—"

"And that will alter his future," he interrupted. Then he shook his head, smiled at me, and continued, "Don't try to be so clever. The problem with this conversation is that each of us is the same person. I know your penchant for splitting hairs, and you should know that it will not work on me. You came here to convince Jimmy to make a choice that you and I did not make. A choice that will change his future."

"No," I insisted. "His future is not yet written."

He contradicted me: "Of course it is, Jim. The multiverse consists of many universes—exact duplicates of each other. The unwritten future occurred in the very first universe. The rest have followed suit. And as such Jimmy must make the same decisions in life that you and I did."

"Then he has no free will," I argued.

"He most certainly does," James answered. "Just as you and I did. He still has that same freedom. He will be confronted with choices. The point is, he will make the same choices that we did. Not because it's predetermined, but because it's what he *chooses* to do. It's not really that complicated. Unfortunately,

you muddled the whole process by coming here. That was not supposed to happen.”

“And yet, you’re here, too,” I replied.

“Wait a minute,” Jimmy interjected. “I’m confused and getting a little dizzy.” Turning to James he continued, “How did you even know that Jim came here?”

“That doesn’t matter,” James answered. “The only thing that matters is that I’m here to stop him. And now that the two of you have talked, I guess I’m here to stop both of you.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said with a hint of sarcasm. “You’re some kind of time cop.”

“No. But I possess the same powers of persuasion as you and I can argue just as effectively. I intend to make a convincing case and use my skills to counter your plan.”

Jimmy put up his hands and said, “Time out.” Then addressing James he continued, “Before this gets too convoluted, I still want to know how you knew Jim was here.”

James paused as if deliberating how much information to divulge. Then he simply said, “I could sense something in the multiverse.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “Maybe we shouldn’t call you James after all.”

“Meaning?” he asked.

“Perhaps we should call you Obi Wan Kenobi,” I answered.

They both ignored my cynicism and Jimmy continued to direct his comments to James. “You say you sensed something in the multiverse. How is that possible?”

I quickly added, “Yes. If your universe is older than ours, you exist in some distant past. You could not possibly know what either of us is doing. Only what we *should* do. Even iterations of our future selves, in universes that are yet to be, will not know that I initiated a change. That’s the genius of my plan. Right here, right now, a shift occurs, and no one knows except me and Jimmy. And now, you.”

“That is so presumptuous,” James replied. “But then I remember how powerful a force arrogance has been in each of our lives.”

“I’m not trying to be arrogant,” I insisted. “I am only trying to effect one...simple...change.”

“Yes. And that’s the trap of conceit. It creates the illusion of simplicity and control. What you are attempting to do is not simple. The multiverse is not only connected on a direct timeline with each universe strung together. There is also an energy that cycles through the whole. Some mystics refer to it as a universal spirit. Whatever it is, it binds the universes as one larger system. By coming here you caused a disruption of this energy, a ripple through the fabric of the entire cosmos.”

Jimmy was very pensive, clearly paying attention. He asked, “Then haven’t you done the same? Haven’t you caused the same kind of ripple effect?”

“Not if I succeed,” James answered. “If I convince you to ignore Jim and make the same choice you would have without his influence, then the disruption will dissipate, Jim and I can return home, and the multiverse will be back in sync. What is happening here tonight is not necessarily irreversible.”

Something about his explanation did not sit right with me.

“That seems just a little too neat,” I said. “If what you say is true, then there must be many other versions of us who sensed the same rupture in the multiverse. In fact, why isn’t this house inundated with Jim Hoffenbergs?”

“I can’t explain that,” James replied. “It might have something to do with time. For although time might be infinite, we are not. Many of our former selves have died. And the ones who have not yet achieved fifty years of age will not be able to sense what has happened to the multiverse. They won’t know that their futures are imperiled.”

“And what about those who are older than fifty and still alive?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Jim,” he replied, almost dismissively. “Perhaps they are too old to make this journey, or perhaps they

fear further disruption of the multiverse. It's not important, anyway. The three of us are here and we need to resolve this now."

I started to laugh. Not at what he was saying, but at the setting. I said, "Looking at the three of us together, I suspect most normal people would consider this situation a bit disturbing. As a matter of fact, some of my friends find it disturbing to see just one of me. Let alone three." They replied simultaneously, "We know."

Then Jimmy said, "I think we need a break. I'm hungry. I have no idea what it's like to travel through universes. And I don't know what kind of food you had on your journeys. But I have not eaten for hours. And I need some food to go with this scotch. Why don't I order a pizza?"

"And fried chicken," I suggested.

"If I were you guys," James said, "I'd skip the pizza and go easy on the fried chicken." He patted his stomach for emphasis and continued, "Unless, of course, you want to resemble me in more than just facial features a few years from now."

"All right, then," Jimmy said. "Only fried chicken. We have a Popeye's Louisiana Kitchen nearby that delivers. Since I'm pretty sure we all prefer legs and thighs I'll order the dark meat special. Then I'll open a bottle of wine and we can continue this conversation at the table."

CHAPTER 6

While we waited for the food, we restricted ourselves to casual conversation, recalling events from our pasts. That was a very strange experience, since up to that evening our shared histories were identical. As we spoke it was as if we were reaching into each other's minds and extracting which memories we wanted to share. We could complete each other's sentences—every sentence—because we knew the next word to exit the speaker's mouth. Of course, we still needed to verbalize what we wanted to say. No telepathic communication was involved. In the telling of these histories we simply *were* each other. For me there was something intriguing about listening to others describe my life from within my own consciousness. At times I felt as if I were having a discussion with myself, inside my own head.

Once the food arrived, Jimmy set the table and I offered to pour the drinks. I just assumed that everyone would want wine which, in fact, Jimmy and I did. James, however, declined.

"Jim, I would prefer to keep drinking scotch," he said. There was nothing particularly unusual about that request. But in doing so he gave a minor insight into what might occur in mine and Jimmy's futures. "I prefer not to mix scotch and wine these days," he continued. "I find that I do not sleep as well when I imbibe both drinks in the same evening. And since it will be a long trip home, I don't want anything disturbing my rest."

That was certainly not an issue for his two younger selves. But did it mean something? Neither of us had ever experienced a desire to restrict our choice of drinks. To me it seemed worth remarking on.

I asked, "Are you revealing part of our future? Suggesting that in years to come we, also, will not want to mix drinks?"

"I'm only saying," he responded, "that I prefer to drink only one type of alcohol on any given evening. This is not a great revelation of things to come, nor does it indicate some significant choice in your futures. It is simply a recognition that my sleep is less restful when I mix scotch and wine in the same evening. I suppose the same will happen to the two of you, but I see no harm in mentioning it. It is nothing to be concerned about and it certainly is not to be compared with your reason for coming here."

James and I were at odds about this visit. And perhaps it was only my imagination, but in that last statement I sensed an unnecessary hint of judgment. Jimmy placed the food on the table, I brought the drinks and we all sat down to eat.

Jimmy spoke first and said, "I'm still trying to comprehend what's going on this evening." Turning first to me he said, "Jim, I understand why you came here. You want me to make a different decision from the one you did." Then to James he added, "And I understand that you want me to make the *same* decision the two of you did. But I don't know why it matters to either of you, because no matter what I decide, it won't change or affect your lives.

"As you know, I have remained friends with Terry since high school. I have shared with him my desire to go to Argentina. I've talked about it for months and he has been encouraging me to make the trip. So have a few other friends. But I honestly have not made up my mind. Now the two of you come along and suggest that no matter the decision, some kind of cosmic effect will follow. Either things will play out as they have before, or some new history will ensue. I don't quite understand that. This does not seem like the kind of decision that would shatter the multiverse. But as I grapple with that, I want to know why you even care—either of you."

That was my cue. I looked first at James and then back to Jimmy.

"What you see tonight are two people who made a choice in their own lives not to go to Buenos Aires for Thomas's surgery. I regret that decision and James doesn't seem to care."

He quickly interjected, "Don't speak for me, Jim. And don't say that I don't care."

"All right," I responded. "Let me rephrase. James doesn't seem to be bothered by our decision."

Jimmy spoke up again and said to me, "Jim, you were the first to show up tonight and you started this whole thing. So let's begin with you. Tell me why this matters, why it is so important to you."

James shot a sharp glance in my direction. I could read in his eyes that he was warning me to take care in what I said. I was, and still am, aware of the dangers of exposing someone to a future that has not yet come to be. But that night I was also willing to take a few risks. I was not sure how absolute a commitment I could make to preserving the timeline in Jimmy's life. I was willing to tread cautiously, but I also had a goal to achieve and had already committed myself to instigating change.

"The reason I'm here," I said, "is to convince you to go to Buenos Aires for Thomas's surgery. There is a risk in telling you why it is important to me. But I took this trip because I want a better future for you than the one that James and I have shared.

"When I arrived, I had hoped that I could simply tap into the deep love that you have for Thomas. I thought that if you could truly be in touch with your feelings you might set aside any fears you have and choose to take the trip now—without my needing to say anything else. That's what our earlier conversation was about. And I think things were going well. I could see your love for Thomas welling up inside of you as we talked about him. It was beginning to take hold, possibly even impacting your decision. That is, until James arrived. Given his objections, I now think I need to say a little more. Maybe I do need to explain the importance of you going to Buenos Aires."

By this time we had finished the wine. "Let me open another bottle of wine," I suggested. "I'll also bring the scotch over to the table."

As I walked to the bar I continued speaking.

"Jimmy, when we were talking earlier you said you want to marry Thomas. That is something I wanted also. Just as deeply as you do. And I told him. But I'm not sure he knew that I was serious. As it turned out, I did not go to Buenos Aires for the surgery. In fact, it was two or three more years before I finally went to Argentina. All that time we stayed in contact. There were long stretches when we spoke by video almost every night. For weeks following the surgery I called every day—even when he could not speak—just to check on his recovery. I made the mistake of thinking those years of conversations would satisfy. That somehow, they would communicate to Thomas the depth of my love. I expected too much. Not even nightly calls were sufficient.

"When I finally made my first trek to Argentina it was wonderful—as were all the trips that followed. To this day Thomas and I are still very close friends. Sometimes I visit him and other times he visits me. But we are not husbands. Through these years my love has remained true and endured. If anything it has grown even stronger. Yet on the deepest level it is an unrequited love. And somewhat paradoxical. For while my longing has lingered, some happiness has been diminished. In my universe I have but one dream left, and I cling to it unerringly: to marry Thomas. Although it persists, it is still only a dream.

"But what about you, your life, your future? If you make the same decision that I did, you will have the same life that I have had. It has not been a bad life. And yet, I know that you can have more. Jimmy, I want you to be more fulfilled than I am. Ten years from now I do not want you to share my regrets: hoping against hope, desiring a wedding, a bond, that may never come to be. I am fairly certain that if you go to Buenos Aires now, you will probably be married in a few years. That is a joy that will make your life complete beyond any imagination or dreams.

"There's something else about my visiting you. However, it reflects more on me. In the life that the three of us have shared, our friends and acquaintances have frequently called

us generous. But the truth is more nuanced, and we have not always acted altruistically. My coming here tonight may be the most selfless thing I have ever done. I cannot change my life. Nor can I re-live my life through you. After tonight the three of us will never again see each other. We will not know what transpires in each other's lives, in each other's universes. When I return home, I will be content to know that you might have achieved a level of happiness that I denied myself. If so, then every me—every *us*, in every other universe that is yet to be—will be happy and filled with joy. That possibility is enough for me.”

* * *

For a few moments none of us spoke a word. It was not that I had said anything particularly profound. But I was passionate, spoke from my heart and told the truth. James and I had been gifted with the same silver tongue and each of us believed himself capable of convincing Jimmy. We were also driven by a common desire to see him happy and fulfilled. We just had different ideas of how that might be achieved. For the moment I was comfortable. I had presented my case well.

Jimmy seemed absorbed, as if truly reflecting on what he had heard. James, on the other hand, appeared to be calculating his response. The look on his face was not as pensive as Jimmy's. Then again, James' long journey provided him plenty of time to consider how he would approach this conversation. When he spoke, he was as committed as I.

“Jimmy, all three of us have experienced the same fifty years of life. That is, until tonight. This evening, right here, is where our experiences diverge. Just the two of us being here in your presence changes all our lives because none of us should have ever met. As I was thinking about what I would say to you, I realized that Jim began at the right place—your love for Thomas. You've shown him how much you love him in both word and action. You've told him in conversation, you made a veiled reference in one of your books, you've written songs for

him. And since actions speak louder than words, consider all you've done over the years. You've never said no to anything he needed, even when it came at a cost to yourself. Whether or not that was the correct course of action is for another conversation. The point is that you were always there for him."

I interrupted and said, "Make sure you tell him that it's not enough."

"Jim, I can handle this on my own," he replied sternly. He continued, "Everything you have done for Thomas speaks of your love. I know how you feel, because I was exactly the same twenty years ago. At times it may seem as though Thomas takes your love for granted. But have you ever considered that he does not know how to respond? He has not been in a relationship for many years. And, as he told you before, he does not see himself with an older man. But I have a more important question. Are you looking for happiness or joy? Because they are not the same thing, and each can be approached by a multitude of paths.

"Jim wants you to believe that only marriage will bring you fulfillment. I remember being fifty years old and wanting to marry the Thomas in my universe. I remember times when I was genuinely happy to have him as a friend. And there were times when I had at least a hint of pure joy. Those experiences may not have been exactly what I was looking for, what I hoped for, but they were real. And by the way, in my life they have continued to this day. Those are experiences you will not lose if you make the same choice that we did."

Jimmy posed a question. "If I decide as you did, what can I expect?"

"Jim told you more than he should have. I will not reveal your future other than to say that you will continue to treasure your relationship with Thomas, whatever that may be or become. I cannot say if you will be fulfilled. That is yet to be determined. You will have to wait and see if it unfolds in your life. I remember something that W. Somerset Maugham wrote in *The Bishop's Apron*: 'The love that lasts the longest is the love that is never returned.' That is where you and Jim find

yourselves at this moment. Love has burst forth from you and you long for it to be realized. I grant that it is unsatisfying to not have that love returned. I will not tell you what happens beyond your sixtieth year, but there is some comfort to be had in Maugham's perception. He acknowledges that true love can exist even if it does not come back to you. His observation also contains an implicit challenge.

"Think of Thomas. There is much you desire from him. But suppose he never returns your love. Or, more accurately, suppose he never loves you the way you love him. Suppose you live as Jim has, and at least for the next ten years, marriage is not in the offing? Do you continue to love only if it is returned? If so, then is that really love? Ask yourself if your love is rooted in Thomas or in yourself.

"This focus on your personal life can engage us only so far. What is really going on tonight is an issue that is bigger than you and Thomas, bigger than Jim, bigger than me. I'm speaking about the multiverse. Whenever, however and by whomever it was established, it is a complex pattern of duplicate existences. If you decide to go to Buenos Aires, no matter how pure your intentions may be, the very structure of reality will be altered. And no one knows what cosmic ramifications would ensue. If you do not alter course, at least Jim knows what your next ten years will be like, and I know what both of you will experience up to the age of seventy. It will be the same in every universe yet to be, just as it has been in the universes that predate ours. The multiverse will still be a complex web, but it will be stable."

CHAPTER 7

James had presented intriguing arguments and raised good questions. I didn't know if he was finished, but I needed to speak up lest Jimmy be swayed.

I addressed James. "It seems to me that the questions you ask should be answered in dialogue. Given that we are all the same person, it would not be unlike the thought processes we employ individually, any time we need to make a decision to do something or go somewhere. Still, there would be value in hearing each other's reactions spoken aloud."

James responded, "That's fine so long as we limit ourselves to the fifty years the three of us have shared in common. I'm still opposed to discussing the future."

"Fair enough," I replied. "Let me begin by saying that I think you exaggerate the effect on the multiverse. But if it is going to be altered one way or the other, at least that change will be rooted in the love that Jimmy has for Thomas. And a universe that is changed by love cannot be bad. It cannot go wrong. So I want to take issue with the quote you used from W. Somerset Maugham. I don't think that an unreturned love is the longest lasting. Unless the lover is fatuous or masochistic. In my opinion the longest lasting love is what emerges from the bond of two people who genuinely care for each other."

"Then how do you explain divorce, or a host of other broken relationships?" he asked.

"There are many ways to explain them. Human emotions are powerful and capable of clouding reality. And no matter how strong, they are also temporary. Many people confuse feelings, especially sexual ones, with love. Look at the celebrities who have been married multiple times, some as many as eight. The most profound explanation for divorce and broken relationships is that the couple did not know, did not have, true love. That is, if you believe in the power of true love

to endure. And I know that you do because what the three of us have for our respective Thomases is true love.”

James smiled and said, “It’s hard to believe that I was like you ten years ago. You seem to have all your ideas so neatly packaged. You leave no room for gray in your life.”

“Oh no. There’s plenty of room for gray. In fact, most of life is lived in the ambiguous areas between good and bad, right and wrong. Very few things are absolute. But I am completely focused on the task at hand tonight. That is why I speak with such certainty.”

“Do you really think that you know what is best for Jimmy?” James asked. “The only future you can see into is the one you and I share over the next ten years. Beyond that you know nothing of my life, my love, my joys and sorrows. For you, those years are still a mystery. How do you know that I have not achieved a level of happiness and peace in my life? That Thomas and I are not married or in a relationship that is fulfilling for both of us?”

“It has long been said that with age comes wisdom. That is not universally true and it certainly is not inevitable. I do not want to sound presumptuous or arrogant, but I think I have some little amount of wisdom that I don’t believe has yet descended on you. I have lived ten years longer than you and I see this situation through the eyes of what small amount of acumen I actually do possess. I am sure that you thought long and hard before coming here, but that decision retains an element of rashness. There are things you do not know and so have not considered.”

“Then tell me what they are. Let me see a little into that future,” I said.

“I won’t do that,” he insisted. Then with a little more compassion he continued. “Jim, I understand how powerful is the love that possesses you, but you are wrong to pursue it this way—to think that Jimmy can only find happiness by making a different decision than we did. On the other hand, you are correct about the love we each have for our own Thomases. But

with love comes responsibility. True love always seeks what is best for the other.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” I insisted.

“You think you are, Jim. And on one level I agree with you because I realize your motives. Ten years ago I actually had the same idea. I knew that I could not change my life and wondered if there were a way that I could somehow impact my other self in a future universe. As it turns out, Jim, you were that other self. But I decided not to try. I had the same concerns about the multiverse then that I have today. So instead I waited, trusting that the love would come to me. I really wanted to do what you are doing but for me it was a question of ethics. You also should be governed by ethics.”

Lacking a quick retort I simply rolled my eyes, then said, “We need another bottle of wine.”

“Bring me a glass, too,” James said.

“What about not mixing drinks?” I asked.

“I think I’ll take the risk tonight.”

* * *

While I went to retrieve another bottle, Jimmy spoke up. “This conversation is interesting. But it adds a weird dimension to an already bizarre night. You speak about me as if I’m not here. I feel like a ghost inhabiting my own room. You are the ones who should not be here. At what point do I get to add my thoughts? In fact, at what point do I get to speak, period? To express my own desires, plans?”

“I apologize,” James replied. “It’s rude to speak about you in the third person while you are sitting right here. I’d actually like to hear what you have to say.”

I returned with the bottle of wine and a third glass. As I began to pour, Jimmy responded to James.

“Before the two of you came here, I was uncertain about going to Buenos Aires. But I wouldn’t call it a complex problem. Now, however, I’m afraid you guys will leave me second guessing not only that decision, but every future one I make. I

will be paralyzed every time I'm asked to make a choice, fluctuating between the options, wondering if my selection will impact the multiverse in some catastrophic way."

"That's fallout from the ethics principle that Jim violated by coming here, and revealing things he should not have," James replied.

"Wait a minute," I objected. "You came here also."

"Yes. But my presence is an attempt to maintain cosmic order," James retorted. "And I was far more careful in the way I spoke, more cautious than you were, lest I reveal something I shouldn't."

I continued to address James. "In our common parlance we have a number of cautionary adages, among them: 'You can't go back,' 'You can't take back what you say,' 'You can't cheat death.' Designed to curb our impulses, to encourage good and careful decisions beforehand, they ring true for you and me. At least in terms of this one decision. What I have done is attempt to help Jimmy get out in front of those sayings so that he won't regret this decision in ten years.

"For all three of us, our entire lives have been a fight against convention. We were never content to surrender to the confines of tradition. We were always willing to challenge orthodoxy, to seek change, to try things that had not been done before. This visit is beyond a mere code of conduct. This is something completely new. So I admit that I was not terribly concerned about ethics when I came here. If I could make it possible for Jimmy to avoid the regret that we both experienced by not going to Buenos Aires, well, I considered that more important than some minor impact on the multiverse."

James became animated. "Don't the two of you realize that this is not a minor impact? I know that both of you are familiar with the concept of contingency. Everything that happens, the movement of every atom is caused by a previous action or movement. In fact, as of tonight the multiverse has already been profoundly changed. In every future universe, a Jim will travel to a younger universe to meet another Jimmy,

trying to change his decision. And every James will follow trying to thwart that attempt. Whatever our Jimmy decides right here, it is now possible that future Jimmys will decide differently. In fact, depending on the success or failure of our future selves, future Jimmys in alternate universes might make differing decisions that bounce back and forth so that some of them go to Buenos Aires, while others stay home in Los Angeles. In those universes where he decides to go to Argentina for Thomas's surgery, a completely new set of events will be introduced. You have injected chaos and uncertainty into the multiverse."

"Just out of curiosity," I asked, "haven't you done the same?"

"Yes and no," he answered. "My coming here means that every future me will do the same. But if I am successful in convincing Jimmy to stay the course, maybe they will be also. Then the ship of the multiverse will be righted and nothing untoward will occur. As I said before, if I am successful tonight, the multiverse will be back in sync—at least for the present. Unfortunately, its future stability is now very much in doubt."

I objected. "You suggest that there might be a future fluctuation in the multiverse. That the Jimmys yet to be might oscillate between going to Buenos Aires or staying home. If I succeed in my task tonight, then maybe every future me will also. In that case the multiverse will simply play out one, single, new scenario. A scenario that is rooted in love. How can that equal chaos?"

"I'm at a loss," James replied. "I know that you are intelligent, Jim. So you know we are not the sole inhabitants in any universe. This one change will affect other people, too. That, in turn, will affect even more people. It will have a cascade effect on the multiverse. It is not one, single, new scenario."

Jimmy stood up and interjected. "You two frustrate the hell out of me. This is *my* life. If the two of you had not come here I would be making just a normal decision. Now I have to be concerned about some cosmic effect resulting from what I

do. Well at this moment there is a part of me that does not much care about the multiverse. But I *do* care about Thomas. I'm not sure that either of your lives offers me much hope for my own dreams or much direction in how I decide.

"Jim, I know that you and Thomas do not marry during the next ten years. That reality awaits me if I make the choice you did and it is not appealing. And James, since you will not tell me if you and Thomas are married in your universe, you leave me with an uncertainty that I find equally disenchanting. At this point I am inclined to go to Argentina. Still, I want to make a responsible choice. The problem is I now know too much." He walked around for a few moments, obviously thinking. James and I remained silent. Eventually Jimmy said, "Suppose I do not go to Buenos Aires for Thomas's surgery. Can't I make a different choice than you did on some other issue, further down the line?"

"The very fact that you can ask that question is the reason I did not want either of us to reveal your future," James replied. "If you had chosen to stay in Los Angeles during Thomas's surgery, knowing nothing of what happened to us, then your future choices would be the same as ours. They would be uncontested. Unfortunately, Jim corrupted your knowledge and that option is now moot. Because of his intervention I suppose you can now choose differently on something else, but that means you'll be second guessing everything when it comes to Thomas. Then again, I suppose that is now true whichever decision you make about the surgery. So to me the best course of action is for you not go to Buenos Aires now. Then we can hope that everything unfolds for you as it has for us."

Jimmy thought for a moment then said to James, "The whole multiverse concept mystifies me. You know what has happened in my life, and in Jim's life. But how do you know what has happened in other people's lives? How do you know that Thomas will not receive representations of himself, just as I have?"

"That's right," I quickly added, as if the idea had not also occurred to me. "Thomas can also alter their future by making a different choice of *his* own during the next ten years. He can, for example, decide to take a chance on a relationship with Jimmy."

"I admit that I had not thought of that," James answered. "I suppose anything is possible. Thomas might be visited by his other selves and make other choices. Even so we have no control over that. All we can control are our own decisions. And that's why I'm here. To ensure that things play out the way they always have in previous universes."

"Life's unfair," Jimmy complained.

James responded, "Yes, Jimmy. It is. It always has been. For everyone. That's why people in every generation, in every universe keep repeating the same lament. Whether parents say it to their kids to toughen them for reality, or adults say it to soothe their unfulfilled desires, it simply does not give anyone the right to shift the realities of the universe. But the unfairness of life is not the issue here. The real issue is that life did not fail Jim and me. We failed ourselves. If we had had enough self-confidence and courage, things would have turned out differently. That's on us."

"Exactly," I said. "Things would have turned out differently. And that's why I'm here. To affirm Jimmy's self-confidence and bolster his courage, so that he does not fail, too. If Jimmy makes the right choice now, then every one of our other selves, in every distant and future universe will be able to experience the happiness we missed."

"But," James asserted, "as we've already discussed, that is not guaranteed. We must consider what happens to the multiverse. No one here knows the ramifications of messing with another person's future, even if it is in another universe."

Jimmy took a long drink of wine, sat down again and said, "In life, there are no choices more significant than who you want to be, and who you want to be with. I am in love with Thomas and I want to be with him. That much I know."

"Then let it happen in its own time," James replied.

“Does it?” Jimmy asked.

“You know I won’t tell you,” he answered.

“And I say you should *make* it happen,” I interjected. “Or at least open the door. Spending time with Thomas, especially during his recovery, may be the most important thing you do.

“In my universe unrequited love defines me—to a certain extent. At least in terms of this relationship. At least during this period of time. I cannot change that. And yet I have to believe that your future is not determined. Jimmy, let me ask you something. How different are you today, in your core, as a person?”

“What do you mean, Jim?” he asked.

“I mean consider where you were five years ago, before you met Thomas. You are already a better person because of him. But what you could be, what you could be together, that’s what is at risk.

“Earlier James enlisted the help of a quotation. I have one also, one that I think is even more germane. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once said, ‘Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.’ But joy is not happiness, Jimmy.

“We can be happy riding a roller coaster, eating ice cream, celebrating a birthday. Unfortunately the human tendency is to be swallowed up by the emotion of happiness, the excitement and pleasure of an intimate experience—or many experiences. But they are superficial and temporary, at best. They pass into memory.

“Joy is so much deeper. It is what Adam and Eve must have known when they strolled through the garden with God. It is what overwhelmed David as he danced before the Lord. It is what Mary Magdalene experienced after Jesus’s resurrection when she heard him speak her name. Joy is more than an emotion or a feeling. It is a sense of knowing that we are with God and God is with us.

“Of all my friendships, of all the relationships in my life that I hold dear, the one with Thomas is my truest treasure. It is also a paradox, for it causes my greatest joy and my greatest

sorrow. Sorrow because we are not together. Joy because when I am with him, I am in the presence of God.”

* * *

The evening had long ago given way to night and the night was approaching dawn. It was time for James and me to leave, for it was also necessary that we not be observed by other people in this universe. We had exhausted our arguments for and against Jimmy going to Buenos Aires.

“Jimmy,” James said, “when the two of us are gone we will not know what you decide. I ask only that you remember that the universe, the entire multiverse, is bigger than any of us, and more important than the fulfillment of any of our desires. Just as we will not know what your decision is, you will never know how that decision will impact the whole of the multiverse. I encourage you not to go to Buenos Aires. Love Thomas as we have loved our Thomases. Find satisfaction in the fact that you are close friends. Be patient, await the future before you, and what it holds.” Then he looked at me and said, “When you get home, I think you should do the same. Try not to be so pessimistic. Be patient. Trust your love. Trust Thomas and his ability to see true love.”

By this time I was approaching exhaustion. I no longer had any desire to try and interpret James’s comments. I don’t know if he was hinting at some joy in my future or not. Either way he spoke a profound truth. I had no other choice in my own life except to return and be patient. And not only trust but also hope.

The truth is that even though James and I argued for different outcomes, we were both correct in everything we said. We were equally matched in our debating skills and there was no flaw in our reasonings. We just approached the question from different perspectives, tinged by our own biases. Jimmy would have to decide if his love for Thomas and desire for marriage was greater than any risk to the multiverse.

My final comments continued along the line of personal yearning.

“Jimmy, most people do not get this opportunity. It’s easy to walk where you can see, where others have blazed a path before you. But the poet Robert Frost was correct about the road less traveled. James and I both took the self-evident path in front of us—at least it was self-evident when we made the choice. It is still the obvious one in front of you. But now you are able to distinguish another, equally discernible path. One that has not yet been taken. We did not have faith in ourselves, and to be honest, we did not have enough faith in Thomas. We were wrong. Unfortunately, no one visited us to challenge our decision. This is your chance to take the road less traveled. To embrace a different future. One that is more exciting, more fulfilling.

“James is correct about one thing: If you do not go to Argentina now, you and Thomas will continue to be very good friends. In my words, you will survive. Choose as we did, and you will experience times of happiness and even some moments of joy. I just don’t know if that will satisfy you because it will include a great deal of regret and even self-incrimination. I think you have a chance for more. I believe that if you walk by faith, if you surrender to true love, you will be immersed in unending joy. The choice is yours. That is why I say again: Go to Buenos Aires.”

* * *

The walk back to the Los Angeles River and to our spaceships did not take long. Most of the way James and I remained silent. We had exhausted our arguments while speaking with Jimmy. Still, something was left unsaid between us. Finally I spoke.

“James, I’m glad I met you. There is much I would like to know about my future. Of course, I will not ask. You will not tell me anyway. But at least I know I’m still alive in ten years. More importantly, as I leave here tonight it is with a renewed hope.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You know me. Who I am. You know my hopes and fears, my regrets and desires. You know that in terms of my relationship with Thomas, I am both happy and sad, that I am both hopeful and anxious. I don’t know what the future holds. I still want to marry him, and I won’t ask if you and he ever became husbands. But I want to thank you for following me here. Because I noticed throughout the evening that you seem to be more at peace than I am. I can’t quite identify it, but having seen such tranquility in you, I leave with a renewed sense of hope for my own future.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” James said. “It was a strange night, but I’m also glad I met you. I don’t know what will happen with Jimmy, but I do know that you will be OK.”

With that we said goodbye, and walked toward our respective spaceships and began our long journeys home.

EPILOGUE

James would not tell Jimmy what happens in his distant future. Maybe things work out for him as they should. Maybe the way they should work out is, in fact, the way Jimmy wants them to. But that did not matter. I had made it possible for another me to live a much more fulfilled and happy life, while still leaving the choice to him.

It had been a long night and I was exhausted. Perhaps it was only my imagination, but just before James entered his ship, I thought I saw him retrieve a ring from his pocket and put it on his finger. True or not, it was an image I was willing to indulge. I was ready to return to my universe, to my world, to my life—to my Thomas. There, I was prepared to await the love I so desired.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



William P. Messenger was born in Los Angeles, CA. He spent more than 30 years as a priest in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

In 2010 he resigned from active parish ministry and retired. Since that time he has taken up writing and is the author of the award-winning Shattered Triangle Trilogy.