

Down at the Café With Jack and Carol and Erich and Mary

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We were all up late again that night, still working on our time machine. It was hard work; we were all more than a little tired and more than a little cranky so when Jack suggested that we take a break and go down to Denny's for coffee, nobody wanted to argue.

So we all drove down to Denny's, and got a table, and when the three a.m. Denny's crowd started staring at us, we just stared right back.

Everybody ordered their coffee except for Mary and me, the token Mormons, and we sipped cold lemonade and they all sipped hot coffee and we started to talk about work, and about Gary who wasn't there that night, and then Jack asked the big question.

"When it's finished," he asked, "What do you all want to do with it?"

"We're not going to do anything," I said. "That's the deal. We're just going to observe. We're historians, for God's sake."

"History students." Jack said. "Anyway, that's not what I mean. We're not really going to change anything, but if we were, what would you want to change?"

"You mean like 'prevent the holocaust'?" Erich asked. Erich was German, and he was always trying to show us how at ease he was with his Germanness.

"No. Personal stuff," Carol said, "Like regrets, you know, fixing what went wrong."

"Exactly." Jack said. "What is there in your own past you want to fix?"

So Carol immediately told the story that she always tells when she's drunk, about when her father was on his deathbed and she still couldn't quite bring herself to say "I love you. Dad." And so we all acted real sympathetic, like always, and told her that her Dad had to know how much she loved him, and she sobbed, and we all knew she'd be okay, at least until the next time we were working late.

It was Mary's turn next, but she passed, just smiling that funny kind of smile that she gets sometimes. I don't know if Mary really

has any regrets. If she does, I simply can't imagine them. Childhood sins, probably. Or maybe not. Maybe she's done something that we would never in a million years believe, but we'll never know because she'll never, ever tell us.

Next it was my turn, and I made up something about stealing candy as a little boy and having to return it, and everybody laughed, but I was really thinking about the summer when I was seventeen, and that night up on the mountain.

I can still remember images from that night; the soft wind, the lights of St. George spread out before us like shining drops of dew on some vast black spiderweb, but I can't really remember her.

We were talking, of course. I remember that. I even remember a little of our conversation. I certainly remember the heat of her body as she leaned against me, remember the loose strands of her hair which the wind lightly brushed into her mouth. I remember having to shift my legs, and strategically placing my coat on my lap. Most of all, I remember thinking that it was the perfect moment, and if I could only find the courage to ask her, she would say yes, and we would ... we would. I didn't know exactly what, but I knew she would have been willing to try.

I didn't ask her. It was the right moment, but I didn't ask her, and I wouldn't change that, even if we got the machine working, even if the others would let me take it out alone. What I would do ... I don't know. I suppose I would like to just find my skinny little seventeen year old self, take him aside, and say, "Listen up, you little son of a bitch. This, here, tonight, is important. You pay attention. You remember."

But I can't do that, and even if I could, it would be against all of the rules that we'd made, right from the beginning.

So I finally came back to reality, and noticed that Erich was just finishing his story about convincing himself not to jump of that shed roof, and mess up his ankle, and ruin what he keeps telling us would have been a really impressive soccer career, and then it was Jack's turn.

"If I could use the machine, just once," he said, pausing like Jack does so we can work ourselves into the frenzy of anticipation that he feels he deserves, "Just once, for anything I wanted, I would ..." and he paused again, and Carol leaned in really close to catch the next glorious bit of wisdom, "I would kill my Grandfather."

"Your Grandfather?" Erich asked. "Wouldn't that kill you, too? Come on, be serious."

"No, really." Jack said. "I would wait until after my father was born, and then I would find my Grandfather and just blow him away. Pow."

"What would be the point?" Mary asked.

"I hated my grandfather, that's all. Isn't that enough?"

"Your Grandfather is already dead." I said.

"I know. That's why I would need the machine."

Well, after that, there just wasn't much point in staying at Denny's, let alone going back to the lab, so we all headed home. I stopped to ask Mary if she could give me a ride, since she was going to her mother's house and my place was on the way.

"Sure," she said, and walked off, and then she turned back and smiled at me, with that funny kind of smile that she gets sometimes, so that I had to reach out and grab the door frame just to keep from falling over, and it was then that I heard it. A voice, a faint voice. My faint voice, whispering in the back of my head.

"Listen up, you little son of a bitch. This, here, tonight, is important. You pay attention. You remember."

And so I did.