

The Doorway in Stephenson's Store

"It makes you want to climb through and investigate . . . (gasp) . . . and I don't know what would happen to anyone who did!"

The man who draws the stories in *Future Funnies* explaining his time-travel window to Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig
(from 'The Rocketing Radish', 1953)

ONE

IN HIS MIRROR, Jeff Mennark watched the plume of dust travel out behind the Oldsmobile and swirl across the deserted blacktop.

"Can't we stop yet?" Lorraine moaned from the back seat, the sound of the flat of her hand slapping the window serving as an exclamation mark after the question.

"Soon." When he spoke—which was infrequently these days, here in the arid desert of the dog days in the couple's eighteenth year of marriage—his voice was matter-of-fact and bereft of emotion. The consummate news anchor passing on details of multiple vehicle smashes on an iced-up Interstate.

Lorraine shifted around on the seat and started messing with the ashtray in the central panel.

"D'you have a good sleep?"

"I haven't *been* asleep," Lorraine snapped.

"Oh."

"What does that mean? '*Oh*'?"

"'Oh'? It means, 'Oh'. It means 'I didn't realise you had not been asleep.'"

"And why is that? Why would you not realise that?"

"Your breathing."

Lorraine flounced into an upright position on the back seat and straightened her hair. "That's a problem to you? The fact that I'm breathing? Like, I don't breathe when I'm asleep? Jesus Chri—"

"Not 'you *are* breathing' but '*your* breathing'—the breathing that is yours."

"What about it?"

"It was noisy."

"Noisy? What the hell does 'noisy' mean?"

"Loud. Make that loud. Not noisy. Never noisy."

There was silence for a few seconds and then Lorraine said, in a quiet voice, "I was thinking."

"Pardon me?"

"I was *thinking*," she repeated with a snap, adding "asshole" more softly.

Jeff let out a sharp snort. "Well, we'll all sleep a little easier *this* night," he said. "Lorraine has been thinking. Chee!"

Lorraine shook her head and looked out of the windows. Outside, more fields went by.

"I take it you do have an idea," Lorraine said, adding, after a brief pause, "You know . . . an idea *where* we're going. Don't you?"

Jeff sighed. "Well, according to the mapbook the last time I looked, we're heading for Forest Plains."

"You read the mapbook while you were driving?"

“I glanced at it when we hit a traffic signal a few miles back. It’s on the seat here, right alongside me.”

“And where and what the hell is Forest Plains?”

She saw Jeff’s shoulders shrug once and then he said, “It’s bigger than a bend in the road and smaller than a town. We’ll get gas there, something to eat maybe, take a look around. Stretch our legs.”

Lorraine grunted. “I need a restroom.”

“We can do that, too.”

Lorraine couldn’t resist sneering. “And all in the busy metropolis of Forest Plains?”

Jeff nodded.

“Why Forest goddam Plains?”

He shrugged and shuffled back in his seat. “I like the name.”

“As good a reason as any, I guess,” Lorraine said tiredly.

“Better than most,” Jeff said.

TWO

They had been staying in a motel in a little coastal Maine town called Wells, a good hour’s drive from Boston where, fresh from Manhattan (if anyone ever *was* fresh from Manhattan), they had spent a few days sightseeing and trying to forget things back home . . . which was just another way of looking anyplace but at each other, and of indulging in vitriolic and sometimes hysterical exchanges of blame and recrimination.

The fact was that things back home were not so good for the Mennarks, hadn’t been good for them for days and weeks and months and years. In fact, if you asked either one of them, they would say that things hadn’t *ever* been good, and they’d say that with a snort and a scowl and maybe an icy look in the direction of their partner. But the truth was a little different to the headlines in the paper, as the truth usually is.

Things *had* been good at the start, which was in the summer of ’81 when Jeff, fresh-faced from business school in New York City and looking for a career, had instead found Lorraine Larruto, a dark-haired beauty who reminded him of Lori Lemaris, the comicbook mermaid who occasionally vied with Lois Lane and Lana Lang for the affections of Superman. Lorraine had been sitting in the park eating a pastrami sandwich and throwing pieces of bread to the birds and the squirrels. Her bench was a little oasis of peace and tranquillity, while all around them the great city of Manhattan shifted and scratched itself, never truly comfortable and always on the move. When he saw her it was like magic—in fact, it really *was* like magic. He had been walking along, lost in a comicbook, when he thought he had heard thunder . . . and when he looked up to see what the noise was, he had seen Lorraine. Even better for Jeff was the fact that, when he stopped to talk with her-

did you hear that?

yeah . . . sounded like thunder

yeah

sky’s clear though

yeah . . .

—he discovered that Lorraine had the double-L handle, which he took to be a divine sign sent to him from Comicbook Valhalla. But that was Jeff all over—comicbooks and, to an extent, old magazines and paperback books. But it was the

comics that took pride of place.

Comicbooks were Jeff's life, his reason for getting out of bed on a morning and—increasingly, this past few years—a reason to get back into it at night, when he would curl up and read and re-read the adventures of his favorite characters, particularly the stories from the so-called Golden and Silver Ages, when reality had not yet come to play such a large role in the funny pages. After all, who needed reality in a comicbook! Jeff could get all the reality he needed out on the street, dodging the muggers and the addicts, and the wide-eyed whackos who shouted profanities in the park and the subway stations, and the cab drivers and the reality TV shows and even the fiction shows of hospital emergency rooms and precinct houses which seemed to delight in cutaway shots of festering wounds, profound pain and brutalised dead bodies.

Life sucked and Jeff set out right at the start to give it as wide a berth as possible. It was probably for this very reason that he avoided regular work—no nine-to-six job for Jeff, no suit and shirt and tie, no neat hairstyle, no having to be polite. In short, no joining the rat race. No *conforming*.

Thus a series of part-time jobs had ensued, all of them simply a means for Jeff to pull in enough money for his rent—the middle floor on an old brownstone on the perimeter of the Village—his smokes, the occasional Michelob or Bud, a once-in-a-blue-moon record album, a few books and, most of all, the four-color fixes he received from reading the funny pages. Sometimes ones he had bought for himself and sometimes for re-selling.

It was Lorraine who came up with the idea for Jeff's business, when another job bit the dust and he was faced with scrimping and scraping to make ends meet until something else came along. He was sitting at the old table in the apartment's small kitchenette, with Lorraine cooking pasta and watching a *Twilight Zone* re-run on their small TV set, poring over a catalog listing and shaking his head. It was then that Lorraine turned—with the old *TZ* theme in the background—and suggested he should turn his love of the comicbooks and magazines and those gaudy good-girl-art Dell mapbacks and Pocket Books into a business.

Well, after a shaky start which saw Jeff borrow money from the bank to set himself up, things went well for a while—Jeff producing fliers and asking for wants lists and then filling out the lists by shopping around, buying wisely and ensuring that his mark-ups were always reasonable.

But then came the dawn of the Internet, the ghost in the ether, and, following hot on the heels of that, the Comicbook Grading Certification scheme and abebooks.com. Suddenly everyone knew where to pick up that elusive Gold Medal paperback original in whatever condition they fancied, and they knew sure as shooting how much the comics were worth . . . resulting in the Overstreet guide—tried and trusted for fifteen years—going out of the window, with key books in nice condition changing hands at high multiples of guide. Soon after that, it was not-so-key books. And then—looking back, it seemed like it happened overnight—the bottom fell right out of the whole thing with the value of restored books taking a nose-dive. And as it turned out, Jeff had just paid a little over twenty-eight thousand dollars—another loan—for a collection of key DC books from the 1950s that turned out to be restored items when the CGC crew sent the books back in their protective plastic slabs. The estimated retail value fell like a stone, far below what Jeff had paid for them. And even at cut-down prices, he couldn't shift the books. He was considering breaking the slabs open and trying to sell them as though they had not been graded when the letter from the IRS appeared in the mailbox.

“Well, we know where at least one fucking weapon of mass destruction is,” Jeff whined loudly, waving the letter in front of Lorraine, “it’s goddam right fucking here.”

The gist of the terse note was that the IRS was hitting on him for an inspection—‘some anomaly Mister Mennark, that’s all I can tell you at this stage,’ was all a hard-voiced woman by the name of Muzz (that was the way she announced herself) Batdorf was prepared to tell Jeff when he called them for clarification. *Yeah, eat shit and die*, Jeff thought. And even as he was thinking it, replacing the receiver, the phone rang and, just for a second, he wondered if it would be Muzz Batdorf calling back to tell him all IRS personnel could read minds as well . . . and would he mind coming in for a meeting right away. But it was only—‘only’ . . . hah!—Jackie from the repair shop over on Bleecker calling to say there was a major problem with the Olds. Shortly after that, with Jeff still dazed, Lorraine came in in tears because some guy had lifted her purse out on the street. She didn’t have much money in there—twenty-five, maybe thirty dollars and change—but it was just a bridge too far for Jeff.

“Didn’t you try stop him?” Jeff asked.

“He told me not to be a fucking hero,” Lorraine gasped breathlessly. “‘It’s only fuckin’ money, lady!’” she added, affecting the gruff patois of the street.

Jeff stared at Lorraine wide-eyed. “I have got to get the fuck away from all this,” he announced to her, in a soft and calm voice that made her more apprehensive than if he had screamed it out while opening the window to take a dive out onto the street.

She nodded. “Where to?” she said.

Jeff glanced around the apartment for inspiration, scanning the walls and the chair-arms and the table littered with papers and little piles of comicbooks. At one side, sporting a Waldenbooks bookmark, was Stephen King’s *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* that Lorraine was in the middle of reading. “New England,” he said

“New England?”

Jeff shrugged. “Maine, I think.”

“Anywhere in particular?”

“Some little town off the beaten map, one of those Rockwell Saturday Evening Post-cover, picket fence communities where the whole town sings hymns on a Sunday and the kids spend their summer vacations fishing for catfish or swinging from tires fastened to old oak trees with ancient rope.”

“And sit outside on porch chairs listening the radio and watching the shooting stars,” Lorraine said.

“All of that.”

“Are you okay?” Lorraine asked.

And Jeff smiled at her, a real tired smile . . . the first sign of softness that has passed between them for many years. “Not really.”

And so, on an overcast August morning that was more fall than summer, they set off from Manhattan in the Olds—whose return to the fold had hit Jeff’s MasterCard with seven hundred dollars and change—heading northwards, away from the city and the bills and the car-horns . . . the idea being to soak up some rays, eat some burgers, read some books and hit the surf. But then Jeff told Lorraine she should keep an eye on him out there because, “. . . the way I feel right now, I just may keep on swimming until I get too tired.”

Not quite the saddest thing about that statement was that Jeff wasn’t entirely joking. The actual saddest thing was that, so long as she knew where the keys to the Olds were, Lorraine couldn’t give a damn what the hell Jeff did.

THREE

Nobody ever really knows when a relationship begins to fail.

It's not like, one minute it's okay and the next minute it's gone. It's a gradual thing, like a tree growing from an acorn or a mountain getting whittled down by the wind and the rain, or the formation of stalactites and stalagmites. A relationship going bad is like that—it happens so slowly that the two parties don't see it souring. But sour it does.

And sour Jeff's and Lorraine's relationship had done. In spades.

So the stormclouds gathering around them during the summer break (it was hardly a vacation, a time of relaxation and catching breath) had not only been in the sky above the Atlantic coast . . . just as the icy chill that lay between Jeff and Lorraine was not merely the consequence of meteorological developments. Indeed, in the Olds, heading out of Wells into the Maine hinterland, the heater did little to lift the temperature.

In the few days leading up to their hitting the road, Jeff had visited every old bookstore in the area and failed to pick up much of anything except for a few old *Posts*—two with Rockwell covers and in pretty nice shape—and a handful of Ace Doubles, including Dick's *The Man Who Japed*, in near mint condition. But even those, at reasonable prices (seeing as how they had cost Jeff only a few bucks apiece), would take an age to get rid of. The problem was that collectors and enthusiasts could get pretty much everything they needed on the net, and then there was eBay . . . in Jeff's opinion, a glorified yard sale visited by people wanting to pick up bargains for nothing.

One more morning of getting out of bed to face the slate-gray sky and an increasingly similar-colored face on her husband had been too much for Lorraine.

"I've had it with freezing my buns off on the beach and then spending hours searching goddam bookshelves before we sit down at a Jolly Whaler or a KFC for dinner," she announced over cartoons and breakfast cereal. "How's about we go for a drive?"

"Where to?" asked Jeff.

Lorraine shrugged. "Just someplace *different*." She imbued the word 'different' with a sense of magic and, just for a second, Jeff looked at her as though he was almost making out something or someone other than his wife . . . but then the moment disappeared.

"Sounds okay with me," Jeff said. One glance out of the window had pretty much made up his mind for him and, of course, there was always the possibility of happening on a good-stuff bookstore in this different and magical someplace.

And so it was that, a little before 9:30 on an overcast and drizzly Thursday morning, the sky above them a deep battleship gray, the pair set out from the Wells motel and headed inland and upstate.

Looking for someplace different.

Looking for magic.

FOUR

It seemed like hours had gone by since they had started out—so long, in fact, that Lorraine had had Jeff pull over so she could stretch out in the back seat, catch a bit of

shuteye.

Neither of them was sleeping well at night, falling off fine-and-dandy at about eleven or eleven-thirty and then waking up at two or three am, padding to the bathroom for a pee before returning to the bed and listening to their partner's fitful breathing.

In addition to pulling over to allow Lorraine's seat-change, Jeff had already stopped twice: once for gas and rest rooms, and once again for coffee and do-nuts from a roadside stand that boasted a smoking chimney.

The land outside the car seemed to have graduated back from the barren wildernesses they had been passing to something approaching civilisation. Houses—more resembling shacks—were now going by on either side of the two-lane blacktop, along with occasional cemeteries, roadside stands selling vegetables and flowers, with sheets of see-through tarpaulin pulled across them to protect the produce, and restaurants and fast food outlets by the dozen, pretty much all of them seeming to specialize in crab and mako shark . . . each sign emblazoned with the word 'fresh', so they were clearly still in reasonable proximity to the sea. But no bookstores.

Every now and again a tow-headed kid or two—boys usually—stopped on their bikes and watched the car speed by, one foot on the ground, grubby hands wrapped around rubber grips, their heads following the car. Way behind them, sometimes plopped in the middle of manicured lawns and sometimes set back a ways and surrounded by trees and bushes, wood-framed houses stood silent in the mid-morning rain.

"Jeez," Lorraine, now fully awake, said as they passed by three such kids on bikes, her voice soft like she didn't want anyone to hear, neither the tow-headed boys nor the silent houses, "it's like a well-moneyed Mississippi. The only thing that's different is the kids are white, the house paint isn't peeling off and there are no old Dodges blocked up in the front yards."

Jeff glanced up at the mirror and watched the boys watching the car—watching *him*. "Yeah, it's like we're intruding on their world," he said. "Like they never seen a car before, driving by like this."

"Maybe they just know all the usual cars," Lorraine said. "Can't be many folks heading out from the coast to Forest goddam Plains."

"Hey," Jeff said perkily, pointing at the windshield. "We got a result!"

The sign by the side of the road read:

**FOREST PLAINS
11 MILES
DRIVE SAFELY**

"Be still my heart," Lorraine grunted.

The car engine gave a little cough as though to agree.

Jeff glanced in the mirror. "Okay back there?" he said, raising his voice.

Lorraine said, "Yeah."

There was another cough and then a dull clunking sound from the engine.

"Jesus Christ," Jeff said. "What the hell was that?"

Now a dull thudding noise sounded out from the engine compartment and Jeff could feel power fading from the gas pedal. The car started juddering forwards in short bursts.

"That doesn't sound good does it?"

"Fucking mechanics," was all Jeff could say.

He turned to Lorraine and said, “You bring your cellphone?”

Lorraine shook her head. “But you got yours in the side pocket there. I saw it just—”

“It’s dead. I meant to take it into the motel to charge it up but I forgot.”

Lorraine faced forward and stared out onto the blacktop and the steady rain that bounced down. There were no buildings to be seen anywhere.

Jeff checked the dials—plenty of gas, temperature okay . . . so what the hell was wrong with the damn car. He visualised himself marching into the Bleecker repair shop carrying a wrench, saw Jackie look up from some Chevy’s hood, black grease all over his hands and painted in stripes on his face like an Indian . . . saw him start to back away as Jeff swung the-

The car clunked once and then again, this time making a sound like something was trapped in there, being caught up in the fan belt or something, getting twisted and turned around, batting itself against the underside of the hood.

“That does not sound good,” Lorraine said in a low voice.

“You said that already.”

“So? I’m just confirming my initial diagnosis.”

“Thank you.”

A handwritten sign appeared just over the top of a slight hill.

Stephensons General Store
Stop in and see us
for all your needs, yesterday and today

“I cannot believe your luck,” Lorraine said without humor.

Jeff looked in the mirror and his eyes met with Lorraine’s. For a second he wanted to snap something right back at her . . . some smartass remark—
well, even my luck couldn’t be so bad for ever

—but, seeing Lorraine’s tuft of hair stuck up like a feather from the way she had been sleeping, he didn’t want to do that. He looked away without saying anything, his eyes catching just a flicker of a frown from hers. As though she knew what he’d been thinking and was wondering why she had been so spared.

“Don’t you just hate that?” Jeff said.

“What?”

“No apostrophe.”

“No apostrophe?” Lorraine looked puzzled at him.

“Stephensons. No apostrophe.”

“Oh. Yeah. My day is ruined.”

Jeff looked out of the side window as they turned off the road and, in spite of his melancholy mood, let out a little laugh. “Boy, that’s quite a sight.”

And it was.

Stephensons-without-an-apostrophe General Store stood back from the road about a hundred yards on the left. It looked like something out of the old *Waltons* TV show—a couple of buildings, wooden-built with a pitched roof of slates, and complete with hitching rail and walking boards set up a couple steps from a dusty parking area. Around the side of the main store was what appeared to be a high-boarded storage area stretching over towards the trees.

Glancing down at the dashboard Jeff saw the counter on the temp gauge sliding slowly upwards. “This isn’t a moment too soon,” he said as he turned into the parking area, the car shuddering like it was about to fall over and die.

Jeff had barely engaged park when steam started issuing from under the hood. He turned off the ignition and watched as the temperature gauge needle stopped rising and then, very slowly, began to drop again.

“Thinks they’ll be able to fix it?”

Jeff looked at the storefront and shook his head slowly. “Looks a bit ‘duelling banjos’ to me. But they’ll have a phone.” There was something in the way he said that that suggested he wasn’t completely sure.

“And what the hell does that mean?” Jeff said. “ ‘For all your needs, yesterday and today’?”

Lorraine shrugged. “A clever marketing campaign aimed at trying to make folks think they needed to move fast and buy buy buy. You know . . . like yesterday?”

Jeff flipped the hood release and stepped out of the car. He breathed in the cool wet air and stretched, glancing across at the still steaming hood.

“Not gonna catch fire is it?” Lorraine asked as she pulled herself upright from the back seat.

Jeff eased the hood catch and lifted it clear. The steam disappeared almost immediately, with its soft hiss replaced by occasional spits and crackles as raindrops fell onto the engine block.

“No, I don’t think so,” Jeff said, scanning the various pipes and hoses, mountings and wires as though he knew what he was looking at. But he didn’t. Asking Jeff to fix a car engine would be like asking Fred Flintstone to perform open heart surgery on Wilma or Barney. Not that he cared so much for the Olds, of course.

“Not much of a General Store,” was all Lorraine could think of to say as she stared into the greasy double-fronted windows.

Jeff left the hood up and started over to her. “I guess there isn’t much need out here.” He looked over at the road, stretching his neck first to the left and the right. “Not a house to be seen,” he said.

“No, but look,” Lorraine said, waving a hand at the window.

Jeff looked.

Behind the dirty and grease-stained glass, it looked as though someone had maybe had an idea of making some kind of display. A large hand-printed card, set upon a nest of tousled sacking and propped against the window-back, boldly stated:

**EVERYTHING YOU NEED
FOR YOUR HOME --
FROM YESTERDAY
TO TODAY**

But apart from that, the window was empty.

Lorraine moved across and looked in the second window. “It’s the same here,” she said. “Same kooky sign, same sparse display.

“Seems to me they’ve forgotten something,” Jeff said.

“And what the hell does that mean? ‘From yesterday to today’?” She turned around and looked back at the sign they’d passed on the way in but she could only see the back of it. “The sign coming in said ‘yesterday *and* today’. Now it says ‘yesterday *to* today’.”

Jeff shrugged and looked back at the road again. For some reason, he had a sudden inclination to slam the hood on the Olds and try limping on the few extra miles to Forest Plains. Surely there would be a repair shop there. He looked back at Stephensons General Store and gave an involuntary shudder.

“Hey, Jeff,” Lorraine hissed. “You gonna go inside? I need to use the bathroom.”

“Just go in!” Jeff snapped at her without moving from in front of the window, “For crissakes,” He added.

For a second, Jeff thought she was going to say something back to him, and he kind of cherished the prospect . . . an opportunity to go into his—

. . . *to the moon, Alice!*

—Ralph Kramden repertoire, but she didn’t speak. Instead of smartassing something back at him, Lorraine just shuffled her feet and looked first at the door to Stephenson’s General Store and then across at him. There was something about that look—something little-girlish and vulnerable—that, just for a second, froze Jeff right in his stride.

Jeff marched over, building up his steam to ignore Lorraine on the way, and stepped onto the boards. The sound of his boot heels clattering on their and the smooth polished surface of the hitching rail made him feel like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. True to form, the porch door screeched loudly. Jeff pushed the inside door open and stepped inside.

Inside the store it was like a ghost town.

Two counters—sitting at ninety degrees to each other—filled an otherwise empty space. There were rails and cupboards, shelves and stands . . . but no produce and no goods.

“This is a weird general store,” Jeff said, his voice low.

“I don’t like it,” Lorraine said from close behind him. “It feels like we’re in a cheesy horror movie except we’re too old to be axe-bait.” She grabbed a hold of Jeff’s sleeve and pulled. “Let’s go.”

“I thought you wanted to use the bathroom?”

“I’ll do it by the side of the road or in my pants,” Lorraine hissed. “Hell, I’ll hang my fanny out the car window and spray the crops if you want, but I want to leave here and I want to leave here *now*.”

“Hello?” Jeff yelled.

“Jesus Chri—”

“Anybody here?”

No answer. Lorraine backed out onto the boards again, let the porch door swing closed.

Jeff banged one of the counters with the flat of his hand, sending up a cloud of dust.

“Hel-lo!?”

Nothing. Except for a shout from Lorraine.

Jeff walked out onto the boards and looked around before stepping down onto the dusty driving area. Leaning forward he saw again the boarded area attached to the back of the store and stretching over to the trees.

“Jeff, I *wanna* go,” Lorraine said.

“The car?” Jeff said. “You forget about that?”

“It’s what . . . two, three miles into Forest Bend and—”

“*Plains*. It’s Forest *Plains*.”

“Whatever. It’s two damn miles. The car will make two damn miles.”

“And if it doesn’t? Then what?”

He walked over to the boarded area and walked alongside it, trailing his hand across it. He slapped the fencing boards a couple times before he found a knothole. He bent down and looked through.

On the other side of the boards it was desolate. Like a coral but without any

horses. There was nothing—no pump, no washing line to hang clothes, no rain barrel up against the back of the store, no toys scattered around the yard . . . not even any windows in the store, just a flat wall. And no basketball hoop bolted up on the wall. Just a single door and that was it.

“Looks deserted,” Jeff said. Then, “Hallo back there—anyone home?”

“I’m getting soaked here,” Lorraine observed.

“I don’t get it,” Jeff said, standing up from the knothole.

“I said, I’m getting soa—”

Jeff span around. “I know what you said, Lorraine. Jesus!” He marched around to the front of the store again. Lorraine was starting to feel a little less threatened now and, with nothing more than a roll of her eyes, she followed after him.

As Jeff walked up the two steps up to the decking, the screen door pushed outward and a tall man stepped out. The man was followed by a woman, a girl of maybe fifteen, sixteen and a young boy—Jeff figured maybe eleven or twelve. The boy was carrying a comicbook. Jeff blinked. Stared. Blinked again.

“Howdy,” the man said, a big smile spreading slowly across his face.

Howdy? Who the hell said ‘Howdy’ these days?

“Hey,” Jeff said. “Sorry to bother you but—”

“No bother,” the man said. “Is it, Susan?”

“No bother,” the woman agreed. “We was just leaving.”

“Leaving?” Jeff looked around for a car or truck but couldn’t see anything. “Vacation?”

The man nodded, smiling. “You might say that,” he said.

The kids watched. The little boy, catching Jeff’s wide-eyed glance at his comicbook, shifted it around behind him.

“This is my wife,” Jeff said, ushering Lorraine up alongside him.

“Lorraine,” Lorraine said, smiling woodenly. The man and woman nodded, returning the smile.

Jeff said, “We called out for you but . . .”

“Oh, we were out back,” the man said.

Jeff frowned. “Out back behind the store? We checked there: looked through a knothole . . . shouted. It was deserted.”

The man smiled, tousling the boy’s head. “Oh we were *way* back.”

“Getting set to leave,” the woman said.

Jeff nodded, his eyes flicking from the man to the woman, and then to the little girl and finally to the boy. The boy with the comicbook. *Had he been imagining it, that com—*

“Name’s Stephenson,” the man announced, holding out his hand. “Paul Stephenson. And this here’s my wife, Susan.” They all shook hands. “And Molly and Josh,” he said, rubbing his son’s head and his daughter’s shoulder in turn.

“So, you need something to eat? Freshen up maybe?” the man said.

“There’s a small town three, four miles down the road,” Susan Stephenson said.

“Forest Plains,” Josh said.

“I could use a bathroom if—” Lorraine was about to say if you have one but just managed to stop herself at the last minute. Who the hell didn’t have a bathroom.

Susan Stephenson took Lorraine by the arm, her grip firm but easy and her smile genuine friendly—Lorraine always said she could tell real hospitality and this was as real as she had ever seen—and ushered her into the empty store. The girl—Molly—followed while Josh hung back and stood behind his father’s legs.

“Not too many folks stop by here,” Paul Stephenson said evenly, squinting into

Jeff's eyes. "Lessen they needs to," he added as he glanced across at the Olds. "Want me to take a look?"

Lessen they needs to? Jesus Christ, this guy talked like he was rehearsing for the remake of Sergeant York. "You know anything about cars?" Jeff said, skilfully avoiding referring to his Olds as a newfangled contraption that'd never replace the horse and buggy.

"Some." The man didn't shake his head, didn't nod. He just stepped down off the decking and strolled over to the car. He seemed to be oblivious to the rain though it had eased a little since Jeff and Lorraine arrived.

"Whyn't you go on inside," he called over his shoulder. "Got a Mister Coffee in the kitchen and cookies in the jar. Josh, you take the gentleman inside and see after him."

"Yessir," Josh said. Then, taking a hold of Jeff's hand, "Come on, mister."

Jeff allowed himself to be led.

As they went inside, he said, "You like comicbooks?"

"Yessir," Josh Stephenson said.

"Me too," Jeff said.

The sound of their shoes clattered on the bare boards as the boy led Jeff through a door at the back of the store and along a little corridor that opened up into a kitchen area. The smell of coffee filled Jeff with a sudden rush of optimism and cheer.

Lorraine appeared from a side door to the sound of a toilet flushing. "Well," she said, wringing her hands the way she always did when she'd just washed them, "that feels so much better."

"Can't think on a full bladder," Susan Stephenson said sagely from the counter over by the sink, "and drinking coffee on one is just out of the question."

Molly sat at the table, her head perched on her hands and her legs swinging in perfect unison, and watched Jeff. She caught his eyes looking over at Josh who had slumped into a big chair over in the corner.

"Look out Jay, he's after your comic," the girl said.

"Molly!" Susan snapped as she carried two full-to-brimming mugs across to the table and set them down. "You mind your manners."

"That's okay," Jeff said.

Lorraine took a sip of coffee and remarked how good it tasted but Jeff couldn't even think about taking a drink. Instead, he said, "I must say that I do still enjoy reading them, now and again." He walked over to the boy as casually as he could and bent over so that he could see what Josh was reading. "Boy, that looks like a good one," he said.

"You wanna look at it?" The boy held it out and Jeff nodded, hardly able to speak. He grunted and took the comic, holding it in his hands like it was the most fragile china pottery.

The comic was more than a 'good one': it was one of Jeff's favorite editions of DC's long-running SF title, *Strange Adventures*—number 110, November 1959 . . . the cover showed a giant hand appearing behind a speeding car. But the best of all was that it looked to be in absolute mint condition . . . a \$100 comicbook, and that was just according to the Overstreet guide, and not something one would usually entrust to a ten-year-old. The pages were white—pure white, not 'off white' or 'cream to white': it was like the comic was brand new.

Jeff had seen books from Edgar Church's so-called 'Mile High' collection and they were pretty good . . . streets ahead, in purely quality terms, of either the Mohawk Valley or Bethlehem collections which, although they retained their cover gloss, were

let down by tanning or browning interior pages. But this book . . . Jeff felt like he was going to drool. If this went to the CGC folks, it would come back at eight to twelve times guide: in other words, a one-thousand-dollar comicbook being read by a teenage boy in a lonely—

empty—let's not forget goddam empty

—general store outside of a godforsaken one-mule New England town called Forest Plains.

Susan Stephenson must have seen something in Jeff's face—possibly the fact that his jaw had dropped down onto the floor between his bent knees—because she said, “You know about comics?”

He snapped his head around, mouth still open, and, just for a second, thought about bullshitting. But the woman's face was all-knowing.

“I run a small business buying and selling antique books and magazines, and—” He handed the comic back to Josh. “—comicbooks. That just happens to be one of my all-time favorites. It's the story that introduced me to adrenaline. It's the best story I ever read,” Jeff said wistfully. “Next to the re-working of The Flash in *Showcase* 4 of course. It's commonly regarded as the first Silver Age comicbook—some say that honor belongs to *Detective* 225 from the previous year—1955, the first appearance of John Jones, Manhunter from Mars—but I say phooey to that. My, but I'd give anything to have a mint copy of *Showcase* 4.”

Susan frowned and placed a pot of sugar, a couple of small spoons and a glass jar filled with cookies on the table. “Sugar?” she said. “Cookies?” And then, “So it's valuable, this *Showcase* comic?”

Jeff nodded enthusiastically. “It would sure solve a lot of our problems,” he said, glancing across at Lorraine and immediately wondering just how many of their problems it *wouldn't* solve. “Is the book yours? Or your husband's? It's certainly in nice shape for a forty-five year old comicbook,” he added as he looked enviously across at the boy.

She let out a short snigger and shook her head. “It's certainly not mine, I don't read much of anything and never comics. And Paul, well . . . he just likes to curl up with a mystery novel.”

“So it's . . . it's your *son's*? It's not *Showcase* 4 but it's a very expensive book.”

She moved her head from side to side and said, “It's *kind of* his . . . for a while anyways. He brought it back.”

“Brought it back?” Jeff hardly wanted to continue with the question. “Brought it back from where?”

The woman seemed to chew on something for a few seconds and then looked across at her daughter.

Molly Stephenson nodded, her eyes smiling, and said, “Makes no nevermind, ma. Go ahead and tell him.”

She pointed to a curtain hanging on a section of the wall at the back of the room. “From out there,” she said.

Lorraine looked over at the curtain.

Jeff looked over at the curtain.

Young Josh looked up from reading ‘The Hand From Beyond’, with all of its glorious Carmine Infantino artwork, and looked first at one of them and then the other, before returning his attention to more interesting fare.

Jeff grunted and walked across to the curtain, half expecting to be stopped in his tracks. But nobody moved. That is, nobody moved physically; there was a frisson of some kind of energy—electrical energy, Jeff would have guessed—that seemed to

pass from them and then among the whole group.

Turning to watch them as they watched him, Jeff set the mug of steaming coffee on the table and reached out to touch the curtain.

Still nobody moved.

The curtain felt just like . . . well, just like curtain. Like any other kind of material he had ever felt. Like, maybe, his mother's skirt fabric or the cotton weave of his father's work overalls; the thick grain of his first baseball uniform or the cool blackness of his Batman cape from childhood. He tried to think of other things—contemporary things—but couldn't. All of the things the curtain reminded him of were in the past.

"Jeff—"

Jeff glanced across at Lorraine and gave her a very slight shake of the head. He had no idea why. He had no idea as to why he might need to be quiet but, deep down, he realized that it wasn't because of danger or the fear of being discovered . . . but rather of reverence.

He pulled the curtain aside to expose a door.

A simple and straightforward door, complete with handle and cross-nailed struts securing a series of vertical planks interspersed with three horizontal ones. As doors went, it was not the finest construction Jeff had ever seen. But then he didn't know diddly about doors.

The slightest of flutters came from the curtain which wafted briefly and then settled. Jeff felt the breath stop in his throat but the loud banging of the screen door behind him caused it to blow out in a single gust.

"She ain't going nowhere right now," Paul Stephenson announced in a sing-song voice, clapping his hands together by way of punctuation. "Doubt you're gonna be able to do much with her. You can maybe have another look but you'd best wait until she cools down a mite," he added.

"What is it, honey?" Susan Stephenson asked.

"Hose," came the reply. "Just a hose. But it's causing a whole heap of trouble, I can tell you. Gonna need a replacement."

"Honey," Susan Stephenson said. "I told them about the doorway."

He nodded. "Kind of figured that out, him standing there right in front of it," he said.

"Well, actually, you *haven't* told me about the doorway," Jeff corrected her, his hands were trembling. "You've kind of *hinted* at something about the doorway but—"

"The door's a gateway," the man said. He lifted his own mug to his mouth and took a big sip. "Leads to different times."

"A gateway?" Jeff said.

"I found it," the girl said.

"No you did not!" Josh snapped.

"I did, too. I found—"

"Doesn't matter who found it," Stephenson said and there was just enough of a hint of annoyance in his voice to make both the kids clam up.

"We were passing through," Stephenson continued, "about eight, nine months back, on our way from one bad decision to what was then already shaping up to be another. Came up from Oklahoma to see Susan's cousin about a job offer—"

"And with hardly two dimes to rub together," Susan Stephenson said softly.

The man nodded thoughtfully. "We hitched a ride that dropped up about six, seven miles back, place called Bellingham. We walked the rest of the way through a storm right out of the Bible and—" He shrugged and nodded at the surroundings. "—we

found this place to shelter in.”

“It was deserted at the time,” his wife said. “Nothing in here but a pile of clothes.”

“Clothes?” Lorraine said from over by the table. “What kind of clothes?”

Stephenson thumbed over his shoulder at an open door leading into a back room. “They’re still back there. Pants and jacket, a shirt, necktie, and smalls, and a woman’s skirt, jacket and blouse, more smalls. Nothing special,” he said. “We didn’t figure the significance until a little while later.”

“Significance?”

“Until *I* found the doorway,” Molly said. And she stepped forward to take center stage, under a withering glare from her younger brother.

Jeff turned to the door. Reached out a hand for the handle.

“Couple things you need to remember before you do that,” Stephenson said, his voice soft. Jeff held his arm rigid and waited.

“First off, don’t forget it’s a different time and place for each person goes through there,” the man said, matter-of-factly. “And you hafta hold onto each other or you’ll wind up in separate places.”

“And times.”

“And times,” he added, nodding to his wife. “If you hold onto each other, you’ll go back to the place and time that the first one picks.”

“What, you just wish for someplace?” Lorraine asked.

“Seems to be that way, yes indeed. You don’t need to wish right out loud,” he went on. “In fact, seems like you don’t actually need to think anything. The door just seems to know.” His eyes took on a wistful glaze as he looked across at the door. “It just takes it where your heart wants to go,” he said, softly, like he was saying it just to himself.

It turned out that, depending on who was in front at the time, the Stephensons had been to the Metropolitan Stadium, home of the Minnesota Twins, on August 25 1970. Paul had gone up there with his father to see the Twins play the Boston Red Sox and had never forgotten it because there was a bomb scare and the 18,000 fans just had to sit it out while the police checked the outfield and the parking lot. Keeping the 16-year-old Paul calm, Dick Stephenson—then, unknown to everyone, busy building a tumor in his gut that would take his life before Thanksgiving—told him about when he went with *his* father to watch the first ever game in San Francisco . . . at the Seals Stadium in the spring of 1958.

“Wheels within wheels,” Stephenson said wistfully. “Seeing my daddy again after all those years . . . well—” He shook his head and looked down at the floor.

In addition there had been an unspecified Christmas morning on a Kansas City street circa 1955 (Susan had been born after her parents had left their hometown but she had listened to her mom’s account of their walking to Church so many times that she just wanted to see for herself); the early morning of 7 December 1941, Pearl Harbor, a silence broken only by the sound of approaching aeroplanes; a 1912 pre-election address in Milwaukee given by a wounded Teddy Roosevelt (only an overcoat, a glasses case and a folded copy of the speech he was about to give saved Roosevelt’s life); the massacre of some 150 Minneconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek on a freezing late December day in 1890 (a trip that had Susan in tears for almost two days after they got back) and the killing (Susan couldn’t bring herself to use the word ‘massacre’ a second time) of four students on the Kent State campus in 1970; Jimi Hendrix’s remarkable interpretation of The Star Spangled Banner at Yasgur’s farm during the Woodstock music festival in August 1969 (after that one, Paul sat for long hours looking out of the greasy windows of the derelict store

wondering where the innocence had gone); and a rope-swing hanging over the stream out back of the Stephensons' home in Chickasha, the occasion being Josh's finally being able to make it right across to the far bank . . . and actually let go. "And all the time he told me he never went near that creek," Susan explained to the transfixed Jeff and Lorraine.

But there were many other times as well, some from their own experience and others pulled from some subconscious wish-list of places and times they suddenly decided they'd like to visit.

The silence that followed what amounted to a virtual presentation seemed to Jeff to be louder than the actual recollections themselves.

The Stephensons, having interrupted and cajoled and reminded each other throughout a full fifteen or twenty minutes, seemed out of breath. So it fell to Jeff to break the spell.

"I don't know whether to believe you," was how he did that.

Stephenson shrugged. "One way to prove it or disprove it," he said.

"Jeff!" Lorraine snapped.

Jeff ignored her and turned to face the door.

He didn't know whether to turn the handle or back right out of Stephenson's General Store and just thumb a ride into town, pick the car up later, maybe tomorrow. Next week even. But, the more he looked at it . . .

"When we found it, we figured right away we could start up a business or something. Bring things back from then into now and sell them to folks—old toys, clothes, you know . . . stuff. But it didn't work out that way. Seems things don't want or aren't able to stay in our time. Eventually, two or maybe three days after, you turn around and poof!"—he clapped his hands. "—there it is, whatever you brought back . . . gone."

"Jeff," Lorraine said from across the kitchen. "Let's go."

"Go? Leave?"

She moved silently across the kitchen and took a hold of her husband's jacket. "I don't like it."

Jeff looked first at her and then at Stephenson. Then he looked at Stephenson's wife, the little girl and . . . Josh. And the November 1959 copy of *Strange Adventures*. "I have to go," he said, saying the words right into Lorraine's face. He looked over at Stephenson as Lorraine stepped even closer to him.

"How do you get back?"

Stephenson shrugged. "Same way you arrived. It'll be a door or an opening of some kind—differs from place to place."

Jeff nodded, took a deep breath as he turned around, and turned the handle. Then, just before he stepped out of Stephensons General Store, Lorraine took a hold of his jacket.

FIVE

Sounds and smells.

"Where are we?" Lorraine whispered, still hanging on to Jeff's jacket.

Jeff breathed in and sniffed.

"All I can tell you is we're on a street," he said, looking around. "And, at a guess, I'd guess it's late summer 1956."

People walked by them, looking in windows, talking, paying them no real

attention . . . though Lorraine's jeans and covering skirt combination caused one or two second glances.

"That's pretty accurate for a guess," she said as she searched for clues.

Jeff took hold of her wrist and freed her clenched hand from his jacket. "Come on," he said. "We need to find somewhere."

And they set off along the street.

A couple of stores along, Jeff said, "It's Providence. I remember it."

"Providence in 1956? You been keeping something from me?"

Jeff held back on the chuckle as he watched cars go by—with their wonderful fins—and registered that almost every man over the age of 20 was wearing a hat.

"I spent an entire summer here living with my Aunt Deborah on Poplar Street. I used to come down here two maybe three times a week buying comicbooks."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me," Lorraine muttered.

"And, if I remember correctly, there's a little soda shop right along here and they—" He pointed. "It's there!"

And it was.

Over on the corner of the street. McDougall's, was the name on the awning and Jeff repeated it aloud as though it were a magical mantra . . . a kind of open sesame.

"You remember it?"

Jeff nodded and then shook his head. "The store, yes. But not the name. I guess I wasn't interested in the name." He checked the street for traffic and pulled Lorraine after him.

"So, where did you ask for . . . you know, in your heart?"

"I didn't ask for any specific *place*," Jeff said as they reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street. "It was a specific *time* I was after."

"And that time was *summer 1956*? Are you out of your mind here?"

"Here we go," Jeff said as he pushed the door open and dragged Lorraine into McDougall's Soda Shoppe . . . or so it said on the banner behind the counter.

The store was an L-shape, with the soda bar and counter over to the right of them and the rest of the store occupying the left and the full area of the turn all the way up to a pharmacy counter at the far end. In between—sandwiched in a dead area at the end of two rows of wooden shelving units—were three tall metal stands, each with four faces and each face choc-full of comicbooks, stacked maybe twenty or thirty-books deep.

When they had come into the store the guy behind the counter had been preparing a three-scoop (chocolate, vanilla and either raspberry or strawberry—Jeff couldn't decide which) sundae for a youngster sitting on one of the stools. Now, as he served the tall glass and took the boy's nickel—

Jesus Christ . . . a *nickel*? Susan thought

—he looked up at them, gave a small smile and a nod.

"Help you folks?" he asked.

He was youngish, maybe late twenties or early thirties, and sporting a lime-bordered apron emblazoned with the word McDougall's in orange, and one of those little caps that the air force fly-boys always wore on the movies.

For a second, Lorraine didn't want to speak . . . was sure that, if she did, the young man would stagger backwards in horror and—

they're from the future!

—point at them . . . and then the whole town would start chasing them down the street like in that *Body Snatchers* movie about the pod people. She tugged at Jeff's sleeve.

“No, now we’re fine,” Jeff said. “In here to pick up some comicbooks.”

“Pardon me?”

“Comicbooks,” Jeff said, and he pointed at the metal racks. “Comics.”

“Oh,” the man nodded. “Sure, go ahead.”

Jeff thanked him and he and Lorraine walked around towards the pharmacy section and the swirling racks of four-color-wonder.

“I don’t believe you brought us here to look at a bunch of goddam comics,” she snarled as quietly as she was able.

“They’re not just *any* bunch of goddam comics,” Jeff hissed back as he reached out for the first rack. “Oh my God,” he said. And for a moment, Lorraine thought he was going to cry.

Jeff pulled out one comic after another, speaking their titles, the lead stories and occasionally some of the dialogue balloons on the covers.

“*Adventures Into The Unknown*,” he said. “*Rex The Wonder Dog* . . . *Superman*—will you look at that cover! And here’s *Batman*, *Detective*. *Marvel*, *Spellbound*, *Uncanny Tales*, *Blackhawk*, *Strange Adventures* . . . and they’re all 1956 issues.” He flicked the tops as carefully as he could, ensuring that he didn’t cause even a slight crease at the top of the spines. “They return all the out-of-date ones . . . or sometimes just scrap them.” He shook his head and lifted out a copy of *Mr. District Attorney*—with the cover showing the DA with a dog as his star witness (the dog moving letters around on a blackboard beside him)—and just let it lie on his outstretched hands.

“It’s like it’s brand new,” he said. “It’s actually pristine.”

“I just put a whole load of new ones in, mister,” a bespectacled man in a white coat said as he stepped out from behind the counter with a thick batch of comics. “You know which ones you’re looking for, do ya?”

“I er . . . I think—” Jeff stumbled across what he wanted to say. And then, “Hey, tell me . . . he’s asking about some new character they’re trying out this month.”

“Yeah?” The man paused and rested his pile of comics on the counter-edge. “You know what he’s called, this character?”

Jeff nodded, swallowed and said, “The Flash I think he said.”

“The Flash? Heh, *he* ain’t new, mister. He’s old as the hills. Wears a tin hat and—”

“No, no, they’re re-doing him. In *Showcase*—new costume and everything. Sounds good he says. My son. *Our* son,” Jeff added as he glanced at Lorraine.

The druggist started flicking. “Okay then, let’s see if we can—Oh, here it is. *The Flash*. Hey, you’re right . . . new uniform. Heh, looks good enough to read myself,” he added with a whisper. He pulled out a copy and handed it to Jeff who took it and, open-mouthed, held it out in front of him.

“You okay, mister?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure . . . I’m fine. I’m just, you know, pleased I was able to get it for him.”

The druggist nodded. “Any others he needs before I put them out?”

“Yeah, some more,” Jeff said mechanically. “Say, I just thought . . . you got any more copies of that Flash one? Our son, his friends’ll want the same comic as him. You know what they’re like. Kids.”

The man shuffled back into the pile as Jeff sidled around to get a good look, and suddenly, he lifted the top of the pile clear and produced another four or five copies of the *Showcase* issue featuring The Flash. “Here you go. How many you need?”

Jeff reached a quivering hand into his pocket. “You mind if I take them all? He’s a popular boy, our . . . Tommy.” Jeff turned to Lorraine and said, “Isn’t he, honey?”

“I guess he’s more popular than he knows.”

“You can take the whole pile for all I care, mister. Save me putting ’em all out. You need any others?”

“I’ll come back,” Jeff said. He waved the batch of six identical comics at the druggist. “This is the main one.” And as he waved them, one copy slipped out of the middle and-

“Look out!” Jeff shrieked.

—fell to the floor, bouncing off of the counter, into the wire racking and finally sliding, spread-open, beneath the racking.

Jeff looked up from the comicbook and looked at the druggist.

The druggist stared at him.

Lorraine was staring at him.

Jeff gave a weak smile and reached down to retrieve the book.

“It’s just a comic, mister,” the druggist said. “If your boy’s fussy then just make sure that one goes to one of his friends.”

Jeff nodded. “Okay, what do I owe you?”

“Well, you got—” He flicked through the comicbooks. “—six copies . . . let’s call it fifty cents even.” He handed the books back to Jeff. “You need a bag or anything?”

Jeff shook his head and pulled a handful of change from his pocket. He found two quarters and dropped them in the druggist’s open palm.

“Well, you come back now once you know what else he wants.”

Jeff looked across at the metal racks, at the thick bunches of comics in each slot, eight slots per face of the rack, four faces per rack, three racks . . . and, for a few seconds, he felt physically sick.

The latest Overstreet guide had *Showcase 4* at around \$30,000 in near mint condition but he knew that if he were to send these books—the six he now held in his hand, for which he’d just paid one half of one dollar—to the CGC people then they’d come back graded 9.4, 9.6 or maybe even 9.8. And that could mean multiples of guide were highly probable.

“You know,” Jeff said, lifting the comics and taking another look inside, “one day, these things are gonna be worth a fortune.”

The druggist looked questioningly at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Like what?”

“Oh—” Jeff stopped and looked at the druggist’s face. And then he looked across the store, past the boy and woman eating nickel sundaes, around the man in a snap-brim Fedora hat browsing yet another spinning metal rack filled with Pocket Books, Perma Books, Ace Doubles, Dell mapbacks and the like . . . all the way out onto the 1956 Mainstreet, Anytown, USA resplendent in tail-finned cars, everyone smoking—

what was it Peter Finch said in Paddy Chayefsky’s Network about nobody getting cancer at Archie Bunker’s place? Well, surely the same held doubly true for Ozzie and Harriet, James Dean, Andy Griffiths . . .

—and he stopped himself and then looked closer into the druggist’s eyes.

Telling this man that, in fifty years, a mint copy of *Action* number 1 would probably be worth a half-million dollars or that the half-dozen books the man had just parted with in return for fifty cents would almost certainly be worth a quarter-million dollars . . . well, there was something about it that was wrong.

Why had he bought the damn things anyway? He couldn’t take them back with him—well, he *could* . . . but then, according to Stephenson, they’d just disappear one day, back to where they came from.

Jeff felt a sharp pain in his chest and he threw out his left hand. Lorraine took a hold of it.

“Jeff?”

“You sure you’re okay, mister?”

“I want to—” Jeff began but his mouth was dry. He glanced down at the six copies of *Showcase 4* and strengthened his grip. Then he looked at Lorraine’s face and he saw . . . he saw concern.

“I’m okay. Really,” he added when Lorraine didn’t look too sure.

Then Jeff handed the six books back to the druggist. “Put these back in the rack,” he said, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I’ll only lose them. I’ll call in tomorrow when I have my briefcase with me.”

The man accepted them, frowning. “You want me to hang onto them for you . . . you know, put them on one side for you?”

Jeff shook his head. “No, I might forget or we could find out that he—our son—has already picked up what he wants someplace else.”

The man shrugged and produced a handful of change from his pants pocket.

“Hey, no . . . don’t bother with a ref-“

“You don’t pay for things you don’t buy, mister,” the man said. He counted out five dimes into Jeff’s hand and then slipped the quarter-million dollars into the metal racking, tamping the tops of the books into the already tight space allowed by the other titles.

With Lorraine’s help, Jeff walked unsteadily out of the store, his vision slightly blurred. Outside, Lorraine asked him if he was really okay.

“I’m fine. Truly. I think . . . hell, I don’t know what I think.” He looked around and breathed in some more nineteen-fifty-six. “Part of it was why buy the books when I know I can’t keep them—though, my God . . . how that would have saved our lives.” Jeff smiled at her and, even though part of him said not to do it, he reached out and squeezed his wife’s shoulder.

“But the real thing was that the guy was selling me those books as though they were just *comics*.”

“They *were* just comics.”

“No. They weren’t just comics to me . . . not when I’d paid for them and was holding them. They were simply an investment . . . a means to get out of our problem. Here in 1956 they’ll be bought by kids . . . kids who are simply buying comics, and buying them to read. Sure, they’ll get folded up, slipped into the back pockets of denims, get creased, scuffed, stained—but they’ll be read. And enjoyed.”

He stopped and took hold of Lorraine’s arm.

Together they walked back down the alleyway and, after Jeff took one last long look around a fifty-year-old Providence street, they opened the door and stepped back into an empty Stephenson’s General Store.

SIX

“Where is everybody?” was the first thing that Susan could think of to say.

Jeff shouted, “We’re back—hello?”

But the store was silent. No, it was more than silent: it was . . . deserted. Empty. Devoid of life. There was not only nobody here, Jeff knew, deep in his heart, but nobody was coming back.

Outside, thunder rolled and a flash of lightning lit up the now dismal interior. That

was when Jeff noticed the heap of clothes scattered in the middle of the floor: dress, work-pants, couple pairs of blue jeans—kids' sizes—four pairs of shoes, various smalls.

Neither of them said anything.

Jeff went to the window just in time to see a fork of lightning straddle the ground on the other side of the road. The roll of thunder that followed almost immediately rattled the floor where they were standing.

"Maybe they went outside," he said.

Lorraine nodded. "Yeah, took off all their clothes and went dancing out into the monsoon. That makes a whole lot of sense."

Jeff felt a deep sense of loss—no, not loss . . . of being wrong. Of being wrong for too long.

"I think we both know where they've gone," was all Lorraine could think of to say. "Well, not exactly where they've ended up," she added, looking around at the door, which was now closed. "And they definitely won't be coming back."

"How's come?"

"It's what he said when we arrived. They were planning on going." She pointed to the clothes on the floor. "And they said that things they brought back from the past disappeared after a couple days. Maybe it's the same the other way around . . . which means they were away from here a couple days before the clothes came right back of their own accord."

"But to the very instant they left," Jeff ventured.

Lorraine breathed in a deep sigh and looked over at the door.

"I wonder where *my* place—*my* time—would be," she said, sidling up to the door and placing a hand on it . . . as though she were looking for a heartbeat.

Jeff looked back at the window. "Well, I think we should go try the car again. Maybe it'll be okay now."

As he leaned against the window, with the thunder rolling above the store, he neither saw nor heard Lorraine open the door.

The sight beyond took her breath away. "Oh, Jeff . . ."

He turned and saw.

Then he looked back at the window, with the rain running down it in torrents, splashing the yard beyond and coating the land across the highway with what appeared to be a gray mist.

And then he looked back at Lorraine and the open door.

And the lush greenness of summertime Central Park, and the sunshine, and the distant sound of car horns. And of 1981.

He walked over to her. "That's your time? Your special time?"

She shrugged. "Looks that way."

"I can't remember exactly where you were sitting."

She pointed to where one of the winding lanes ran round a group of young oaks. Next to the trees was a bench. Sitting on the bench, her back to them, was a young woman. She was eating a sandwich.

"But where are you?" she said, scanning the surrounding area.

"I came into the park from Columbus Circle," Jeff said. "So I guess I would be coming—" He stopped and looked. "Oh, God . . . there I am."

And he was. Walking along the lane, his head buried in a comicbook out of a bag he'd just bought at the drug store on Central park West.

"It was . . ." Jeff frowned as he tried to remember. "It was an old *Conan* I think. Yeah, one of the Moorcock ones—"

The lightning lit the inside of the store like a strobe and the boards shook beneath their feet. A single piece of wood detached itself from the door-frame and hung down, momentarily swinging before it landed with a thud on the floor. Without thinking, Jeff placed an arm around Lorraine as the doorway shifted to one side.

“Jeff!”

Jeff saw even before she pointed. Over on the lane, the young Jeff had looked up—

did you hear that?

yeah . . . sounded like thunder

yeah

sky's clear though

yeah . . .

—and was saying something to the young Lorraine.

Behind them, a piece of wooden rafter fell into the middle of the store, quickly followed by a tumble of planks.

Jeff pulled Lorraine towards him and watched the rain darken the floorboards in a big circle. Up above, he could see the black sky.

“We have to get out,” he said.

Lorraine said something that was lost beneath the thunder. But Jeff knew pretty well what it was: or we could go back.

He looked back at the doorway and saw it was now slewed drunkenly to one side. He turned her around so she could see and together they watched summertime Central Park crackle and blur, like a badly-tuned TV set, until all there was was rain and wind, and an empty boarded-up area leading to some trees.

“It’s gone,” he heard Lorraine say, and he felt her shoulders slump.

“No, it’s still there,” he said. “And we’re still there.”

She looked around at him and then at the side of the store: a whole section of panelling was now looking set to fall out into the storm. “We have to go,” she said, “don’t we.”

He nodded. “We can sit in the car.”

“Okay.” She stood clear of him and reached out for his hand. Jeff took it.

“Be a shame to let them go through all that for nothing,” he said, nodding his head at the now wrecked back door.

Lorraine smiled. “Time to get on with our lives,” she said. “And we’ll face whatever comes up together.”

And together, they ran out of the store.

SEVEN

The pick-up appeared when they were halfway across to the car. Jeff waved at it but it was already pulling in.

An old man—maybe seventy, seventy five years old—rolled down the passenger window when he was up alongside them and, leaning across the seats, stared first at Lorraine and then at Jeff.

“Need a ride?” was his opening gambit. And then, as Jeff opened the door and pushed Lorraine inside, he said, “Been out here three times this past couple weeks. Every day it rained,” he added.

Jeff slid alongside Lorraine and caught his breath. “You’re either real unlucky,” he said, “or you just *like* rain.”

The man shook his head. “Neither.” He held out a hand and said, “Been a long time. Name’s Josh Stephenson.”

A cluster of boards flew across in front of them before Jeff could think of what to say. The General Store was falling down.

“I’ll take you back into Forest Plains,” the old man said as he swung the pick-up back onto the road the way he’d come. “You can find a place to freshen up, stay the night. Maybe get someone to pick up your car tomorrow.”

Neither Jeff nor Lorraine knew what to say so the old man did the talking.

It turned out that, after Jeff and Lorraine had gone through the door, Josh’s father had gathered the family together and they’d gone through themselves. They had landed in Cedar Rapids, 1946—for no particular reason as far as any of them could make out. But they felt right at home almost immediately. And so they stayed.

Josh’s mom and dad had passed on a good few years back but, he told Lorraine and Jeff, they’d both sent their best wishes. Molly was still around—a little cranky now she had eighty in her sights—and living in Florida where the weather suited her arthritis. But she’d told Josh to say Hi.

“They all knew you would come out to see us?” Jeff said as they pulled into town.

The old man nodded. “Oh, sure. I always said I would. But I couldn’t figure out which day it was so I been out here a good few times this past month or so . . . whenever it looked like rain.” He paused and looked straight ahead and Jeff knew the man wasn’t seeing the Main Street of Forest Plains.

“I saw us all,” he said, his voice cracking. “I thought about pulling in and saying hello, giving them both a hug . . . you know. But I just couldn’t face it.” He looked around at Jeff. “They all looked just the same.”

Lorraine squeezed the old man’s shoulder.

He straightened up and gave a little cough. “Anyways, here’s where we part company. You go along there—” He pointed down the street to an intersection. “—and make a right. Couple of blocks down, there’s a little guest house. Tell Mary I sent you.”

Jeff shook his hand and said thanks, and Lorraine did the same. There was nothing else either of them could do. Then they slid out of the pick-up onto the sidewalk, pleased that it had stopped raining.

Just as Jeff was about to close the door, the old man suddenly waved him back. He rummaged in the glove compartment where Jeff had been sitting and produced a packet, about A4 size. “Almost forgot this,” he said, “been looking after it so damn long.”

Jeff took the packet and weighed it in his hands. It felt solid but light.

“What is it?” Jeff asked as he pushed the door closed.

“A present,” the old man said. “*Three* presents in fact. Been looking after them since the fall of fifty-six.” As he shifted into gear, he added. “You owe me thirty cents.”

And he pulled away from the sidewalk.

“What is it?” Lorraine asked.

Jeff opened the packet and removed a Scotch-taped hard-plastic container. He flipped open the container to find three mint copies of *Showcase 4*.

“Ohmygod!”

“I—I don’t *believe* it! That’s—That’s—” He flicked through each comic very carefully. “The condition is absolutely superb. Completely white pages, full gloss, no visible defects at all.”

“Are they worth a lot, honey?”

Jeff turned to her and kissed her on the lips, watching her eyes widen.

“Money-wise, they’re going to get us out of a hole.” He looked at her then, maybe for the first time in many years, and with a heart that had been lightened and freed of pressure. It was as though he was seeing her completely new, a time machine of his very own. And yet, his wife had always been there . . . if only he had stopped to look. “But I already had everything I *really* needed,” he said at last. And a big smile lit up his face.

“Me too,” Lorraine said.

The storm had passed. The sky above Forest Plains had cleared and the sidewalk was already showing signs of drying out. Jeff took a deep breath and, with the comics safely back in their case, he took hold of Lorraine and the two of them started walking. They weren’t sure where their steps would take them but they didn’t care: arriving at a destination after a long journey is rarely as exciting or as mysterious as the journey itself.

The main thing was they were together again: nothing else really mattered.

“All my possessions for a moment of time.”

Allegedly the last words spoken by
Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1601)

***For Julius Schwartz, without whom—of course—this
story could not have been written.***