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Paul lives in Ohio in Universe #7621 with his beautiful wife and three children, the third a very recent addition. He was born in Universe #7271, but was kidnapped by a crazed version of himself and forced to write thinly disguised Harry Potter novels until he escaped by clocking the other Paul on the head with the complete manuscript of Harry Potter and the Poorly Tuned Piano. #7621 is not so bad, but he misses the Ultra Jojopops from his old universe that came in virimo and ommerdoge flavors.

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"Johnny?" his mother called after him, but by then he was in the dark shadow of the barn. He slipped around the far end and any more of his mother's calls were lost among the sliding of cricket legs. His breath blew from his mouth in clouds.

John came to the edge of the pumpkin patch, stood for a moment, then plunged into it. Through the pumpkin patch was east, toward Case Institute of Technology where he hoped to start as a freshman the next year. Not that it was likely. There was always the University of Toledo, his father had said. One or two years of work could pay for a year of tuition there.

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He kicked a half-rotten pumpkin. Seeds and wispy strings of pumpkin guts spiraled through the air. The smell of dark earth and rotten pumpkin reminded him it was a week before Halloween and they hadn't had time to harvest the pumpkins: a waste and a thousand dollars lost to earthworms. He ignored how many credits that money would have bought.

The pumpkin field ended at the tree

line, the eastern edge of the farm. The trees—old maples and elms—abutted McMaster Road, beyond which was the abandoned quarry. He stood in the trees, just breathing, letting the anger seep away.

It wasn't his parents' fault. If anyone was to blame, it was him. He hadn't had to beat the crap out of Ted Carson. He hadn't had to tell Ted Carson's mom off. That had entirely been him. Though the look on Mrs. Carson's face had almost been worth it when he told her her son was an asshole. What a mess. He spun at the sound of a stick cracking.

For a moment he thought that Ted Carson had chased him out of the farmhouse, that he and his mother were

there in the woods. But the figure who stood there was just a boy, holding a broken branch in his hand.

"Johnny?" the boy said. The branch flagged in his grip, touching the ground. John peered into the dark. He wasn't a boy; he was a teenager. John stepped closer. The teen was dressed in jeans and plaid shirt. Over the shirt he wore a sleeveless red coat that looked oddly out of date.

His eyes lingered on the stranger's face. No, not a stranger. The teen had *his* face.

"Hey, Johnny. It's me, Johnny."

The figure in the woods was him.

* * * *

John looked at this other John, this

John Subprime, and decided he would be the one. He was clearly a Johnny Farmboy, not one of the Johnny Rebels, not one of the Broken Johns, so he would be wide-eyed and gullible. He'd believe John's story, and then John could get on with his life.

"Who ... who are you?" Johnny Farmboy asked. He was dressed in jeans and a shirt, no coat. John forced his most honest smile. "I'm you, John."

"What?"

Johnny Farmboy could be so dense.

"Who do I look like?"

"You look like..."

"I look just like you, John. Because I am you." Johnny Farmboy took a step back, and John continued.

"I know what you're thinking. Some trick. Someone is playing a trick on the farmboy. No. Let's get past that. Next you're going to think that you were twins and one of them was put up for adoption. Nope. It's much more interesting than that."

Johnny Farmboy crossed his arms. "Explain it, then."

"Listen, I'm really hungry; I could use some food and a place to sit down. I saw Dad go in the house. Maybe we can sit in the barn, and I can explain everything."

John waited for the wheels to turn.

"I don't think so," Johnny Farmboy finally said.

"Fine. I'll turn around and walk away.

Then you'll never get to hear the story." John watched the emotions play across Farmboy's face. Typically skeptical, he was debating how full of crap this wraith in the night was, while desperately wanting to know the answer to the riddle. Farmboy loved puzzles.

Finally his face relaxed. "Let's go to the barn," he said.

* * * *

The stranger walked at his side, and John eased away from him. As they walked through the pumpkin patch, John noted that their strides matched. John pulled open the back door of the barn, and the young man entered ahead of him, tapping the light switch by the door.

"A little warmer," he said. He rubbed

his hands together and turned to John. The light hit his face squarely, and John was startled to see the uncanny match between them. The sandy hair was styled differently and was longer. The clothes were odd; John had never worn a coat like that. The young man was just a bit thinner as well. He wore a blue backpack, so fully stuffed that the zipper wouldn't close all the way. There was a cut above his eye. A bit of brown blood was crusted over his left brow, clotted but recent.

He could have passed as John's twin.

"So, who are you?"

"What about a bite of something to eat?"

John went to the horse stall and pulled

an apple from a bag. He tossed it to the young man. He caught it and smiled at John.

"Tell the story, and I might get some dinner from the house."

"Did Dad teach you to be so mean to strangers? I bet if he found me in the woods, he'd invite me in to dinner."

"Tell," John said.

"Fine." The young man flung himself on a hay bale and munched the apple. "It's simple, really. I'm you. Or rather I'm you genetically, but I grew up on this same farm in another universe. And now I've come to visit myself."

"Bullshit. Who put you up to this?"

"Okay, okay. I didn't believe me either." A frown passed over his face.

“But I can prove it. Hold on a second.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Here we go: That horse is named Stan or Dan. You bought him from the McGregors on Butte Road when you were ten. He's stubborn and willful and he hates being saddled. But he'll canter like a show horse if he knows you have an apple in your pocket.”

He turned to the stalls on his left. “That pig is called Rosey. That cow is Wilma. The chickens are called Ladies A through F. How am I doing so far?” He smiled an arrogant smile.

"You stole some of your uncle's cigarettes when you were twelve and smoked them all. You killed a big bullfrog with your BB gun when you

were eight. You were so sickened by it you threw up and haven't used a gun since. Your first kiss was with Amy Walder when you were fourteen. She wanted to show you her underwear too, but you ran home to Mommy. I don't blame you. She's got cooties everywhere I go.

"Everyone calls you Johnny, but you prefer John. You have a stash of *Playboy* s in the barn loft. And you burned a hole in the rug in your room once. No one knows because you rearranged your room so that the night stand is on top of it." He spread his arms like a gymnast who'd just struck a landing.

"Well? How close did I come?" He

smiled and tossed the apple core into Stan's stall.

"I never kissed Amy Walder." Amy had gotten pregnant when she was fifteen by Tyrone Biggens. She'd moved to Montana with her aunt and hadn't come back. John didn't mention that everything else he'd said was true.

"Well, was I right?"

John nodded. "Mostly."

"Mostly? I nailed it on the head with a hammer, because it all happened to me. Only it happened in another universe."

How did this guy know so much about him? Who had he talked to? His parents? "Okay. Answer this. What was my first cat's name?"

"Snowball."

"What is my favorite class?"

"Physics."

"What schools did I apply to?"

The stranger paused, frowned. "I don't know."

"Why not? You know everything else."

"I've been traveling, you know, for a while. I haven't applied to college yet, so I don't know. As soon as I used the device, I became someone different. Up till then, we were the same." He looked tired. "Listen. I'm you, but if I can't convince you, that's fine. Let me sleep in the loft tonight and then I'll leave." John watched him grab the ladder, and he felt a twinge of guilt at treating him so shabbily. "Yeah, you can sleep in the

loft. Let me get you some dinner. Stay here. Don't leave the barn, and hide if someone comes. You'd give my parents a heart attack."

"Thanks, John."

* * * *

John watched Farmboy disappear through the door into the night, shuddering and then exhaling. He hadn't even come to the hard part yet.

It would have been so easy to kill Farmboy, a blow to the back of the head, and it was his. But John wouldn't do that. He hoped, not yet. He was desperate, but not willing to commit homicide. Or would it be suicide?

He chuckled grimly to himself. Dan the Man nickered in response.

John took an apple from the basket and reached out to the horse. Suddenly his eyes were filled with tears.

"Hold yourself together, man," he whispered as he let Dan gingerly chomp the apple from his hand. His own Dan was dead, at his own hand.

He'd taken Dan riding and had tried for the fence beyond the back field. They had flown. But Dan's hind left hadn't cleared it. The bone had broken, and John ran sobbing to his farm. His father met him halfway, a rifle in his hand, his face grim. He'd seen the whole thing.

"Dan's down!" John cried.

His father nodded and handed the rifle to him.

John took it blankly, then tried to hand

it back to his father.

"No!"

"If the leg's broken, you must."

"Maybe.... "But he stopped. Dan was whinnying shrilly; he could hear it from where they stood. The leg had been horribly twisted. There was no doubt.

"Couldn't Dr. Kimble look at him?"

"How will you pay for that?"

"Will you?"

His father snorted and walked away.

John watched him trudge back to the house until Dan's cries became too much for him. He turned then, tears raining down his cheeks.

Dan's eyes were wide. He shook his head heavily at John, then he settled when John placed the barrel against his

skull. Perhaps he knew. John fished an apple from his pocket and slipped it between Dan's teeth.

The horse held it there, not biting, waiting. He seemed to nod at John. Then John had pulled the trigger. The horse had shuddered and fallen still. John sank to the ground and cried for Dan for an hour. But here he was. Alive. He rubbed Dan's muzzle.

"Hello, Dan. Back from the dead," John said. "Just like me."

* * * *

His mother and father stopped talking when the door slammed, so he knew they'd been talking about him.

"I'm gonna eat in the barn," he said. "I'm working on an electronics

experiment." He took a plate from the cabinet and began to dish out the lasagna. He filled the plate with enough to feed two of him.

His father caught his eye, then said, "Son, this business with the Carson boy..." John slipped a second fork into his pocket. "Yeah?"

"I'm sure you did the right thing and all." John nodded at his father, saw his mother look away.

"He hates us because we're farmers and we dig in the dirt." His mother lifted her apron strap over her neck, hung the apron on a chair, and slipped out of the kitchen.

"I know that, Johnny ... John. But sometimes you gotta keep the peace."

John nodded. "Sometimes I have to throw a punch, Dad." He turned to go.

"John, you can eat in here with us."

"Not tonight, Dad."

Grabbing a quart of milk, he walked through the laundry room and left out the back door.

* * * *

"Stan never lets anyone do that but me."

John turned from rubbing Dan's ears. "Just so," he said. He took the proffered paper towel full of lasagna, dug into it with the extra fork Farmboy had fetched.

"I always loved this lasagna. Thanks."

Farmboy frowned, and John recognized the stubbornness; he did the same thing when presented with the

impossible. He decided to stay silent and stop goading him with the evidence. This John needed a softer touch.

John ate in silence while Farmboy watched, until finally he said, "Let's assume for a moment that you are me from another universe. How can you do it? And why you?"

Through a mouthful of pasta, he said, "With my device, and I don't know."

"Elaborate," John said, angry.

"I was given a device that lets me pass from one universe to the next. It's right here under my shirt. I don't know why it was me. Or rather I don't know why it was us."

"Stop prancing around my questions!" Farmboy shouted. "Who gave you the

device?"

"I did!" John grinned.

"One of us from another universe gave you the device."

"Yeah. Another John. Nice looking fellow." So far all he had said was the truth. Farmboy was silent for a while, his lasagna half-eaten. Finally he said, "I need to feed the sheep." He poured a bag of corn into the trough. John lifted the end of it with him. "Thanks." They fed the cows and the horse afterwards, then finished their own dinner.

Farmboy said, "So if you are me, what do I call you?"

"Well, John won't work, will it? Well, it will if there's just the two of us, but as soon as you start adding the

infinite number of Johns out there ... how about John Prime?"

"Then who gave you the device?"

"Superprime," John Prime said with a smile. "So do you believe me yet?" Farmboy was still dubious. "Maybe."

"All right. Here's the last piece of evidence. No use denying this." He pulled up his pant leg to reveal a long white scar, devoid of hair. "Let's see yours," John said, pushing down his panic. The last time he'd tried this, it hadn't been there.

Farmboy looked at the scar, and then pulled his jeans up to the knee. The cold air of the barn drew goose bumps on his calf everywhere except the puckered flesh of his own identical scar. When

John Prime had been twelve, he and Bobby Walder had climbed the barbed wire fence of old Mrs. Jones to swim in her pond. Mrs. Jones had set the dogs on them, and they'd had to run naked across the field, diving over the barbed wire fence. John hadn't quite cleared it. Bobby had run off, and John had limped home. The cut on his leg had required three dozen stitches and a tetanus shot.

"Now do you believe?" John Prime asked.

John stared at the scar on his leg. "I believe. Hurt like hell, didn't it?"

"Yes," John Prime said with a grin. "Yes, it did, brother."

* * * *

John sat in the fishbowl—the glass-

enclosed room outside the principal's office—ignoring the eyes of his classmates and wondering what the hell John Prime was up to. He'd left his twin in the barn loft with half his lunch and an admonition to stay out of sight.

"Don't worry," he'd said with a smirk. "Meet me at the library after school."

"Don't let anyone see you, all right?"

John Prime had smiled again.

"John?" Principal Gushman stuck his head out of his office. John's stomach dropped; he was never in trouble.

Mr. Gushman had a barrel chest, balding head, and perpetual frown. He motioned John to a chair and sat behind the desk, letting out his breath heavily as he sat. He'd been a major in the Army,

people said. He liked to be strict. John had never talked with him in the year he'd been principal.

"John, we have a policy regarding violence and bullying." John opened his mouth to speak.

"Hold on. Let me finish. The facts of the matter are these. You hit a classmate—a younger classmate—several times in the locker room. He required a trip to the emergency room and stitches." He opened a file on his desk.

"The rules are there for the protection of all students. There can be no violence in the school. There can be no exceptions. Do you understand?"

John stared, then said, "I understand the rule. But—"

"You're a straight-A student, varsity basketball and track. You're well-liked. Destined for a good college. This could be a blemish on your record."

John knew what the word "could" meant. Gushman was about to offer him a way out.

"A citation for violence, as stated in the student handbook, means a three-day suspension and the dropping of any sports activities. You'd be off the basketball and track teams." John's throat tightened.

"Do you see the gravity of the situation?"

"Yes," John managed to say.

Gushman opened another folder on his desk. "But I recognize this as a special

case. So if you write a letter of apology to Mrs. Carson, we'll drop the whole matter." Gushman looked at him, expecting an answer.

John felt cornered. Yes, he had hit Ted, because he was a prick. Ted needed hitting, if anyone did; he had dropped John's clothes in the urinal. He said, "Why does Mrs. Carson want the letter? I didn't hit her. I hit Ted."

"She feels that you showed her disrespect. She wants the letter to address that as well as the violence." If he just wrote the letter, it would just all go away. But he'd always know that his mother and Mrs. Carson had squashed him. He hated that. He hated any form of defeat. He wanted to tell Gushman he'd

take the suspension. He wanted to throw it all in the man's face.

Instead, he said, "I'd like to think about it over the weekend if that's okay." Mr. Gushman's smile told John that he was sure he'd bent John to his will. John went along with it, smiling back. "Yes. You may. But I need a decision on Monday."

John left for his next class.

* * * *

John walked past the librarian, his Toledo Meerkats cap low over his face. He didn't want to be recognized as John Rayburn. At least not yet. The reference section was where he expected it to be, which was a relief. If the little things were the same he had hope for the bigger

things. He'd tried living in the weird places, but sooner or later something tripped him up and he had to run. He needed a place like what he remembered, and so far, this place seemed pretty close. He reached for the almanac. Sure an encyclopedia had more information, but he could be lost in the details for hours. All he needed was a gross comparison.

He ran his finger down the list of presidents, recognizing all of them. He already knew this wasn't a world where Washington served four terms and set a standard for a king-president serving life terms. Turning the page, he found the next twenty presidents to be the same until the last four. Who the hell was Bill

Clinton?

The deviation was small, even so. It had to be, he was so tired of running. John found a quiet table, opened his backpack, and began researching.

* * * *

The city library was just a couple of blocks from the school. John wandered through the stacks until he found John Prime at the center study desk in a row of three on the third floor. He had a dozen Findlay *Heralds* spread out, as well as a couple of books. His backpack was open, and John saw that it was jammed with paper and folders.

To hide his features, John Prime wore a Toledo Meerkats baseball hat and sunglasses. He pulled off his glasses

when he saw John, and said, "You look like crap. What happened to you?"

"Nothing. Now what are you doing? I have to get back to the school by five. There's a game tonight."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." John Prime picked up the history book. "In every universe I've been in, it's always something simple. Here George Bush raised taxes and he never got elected to a second term. Clinton beat him in '91." He opened the history book and pointed to the color panel of American Presidents. "In my world, Bush never backed down on the taxes thing, and the economy took off and he got elected to his second term. He was riding even higher when Hussein was assassinated

in the middle of his second term. His son was elected in 1996."

John laughed, "That joker?"

John Prime scowled. "Dubya worked the national debt down to nothing. Unemployment was below 3 percent."

"It's low here too. Clinton did a good job."

John Prime pointed to a newspaper article he had copied. "Whitewater? Drug use? Vince Foster?" He handed the articles to John, then shook his head. "Never mind. It's all pretty much irrelevant anyway. At least we didn't grow up in a world where Nixon was never caught."

"What happened there?"

"The Second Depression usually. Russia and the US never coming to an arms agreement. Those are some totalitarian places." He took the articles back from John. "Are there Post-It notes in this world?"

"Yes. Of course."

John Prime shrugged. "Sometimes there aren't. It's worth a fortune. And so simple." He pulled out his notebook. "I have a hundred of them." He opened his notebook to a picture of the MTV astronaut.

"MTV?"

"Yep."

"The World Wide Web?"

"I think so."

"Rubik's Cube?"

"Never heard of it."

John Prime checked the top of the figure with a multi-colored cube. "Ah ha. That's a big money maker."

"It is?"

He turned the page. "Dungeons and Dragons?"

"You mean that game where you pretend to be a wizard?"

"That's the one. How about Lozenos? You got that here?"

"Never heard of it. What is it?"

"Candy. South African diamond mines?"

They worked through a long list of things, about three-quarters of which John had heard of, fads, toys, or inventions.

"This is a good list to work from. Some good money makers on this."

"What are you going to do?" John asked. This was his world, and he didn't like what he suspected John Prime had in mind.

John Prime smiled. "There's money to be made in interdimensional trade."

"Interdimensional trade?"

"Not in actual goods. There's no way I can transport enough stuff to make a profit. Too complicated. But ideas are easy to transport, and what's in the public domain in the last universe is unheard of in the next. Rubik sold one hundred million Cubes. At ten dollars a cube, that's a billion dollars." He lifted up the notebook. "There are two dozen

ideas in here that made hundreds of millions of dollars in other worlds."

"So what are you going to do?"

John Prime smiled his arrogant smile. "Not me. We. I need an agent in this world to work the deals. Who better than myself ? The saying goes that you can't be in more than one place at a time. But I can."

"Uh huh."

"And we split it fifty-fifty."

"Uh huh."

"Listen. It's not stealing. These ideas have never been thought of here. The people who invented these things might not even be alive here."

"I never said it was stealing," John said. "I'm just not so sure I believe you

still." John Prime sighed. "So what's got you so down today?"

John said, "I may get suspended from school and kicked off the basketball and track teams."

"What? Why?" John Prime looked genuinely concerned.

"I beat up a kid, Ted Carson. His mother told my mother and the principal. They want me to apologize." John Prime was angry. "You're not gonna, are you? I know Ted Carson. He's a little shit. In every universe."

"I don't have a choice."

"There's always a choice." John Prime pulled a notebook out of his bag. "Ted Carson, huh? I have something on him."

John looked over his shoulder at the notebook. Each page had a newspaper clipping, words highlighted and notes at the bottom referencing other pages. One title read, "Mayor and Council Members Indicted." The picture showed Mayor Thiessen yelling. Another article was a list of divorces granted. John Prime turned the page and pointed. "Here it is. Ted Carson picked up for torturing a neighbor's cat. Apparently the boy killed a dozen neighborhood animals before getting caught." He glanced at John.

"I've never heard anything about that."

"Then maybe he never got caught here."

"What are we going to do with that?" John asked. He read the article, shaking

his head.

"Grease the gears, my brother." He handed John a newspaper listing of recent divorces. "Photocopy this."

"Why?"

"It's the best place to figure out who's sleeping with who. That usually doesn't change from one universe to the next. Speaking of which, how does Casey Nicholson look in this universe?"

"What?"

"Yeah. Is she a dog or a hottie? Half the time she's pregnant in her junior year and living in a trailer park."

"She's a cheerleader," John said.

John Prime glanced at him and smiled. "You like her, don't you? Are we dating her?"

"No!"

"Does she like us?"

"Me! Not us," John said. "And I think so. She smiles at me in class."

"What's not to love about us?" He glanced at his watch. "Time for you to head over to the school, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I'll meet you at home tonight. See ya."

"Don't talk to anyone," John said. "They'll think it was me. Don't get me in trouble."

"Don't worry. The last thing I want to do is screw up your life here."

* * * *

"Casey, Casey, Casey," John thought as he watched Johnny Farmboy depart.

Casey Cheerleader was the best Casey of all. She smelled so clean. And it was all wasted on Johnny Farmboy. He had planned on working until the library closed, but the idea of seeing Casey was overwhelming. He halfheartedly perused a few microfiched newspapers, then packed his things up and headed for the school.

Once again he was hit with nostalgia as he walked through the small Findlay downtown. He had spent his entire life in this little town—well, not *this* particular town. For a moment he wanted to run into Maude's Used Books and rummage through the old comic books. But the counter clerk would surely recognize him. *Not yet*, he

thought.

The junior varsity team was playing when he reached the high school stadium. He found a seat at the top of the bleacher and made sure his ball cap covered his face. The sun was just dipping below the far end zone, casting long violet shadows as the JV teams—Findlay High was playing Gurion Valley—moved the ball haphazardly up and down the field. Watching the shadows was more interesting. But then the game was over, and the stands were filling. He recognized faces, year old memories, but still vivid. He shrank down on the bench, pulled up the collar on his ski coat. Then he laughed at himself. Always hiding, always running. Not this

time.

The varsity cheerleaders came on the field. He spotted Casey immediately and he felt a spurt of hormones course through him. Across universes he'd come for her, he thought. How was that for a pickup line?

Goddamn, she was beautiful. He stood to get a better look.

"Hey, John!" someone shouted, two rows down.

John looked at him, shocked. He had no idea who he was. A wave of doubt shook him. He'd been gone a year; how much had he missed in that time?

"Hey."

"Shouldn't you be down with the team? I thought you were keeping stats."

"Yeah, I was just going."

John took the bleacher steps two at a time, nearly running. He had things to do before he could gawk at Casey.

* * * *

After the game John left a copy of the stats with Coach Jessick and then met his father in the parking lot.

"Not a good game for the home team," his father said. He wore his overalls and a John Deere hat. John realized he'd sat in the stands like that, with manure on his shoes. Soft country and western whispered tinnily from the speakers. For a moment he was embarrassed, then he remembered why he'd had to fight Ted Carson.

"Thanks for picking me up, Dad."

"No problem." He dropped the truck into gear and pulled it out of the lot. "Odd thing. I thought I saw you in the stands."

John glanced at his father, forced himself to be calm. "I was down keeping stats."

"I know, I saw. Must be my old eyes, playing tricks."

Had John Prime not gone back to the barn? What was that bastard doing to him?

"Gushman called."

John nodded in the dark of the cab. "I figured."

"Said you were gonna write an apology."

"I don't want to," John said. "But...."

"I know. A stain on your permanent record and all." His father turned the radio off. "I was at the U in Toledo for a semester or two. Me and college didn't get along much. But you, son. You can learn and do something interesting with it. Which is really what me and your mother want."

"Dad—"

"Hold on a second. I'm not saying what you did to the Carson boy was wrong, but you did get caught at it. And if you get caught at something, you usually have to pay for it. Writing a letter saying something isn't the same as believing it."

John nodded. "I think I'm gonna write the letter, Dad."

His father grunted, satisfied. "You helping with the apples tomorrow? We wait any longer and we won't get any good ones."

"Yeah, I'll help until lunch. Then I have basketball practice."

"Okay."

They sat in silence for the remainder of the trip. John was glad his father was so pragmatic. As they drove up to the farmhouse, John considered what he was going to do about John Prime.

* * * *

"Where are you?"

John paused in his scanning of the newspaper and gripped a shovel. It might have come to violence anyway; Johnny Farmboy looked pissed.

"Up here."

"You went to the football game," he accused as he climbed the ladder.

"Just for a bit."

"My dad saw you."

"But he didn't realize it was me, did he?"

Farmboy's anger faded a notch. "No, no. He thought he was seeing things."

"See? No one will believe it even if they see us together." Farmboy shook his head. He grunted.

John added, "This Ted Carson thing is about to go away."

"What do you mean?"

"A bunch of cats have gone missing over there."

"You went out in public and talked to

people?"

"Just kids. And it was dark. No one even saw my face. Three cats this month, by the way. Ted is an animal serial killer. We can pin this on him and his mom will have to back off."

"I'm writing the letter of apology," Farmboy said.

"What? No!"

"It's better this way. I don't want to screw up my future."

"Listen. It'll never get any better than this. The kid is a psychopath and we can shove it in his parents' faces!"

"No. And listen. You have got to lay low. I don't want you wandering around town messing up things,"

Farmboy said. "Going to the library today was too much."

John smiled. "Don't want me hitting on Casey Nicholson, huh?"

"Stop it!" He raised his hand. "That's it. Why don't you just move on? Hit the next town or the next universe or whatever. Just get out of my life!"

John frowned. It was time for the last shot. He lifted up his shirt. Under his grey sweatshirt was a shoulder harness with a thin disk the diameter of a softball attached at the center. It had a digital readout which said 7533, three blue buttons on the front, and dials and levers on the sides. John began unstrapping the harness and said, "John, maybe it's time you saw for yourself."

* * * *

John looked at the device. It was tiny for what it was supposed to do.

"How does it work?" he asked. John envisioned golden wires entwining black vortices of primal energy, x-ray claws tearing at the walls of the universe as if they were tissue.

"I don't know how it works," John Prime said, irritated. "I just know how to work it." He pointed to the digital readout. "This is your universe number."

"Seventy-five thirty-three?"

"My universe is 7433." He pointed to the first blue button. "This increments the universe counter. See?"

He pressed the button once and the number changed to 7534. "This one

decrements the counter.” He pressed the second blue button and the counter flipped back to 7533. He pointed to a metal lever on the side of the disk. “Once you’ve dialed in your universe, you pull the lever and—Pow!—you’re in the next universe.”

"It looks like a slot machine," John said.

John Prime pursed his lips. "It's the product of a powerful civilization."

"Does it hurt?" John asked.

"I don't feel a thing. Sometimes my ears pop because the weather's a little different. Sometimes I drop a few inches or my feet are stuck in the dirt."

"What's this other button for?"

John Prime shook his head. "I don't

know. I've pressed it, but it doesn't seem to do anything. There's no owner's manual, you know?" He grinned. "Wanna try it out?"

More than anything, John wanted to try it. Not only would he know for sure if John Prime was full of crap, but he would get to see another universe. The idea was astounding. To travel, to be free of all this

... detritus in his life. Ten more months in Findlay was a lifetime. Here in front of him was adventure.

"Show me."

John Prime frowned. "I can't. It takes twelve hours to recharge the device after it's used. If I left now, I'd be in some other universe for a day before I could

come back."

"I don't want to be gone a day! I have chores. I have to write a letter."

"It's okay. I'll cover for you here."

"No way!"

"I can do it. No one would know. I've been you for as long as you have."

"No. There's no way I'm leaving for twelve hours with you in control of my life." John Prime shook his head. "How about a test run? Tomorrow you're doing what?"

"Picking apples with my dad."

"I'll do it instead. If your dad doesn't notice a thing, then you take the trip, and I'll cover for you. If you leave tomorrow afternoon, you can be back on Sunday and not miss a day of school." John

Prime opened his backpack wider. "And to make the whole trip a lot more fun, here's some spending money."

He pulled out a stack of twenty dollar bills.

"Where did you get that?" John had never seen so much money. His bank account had no more than three hundred dollars in it.

John Prime handed him the stack of cash. The twenties were crisp, the paper smooth-sticky. "There's got to be two thousand dollars here."

"Yep."

"It's from another universe, isn't it? This is counterfeit."

"It's real money. And no one in this podunk town will be able to tell me that

it's not." John Prime pulled a twenty out of his own pocket. "This is from your universe. See any differences?" John took the first twenty off the stack and compared it to the crumpled bill. They looked identical to him.

"How'd you get it?"

"Investments." John Prime's smile was ambiguous.

"Did you steal it?"

John Prime shook his head. "Even if I did steal it, the police looking for it are in another universe." John felt a twinge of apprehension. John Prime had his fingerprints, his looks, his voice. He knew everything there was to know about him. He could rob a bank, kill someone, and then escape to another

universe, leaving John holding the bag. All the evidence of such a crime would point to him, and there was no way he could prove that it wasn't him.

Would he do such a thing? John Prime had called John his brother. In a sense they were identical brothers. And John Prime was letting John use his device, in effect stranding him in this universe. That took trust.

"Twenty-four hours," John Prime said. "Think of it as a vacation. A break from all this shit with Ted Carson."

The lure of seeing another universe was too strong. "You pick apples with my father tomorrow. If he doesn't suspect anything, then maybe I'll take the trip."

"You won't regret it, John."

"But you have got to promise not to mess anything up!"

John Prime nodded. "That's the last thing I'd want to do, John."

* * * *

"Damn, it's early," John said, rubbing the straw from his hair.

"Don't let my dad hear you cursing," Johnny Farmboy said.

"Right, no cursing." John stood, stretching. "Apple picking? I haven't done that ... in a while." It had been a lot longer than a year. His own father hadn't bothered with the orchard in years. John peered out a small window. Farmboy's father was already out there with the tractor.

"What's up between you and your dad? Anything heavy?" John asked. Johnny Farmboy took off his coat and handed it to John, taking John's in return.

John shook his head. "We talked last night about the Carson thing. He wanted me to write the letter."

"So that's it. What about your mother?"

"She was pissed with me before. She still may be. We haven't talked since Thursday."

"Anything happening this afternoon?" John Prime took a pencil out and started jotting things down.

"Nothing until tomorrow. Church, then chores. Muck the stalls. Homework. But I'll do that."

"What's due for Monday?"

"Reading for Physics. Essay for English on Gerard Manley Hopkins. Problem set in Calculus. That's it."

"What's your class schedule like?"

Farmboy began to tell him, but then said, "Why do you need to know that? I'll be back."

"In case someone asks."

"No one's gonna ask." As Farmboy pulled John's ski jacket on, he looked through his binoculars. "I'll watch from here. If anything goes wrong, you pretend to be sick and come back to the barn. You'll brief me and then we switch back."

John Prime smiled. "Nothing's gonna happen. Relax." He pulled on gloves and

climbed down the ladder.

"See ya at lunch."

With more trepidation than he showed, John walked out to the orchard. He cast one glance over his shoulder and saw Farmboy watching him through binoculars. This was a test in more ways than one. He could still run. He could still find another bolthole.

His father barely glanced at him, said, "How 'bout we start this end?"

"Okay," John said, his throat dry. His father stood tall, and when he walked past he smelled of dirt, not booze. He walked up to a tree and turned to look at him.

"Well? Come on."

John gripped a branch and pulled

himself into the tree. The rough bark cut his hands through the gloves. His foot missed a hold, and he slipped.

"Careful there."

"I'm getting too big for this," John said.

"Next year, I'll have to hire someone to help me."

John paused, words of banter on his lips. He smiled. "I bet mom could do it." His father laughed. "Now there's a thought."

* * * *

John felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched his father laugh at John Prime's joke. He wondered what John Prime had said to make his father laugh. Then he realized that if his father was laughing at

John Prime's jokes, there was no danger of being found out.

The precarious nature of his situation bothered him. Effectively, John Prime was him. And he was ... nobody. Would it be that hard for someone to slip into his life? He realized that it wouldn't. He had a few immediate relationships, interactions that had happened within the last few weeks that were unique to him, but in a month, those would all be absorbed into the past. He had no girlfriend. No real friends, except for Erik, and that stopped at the edge of the court. The hardest part would be for someone to pick up his studies, but even that wouldn't be too hard. All his classes were a breeze, except Advanced

Physics, and they were starting a new module on Monday. It was a clear breaking point. John wondered what he would find in another universe. Would there be different advances in science?

Could he photocopy a scientific journal and bring it back? Maybe someone had discovered a unified theory in the other universe. Or a simple solution to Fermat's Last Theorem. Or ... but what could he really do with someone else's ideas? Publish them under his own name? Was that any different than John Prime's scheme to get rich with Rubik's Square, whatever that was? He laughed and picked up his physics book. He needed to stay caught up in this universe. They were starting

Quantum Mechanics on Monday, after all.

* * * *

John brought Johnny Farmboy a sandwich.

"Your mom didn't notice either."

He took the sandwich, pausing to look John in the eye. "You look happy." John started. His clothes were covered in sap. His hands were cut and raw. His shoulders ached. He had always loathed farm work. Yet...

"It felt good. I haven't done that in a while."

Around a bite of sandwich, Farmboy said, "You've been gone a long time."

"Yeah," John said. "You don't know what you have here. Why do you even

want to go to college?" Farmboy laughed. "It's great for the first fifteen years, then it really begins to drag."

"I hear you."

Farmboy handed John his ski jacket. "What will I see in the next universe?" John's heart caught. "So you're gonna take me up on the offer?" he said casually.

"Yeah, I think so. Tell me what I'll see."

"It's pretty much like this one, you know. I don't know the exact differences."

"So we're in the next universe?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't try to meet him or anything. He doesn't know about us."

"Why'd you pick me to talk to? Why

not some other me? Or why not all of us?"

"This is the most like home," John said. "This feels like I remember."

"In one hundred universes this is the one that is most like yours? How different are we from one to the next? It can't be too different."

"Do you really want to hear this?"

Farmboy nodded.

"Well, there are a couple types of us. There's the farm boy us, like you and me. Then there's the dirt bag us."

"Dirt bag?"

"Yeah. We smoke and hang out under the bleachers."

"What the hell happened there?"

"And sometimes we've knocked up

Casey Nicholson and we live in the low income houses on Stuart. Then there's the places where we've died."

"Died?"

"Yeah. Car accidents. Tractor accidents. Gun accidents. We're pretty lucky to be here, really." Farmboy looked away, and John knew what he was thinking. It was the time he and his father had been tossing hay bales and the pitchfork had fallen. Or it was the time he had walked out on old Mrs. Jones'

frozen pond, and the ice had cracked, and he'd kept going. Or the time the quarry truck had run him off the road. It was a fluke really that either of them was alive.

Finally Farmboy said, "I think I'm

ready. What's the plan?"

John Prime lifted up his shirt and began unbuckling the harness. "You leave from the pumpkin field. Select the universe one forward. Press the toggle. Spend the day exploring. Go to the library. Figure out what's different. If you want, write down any money-making ideas you come across." When he saw Farmboy's face, John added, "Fine. Then don't. Tomorrow, flip the counter back to this universe and pull the lever. You'll be back for school on Monday."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Don't lose the device! Don't get busted by the police! Don't do anything to draw attention to yourself."

"Right."

"Don't flash your money either. If anyone recognizes you, go with it and then duck out. You don't want to make it hot for our guy over there."

"Right."

"Johnny, you look a little nervous. Calm down. I'll keep you covered on this end." John slapped him on the back, then handed him the harness.

Farmboy pulled off his shirt and shivered. He passed the two bands of the harness over his shoulders, then connected the center belt behind his back. The disk was cold against his belly. The straps looked like a synthetic material.

"It fits."

"It should," John said. "I copied some

of my materials for you in case you need them.” John Prime pulled a binder from his own bag, opened it to show him pages of clippings and notes. “You never know. You might need something. And here's a backpack to hold it all in.” John felt a twinge pass through him. He was powerless. The device was out of his control.

“What's wrong?” Farmboy asked.

“I haven't been away from the device in a long time. It's my talisman, my escape. I feel naked without it. You gotta be careful with it.”

“Hey,” John said. “I'm leaving my life in your hands. How about a little two-way trust?” John smiled grimly. “Okay. Are you ready? I've got 12:30 on my

watch. Which means you can return half an hour past midnight. Okay?"

John checked his watch. "Okay."

"Toggle the universe."

John lifted the shirt and switched the number forward to 7534. "Check."

"Okay. I'll watch from the loft." John climbed the ladder, then turned. "Make sure no one sees you." His heart was racing. This was it. It was almost his. He looked down from the barn window, waved. Farmboy waved back, then he lifted up his shirt. Sunlight caught the brushed metal of the device. Farmboy hesitated.

"Go!" John whispered. "Do it."

Farmboy smiled, pulled the switch, and disappeared.

* * * *

John's ears popped and his feet caught in the dirt. He stumbled and fell forward, catching himself on his gloved hands. He wasn't in a pumpkin patch anymore. Noting the smell of manure, he realized he was in a cow pasture.

He worked his feet free. His shoes were embedded an inch into the earth. He wondered if there was dirt lodged in his feet now. It looked like the dirt in the current universe was an inch higher here than in the old one. Where did that extra inch of dirt go? He shook his feet and the dirt fell free. It worked! He felt a thrill. He'd doubted to the last second, but here he was, in a new universe. He paused. John Prime had said there was a John in

this universe. He spun around. Cows grazed contentedly a few hundred yards away, but otherwise the fields were empty, the trees gone. There was no farmhouse.

McMaster Road was there and so was Gurney Road. John walked from the field, hopped the fence, and stood at the corner of the roads. Looking to the north toward town, he saw nothing but a farmhouse maybe a mile up the road. To the east, where the stacks of the GE plant should have been, he saw nothing but forest. To the south, more fields.

John Prime had said there was a John Rayburn in this universe. He'd said that the farm was here. He'd told John he'd been to this universe.

John pawed up his jacket and shirt and tried to read the number on the device. He cupped his hand to shield the sun and read 7534. He was where he expected to be, according to the device. There was nothing here.

The panic settled into his gut. Something was wrong. Something had gone wrong. He wasn't where he was supposed to be. But that's okay, he thought, calming himself. It's okay. He walked to the edge of the road and sat on the small berm there.

Maybe John Prime had it wrong; there were a lot of universes and if all of them were different that was a lot of facts to keep straight.

He stood, determined to assume the

best. He'd spend the next twelve hours working according to the plan. Then he'd go back home. He set off for town, a black mood nipping at his heels.

* * * *

John watched his other self disappear from the pumpkin field and felt his body relax. Now he wouldn't have to kill him. This way was so much better. A body could always be found, unless it was in some other universe. He didn't have the device, of course, but then he'd never need it again. In fact he was glad to be rid of it. John had something more important than the device; he had his life back. It had taken him three days of arguing and cajoling, but finally Johnny Farmboy had taken the bait. Good

riddance and goodbye. He had been that naive once. He'd once had that wide-eyed gullibility, ready to explore new worlds. There was nothing out there but pain. He was alive again. He had parents again. He had money—\$125,000. And he had his notebook. That was the most important part. The notebook was worth a billion dollars right there.

John looked around the loft. This would be a good place for some of his money. If he remembered right, there was a small cubbyhole in the rafters on the south side of the loft. He found it and pulled out the bubble gum cards and slingshot that was hidden there.

"Damn farmboy."

He placed about a third of his money in the hiding place. Another third he'd hide in his room. The last third, he'd bury. He wouldn't deposit it like he'd done in 7489. Or had that been 7490? The cops had been on his ass so fast. So Franklin had been looking the wrong way on all those bills. He'd lost \$80,000.

No, he'd be careful this time. He'd show legitimate sources for all his cash. He'd be the talk of Findlay, Ohio as his inventions started panning out. No one would suspect the young physics genius. They'd be jealous, sure, but everybody knew Johnny Rayburn was a brain. The Rubik's Cube—no, the Rayburn's Cube—would be his road to fame and riches.

* * * *

John reached the outskirts of town in an hour, passing a green sign that said “Findlay, Ohio. Population 6232.” His Findlay had a population in the twenty thousand range. As he stood there, he heard a high-pitched whine grow behind him. He stepped off the berm as a truck flew by him, at about forty-five miles per hour. It was in fact two trucks in tandem pulling a large trailer filled with gravel. The fronts of the trucks were flat, probably to aid in stacking several together for larger loads, like a train with more than one locomotive. The trailer was smaller than a typical dump truck in his universe. A driver sat in each truck. Expecting to be enveloped in

a cloud of exhaust, John found nothing fouler than moist air. *Flywheel?* he wondered. *Steam?*

Despite his predicament, John was intrigued by the engineering of the trucks. Ten more minutes of walking, past two motels and a diner, he came to the city square, the Civil War monument displayed as proudly as ever, cannon pointed toward the South. A few people were strolling the square, but no one noticed him.

Across the square was the courthouse. Beside it stood the library, identical to what he remembered, a three-story building, its entrance framed by granite lions reclining on brick pedestals. There was the place to start figuring this

universe out.

The library was identical in layout to the one he knew. John walked to the card catalog—there were no computer terminals—and looked up the numbers for American history. On the shelf he found a volume by Albert Trey called *US History and Heritage: Major Events that Shaped a Nation* . He sat in a low chair and paged through it. He found the divergence in moments.

The American Revolution, War of 1812, and Civil War all had the expected results. The presidents were the same through Woodrow Wilson. World War I was a minor war, listed as the Greco-Turkish War. World War II was listed as the Great War and was

England and the US against Germany, Russia, and Japan. A truce was called in 1956 after years of no resolution to the fighting. Hostilities had flared for years until the eighties when peace was declared and disarmament accomplished in France, which was split up and given to Germany and Spain.

But all of those things happened after Alexander Graham Bell developed an effective battery for the automobile. Instead of an internal combustion engine, cars and trucks in this universe used electric engines. That explained the trucks: electric engines.

But even as he read about the use of zeppelins for transport, the relatively peaceful twentieth century, his anger

began to grow. This universe was nothing like his own. John Prime had lied. Finally, he stood and found the local telephone book. He paged through it, looking for Rayburns. As he expected, there were none.

He checked his watch; in eight hours he was going back home and kicking the crap out of John Prime.

* * * *

His mother called him to dinner, and for a moment he froze with fear. *They'll know*, he thought. *They'll know I'm not their son.*

Breathing slowly, he hid the money back under his comic book collection in the closet.

"Coming!" he called.

During dinner he kept quiet, focusing on what his parents mentioned, filing key facts away for later use. There was too much he didn't know. He couldn't volunteer anything until he had all his facts right. Cousin Paul was still in jail. They were staying after church tomorrow for a spaghetti lunch. His mother would be canning and making vinegar that week. His father was buying a turkey from Sam Riley, who had a flock of twenty or so. The dinner finished with homemade apple pie that made the cuts on his hands and the soreness in his back worth it.

After dinner he excused himself. In his room he rooted through Johnny Farmboy's bookbag. He'd missed a year

of school; he had a lot of make-up to do. And, crap, an essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins, whoever the heck that was.

* * * *

By the time the library closed, John's head was full of facts and details about the new universe. There were a thousand things he'd like to research, but there was no time. He stopped at a newspaper shop and picked an almanac off the shelf. After a moment's hesitation, he offered to buy the three-dollar book with one of the twenties John Prime had given him. The counter man barely glanced at the bill and handed John sixteen dollars and change. The bills were identical to those in his own world. The coins bore other faces.

He ate a late dinner at Eckart's cafe, listening to rockabilly music. None of it was familiar music, but it was music that was playable on the country stations at home. Even at ten in the evening, there was a sizeable crowd, drinking coffee and hard liquor. There was no beer to be had. It was a tame crowd for a Saturday night. He read the almanac and listened in to the conversations around him. Most of it was about cars, girls, and guys, just like in his universe. By midnight, the crowd had thinned. At half-past midnight, John walked into the square and stood behind the Civil War statue. He lifted his shirt and toggled the number back to 7533. He paused, checked his watch and saw it was a

quarter till one. Close enough, he figured. He pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

* * * *

He managed to get through church without falling asleep. Luckily the communion ritual was the same. If there was one thing that didn't change from one universe to the next, it was church. He expected the spaghetti lunch afterwards to be just as boring, but across the gymnasium, John saw Casey Nicholson sitting with her family. That was one person he knew where Johnny Farmboy stood with. She liked him, it was clear, but Johnny Farmboy had been too clean-cut to make a move. Not so for him. John excused himself and walked

over to her.

"Hi, Casey," he said.

She blushed at him, perhaps because her parents were there.

Her father said, "Oh, hello, John. How's the basketball team going to do this year?" John wanted to yell at him that he didn't give a rat's ass. But instead he smiled and said, "We'll go all the way if Casey is there to cheer for us."

Casey looked away, her face flushed again. She was dressed in a white Sunday dress that covered her breasts, waist, and hips with enough material to hide the fact that she had any of those features. But he knew what was there. He'd seduced Casey Nicholson in a dozen universes at least.

"I'm only cheering fall sports, John," she said softly. "I play field hockey in the spring." John looked at her mother and asked, "Can I walk with Casey around the church grounds, Mrs. Nicholson?"

She smiled at him, glanced at her husband, and said, "I don't see why not."

"That's a great idea," Mr. Nicholson said.

Casey stood up quickly, and John had to race after her. She stopped after she had gotten out of sight of the gymnasium, hidden in the alcove where the rest rooms were. When John caught up to her, she said,

"My parents are so embarrassing."

"No shit," John said.

Her eyes went wide at his cursing, then she smiled.

"I'm glad you're finally talking to me," she said.

John smiled and said, "Let's walk." He slipped his arm around her waist, and she didn't protest.

* * * *

There was no sensation of shifting, no pressure change. The electric car in the parking lot was still there. The device hadn't worked.

He checked the number: 7533. His finger was on the right switch. He tried it again. Nothing. It had been twelve hours. Twelve hours and forty-five minutes. But maybe John Prime had been estimating. Maybe it took thirteen hours

to recharge. He leaned against the base of the statue and slid to the ground.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. John Prime had lied to him about what was in Universe 7534. Maybe he had lied about the recharge time. Maybe it took days or months to recharge the device. And when he got back, he'd find that John Prime was entrenched in his life. He sat there, trying the switch every fifteen minutes until three in the morning. He was cold, but finally he fell asleep on the grass, leaning against the Civil War Memorial.

He awoke at dawn, the sun in his eyes as it streamed down Washington Avenue. He stood and jumped up and

down to revive his body. His back ached, but the kinks receded after he did some stretches. At a donut shop off the square, he bought a glazed and an orange juice with the change he had left over from the almanac. A dozen people filed in over the course of an hour to buy donuts and coffee before church or work. On the surface, this world was a lot like his.

John couldn't stand the waiting. He walked across the square and climbed the library steps and yanked at the door. They were locked, and he saw the sign showing the library's hours. It was closed until noon. John looked around. There was an alcove behind the lions with a bench. No one would easily see

him from the street. He sat there and tried the device. Nothing.

He continued to try the lever every ten or fifteen minutes. As he sat on the steps of the library, his apprehension grew. He was going to miss school. He was going to miss more than twenty-four hours. He was going to miss the rest of his life. Why wouldn't the device work like it was supposed to?

He realized then that everything John Prime had told him was probably a lie. He had to assume that he was the victim of John Prime's scheming, trapped in another universe. The question was how he would return to his life.

He had the device. It had worked once, to bring him from Universe 7533

to Universe 7534. It would not allow him to return because it wasn't recharged yet. It took longer than—he checked his watch—twenty hours to recharge the device, apparently.

He stopped. He was basing that logic on information he got from John Prime. Nothing that John Prime had said could be used as valid information. Only things that John had seen or gotten from a valid source were true. And John Prime was not a valid source.

The twelve hour recharge time was false. He had assumed that it meant the length of time was what was false in John Prime's statement. What if there was no recharge time at all?

There were two possibilities that John

could see. First, there was no recharge time and he was being prevented from returning to his universe for some other reason. Second, the device no longer worked. Perhaps he had used the last of its energy source.

For some reason he still wanted to believe John Prime. If it was simply a mechanical issue, then he could use intelligence to solve the problem. Maybe John Prime was truthful, and something happened to the device that he didn't know about. Maybe John Prime would be surprised when John never returned with the device, effectively trapping John Prime in John's life. John Prime might even think that John had stolen his device.

But mechanical failure seemed unlikely. John Prime said he had used the device one hundred times. His home universe was around 7433. If he'd used it exactly one hundred times, that was the distance in universes between John's and John Prime's. Did that mean he only used the device to move forward one universe at a time? Or did he hop around? No, the numbers were too similar. John Prime probably moved from one universe to the next systematically.

John decided that he was just too ignorant to ignore all of John Prime's information. Some of it had to be taken at face value.

The one hundred number indicated that John only incremented the universe

counter upward. Why? Did the device only allow travel in one direction?

He played with the theory, fitting the pieces together. The device was defective or designed in such a way that only travel upward was allowed. John Prime mentioned the recharge time to eliminate any possibility of a demonstration. There was perhaps no recharge time. The device was of no value to John Prime, since he planned to stay. That explained the personal questions John Prime had asked; he wanted to ease into John's life. Some things he knew, but other things he had to learn from John. The fury built in John.

"Bastard!" he said softly. John Prime had screwed him. He'd tempted him with

universes, and John had fallen for it. And now he was in another universe, where he didn't exist. He had to get back. There was nothing to do, he realized, but test the theory.

He pulled his backpack onto his shoulders and checked around the bench for his things. Then, with a quick check to see if anyone was looking, he toggled the device to 7535 and pulled the lever. He fell.

* * * *

Monday morning at school went no worse than expected. John barely made it to homeroom, and ended up sitting with the stoners by accident. He had no idea what the word “Buckle” meant in the Hopkins poem. And Mr. Wallace had

to flag him down for physics class.

"Forget which room it is?" he asked.

"Er."

There was no Mr. Wallace in John's home universe, and he had to dodge in-jokes and history between him and Johnny Farmboy; the class was independent study! John realized he'd have to drop it. He was grateful when a kid knocked on the door.

"Mr. Gushman needs to see John Rayburn."

Mr. Wallace took the slip of paper from the acne-ridden freshman. "Again? Read the assignment for tomorrow, John. We have a lot to cover." The man was disappointed in him, but John couldn't find the emotion to care. He hardly knew

him.

John nodded, then grabbed his stuff. He nudged the freshman hall monitor as they walked down the hall.

"Where's Mr. Gushman at?"

The freshman's eye widened like marbles. "He's in the front office. He's the principal."

"No shit, douche bag," John said.

John entered the fish bowl and gave his name to the receptionist. After just a few minutes, Mr. Gushman called him in.

John didn't have anything on Gushman. He'd come to Findlay High School in the time John had been away. The old principal had fucked a student at his old school and that had come out in one of

the universes that John had visited. That bit of dirt would be no good in this universe.

"Have you got the letter of apology for Mrs. Carson?" he asked. John suddenly realized what the meeting was about. He'd not written the letter.

"No, sir. I've decided not to write the letter."

Mr. Gushman raised his eyebrows, then frowned. "You realize that this will have grave consequences for your future."

"No, I don't think so. In fact, I've contacted a lawyer. I'll be suing Ted Carson." John hadn't thought of doing that until that moment, but now that he'd said it, he decided it was a good idea.

"I'm an honor student, Gushman. I'm a varsity player in two sports. There will be fallout because of this. Big fallout."

"It's Mr. Gushman, please. I'll have your respect." His knuckles were white, and John realized that Gushman had expected him to cave. Well, maybe Johnny Farmboy would have caved, but not him. He had dirt on the education board members. He had dirt on the mayor. This would be a slam dunk for him.

"Respect is earned," John said.

"I see. Shall I have your mother called or do you have transportation home?"

"Home? Why?" John said.

"Your three day suspension starts right now." John had forgotten about

that. He shrugged. Johnny Farmboy would have shit a brick at being expelled. To John, it didn't really matter.

"I can take care of myself."

"You are not allowed on school property until Thursday at noon. I'll be sending a letter home to your parents. I'll also inform Coach Jessick that you are off the roster for basketball and track."

"Whatever."

Mr. Gushman stood, leaning heavily on the desk. His voice was strained as he said, "I expected better of you, John. Everything I know about you says that you're a good boy. Everything I've seen since you walked in this door has made me reevaluate my opinions."

John shrugged again. "Whatever." He

stood, ignoring Gushman's anger. "We done here?"

"Yes. You are dismissed."

At least he didn't have to worry about learning basketball. And three days was enough time to get started on his plans. He smiled as he passed the receptionist, smiled at the dirtbags waiting in the office. This was actually working out better than he expected.

* * * *

John's arms flailed and his left foot hit the ground, catching his weight. He groaned as his leg collapsed under him. He rolled across the grass.

Grass? he thought as the pain erupted in his knee. He sat up, rocking as he held his knee to his chest. He'd been on the

steps of the library and now he was on a plain. The wind blew the smell of outside: dirt, pollen, clover.

He tried to stretch his leg, but the pain was too much. He leaned back, pulling off his backpack with one hand, and looked up at the sky, breathing deeply. It hurt like hell. The device had worked. He had changed universes again. Only this universe had no library, no Findlay, Ohio. This universe didn't seem to have anything but grass. He fell because the steps he'd been standing on weren't in the universe he was in now.

He checked the readout on the device. He was in 7535. He'd gone forward one universe. John looked around him, but didn't see anything through the green-

yellow grass. It rustled in the wind, making sounds like sandpaper rubbing on wood.

John stood gingerly on his other leg. He was on a broad plain, stretching for a good distance in every direction. There were small groves of trees to the north and east. To the west and south, the grass stretched as far as he could see.

There was no library to use to figure out what was different in this universe. No humans at all, maybe. A Mayan empire? If he wanted to find the differences, he'd have to do some field research. He sat back down. No, he thought. He had to get back to his life. John Prime had some answers to give and a price to pay. It was Sunday

afternoon. He still had half a day to figure out how to get back to his universe.

His knee was swelling, so he took off his coat and shirt. He ripped his T-shirt into long strips and used them to wrap his knee as tightly as possible. It wasn't broken, but he might have sprained it. He took the sandwich that he had packed on Saturday from his backpack and unwrapped it. He finished it in several bites and rinsed it down with some of the water in his water bottle. The taste of the sandwich made him angry. John Prime was eating his food and sleeping in his bed. John wondered how he would feel punching someone who looked like him in the face. He decided

that he could do it. John spent the afternoon, nursing his knee and considering what he knew, what he thought he knew, and what John Prime had told him. The latter category he considered biased or false. What he knew, however, was growing.

Universe 7535 was the second one he'd visited. The device clearly still worked. His going from 7534 to 7535 proved that.

It was also support for his theory that the device only allowed travel to universes higher in number than the one a traveler currently resided in. But not proof. Hypotheses required repeatable experimental proof. He'd used the device to move forward through two

universes. He'd have to do it a couple more times before he was certain that that was the way the device worked. He took a blade of grass and chewed on it. This was an unspoiled universe, he thought. Which gave him another piece of data. Universes sequentially next to each other could have little in common. John couldn't even begin to guess what had happened for a universe to not have North America settled by the Europeans.

There'd been no library steps here, so he had fallen ten feet to the ground. More data: There was no guarantee that a man-made object in one universe would exist in the next. Nor even natural objects. Hills were removed or added by machines. Rivers were dammed and

moved. Lakes were created. What would happen if he jumped to the next universe and the steps were there? Would he be trapped in the cement that formed the steps? Would he die of asphyxiation, unable to press the lever because he was encased in the library steps?

The thought of being entombed, blind and without air, horrified him. It was no way to die. He would have to be careful when he changed universes. He'd have to be as certain as possible that there was nothing solid where he was going. But how?

Movement caught his eye and he looked up to see a large beast walking in the distance. It was so tall he saw it from his seat in the grass. A cross between a

rhinoceros and a giraffe, it munched at the leaves of a tree. It was grey with legs like tree limbs, a face like a horse. Leaves and branches gave way quickly to its gobbling teeth.

No animal like that existed in his universe.

John watched, amazed. He wished he had a camera. A picture of this beast would be a nice addition to his scrapbook. Would it be worth cash? he wondered.

Ponderously it moved to the next tree in the grove.

John looked around him with more interest. This was no longer a desolate North America. There were animals here that no longer existed in his

timeline. This universe was more radically different than he could have imagined.

The wave of the grass to the west caught his attention. The grass bobbed against the wind, and he was suddenly alert. Something was in the grass not twenty yards from him. He realized that large herbivores meant large carnivores. Bears, mountain lions, and wolves could be roaming these plains. And he had no weapons. Worse still, he had a bum knee.

He looked around him for a stick or a rock, but there was nothing. Quickly he gathered the notebook into the backpack. He pulled his coat on.

Was the thing closer? he wondered.

He glanced at the grass around him. *Why hadn't he thought of that earlier?*

John felt beneath his shirt for the device. He glanced down and toggled the universe counter up one to 7536. But he dared not pull the lever. He could be under the library right now. He looked around him, tried to orient himself. The library entrance faced east, toward the Civil War Memorial. If he traveled east two hundred feet, he'd be in the middle of the park and it was unlikely that anything would be in his way. It was the safest place he could think of to do the transfer. Suppressing a groan he moved off in an easterly direction, counting his steps. At fifty-two steps he heard a sound behind him. A dog-like creature

stood ten yards away from him in his wake in the grass. It had a dog's snout and ears, but its eyes were slit and its back was arched more like a cat's. It had no tail. Its fur was tan with black spots the size of quarters along its flank. John froze, considering. It was small, the size of a border collie. He was big prey and it may just have been curious about him.

"Boo-yah!" he cried, waved his arms. It didn't move, just stared at him with its slit eyes. Then two more appeared behind it.

It was a pack animal. Pack animals could easily bring down an animal larger than a pack member. He saw three of them, but there could be a dozen hidden in the grass. John turned and ran.

The things took him from behind, nipping his legs, flinging themselves onto his back. He fell, his leg screaming. He felt weight on his back, so he let the straps of his backpack slide off. He crawled forward another yard. Hoping he'd come far enough, he pulled the lever on the device.

* * * *

John took the two o'clock Silver Mongoose to Toledo, right after he stood in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles trying to convince the clerk to file the paperwork for his lost license.

"I am positive that it won't turn up," John said.

"So many people say that, and then there it is in the last place you look."

"Really. It won't."

"All righty, then. I'll take that form from you."

He was tempted to rent a car, but that would have raised as many eyebrows as hiring a patent lawyer in Findlay. John had to go to Toledo to get his business done. Three days off school was just about perfect. As the northern Ohio farmland rolled by, he wondered how hurt he'd be if he had to transfer out right now. He was always considering his escape routes, always sleeping on the ground floor, always in structures that were as old as he could find. His chest itched where the device should have been. It was Johnny Farmboy's problem now. He was free of it. No one would

come looking for him here. He blended right in. No police would come barging in at three AM. No FBI agents wanting his device. What an innocent he'd been. What a piece of work. How many times had he almost died? How many times had he screwed up within inches of the end?

For a moment, he had a twinge of guilt for the displaced John. He hoped that he figured out a few things quickly, before things went to hell. Maybe he could find a place to settle down just like he had. *Maybe I should have written him a note,* he thought.

Then he laughed to himself. Too late for that. Johnny Farmboy was on his own. Just like he had been.

* * * *

A car horn screeched and a massive shape bore down on him. John tried to scramble away, but his hand was stuck. As his wrist flexed the wrong way, pain shot up his arm.

He looked up, over his shoulder, into the grill of a car. John hadn't made it into the park. He was still in the street, the sidewalk a few feet in front of him.

John got to his knees. His hand was embedded in the asphalt. He planted his feet and pulled. Nothing happened except pain.

"Buddy, you okay?" The driver was standing with his door open. John's eyes were just over the hood of the man's car.

John didn't reply. Instead he pulled

again and his hand tore loose with a spray of tar and stones. The impression of his palm was cast in the asphalt.

The man came around his car and took John's arm. "You better sit down. I'm really sorry about this. You came outta nowhere." The man led him to the curb, then looked back and said, "Jesus. Is that your dog?"

John looked and saw the head and shoulders of one of the cat-dogs. The transfer had caught only half the beast. Its jaws were open, revealing yellowed teeth. Its milky eyes were glazed over. Blood from its severed torso flowed across the street. A strand of intestine had unraveled onto the pavement.

"Oh, man. I killed your dog," the

motorist cried.

John said between breaths, "Not ... my ... dog.... Chasing me." The man looked around. "There's Harvey," he said, pointing to a police officer sitting in the donut shop that John had eaten in that morning. *Well, not the same one*, John thought. This wasn't the same universe, since this car was gas powered.

"Hey, Harvey," he yelled, waving his arms. Someone nudged the police officer and he turned, looking at the blood spreading across the street.

Harvey was a big man, but he moved quickly. He dropped his donut and coffee in a trash can at the door of the shop. As he approached he brushed his hands on his pants.

"What happened, Roger?" he said. He glanced at John, who was too winded and too sore to move. He looked at the cat-dog on the street. "What the hell is that?"

He kicked it with his boot.

"This young man was being chased, I think. I nearly clipped him and I definitely got that thing. What is it?

A badger?"

"Whatever it is, you knocked the crap out of it." He turned to John. "Son, you okay?"

"No," John said. "I twisted my knee and my wrist. I think that thing was rabid. It chased me from around the library."

"Well, I'll be," said the officer. He

squatted next to John. "Looks like it got a piece of your leg." He lifted up John's pant leg, pointed to the line of bite marks. "Son, you bought yourself some rabies shots." The officer called Animal Control for the carcass and an ambulance for John. The white-uniformed Animal Control man spent some time looking for the other half of the cat-dog. To Harvey's questions about what it was, he shrugged. "Never seen nothing like it." When he lifted up the torso, John saw the severed arm straps of his backpack on the ground. He groaned. His backpack, with seventeen hundred dollars in cash, was in the last universe under the other half of the cat-dog. A paramedic cleaned John's calf,

looked at his wrist and his knee. She touched his forehead gingerly.

"What's this?"

"Ow," he said, wincing.

"You may have a concussion. Chased by a rabid dog into a moving car. Quite a day you've had."

"It's been a less than banner day," John said.

"Banner day," she repeated. "I haven't heard that term in a long time. I think my grandmother said that."

"Mine too."

They loaded him into the ambulance on a stretcher. By the time the door had shut on the ambulance, quite a few people had gathered. John kept expecting someone to shout his name in

recognition, but no one did. Maybe he didn't exist in this universe.

They took him to Roth Hospital, and it looked just like it did in his universe, an institutional building from the fifties. He sat for fifteen minutes on an examining table off of the emergency room. Finally, an older doctor came in and checked him thoroughly.

"Lacerations on the palm. The wrist has a slight sprain. Minor. The hand is fine." Looking at John's knee, he added, "Sprain of the right knee. We'll wrap that. You'll probably need crutches for a couple days." A few minutes later, a woman showed up with a clipboard. "We'll need to fill these forms out," she said.

“Are you over eighteen?”

John shook his head, thinking fast.

“My parents are on the way.”

"Did you call them?"

"Yes."

"We'll need their insurance information."

John stood, wincing, and peered out the door until she disappeared. Then he limped the other way until he found an emergency exit door. He pushed it open and hobbled off into the parking lot, the bleating of the siren behind him.

* * * *

The first lawyer John visited listened to him for fifteen minutes until she said she wasn't taking any new clients. John almost screamed at her, “Then why did

you let me blather on for so long?" The second took thirty seconds to say no. But the third listened dubiously to his idea for the Rayburn Cube. He didn't even blink at the cash retainer John handed over for the three patents he wanted him to research and acquire.

He called Casey from his cheap hotel.

"Hey, Casey. It's John!"

"John! I heard you were expelled for a month."

"News of my expulsion has been greatly exaggerated."

"What happened?"

"Just more of the Ted Carson saga. I told Gushman I wasn't going to apologize, so he kicked me out of school. You should have seen the colors

on his face."

"You told Gushman no?" she asked.
"Wow. He used to be a colonel in the army."

"He used to molest small children too," said John.

"Don't say that."

"Why? He sucks."

"But it's not true."

"It could be true, probably is in some other universe."

"But we don't know for sure."

John switched subjects. "Listen, I called to see if you wanted to go out on Saturday."

"Yeah, sure," she said quickly.
"Yeah."

"Movie?"

"Sounds good. What's playing?"

"Does it matter?"

She giggled. "No." After a moment, she added, "Didn't your parents ground you?"

"Oh, shit!"

"What?"

"They don't know yet," John said. He looked at the cheap clock radio next to the bed: six-thirty. "Shit."

"Do you think we can still go out?"

"One way or another, Casey, I'll see you on Saturday."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He hung up.

His parents. He'd forgotten to call his parents. They were going to be pissed. Damn. He'd been without them for so

long, he'd forgotten how they worked.

He dialed his home number.

"Mom?"

"Oh, my God!" she yelled. Then to his father, she said, "Bill, it's John. It's John."

"Where is he? Is he all right?"

"Mom, I'm okay." He waited. He knew how Johnny Subprime would play this. Sure, he'd never have gone to Toledo, but John could play the suspension for all it was worth. "Did you hear from Gushman?"

"John, yes, and it's okay. We understand. You can come home. We aren't angry with you."

"Then, Mom, you know how I feel. I did the right thing, Mom, and they took

everything away from me.”

It was what Farmboy would have said.

"I know, dear. I know."

"It's not fair."

"I know, Johnny. Now where are you? You've got to come home." His mother sounded pitiful.

"I won't be home tonight, Mom. I've got things to do."

"He's not coming home, Bill!"

"Give me the phone, Janet." Into the phone, his father said, "John, I want you home tonight. We understand that you're upset, but you need to be home, and we'll handle this here, under our roof."

"Dad, I'll be home tomorrow."

"John—"

"Dad, I'll be home tomorrow." He hung up the phone and almost chortled. Then he turned on Home Theatre Office and watched bad movies until midnight.

* * * *

John shivered in the morning cold. His knee was the size of a melon, throbbing from the night spent on the library steps. The bell tower struck eight; John Prime would be on his way to school right now. He'd be heading for English class. John hoped the bastard had done the essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins. He'd slept little, his knee throbbing, his heart aching. He'd lost the 1700 dollars John Prime had given him, save eighty dollars in his wallet. He'd lost his backpack. His clothes were

ripped and tattered. He'd skipped out on his doctor's bill. He was as far from home as he'd ever been. He needed help.

He couldn't stay here; the hospital probably called the police on his unpaid bill. He needed a fresh universe to work in.

Limping, he walked across to the Ben Franklin's, buying new dungarees and a backpack. Then he stood in the center of the town square and waited for a moment when no one was around. He toggled the universe counter upward and pressed the lever.

* * * *

"It turns *this* way, *this* way, and *this* way!" John made the motions with his hands for the fourth time, wishing again

that he'd bought the keychain Cube when he'd had the chance.

"Why?" Joe Patadorn was the foreman for an industrial design shop. A pad of paper on his drafting board was covered in pencil sketches of cubes. "Rotate against what? It's a cube."

"Against itself ! Against itself ! Each column and each row rotates."

"Seems like it could get caught up with itself."

"Yes! If it's not a cube when you try to turn it, it'll not turn."

"And this is a toy people will want to play with?"

"I'll handle that part."

Joe shrugged. "Fine. It's your money."

"Yes, it is."

"We'll have a prototype in two weeks."

They shook on it.

His errands were finally done in Toledo. His lawyer was doing the patent searches and Patadorn was building the prototype. If he was lucky, he could have the first batch of Cubes ready to ship by Christmas, perfect timing.

From the bus stop, he hiked the three miles to the farm and stashed his contracts in the loft with the money there. When he was climbing down, he saw his dad standing next to the stalls.

"Hey. Am I in time for dinner?" John asked.

His father didn't reply, and then he realized that he was in trouble. His

father's face was red, his cheeks puffed out. He stood in overalls, his fists at his hips.

"In the house." The words were soft, punctuated.

"Dad—"

"In the house, now." His father lifted an arm, pointing.

John went, and as he entered the house, he was angry too. How dare he order him around?

His mother was waiting at the kitchen table, her fingers folded in a clenched, white mound.

"Where were you?" his father demanded.

"None of your business," John said.

"While you're in my house, you'll

answer my questions!" his father roared.

"I'll get my things and go," John said.

"Bill..." his mother said. "We've discussed this."

His father looked away, then said, "He pranced into the barn like he'd done nothing wrong." His mother turned to him. "Where were you, John?"

He opened his mouth to rail, but instead he said, "Toledo. I had to ... cool off." His mother nodded. "That's important."

"Yeah."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes ... no." Suddenly he was sick to his stomach. Suddenly he was more angry with himself than with his father.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay what

you did, and we're glad you're back. Bill?" His father grunted, then said, "Son, we're glad you're back." And then he took John in his big farmer arms and squeezed him.

John sobbed before he could fight it down, and then he was bawling like he hadn't since he was ten.

"I'm sorry, Dad." The words were muffled in his shoulder. His throat was tight.

"It's okay. It's okay."

His mother joined them and they held onto him for a long time. John found he didn't want to let go. He hadn't hugged his parents in a long time.

* * * *

John climbed the steps to the library.

This universe looked just like his own. He didn't really care how it was different. All he wanted was to figure out how to get home. He'd tried the device a dozen times in the square, but the device would not allow him to go backwards, not even to universes before his own. He needed help; he needed professional help. He needed to understand about parallel universes. Browsing the card catalog, it soon became apparent the Findlay library was not the place to do a scientific search on hypothetical physics. All he could find were a dozen science fiction novels which were no help at all.

He was going to have to go to Toledo. U of T was his second choice after Case.

It was a state school and close. Half his friends would be going there. It had a decent if not stellar physics department. He took the bus to Toledo, dozing along the way. A local brought him to the campus. The Physics Library was a single room with three tables. Stacks lined all the walls and extended into the middle of the room, making it seem cramped and tiny. It smelled of dust, just like the Findlay Public Library.

"Student ID?"

John turned to the bespectacled student sitting at the front desk. For a moment, he froze, then patted his front pockets. "I left it at the dorm."

The student looked peeved then said, "Well, bring it next time, frosh." He

waved him in.

"I will."

John brought the catalog up on a terminal and searched for "Parallel Universe." There wasn't much. In fact there was nothing at all in the Physics Library. He was searching for the wrong subject. Physicists didn't call them parallel universes, of course. TV and movies called them parallel universes. He couldn't think what else to search for. Perhaps there was a more formal term for what he was looking for, but he had no idea what it was. He'd have to ask his dumb questions directly of a professor. He left the library and walked down the second floor hall, looking at name plates above doors. Billboards lined the walls,

stapled and tacked with colloquia notices, assistantship postings, apartments to share. A lot of the offices were empty. At the end of the hall was the small office of Dr. Frank Wilson, Associate Professor of Physics, lit and occupied.

John knew associate professors were low on the totem pole, which was probably why he was the only one in his office. And maybe a younger professor would be more willing to listen to what he had to say. He knocked on the door.

"Come on in."

He entered the office, found it cluttered on all sides with bookshelves stacked to bursting with papers and tomes, but neat at the center, where a

man sat at an empty desk reading a journal.

"You're the first person to show for office hours today," he said. Professor Wilson was in his late twenties, with black glasses, sandy beard, and hair that seemed in need of a cut. He wore a grey jacket over a blue oxford.

"Yeah," John said. "I have some questions, and I don't know how to ask them."

"On the homework set?"

"No. On another topic." John was suddenly uncertain. "Parallel universes." Professor Wilson nodded. "Hmmm." He took a drink of his coffee, then said, "Are you one of my students? Freshman Physics?"

"No," John said.

"Then what's your interest in this? Are you from the creative writing department?"

"No, I..."

"Your question, while it seems simple to you, is extremely complex. Have you taken calculus?"

"Just half a semester...."

"Then you'll never understand the math behind it. The authorities here are Hawking, Wheeler, Everett."

He ticked them off on his fingers. "You're talking about quantum cosmology. Graduate level stuff." John said quickly before he could cut him off again, "But my question is more practical. Not theoretical."

"Practical parallel worlds? Nonsense. Quantum cosmology states that there may be multiple universes out there, but the most likely one is ours, via the weak anthropic principle. Which means since we're here, we can take it as a given that we exist. Well, it's more complex than that."

"But what about other universes, other people just like us?" The man laughed. "Highly unlikely. Occam's razor divests us of that idea."

"How would I travel between universes?" John said, grasping at straws against the man's brisk manner.

"You can't, you won't, not even remotely possible."

"But what if I said it was. What if I

knew for sure it was possible."

"I'd say your observations were manipulated or you saw something that you interpreted incorrectly." John touched the wound in his calf where the cat-dog had bitten him. No, he'd seen what he'd seen. He'd felt what he'd felt. There was no doubt about that.

"I know what I saw."

Wilson waved his hands. "I won't debate your observations. It's a waste of my time. Tell me what you think you saw."

John paused, not sure where to start and what to tell, and Professor Wilson jumped in. "See? You aren't sure what you saw, are you?" He leaned forward. "A physicist must have a discerning eye.

It must be nurtured, tested, used to separate the chaff from the wheat.” He leaned back again, glanced out his window onto the quad below. “My guess is that you've seen too many Schwarzenegger movies or read too many books. You may have seen something peculiar, but before you start applying complex physical theories to explain it, you should eliminate the obvious. Now, I have another student of mine waiting, one I know is in my class, so I think you should run along and think about what you really saw.” John turned and saw a female student standing behind him, waiting. His rage surged inside him. The man was patronizing him, making assumptions based on his

questions and demeanor. Wilson was dismissing him.

"I can prove it," he said, his jaw clenched.

The professor just looked at him, then beckoned the student into his office. John turned and stalked down the hall. He was asking for help, and he'd been laughed at.

"I'll show him," John said. He took the steps two at a time and flung open the door to the quadrangle that McCormick faced.

"Watch it, dude," a student said, almost hit by the swinging door. John brushed past him. He grabbed a handful of stones and, standing at the edge of the quadrangle, began flinging them at the

window that he thought was Wilson's. He threw a dozen and started to draw a crowd of students, until Wilson looked out the window, opened it and shouted, "Campus security will be along in a moment." John yelled back, "Watch this, you stupid bastard!" He toggled the device forward one universe and pulled the lever.

* * * *

John awoke in the night, gripped by the same nightmare, trapped in darkness, no air, his body held rigid. He sat up and flung the covers away from him, unable to have anything touching him. He ripped off his pajamas as well and stood naked in the bedroom, just breathing. It was too hot; he opened the window and stood

before it.

His breathing slowed, as the heavy air of the October night brought the smells of the farm to him: manure and dirt. He leaned against the edge of the window, and his flesh rose in goose pimples. It was a dream he'd had before, and he knew where it came from. He'd transferred near Lake Erie, on a small, deserted beach not far from Port Clinton, and ended up buried in a sand dune. He'd choked on the sand and would have died there if a fisherman hadn't seen his arm flailing. He could have died. It was pure luck that the guy had been there to dig his head out. He'd never transferred near a body of water or a river again.

That hadn't been the only time either.

In Columbus, Ohio, he'd transferred into a concrete step, his chest and lower body stuck. He'd been unable to reach the toggle button on the device and had to wait until someone wandered by and called the fire department. They'd used a jack-hammer to free him. When they'd turned to him, demanding how he'd been trapped, he'd feigned unconsciousness and transferred out from the ambulance.

After that, each time he touched the trigger he did so with the fear that he'd end up in something solid, unable to transfer out again, unable to breath, unable to move. He was nauseated, his stomach kicking, his armpits soaked, before the jumps.

It was the cruelest of jokes. He had

the most powerful device in the world and it was broken.

"No more," he said to himself. "No more of that." He had a family now, in ways he hadn't expected. The confrontation with his parents had been angry, then sad, and ended with all of them crying and hugging. He'd meant to be tough; he'd meant to tell his parents that he was an adult now, and could take care of himself, but his resolve had melted in the face of their genuine care for him. He'd cried, goddamn it all.

He'd promised to reconsider the letter. He'd promised to talk with Gushman again. He'd promised to be more considerate to his parents. Was he turning into Johnny Farmboy?

He'd gone to bed empty, spent, his mind placid. But his subconscious had pulled the dream out. Smothering, suffocating, his body held inflexible as his lungs screamed. He shivered, then shut the window. His body had expelled all its heat.

He slipped back into bed and closed his eyes.

"I'm becoming Johnny Farmboy," he whispered. "Screw it all."

* * * *

McCormick Hall looked identical. In fact the same student guarded the door of the Physics Library, asked him the same question.

"Student ID?"

"I left it in my dorm room," John

replied without hesitation.

"Well, bring it next time, frosh."

John smiled at him. "Don't call me frosh again, geek."

The student blinked at him, dismayed.

His visit with Professor Wilson had not been a total loss. Wilson had mentioned the subject that he should have searched for instead of parallel universes. He had said that the field of study was called quantum cosmology.

Cosmology, John knew, was the study of the origin of the universe. Quantum theory, however, was applied to individual particles, such as atoms and electrons. It was a statistical way to model those particles. Quantum cosmology, John figured, was a

statistical way to model the universe. Not just one universe, either, John hoped, but all universes.

He sat down at a terminal. This time there were thirty hits. He printed the list and began combing the stacks.

Half of the books were summaries of colloquia or workshops. The papers were riddled with equations, and all of them assumed an advanced understanding of the subject matter. John had no basis to understand any of the math.

In the front matter of one of the books was a quote from a physicist regarding a theory called the Many-Worlds Theory. "When a quantum transition occurs, an irreversible one, which is happening in

our universe at nearly an infinite rate, a new universe branches off from that transition in which the transition did not occur. Our universe is just a single one of a myriad copies, each slightly different than the others." John felt an affinity for the quote immediately. He had seen other universes in which small changes had resulted in totally different futures, such as Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the electric motor. It almost made sense then, that every universe he visited was one of billions in which some quantum event or decision occurred differently.

He shut the book. He thought he had enough to ask his questions of Wilson now. The second floor hallway seemed

identical, right down to the empty offices and cluttered billboards. Professor Wilson's office was again at the end of the hall, and he was there, reading a journal. John wondered if it was the same one.

"Come on in," he said at John's knock.

"I have a couple questions."

"About the homework set?"

"No, this is unrelated. It's about quantum cosmology."

Wilson put his paper down and nodded. "A complex subject. What's your question?"

"Do you agree with the Many-Worlds Theory?" John asked.

"No."

John waited, unsure what to make of

the single syllable answer. Then he said, "Uh, no?"

"No. It's hogwash in my opinion. What's your interest in it? Are you one of my students?" Wilson sported the same gray jacket over the same blue oxford.

"You don't believe in multiple universes as an explanation ... for..." John was at a loss again. He didn't know as much as he thought he knew. He still couldn't ask the right questions.

"For quantum theory?" asked Wilson. "No. It's not necessary. Do you know Occam's Theory?" John nodded.

"Which is simpler? One universe that moves under statistical laws at the quantum level or an infinite number of universes each stemming from every

random event? How many universes have you seen?" John began to answer the rhetorical question.

"One," said Wilson before John could open his mouth. Wilson looked John up and down. "Are you a student here?"

"Uh, no. I'm in high school," John admitted.

"I see. This is really pretty advanced stuff, young man. Graduate level stuff. Have you had calculus?"

"Just half a semester."

"Let me try to explain it another way." He picked up a paperweight off his desk, a rock with eyes and mouth painted on it. "I am going to make a decision to drop this rock between now and ten seconds from now." He paused, then dropped the

rock after perhaps seven seconds. “A random process. In ten other universes, assuming for simplicity that I could only drop the rock at integer seconds and not fractional seconds, I dropped the rock at each of the seconds from one to ten. I made ten universes by generating a random event. By the Many-Worlds Theory, they all exist. The question is, where did all the matter and energy come from to build ten new universes just like that?” He snapped his fingers. “Now extrapolate to the nearly infinite number of quantum transitions happening on the earth this second. How much energy is required to build all those universes? Where does it come from? Clearly the Many-Worlds Theory is

absurd."

John shook his head, trying to get his arms around the idea. He couldn't refute Wilson's argument. He realized how little he really knew. He said, "But what if multiple worlds did exist? Could you travel between the worlds?"

"You can't, you won't, not even remotely possible."

"But—"

"It can't happen, even if the theory were true."

"Then the theory is wrong," John said to himself.

"I told you it was wrong. There are no parallel universes." John felt the frustration growing in him. "But I know there are. I've seen them."

"I'd say your observations were manipulated or you saw something that you interpreted incorrectly."

"Don't condescend to me again!" John shouted.

Wilson looked at him calmly, then stood.

"Get out of this office, and I suggest you get off this campus right now. I recommend that you seek medical attention immediately," Wilson said coldly.

John's frustration turned to rage. Wilson was no different here than in the last universe. He assumed John was wrong because he acted like a hick, a farm boy. He was certain John knew nothing that he didn't already know.

John flung himself at the man. Wilson's papers scattered across his chest and onto the floor. John grabbed at his jacket from across the desk and yelled into his face, "I'll prove it to you, goddammit! I'll prove it."

"Get off me," Wilson yelled and pushed John away. Wilson lost his balance when John's grip on his jacket slipped and he fell on the floor against his chair. "You maniac!" John stood across from the desk from him, his breathing coming hard. He needed proof. His eyes saw the diploma on the wall of Wilson's office. He grabbed it and ran out of the office. If he couldn't convince this Wilson, he'd convince the next. He found an alcove beside the building and

transferred out. John stood clutching Wilson's diploma to his chest, his heart still thumping from the confrontation. Suddenly he felt silly. He'd attacked the man and stolen his diploma to prove to another version of him that he wasn't a wacko.

He looked across the quad. He watched a boy catch a Frisbee, and then saw juxtaposed the images of him tripping and not catching it, just missing it to the left, to the right, a million permutations. Everything in the quad was suddenly a blur.

He shook his head, then lifted the diploma so that he could read it. He'd try again, and this time he'd try the direct approach.

John climbed the steps to Wilson's office and knocked.

"Come on in."

"I have a problem."

Wilson nodded and asked, "How can I help?"

"I've visited you three times. Twice before you wouldn't believe me," John said.

"I don't think I've ever seen you before," he said. "You're not one of my students, are you?"

"No, I'm not. We've never met, but I've met versions of you."

"Really."

John yelled, "Don't patronize me! You do that every fucking time, and I've had enough." His arms were shaking. "I don't

belong in this universe. I belong in another. Do you understand?" Wilson's face was emotionless, still. "No, please explain."

"I was tricked into using a device. I was tricked by another version of myself because he wanted my life. He told me I could get back, but the device either doesn't work right or only goes in one direction. I want to get back to my universe, and I need help."

Wilson nodded. "Why don't you sit down?"

John nodded, tears welling in his eyes. He'd finally gotten through to Wilson.

"So you've tried talking with me—other versions of me—in other

universes, and I won't help. Why not?"

"We start by discussing parallel universes or quantum cosmology or Multi-Worlds Theory, and you end up shooting it all down with Occam's Razor."

"Sounds like something I'd say," Wilson said, nodding. "So you have a device."

"Yeah. It's here." John pointed to his chest, then unbuttoned his shirt. Wilson looked at the device gravely. "What's that in your hand?" John glanced down at the diploma. "It's ... your diploma from the last universe. I sorta took it for proof." Wilson held out his hand, and John handed it over. There was an identical one on the wall. The professor

glanced from one to the other. "Uh huh," he said, then after a moment, "I see." He put the diploma down and said, "My middle name is Lawrence." John saw that the script of the diploma he'd stolen said "Frank B. Wilson" while the one on the wall said

"Frank L. Wilson."

"I guess it's just a difference—"

"Who put you up to this? Was it Greene? This is just the sort of thing he'd put together." Anguish washed over John. "No! This is all real."

"That device strapped to your chest. Now that's classic. And the diploma. Nice touch."

"Really. This is no hoax."

"Enough already. I'm on to you. Is

Greene in the hall?" Wilson called through the door. "You can come out now, Charles. I'm on to you."

"There is no Charles. There is no Greene," John said quietly.

"And you must be from the drama department, because you are good. Two more copies of me! As if the universe can handle one."

John stood up and walked out of the office, his body suddenly too heavy.

"Don't forget the shingle," Wilson called, holding up the diploma. John shrugged and continued walking down the hall.

He sat on a bench next to the quad for a long time. The sun set and the warm summer day vanished along with the kids

playing Frisbee with their shirts tied around their waists. Finally he stood and walked toward the Student Union. He needed food. He'd skipped lunch at some point; his stomach was growling at him. He didn't feel hungry but his body was demanding food. He just felt tired.

There was a pizza franchise in the Student Union called Papa Bob's. He ordered a small pizza and a Coke, ate it mechanically. It tasted like cardboard, chewy cardboard. The Union was desolate as well, all the students driving home or heading to the dorms for studying and TV. John spotted a pay phone as he sat pondering what he would do next, whether he should confront Wilson again. John realized that

he should have taken a picture of the man or demanded he write himself a note. But he would have told John that it was computer generated or forged. He walked over to the phone and dialed his number. The phone demanded seventy-five cents. He inserted the coins and the phone began to ring.

"Hello?" his mother answered.

"Hello," he replied.

"Johnny?" she asked, surprised.

"No, could I talk to John please?"

She laughed. "You sound just like him. Gave me a fright, hearing that, but he's standing right here. Here he is."

"Hello?" It was his voice.

"Hi, this is Karl Smith from your English class," John said making up a

name and a class.

"Yeah?"

"I missed class today, and I was wondering if we had an assignment."

"Yeah, we did. We had an essay on the poem we read, Tennyson's 'Maud.' Identify the poetic components, like the last one."

"Oh, yeah," John said. The poem was in the same unit as the Hopkins one. He remembered seeing it.

"Thanks." He hung up the phone.

This universe seemed just like his own. He could fit right in here. The thought startled him, and then he asked himself what was stopping him.

He walked to the bus station and bought a ticket back to Findlay.

* * * *

John helped his father around the farm the next day. He took it as penance for upsetting his parents. They still thought he was Johnny Farmboy, and so he had to act the part, at least until his projects started churning.

As they replaced some of the older wood in the fence, John said, "Dad, I'm going to need to borrow the truck on Saturday night."

His father paused, a big smile on his face. "Got a big date, do you?" He said it in such a way that John realized he didn't think his son really had a date.

"Yes. I'm taking Casey Nicholson out."

"Casey?" His father held the plank as

John hammered a nail into it. "Nice girl."

"Yeah, I'm taking her to a movie at the Bijou."

"The Bijou?"

"I mean the Strand," John said, silently yelling at himself for sharing details that could catch him up. The movie theatre was always called the Palace, Bijou, or Strand.

"Uh-huh."

John took the shovel and began shoring up the next post.

"What movie you gonna see?"

Before he could stop himself, he answered, "Does it matter?"

His father paused, then laughed heartily. "Not if you're in the balcony, it

doesn't." John was surprised, then he laughed too.

"Don't tell your mother I told you, but we used to go to the Strand all the time. I don't think we watched a single movie."

"Dad!" John said. "You guys were ... make-out artists?"

"Only place we could go to do it," he said with a grin. "Couldn't use this place; your grampa would have beat the tar out of me. Couldn't use her place; your other grampa would have shot me." He eyed John and nodded. "You're lucky we live in more liberal times."

John laughed, recalling the universe where the free love expressions of the 60s had never ended, where AIDS had killed a quarter of the population and

syphilis and gonorrhea had been contracted by 90

percent of the population by 1980. There, dating involved elaborate chaperone systems and blood tests.

"I know I'm lucky."

* * * *

In the early hours of the morning, John slipped across Gurney, through the Walders' field and found a place to watch the farm from the copse of maple trees. He knelt on the soft ground, wondering if this was where John Prime had waited for him.

John's arms tingled as he anticipated his course of action. He was owed a life, he figured. His had been stolen and he was owed another. He'd wanted his

own back, and he'd tried to get it. He'd researched and questioned and figured, but he couldn't see any way back.

So he was ready to settle for second best.

He'd trick the John Rayburn here, just like he'd been tricked. Tease him with the possibilities. Tickle his curiosity. And if he wasn't interested, he'd force him. Knock him out and strap the device on his chest and send him on.

Let him figure it out like John had. Let him find another universe to be a part of. John deserved his life back. He'd played by the rules all his life. He'd been a good kid; he'd loved his parents. He'd gone to church every Sunday.

He'd been pushed around for too long.

John Prime had pushed him around, Professor Wilson, the cat-dogs. He'd been running and running and with no purpose. And enough of that. It was time to take back what had been stolen from him.

Dawn cast a slow red upon the woods. His mother opened the back door and stepped out into the yard with a basket. He watched her open the hen house and collect eggs. She was far away, but he recognized her as his mother instantly. Logically, he knew she wasn't his mother, but to his eyes, she was. That was all that mattered.

His father pecked her lightly on the cheek as he headed for the barn. He wore heavy boots, thick ones, coveralls,

and a John Deere cap. He entered the barn, started the tractor, and drove toward the fields. He'd be back for breakfast in an hour, John knew. Bacon, eggs, toast, and, of course, coffee. They were his parents. It was his farm. Everything was as he remembered it. And that was enough for him.

The light in John's room turned on. John Rayburn was awake. He'd be coming out soon to do his chores. John waited until this John went into the barn, then he dashed across the empty pumpkin field for the barn's rear door. The rear door was locked, but if you jiggled it, John knew, it came loose. John grabbed the handle, listening for sounds from within the barn, then shook it once for a

few seconds. The door held. He paused, then shook it again and it came open suddenly, loudly. He slipped into the barn and hid between two rows of stacked bales.

"Hey, Stan-Man. How are you this morning?"

The voice came from near the stalls. This John—he started thinking of him as John Subprime—was feeding his horse.

"Here's an apple. How about some oats?"

John crept along the row of bales, then stopped when he could see the side of John Subprime's face from across the barn. John was safe in the shadows, but he needed to get closer to him. Stan nickered and nuzzled John Subprime's

head, drawing his tongue across his forehead.

"Stop that," he said, with a smile.

John Subprime turned his attention to the sheep, and when he did so, John slipped around the bales and behind the corn picker.

He realized something as he sat in the woods, and his plan had changed accordingly. John wasn't a liar. He wasn't a smooth talker. He couldn't do what John Prime had done to him, that is, talk him into using the device. John would have to do it some other way. And the only way he could think to do it was the hard way.

John lifted a shovel off a pole next to the corn picker. It was a short shovel

with a flat blade. He figured one blow to the head and John Subprime would be out cold. Then he'd strap the device to his chest, toggle the universe counter up one, and then hit the lever with the end of the shovel. It'd take half the shovel with him, but that was okay. Then John would finish feeding the animals and go in for breakfast. No one would ever know.

John ignored the queasy feeling in his stomach. Gripping the shovel in two hands, he advanced on John Subprime.

John's faint shadow must have alerted him.

"Dad?" John Subprime said, then turned. "My God!" He shrank away from the raised shovel, his eyes passing from

it to John's face. His expression changed from shock to fear. John's body strained, the shovel raised above his head.

John Subprime leaned against the sheep pen, one arm raised, the other... He had only one arm.

Nausea washed through John's body and he dropped the shovel. It clattered on the wood floor of the barn, settled at John Subprime's feet.

"What am I doing?" he cried. His stomach heaved, but nothing came up but a yellow bile that he spat on the floor. He heaved again at the smell of it.

He was no better than John Prime. He didn't deserve a life.

John staggered to the back door of the barn.

"Wait!"

He ran across the field. Something grabbed at his feet and he fell. He pulled his foot free and ran into the woods.

"Wait! Don't run!"

John turned to see John Subprime running after him, just one arm, the right, pumping. He slowed twenty feet in front of John, then stopped, his hand extended.

"You're me," he said. "Only you have both arms."

John nodded, his breath too ragged, his stomach too tense to speak. Tears were welling in his eyes as he looked at the man he had contemplated clubbing.

"How can that be?"

John found his voice. "I'm a version of you."

John Subprime nodded vigorously. "Only you never lost your arm!"

"No, I never lost it." John nodded his head. "How did it happen?" John Subprime grimaced. "Pitchfork. I was helping dad in the barn loft. I lost my balance, fell. The pitchfork caught my bicep, sliced it...."

"I remember." In John's universe, he'd been twelve, and he had fallen from the loft while he and his father loaded it with hay. He had thought he could carry the bale, but he hadn't been strong enough and he'd fallen to the farm yard, knocking the wind out of himself, bumping the pitchfork over as he fell. The pitchfork had landed next to him, nicking his shoulder. His father had

looked on in horror and then anger. The scolding from his mother had been worse than the nick. "I just got a cut on my shoulder." John Subprime laughed. "In one world, I lose my arm, and in another I get a scratch. Don't that beat all."

Why was he laughing? Didn't he realize that John had meant to steal his life?

"Yeah."

"Why don't you come inside and have some breakfast?"

John looked at him, unsure of how he could ask that. He yelled, "I was going to steal your life!" John Subprime nodded. "Is that why you had the shovel? Then you saw my arm. No way you

could steal my life. You've got two arms." He laughed.

"It wasn't just that," John said. "I couldn't bring myself to hurt..."

"Yeah, I know."

"How could you possibly?" John yelled. "I've lost everything!" He reached into his shirt and toggled the universe counter. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave."

"No. Wait!" John Subprime yelled.

John backed away and pulled the lever.

The world blurred and John Subprime blinked away.

There was the barn and the farmhouse, and off in the distance his father on the tractor. Another universe where he didn't

belong. He toggled the device and pulled the lever. Again the farmhouse. He didn't belong here either. Again he moved forward through the universes. The farmhouse was gone. And again. Then it was there, but green instead of red. He toggled it again and again, wanting to get as far away from his contemplated crime as possible.

The clouds flew around in chaotic fast motion. The trees he stood in were sometimes there, sometimes not. The farmhouse bounced left and right a foot, a half foot. The barn more, sometimes behind the house, sometimes to the east of it. The land was the one constant, a gently sloping field. Once he found himself facing the aluminum siding of a

house. And then it was gone as he transferred out. A hundred times, he must have transferred through universe after universe where he didn't belong until finally he stopped and collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

He'd lost his life. He'd lost it all, and he'd never get it back.

He rested his head against the trunk of a maple and closed his eyes. After the tears were gone, after his breathing had slowed, he slept, exhausted.

"Hey there, fella. Time to get up."

Someone poked him. John looked up into his father's face.

"Dad?"

"Not unless my wife's been hiding something from me." He offered a hand,

and John pulled himself up. John was in the copse of maples, his father from this universe standing beside him, holding a walking stick. He didn't recognize John.

"Sorry for sleeping here in your woods. Got tired."

"Yeah. It'll happen." He pointed toward Gurney with his stick. "Better be heading along. The town's that way." He pointed north. "About two miles."

"Yes, sir." John began walking. Then he stopped. His father hadn't recognized him. Which meant what?

John wasn't sure. He turned back to him. "Sir, I could use some lunch. If you have extra. I could work it off."

Bill Rayburn—John forced himself to use the name in his head. This man was

not his father—checked his watch, then nodded. “Lunch in a few minutes, my watch and my stomach tell me. Cold cuts. As to working it off, no need.”

"That's fine."

"What's your name?"

"John ... John Wilson." He took Professor Wilson's last name spontaneously. John turned and followed Bill across the pumpkin field toward the house. The pumpkins were still on the vine, unpicked and just a week until Halloween. Some of them were already going bad. He passed a large one with its top caved in, a swarm of gnats boiling out of it. He remembered the joke his father had told him a week ago.

"How do you fix a broken jack-o'-

lantern?" he asked.

Bill turned and glanced at him as if he were a darn fool.

"I don't know."

"With a pumpkin patch," John replied, his face straight.

Bill stopped, looked at him for a moment, then a small smile crept across his lips. "I'll have to remember that one."

The barn was behind the house, smaller than he remembered and in need of paint. There was a hole in the roof that should have been patched. In fact the farm seemed just a bit more decrepit than he remembered. Had hard times fallen on his parents here?

"Janet, another one for lunch," Bill

called as he opened the back door. "Leave your shoes." John took his shoes off, left them where he always did. He hung his bag on a hook. It was a different hook, brass and molded, where he remembered a row of dowels that he and his father had glued into the sideboard.

John could tell Janet wasn't keen on a stranger for lunch, but she didn't say anything, and she wouldn't until she and Bill were alone. John smiled at her, thanked her for letting him have lunch. She wore the same apron he remembered. No, he realized. She'd worn this one, with a red check pattern and deep pockets in front, when he was younger.

She served John a turkey sandwich,

with a slice of cheese on it. He thanked her again as she did, and ate the sandwich slowly. Janet had not recognized him either.

Bill said to Janet, "Got some good apples for cider, I think, a few bushels." John raised his eyebrows at that. He and his father could get a couple bushels per tree. Maybe the orchard was smaller here. Or maybe it had been hit with blight. He glanced at Bill and saw the shake in his hand. He'd never realized how old his father was, or maybe he had aged more quickly in this universe for reasons unknown. Maybe a few bushels was all he could gather.

"I should work on the drainage in the far field tomorrow. I've got a lake there

now and it's going to rot my seed next season." The far field had always been a problem, the middle lower than the edges, a pond in the making.

"You need to pick those pumpkins too, before they go bad," John said suddenly. Bill looked at him.

"What do you know of farming?"

John swallowed his bite of sandwich, angry at himself for drawing the man's resentment. John knew better than to pretend farm another farmer's fields.

"Uh, I grew up on a farm like this. We grew pumpkins, sold them before Halloween and got a good price for them. You'll have to throw half your crop away if you wait until Sunday, and then who'll buy that late?"

Janet said to Bill, "You've been meaning to pick those pumpkins."

"Practically too late now," Bill said. "The young man's right. Half the crop's bad."

"I could help you pick them this afternoon." John said it because he wanted to spend more time there. It was the first chance he'd had in a long time to relax. They weren't his parents; he knew that. But they were good people.

Bill eyed him again appraisingly.

"You worked a farm like this, you say. What else you know how to do?"

"I can pick apples. I can lay wood shingles for that hole in your barn."

"You been meaning to do that too, Bill," Janet said. She was warming to

him.

"It's hard getting that high up, and I have a few other priorities," he said. He looked back at John. "We'll try you out for the day, for lunch and dinner and three dollars an hour. If it isn't working out, you hit the road at sundown, no complaining."

John said, "Deal."

"Janet, call McHenry and ask him if he needs another load of pumpkins and if he wants me to drop 'em off tonight."

* * * *

John waited outside the County Clerk's window, his rage mounting. How damn long did it take to hand over a marriage certificate? Casey was waiting for him outside the judge's chamber, nine

months pregnant. If the man behind the glass wall took any longer, the kid was going to be born a bastard. And Casey's and his parents had been adamant about that. No bastard. He'd said he'd take care of the kid and he meant it, but they wanted it official.

Finally the clerk handed over the license and the two notarized blood tests and John snatched them from his hand.

"Thanks," he said, turning and heading for the court building. After the wedding he and Casey were driving up to Toledo to honeymoon on the last of his cash. In a week he was scheduled to start his GE job. He was going to work one of the assembly lines, but that was just until the book he was writing— *The Shining*—

took off. The trip to Toledo served the purpose of the honeymoon, as well as the fact that he had meetings regarding the screwed-up Rubik's Cube. It still irked him. The patent search had turned up nothing and they had built a design, one that finally worked, and they'd sunk \$95,000 into a production run. Then they'd gotten a call from the lawyer in Belgium. Apparently there was a patent filed in Hungary by that bastard Rubik. The company Rubik had hired in New York to market the things had gone under and he'd never bothered to try again. Someone had gotten wind of their product and now they wanted a piece of the deal.

The lawyer had wanted to drop him

like a hot potato, but he'd convinced him that there was still cash to be made from it. Some cash at least. He'd have to pay a licensing fee probably. Kiss some ass. But there was money to be made. He'd stick it out with John, though the retainer was just about gone. Casey waved as he rounded the corner on the third floor in front of the judge's office. Casey sat on a bench, her belly seeming to rest on her knees. Her face was puffy and pink, as if someone had pumped her with saline.

"Hi, Johnny," she said. "Did you get the paper?"

He hated being called Johnny and he'd told her that, but she still did it. Everybody used to call Johnny Farmboy Johnny so he was stuck with it. Some

things just couldn't be changed. He put on a smile and waved the certificate. "Yeah," he said. "Everything's ready." He kissed Casey on the cheek. "Darling, you look radiant." He'd be glad once the baby was out of her body; then she could start dressing the way he liked again. He hoped her cheerleading uniform still fit. The ceremony was quick, though Casey had to dab her eyes. John wasn't surprised that none of Casey's friends were there. Getting pregnant had put a lot of stress on her relationships. Field hockey had been right out.

The judge signed the certificate and it was done. John was glad Casey's and his parents hadn't come. They'd wanted to, but John had axed that request. They had

settled for a reception after the baby was born.

He knew his parents were disappointed in what had happened, and John hadn't wanted to face them during the ceremony. They'd wanted him to go to college, to better himself. But those were the dreams they had for Johnny Farmboy. He was a completely different thing.

They'd understand once the money started rolling in. They'd not be disappointed in their son any more. John slowly lowered Casey into the bucket seat of the Trans Am, a splurge with the last of his cash. He had to have decent wheels. The Trans Am pulled away and he headed for Route 16. "Glad that's

over with," he said.

"Really?" Casey asked.

"Well, I'm glad it's over with and we're married now," he said quickly.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

John nodded. He had to be careful what he said with Casey, what he shared. About the time she'd started showing and they'd had to tell their parents, John had wished he had the device, wished he could jump to the next universe and start over. John realized he should have killed Johnny Farmboy, hidden the body, and kept the device. Now the Cube had to work right. With his money almost gone, he might not have another chance, no matter how good an idea the AbCruncher was. He'd

wanted to come clean and tell Casey all about his past, but he didn't dare. How could she believe him?

He was stuck here and he had to make it work. There were no other choices now. This was the life he'd chosen. He patted Casey's leg and smiled at her. He'd make some money, enough to set her and the kid up, and then he'd have his freedom to do what he wanted with his life. It would take a little longer now; there were some bumps in the road, but he'd succeed. He was Johnny Prime.

* * * *

Spring had arrived, but without the sun on his shoulders, John was chilly. He'd started working on the car in the morning and the sun had been on him,

and now, after lunch, it was downright cold. He considered getting the tractor out and hauling the beat-up Trans Am into the sun. He finally decided it was too much trouble. It was late and there was no way he'd get the carburetor back together before dinner. He'd bought the car for fifty dollars, but the car had yet to start. He'd need it soon. He started a second shift job at the GE plant in May. And then in the fall he was taking classes at the University of Toledo. He'd applied to the University of Toledo's continuing education program. He couldn't enroll as a traditional freshman, which was all right with him, because of the fact that he'd taken the GED instead of graduating from high school. He

wouldn't get into the stuff he wanted to learn until his senior year: quantum field theory, cosmology, general relativity. That was all right. He was okay where he was for the time being. If he didn't think about home, he could keep going.

With the plant job, washing machine assembly line work from four until midnight, he'd have enough for tuition for the year. Plus Bill and Janet were still paying him three an hour for chores he was helping out with. He noted ironically to himself that in his own universe he wouldn't have been paid a dime. In September he'd get another job for pocket money and rent near the university. He set the carburetor on the front seat and rolled the car back into the

barn. This was a good universe, John had decided, but he wasn't staying. No, he was happy with Bill and Janet taking him in. They were kind and generous, just like his own parents in nearly every respect, but he couldn't stay here. Not for the long term.

The universe was a mansion with a million rooms. People didn't know they were in just one room. They didn't know there was a way through the walls to other rooms.

But John did. He knew there were walls. And he knew something else too. He knew walls came down. There were holes between worlds.

John had listed his major as physics, and he'd laughed when the manila

envelope from the department had arrived, welcoming him and listing his faculty advisor as Dr. Frank Wilson. Professor Wilson's world was going to shatter one day, and John was going to do it for him.

John knew something that no other physicist in this world knew. A human could pass through the walls of the universe. Just knowing that it was possible, just knowing, without a bit of doubt—he needed only to pull up his pant leg and look at the scars from the cat-dog bite—that there were a million universes out there, was all it would take for John to figure the science of it out. That was his goal. He had the device and he had his knowledge. He'd

reverse engineer it, take it apart, ask the questions of the masters in the field, he would himself become one of those masters, to find out how it was done.

And then, once the secrets of the universe lay open to him, he would go back and he would kick the shit out of John Prime.

He smiled as he shut the barn door.

THE END

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