

## Eyes of the Future

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After hearing the Time Traveler's explanation of *time* being the fourth dimension and of how we *all* move constantly in time, aging, the young man left the university's premises pondering the implications of this very new—and ultimately disappointing—information. As he walked past the door on his way out, he wondered whether the keynote speaker was right and all there really was of practical time travel was an insipid euphemism for aging. "To exist in space is to be on time," he whispered to himself. In accordance to this awful premise, we are all time travelers, in a very ordinary fashion. That meant that time travel could be done only one way—forward—and always at the same tedious pace. The young man also wondered whether the many doubts ricocheting in his mind would have been answered if he had stayed just a few more minutes and listened to the final comments of the speaker. It had been an unfortunate coincidence that a previous appointment required his immediate presence elsewhere. After all, he was a busy man and being on time was his specialty.

Before providing further information on frantic comings and goings of this young man, it is of the utmost importance to clarify that the present narration describes occurrences that have not been determined yet. That is, the events being told here are still moving and changing and will keep doing so even as you read this. My attempted narration is not the most accurate account on what is happening; it is but the latest rendition of the events as I have been able to witness, and *that* will have to suffice.

For the time being, I shall call the busy young man concerned with time traveling Carter. Born July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1964, he was of the tender age of twenty-seven but had already proven an asset to the scientific community. Mr. Carter had received the *Hopkins Grant for Extraordinary Young Talents*, an honor that only few of the most promising citizens of the world receive, and up to the moment, he was passionately dedicated to the field of physics. He had published several articles before and made significant breakthroughs in Acoustics, Thermodynamics, and Optics, which were his early areas of interest. Many eyes were fixed on this young man. In fact, a growing number of scientists believed him to be the future of physics.

The incursion of young Carter into science had come relatively early and unintentionally. The boy's family never promoted in him a love for science. He had actually been raised to favor the warmth of creative art over the cold sterility of science. It was a sunny day of March when he was twelve that he decided, against everything that had been taught to him, that he would embark on the study of sciences. This sudden and naive intrusion into the field had led Mr. Carter to that conference room fifteen years later, and of course it had also led him to leave the lecture before it finished and consequently to face his destiny on the way back to his chambers.

Walking down the street, Mr. Carter experienced the familiar feeling of being watched, but already accustomed to that unnerving sensation, he simply kept going at his common fast pace. Steadfastly walking, he gave this old pocket watch of his a glimpse. It was 15:12 then, and his appointment was at 16:00, so he had exactly forty-eight minutes to go home, retrieve the hidden files from under his mattress and speed back to his office on campus, where he was to meet the stranger that had requested his most urgent presence.

Rushing through the streets to meet deadlines and arrive punctually was not unusual for Mr. Carter, nor was meeting strangers asking for his advice. He often helped colleagues from different universities and even other countries to find out, for example, where the missing electron in their formulas had gone or how to optimize their equipment. Commonly, Mr. Carter was not as excited to help strangers as he was in this particular occasion, but like a sailor is irredeemably lured by a mermaid's song, the mysteriousness and uncanny familiarity of the communication he had received earlier compelled him not to miss this meeting. The note slipped under his door the day before merely read: "Meet me in the office. 16:00." And it was simply labeled "Time Travel." He had to be there at four.

The minute hand of his pocket watch slid slightly forward indicating 15:18. As Mr. Carter rushed through that street, he unconsciously began thinking how a state of constant *déjà-vu* dominated his daily life. He had pondered on the same conundrum each time he walked that street back home every day since who knows when. Some days there was rain. Some days were sunny. Some days there were few people on the street; some others many. But these small variants, he thought, were absolutely inconsequential. Neither weather conditions nor the number of people on the streets would ever change the fact that he was heading home. They couldn't modify his address, have him magically moved a couple of blocks. They couldn't shorten the distance home. These small circumstances slightly modified only the surface of his days but failed to affect their essence. He was fixed to share his sojourns with no one but his thoughts. Hand in hand they would walk those twelve blocks back home. That was not going to change because of something as mundane as the weather. It would in fact take something extraordinary to force his journey home to change.

Mr. Carter applied this same logic to the ideas he meditated on during each walk back home. Most days he boarded a different train of thought, but he would eventually arrive to the same destination, the same conclusion. Just like weather changes and the fluctuating number of people on the street could not alter his

address, different thoughts would always guide him to the same mental place. It actually marveled Mr. Carter that, no matter from what angle he looked at things, he would always arrive to the same conclusion: *practical time travel was possible and had to be tried out*. It seemed chiseled on the back of his brain.

That particular sojourn back home was filled up with great ideas on the work to come. He could—and perhaps should—have entertained deep thought about the stranger. Why had he written so little information on his note? How did he know Carter would respond to it? Was it dangerous to meet him? Was it a he or a she? Could there—

A blow on the back of his neck broke his thought. As he walked home distracted, some contemptible rascal had approached him from behind and tackled him with such strength that it threw his glasses flying away from his face. The physicist fell to the ground landing mostly on his knees. “A mugger,” Carter whispered to himself. He looked around as the thought slipped through his lips. He hadn’t seen anyone on the street before. This brute must have been lurking out of sight for a victim, and now the whole street looked blurry without his glasses. Carter readied himself to be attacked again but soon realized that his aggressor stood motionless opposite to him just ten feet away, keeping his distance, almost inviting the physicist to join in a self-indulgent chase.

Normally Mr. Carter wouldn’t yield to violent impulses, but as he raised himself from the sidewalk, he noticed that his pocket watch was gone. Blood rushed to his head, and his ears felt warm and thumping. Mr. Carter, the renowned specialist on the cosmos and anything worth knowing, lost his temper and dashed towards the thief with frantic arm-flapping and cursing.

Carter would have caught him if there hadn’t been a greater complication to his pursue. He was two steps short of his attacker when the sound of screaming tires put a halt to his attempt at rescuing his watch. He knew little about cars, but now he knew the racket they could make as they crashed.

A few feet back, the driver of a truck carrying oranges had lost control of the vehicle and flipped sidewise landing on the sidewalk. The truck had swept across the sidewalk trampling everything within its path for several feet. Mr. Carter stood paralyzed in awe until he felt the singular thud of one of the oranges that had rolled to his feet. The physicist was a great thinker, but that didn’t necessarily imply he could think *fast*. In that moment all thought was suspended, and his body was frozen. He was lucky, though. The physicist later learned that the trunk had hit a newsstand as it flipped, swirled slightly, and clashed flat against the steps of an apartment store doorway. The course of destruction of the massive projectile had ended abruptly just a few steps away from where he stood. It seemed like he hadn’t been hurt. Death had come looking for him, but it had missed him by a few feet. There were no people on the street that particular day, so there hadn’t been any screaming; there was no blood, no gore. Carter looked around trying to locate the mugger, but he was gone too. This had been a most intimate incident between Mr. Carter and a clashing truck.

He was in no immediate danger whatsoever, but something activated in his brain. Having lost his watch, he had no idea what time it was. He felt full of

terror, perhaps paranoia, and everything was blurry without his glasses. He did not care where the truck had come from. He did not care for who was driving. He didn't even care where his attacker had gone. In that precise moment, all that occupied Mr. Carter's mind was the inescapable urgency of leaving the place.

He must have walked faster than he ever had. Mr. Carter only realized his thoughts had been interrupted once he reached the door to his apartment. Strange! But inconsequential, he thought. He let it pass to focus on finding what he needed.

As he pushed his key through the lock and turned it open, a curious chill ran through his arm all the way up to the back of his neck and then down his spine. He shook it off as if it had been dust on his jacket and proceeded in. Once inside, he secured the door and slid the door chain. It was only then that he could finally take a deep breath of the air of comfort and protection that filled his apartment. But right as he was about to let go of his tension, the physicist frowned at the awkward feeling that something was wrong. Carter winked a couple of times trying to focus better, as if winking could cure myopia. He couldn't explain the awkward atmosphere. The living room looked the same as far as he could see, but somehow he felt something odd.

It took him a minute or two to give the first three steps across the living room, but then Mr. Carter regained his confidence and started towards his bedroom. He entered the chamber and went straight to the night table where he kept his spare glasses. As he put them on, he affirmed to himself, "There is nothing here. I'm home. I am safe." Then with one labored clumsy movement, he picked up the files from under his mattress.

"When did you start talking to yourself?"

Carter jumped at the words as if they had been a ghost's howl. He could not determine where they had come from. Let alone *who* had uttered them.

"Don't do that. People will think you are losing it."

All his muscles tensed as he heard the voice coming from the chamber's bathroom. Then there was a pause, almost long enough to allow him to take courage and step forward, but the silence was shortly interrupted by another sudden burst of words coming from the bathroom again.

"You never saw that truck dashing towards you. . . Nobody got injured, in case you were wondering. That's lucky."

He hadn't had time to wonder. A drop of cold sweat ran down his face, and he couldn't make a reply to the unknown conversationalist. Instead, Mr. Carter sat on the edge of his bed and stared attentively at the half-opened bathroom door. It soon produced the figure of a man.

The stranger was not excessively tall but about his height and look rather skinny. At first Carter was somewhat relieved, even a little disappointed, that his bedroom-lurker was not the 6'8" street-fighter that he had expected, but then he realized the immediate danger that implied having any kind of assailant in one's bathroom. The physicist stared at him and remained quiet. Although this stranger was not physically impressive, his presence was very unnerving. He was wearing Carter's favorite leather jacket, and his face was covered with a mask, *his* mask.

He was wearing one of the masks from his collection—the *Bauta*. Mr. Carter displayed his pieces in the living room, hanging from the wall across from the door to his apartment. That was what he should have noticed missing from the room as he first entered his home. The *Bauta* mask was one of his favorites. What a fool he had been for overlooking its absence from the wall.

“You only have a few minutes,” said the stranger, his voice muffled by the *Bauta*. “I’ve never been as direct as this on any of our previous encounters. I thought about this long, very long. You—the thing is that I need you not to die today. . . or in the near future.”

As if the word “die” had triggered an ejection seat hidden beneath the bedspread where he was sitting, Carter flipped backwards and landed on the other side of his bed. In a second, he grabbed the pocket knife he had in one of his drawers and strategically position himself behind his dresser.

“What do you mean by dying today? And who are you?” Though his voice broke a little, Mr. Carter spoke decisively.

“Look. I apologize for the abruptness of my visit, but no time traveler has ever died and I don’t want you to be the first.”

“Time traveler?” Carter was not used to not understanding things.

“Perhaps I know you better than you know yourself.” The masked man sat on the edge of the bed, right where Carter had just been sitting a moment before. He looked at the scared physicist cornered behind the dresser and sighed. For a moment, he thought about mentioning how pathetic Carter looked, hopeless as a scared child holding a letter opener, but he didn’t. Instead the stranger focused on serious matters and resumed, “You are the world’s first time traveler.” He paused just a second and then corrected himself, “you *will* be the world’s first time traveler.”

Information was coming a little too fast for Carter, and just like any other logical human being would have done, he rejected the masked man’s proposition with a shake of his head. Luckily for the stranger, Carter looked down at his hand and remembered the file he had come looking for. Could it be? Somehow it made sense.

Noticing Carter’s gaze stapled to the paper folder in his hand, the man with a hidden face saw an opportunity to explain. “That file,” he said. “That file contains your whole research on time traveling. You have the math there, the physics, the engineering. You even have the fiction that got you inspired.” The muffled voice became deeper, “and of course, what you know on time’s flux.”

There was a small pause. You could see, even with his mask on, that the stranger wanted to speak, but he was granting Carter a moment to process the information. He took a deep breath and continued, “The research is solid, but the idea is still embryonic, and your method needs massive work. You love the contents of that file. That’s why you keep it hidden under your mattress. You are afraid of becoming a laughingstock to the scientific community. It is all too personal so you can’t afford failure.”

It was all true. Momentarily, every concern Carter had had, time travel, his pending appointment, the crashing truck, the paranoia, they all yield space from within his mind to let this one big question entertain his whole capacity. “Who?”

Nearly smiling behind his concealment, the *Bauta*-man slowly raised his hands to the back of his head and reached for the cord holding his mask. As he removed it, Carter's thoughts were once again starting to reclaim his mind.

How like waves sliding to shore did Mr. Carter's feelings swoop on him one after another, but how unlike the waves receding back to sea, did his feelings pile up together and confuse him—one emotion overlapping another, then another, then another. Old and weathered, he saw a few steps away from him a familiar face that had disappeared from his life almost too long before.

"In all fairness," started the stranger, "I must confess that I know what you are thinking—and no, I am not your father."

Father. The very word brought him back to his childhood. Mr. Carter had not always dedicated himself to science. He spent, in fact, most of his childhood days happily oblivious to its existence.

Raised by an almost-famous poet (better left unnamed), he developed an early affinity for the arts, music in particular. He spent his early years studying the work of master composers such as Beethoven, Wagner, and López. By age 10, his impressive timing and skill with the cello earned him "first chair" in the prestigious St. Benedict's Orchestra. Carter Senior couldn't be happier that his son was an exquisite musician and that he was on his path to becoming a successful professional cellist. It had always been his dream that little Carter dedicated himself professionally to music. It had always been his mission to sow the seed of art so deep into his son's heart that he had no escape but to succumb to the overwhelming warmth of its embrace.

To a great extent his father was successful, but to an even greater extent he could not muffle the call of science just enough to prevent it from reaching his son's ears. Carter had a restless mind with a knack for finding outlets to his creativity, a quality that his father had always praised, even when his twelve-year-old son told him he was giving up the cello to study physics.

Looking back at that day of March when he was twelve and he told his father he was quitting the cello, Mr. Carter realized that the change had been anything but subtle. You could see it in his father's eyes that day, the whole story. He knew it before he was told. Earlier that week, little Carter had heard some talk about particles. He had heard that electrons orbit erratically around the core of an atom, popping, hopping and disappearing. His father's eyes big and watery would close as little Carter enlightened him about how these particles could, as far as he understood, even be in two places at the same time. He then broke the news to his father with a total lack of delicacy. He had made the decision of studying physics.

"After hearing the fatidic sentence that would irrevocably chain his dearest son to the world of physics, the old man fell silent," said the strange man still sitting on Carter's bed. "He hurt you when he left you standing right there in the middle of your great announcement, craving for a reply. He hurt you more when he left the house that very night and never came back." It had always pained Carter that that had been the last conversation he had with his father before he disappeared from his life.

The stranger paused seemingly meditating on the number of announcements, thoughts, and truths that he had to share with Carter and the small amount of time he had to share them. That time was gradually and irredeemably elapsing.

Had there only been more time.

The man sitting on his bed looked exactly the way he remembered his father. He was about fifty-two when he disappeared. In that precise moment, Mr. Carter wished desperately for a photograph, a picture, even a doodle. He needed anything that could prove his recollections were real, but he had no token of his father. He had never had one, except for his old beat-up pocket watch, and even that, his only link with that old memory of a family, had been stolen now.

“I should look like him,” said the stranger. “Your father was about my age when he left you.” Carter sat on the opposite corner of the bed and listened as the man continued, “he didn’t die. They told you so, but he never really died, not that day at least. He left you because he failed.” The poet had tried to prevent Carter from going into physics. He wanted to allow his younger version to lead a life without time travel.

“Look, I know that you have many questions to ask me, but we’ll sprint to the one with the most relevance in times like this. I am a time traveler, and there are more. Well there is actually just the one, but it comes in many versions.” By the time the Time Traveler finished the sentence, he had stood up and was pacing aimlessly. One could tell that he had great difficulty explaining.

Still going around the room, he continued, “We all hate time traveling—*now*. When you travel back, you lose your life. You become a spectator. You are trapped.” If he had had the time, the Time Traveler would have warned Carter even further. He would have revealed that going backwards in time was possible, but making time rewind wasn’t. He would have also told him that one cannot travel back to the future, to one’s original time. He would have mentioned all this, but he was interrupted before he could say it.

Unexpectedly, they heard the lock of the main door open, and immediately startled at the thud of the door chain. He was trying to break it open.

“That’s our third party,” said the Time Traveler and rushed to close the bedroom door. He looked around and asked for Carter’s help. Together, they barricaded the door with his heavy dresser.

The Time Traveler sat on the floor and leaned back against the dresser. “I don’t know how many times it has happened. I know there are at least four of us, the speaker at the conference you attended today, the ‘father’ who raised you into music, I—and of course, the one who is coming after you right now. For all that matters, there could be dozens, potentially even thousands.”

The Time Traveler had been speaking exponentially faster and seemed out of breath. He took a pause and looked at Carter in the eye. After that he continued, “Then again we could all be the same single one. It is hard to determine. They are us, and we are the same person in different moments.” The Time Traveler continued talking but avoided explaining that, every time, there was

one more “Mr. Carter” in the world, each with a slightly different idea on what needed to be done concerning time traveling.

He did mention, however, that Carter would indeed find a way to jump back in time. And that he would probably do so like many before him with the naive belief that the flux of time can indeed be modified.

“I’ve been around for a long time, but the one trying to kill you—he is probably new to this business. He must know something about the appointment you have this afternoon and must be feeling like he’s running out of time. The incident with the truck was hardly improvised, and trying to break into your apartment with you in it reeks of desperation. Somehow I understand his frustration.”

“Can’t we just confront him? He’s just one, and we can team up against him,” said Carter frenziedly. He was full with adrenaline.

“I don’t want to take the chance. He is armed—with something deadlier than a pocket knife.” The Time Traveler paused to think. “Here’s what we’ll do. Go into the bathroom. Slam the door so that he knows that you are there. He’ll go after you and try to catch you. I’ll hide and jump him on the back while he’s distracted. He doesn’t know I’m here. That should work.”

The main door broke open, and the attacker immediately started on the second door. With his first two blows, the door was almost done for.

When his collaborator whispered him to go, Mr. Carter flew into the bathroom and slammed the door making a loud noise. Almost instantly, the Time Traveler left his spot from against the dresser and position himself opposite to the bathroom so that when the door opened he could still be on the attacker’s blind spot and could outflank him.

When the bedroom door finally gave, the attacker entered pointing a handgun. He gazed around the room but quickly turned to the bathroom. He headed towards the closed door and once again started trying to force it open. He was about to succeed, but then the Time Traveler delivered. He produced a syringe from one of his pockets and jumped on the attacker’s neck inoculating him with a strange substance. Half buried in his neck, the needle broke as the attacker tried to turn around. He screamed in pain and raised his gun, shooting twice. One of the bullets flew right into the ceiling. The other one drew a hole on the opposite wall and on its way grazed the Time Traveler’s cheek. Both men clutched on an embrace of pain and fright and fell to the ground.

After a moment’s silence, Carter opened the bathroom door and found the assailant lying unconscious on the floor. The Time Traveler sat next to him calmly gazing at his other “I.” He was a middle ground between Mr. Carter and his fifty-something year old companion, perhaps about forty, definitely fitter and rougher-looking than any of the other two.

The Time Traveler rose from the floor and pushed Carter aside on his way to the bathroom. He rested momentarily against the washbowl and checked his wound on the mirror. Carter recognized the pain on the Time Traveler’s stare as he eyed his reflection on the mirror. “You are like a blind man looking for a match during a blackout,” said the old man pressing a towel against his cheek. “Time traveling has absolutely no relevance to you. You just want to marvel others.”

There was an awkward moment of silence.

“Go. You have a meeting and you can’t be late.”

Mr. Carter left the building disquietly. He was torn between meeting the future that awaited him on the other side of town in his office and tending the future he was leaving behind in his apartment. He wondered whether he should come back and deal with the other I’s in his chambers. He wondered if he would see them again after that day. Many were the concerns seizing his mind, but what would really bother Mr. Carter later on was not having asked the Time Traveler how he knew so much of what was happening during their little adventure together. Of course, if asked, the Time Traveler would have never told Carter that he had been there before.

As he rushed down that street again, Carter considered what the Time Traveler had said just before they departed. He could give it up, the whole thing. He didn’t really have a greater purpose. He did not intend to save any beloved from dying in an unfortunate accident of the past; he wasn’t losing any sleep over the mystery of who created the pyramids in Egypt nor desperately wanted to meet Christ, and he was definitely not going to risk his life trying to kill Hitler before WWII. His motivations for looking into time traveling were selfish and dry. He merely needed, or thought he needed, to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. He *did* want to marvel others and to stand in front of millions and claim, “I am the world’s first and only time traveler!” But his last minute visitors had given him much to think about. Knowing that he would eventually manage a method for time traveling electrified him, but this newly found assurance had also taken away much of the excitement of the research.

Mr. Carter still felt watched. He was sure then that the sensation would never disappear. He practically ran the entire way to campus. With all that had happened he had completely lost track of time. When he arrived to the faculty premises, his heart was pounding, more with excitement than because of physical activity. He yelled at the first floor janitor for the time as he rushed passed him. “Two past four,” he thought he heard he him reply. Dread.

Carter flew up the stairs and finally arrived to his office. He stopped for a second facing the door. Then he swung it open and a metallic flash immediately caught his eye. He gazed upon his desk and saw an old battered pocket watch dangling from his desk lamp as it struck four sharp. He drew a smile on his face. After all, he was a busy man and an expert on being on time

Aren’t we all?

THE END

