

“1985”

Short Story

OSU Creative Writing Contest

James slipped the orange foam-covered headphones over his ears and pressed play on the Walkman hanging from his belt. The cassette player whirred to life and the sounds of Night Ranger blasted through the wires and into his brain. Standing in audio bliss, he picked up the long stick lying at his feet and held it like a sword. The branch of wood cut through the air in awkward slashes and thrusts as James battled the invisible ninja army attacking him. Outside the headphones, the only sound in the greenbelt area was his Vans sneakers crunching the leaves underneath, but inside he knew he could “still rock in America.”

The final slash of his imaginary sword impacted the side of an innocent tree and shattered the limb that James held. He dropped the broken weapon and began some karate moves he read in a book once to finish off his attackers. In mid jump-kick, a bright flash out of the corner of his eye caused James to stumble on the landing and knock his headphones off.

Slowly, he looked over to where he had seen the flash. It was late afternoon so the sun wouldn't have reflected on some piece of abandoned junk and the whole reason that James came here to practice his moves was that no one would be around to watch him. So where had it come from?

Standing there about five yards away, an older man looked at James. He wore blue jeans that looked like they hung a little low, some running shoes, and a t-shirt with a Pepsi logo from the seventies. His hair was closely shaved, like he just got out of boot camp, and he had an actual goatee, like he was some kind of villain.

It took Kevin a moment to get his bearings after the jump. When he did, a curse slipped from his lips as he saw that instead of an empty field, he stood in front of some teenager dressed in parachute pants and a Japanese t-shirt. Large glasses with invisible frames and hair down to his shoulders completed the fashion look. Trailing from a tape player lay some “lightweight” headphones with the sounds of 80s rock leaking out.

“What are you doing here?” Kevin barked before James could figure out what to say.

"What are you doing here?" James parroted.

"I asked you first."

James shrugged. "I dunno. Just hanging out."

"In the middle of a field?" Kevin asked, a little more calmly.

"I like it here. I can practice and stuff."

Kevin nodded in response.

"Where did you come from?" James asked.

"Uh..."

James brain finally caught up to the events that it had just observed. "Yeah," he continued, "where did you come from? There's nothing here, just a field, and suddenly you appear. Who are you?"

"Uh...," Kevin continued, "... it's not important."

James squinted his eyes. "Are you hiding out here from someone? Are you trying to avoid the cops?" He took a step back.

"What?" Kevin said. "No. Of course not."

"Then why are you hiding here?"

"I'm not hiding... I just got here."

"How come I didn't see you walking up here?" James asked.

"Uh...you had on your headphones; you didn't hear me until you turned around."

"Then what was that flash, huh?"

"Beats me, I didn't see it. Did you?" Kevin asked.

James ignored the question. "And why do you look like that? What's up with the goatee, you an actor or something?"

Kevin threw his hands up in exasperation. "It doesn't matter. Forget it." He looked around. Basically he found himself in the middle of an uneven field covered in vegetation. Copses of trees

peppered the landscape and Kevin could just see the roofs of a nearby housing development off in the distance. After taking in his surroundings, he looked back at James.

"Ok, I don't want you to freak out or anything, but can you tell me the date?"

James squinted his eyes slightly as he decided whether to answer. After a few moments, he said "April 23rd."

Kevin nodded. "Right. What year?"

"What year? 1985 of course."

Kevin smiled. "It worked."

James looked closer at Kevin. He saw the thin electronic watch, the odd fashion, the goatee. He grabbed the remains of the stick at his feet and held it defensively between the two of them. Slowly he said "I'm going to ask you one question. I don't want you to come any closer; I just want you to answer it. What year are you from?"

Kevin stared at James, uncertain how to answer. He opened his mouth to reply, but he closed it again before saying anything, the words a jumble in his brain. Finally he just said "Screw it. I'm from 2017. How did you know?"

"You're dressed strange. Close but not quite right, and the goatee... no one wears a goatee. Plus that shirt looks new but the logo looks old. Your watch seems pretty fancy and YOU TELEPORTED IN HERE!"

"Keep your voice down!" Kevin barked. "I don't want anyone to know I'm here."

Adopting the sarcastic look only a teenager can deliver, James said "Well you blew that one future-man."

Kevin looked at the surrounding trees a little more. "So this really is 1985? I always remembered it... I don't know... cleaner I guess?"

"We're in the woods. What they don't have dirt in 2017?" James replied.

"Watch it kid. Nobody likes a smart-alecky teenager. No, it's just when I think back about this time, it seems... more wholesome, I guess."

"Wholesome? We've got Madonna you know. Man, you really should have studied this more."

"Studied it? Kid, I lived it. In fact, I was about your age in 1985."

James' mind tried to determine how old he would be in 2017. "Whoa." The two stood there for a few more moments. Kevin continued to admire the surroundings while James struggled to think of something to say. Eventually, Kevin reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small rectangular device. James saw it looked like a small remote control with no buttons, just smooth glass. Kevin pushed a button on it and a screen lit up. He slid his finger over it and suddenly a bunch of small buttons appeared on screen. He walked slowly around, looking at the device.

"Is that a tricorder or something?" James asked.

"What?" Kevin replied. "No, it's a phone. I didn't think there would be any signal out here, but you never know. No GPS signal either."

"GPS?"

"Yeah. In the future, there are a bunch of satellites orbiting the earth that tell you where you are at any time."

"Whoa!"

Kevin looked up from his phone and looked over at James. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you these things; I mean I could mess up the future if you know too much."

James ignored him. "So that little thing is a phone. Like a cordless phone?"

"Yeah, it's a cell phone. Basically there are towers all over the place that you connect to and you can make a call."

"Gnarly." James said, eyes as big as saucers. "So you could make a call from, like, anywhere? Even in a car?"

"Even in a car." Kevin replied. "Come here, let me show you something else."

James closed the few feet to Kevin, headphones dragging behind him. "You know that Walkman you have there?" Kevin asked. "Each tape holds what, about 45 minutes of music?"

"Yeah, if you listen to both sides."

"Well check this out." Kevin touched another icon and a long list of songs appeared on the screen. He zipped his finger up the display and the list continued to scroll on. "I've got over 1000 songs on this thing."

"Whoa. Where are they kept? On a floppy disc?"

"No, you just plug the phone right into the computer and it puts them into the phone."

"But how do they get into the computer?"

"You pull them off the internet?"

"Internet?" James asked.

Kevin sighed. "That's right, I forgot. The Internet is a bunch of computers linked together."

"Like a BBS?"

"Sure, I guess. Anyway, in 2017, you can carry all of your music with you wherever you go."

"That is awesome." James said. "What about flying cars, do we have those?"

"No, no flying cars. No jetpacks either."

"That bites. What about hover boards?"

"Nope. But we do have cameras without film, hundreds of TV channels, and remote controls for everything."

"Awesome," James said smiling broadly. "I bet the arcades are radical. Like 3d games and stuff."

"Uh... yeah. Well... there are some pretty cool video games, but arcades are basically dead."

James' face fell. "Oh."

The two stood there awkwardly for another moment. Kevin started determining where north was, trying to get his bearings. "Look, I need to get to the Indian Springs housing addition. Can you point me towards it?"

James pointed to the right of the two of them. "Sure, it's over that way, past the creek. What are you doing here anyway?"

Kevin's face clouded over. "I can't tell you that, sorry."

"Is it some kind of 'save the world' thing?" James asked excitedly.

Kevin turned in the direction James had pointed. "No, nothing like that. Just something I have to do."

James hurried to catch up to Kevin and walked beside him. "Well how long are you going to be here?"

Kevin reached into another pocket in his jeans and pulled out a small oblong object, about half the size of his phone. On it could be seen the current date and a battery icon, one quarter full.

"Hopefully not long."

"Well do you need help on your mission?" James asked hopefully.

"Sorry, kid this is personal."

James stopped walking as Kevin continued. "Please?"

Kevin turned back to look at James. "Sorry, no. Time space continuum."

"Oh. Well I'll stay here until dinner time, if you need me."

"Thanks, kid."

Kevin climbed down through the vegetation and soon found the creek James mentioned. It looked exactly as he remembered it and soon he knew where he was and where his destination lay. A little more hiking and he came to a steep hill with a neighborhood street at the top. Glancing around, Kevin saw it was empty. He stepped onto the street and walked a ways through the neighborhood.

He paused at a house, staring at it from the sidewalk. He walked over to the tree in the front lawn, running his hands over the bark. He could barely see the carved initials in it. He saw the chipped rock on the face of the house, heard the wind chimes lightly playing on the porch, and the set of chairs also on the porch waiting for someone to sit on them. Exhaling a breath he didn't realize he held, Kevin walked up to the front door.

He looked down at the shrubs and plants lining the front of the house. He picked up a specific rock, turned it over, and slid the cover off the bottom of the false rock. A house key fell into the palm of his hand. Gently he replaced the rock and unlocked the front door.

Inside the house, he was unprepared for the emotions that rolled over him. He looked at the family portrait hanging over the couch, husband and wife, brother and sister. Big hair and large collars, large ties and heavy eye makeup. They looked happy, or at least as happy as someone could be at Olan Mills. Too bad that happiness would be short lived.

Turning towards the kitchen, he heard the sound of dog tags jingling and claws skittering across tile as a medium-sized brown dog bounded towards him, a baseball mitt in its mouth. The dog dropped the mitt to bark at the intruder.

Kevin knelt down and gave the back of his hand for the dog to sniff. After a few brushes with the cold, wet nose, the dog's tail wagged and started licking Kevin's face. He smiled and petted the dog. "Good boy, Hershey," he said.

Kevin then picked up the baseball mitt and gave it a good examination. There were a couple of holes in it from the dog, and an inordinate amount of slobber, but overall it looked in good condition. The same couldn't be said for a few of the other items laying on the floor in the kitchen. A stuffed animal, a magazine, and a TV remote control all dismembered and destroyed by the dog's powerful jaws.

"You're going to get in trouble for that," Kevin said as he placed the baseball mitt high on the kitchen counter.

The sound of the front door opening caught Kevin by surprise. He turned to face it as a woman, the mother from the photograph over the couch, stepped inside the house. Kevin's eyes locked on hers and an immediate flash of recognition covered his face. She dropped her purse at seeing the stranger and yelled "Who are you?"

Kevin put his hands up defensively. "Uh... I'm sorry. Uh... this is the wrong house." Kevin looked around for an escape route, but the woman was between him and the front door.

"You bet it's the wrong house! I'm calling the police!" She ran for the phone in the living room, moving closer to Kevin. He just stood there and stared as she grabbed it and began dialing 911. Kevin felt paralyzed seeing her there. He knew he needed to escape but he couldn't make his legs move.

"There's an intruder in my house," she said into the phone, staring at Kevin. Those words shook him out of his daze and he sprinted past her and straight out the front door.

"Get back here!" she yelled as Kevin raced down the driveway and out into the street. Five houses down, the adrenaline began to wear off and Kevin found himself panting hard. He slowed to a jog and wound his way through the neighborhood.

The sound of a police siren revitalized him and shot another dose of adrenaline into his system. He bolted down the street and back into the greenbelt area behind the housing addition. He imagined he heard the pursuit of the police, footsteps and sirens, but each time he glanced back he saw nothing.

Kevin leapt over the creek and scrambled up the other side. He clawed his way through the vegetation and back up to the field where, true to his word, James remained, again practicing his martial arts moves, this time with a magazine open at his feet.

Kevin stopped running as he drew near to James and leaned over, hands on his knees. He took deep breaths, sucking in as much oxygen as he could.

"What's going on?" James asked. "Are those police sirens for you?"

Kevin could only nod as a response, perhaps he hadn't imagined them.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Kevin held up a finger to ask for a moment. Eventually he gasped out "It was a misunderstanding. Someone was where she shouldn't have been."

"But you're a time traveler, right? Wouldn't you know where people were?"

Still breathing heavily, Kevin replied, "Yeah... maybe... I don't know."

"You don't know? What kind of time traveler are you?" James asked.

"A crappy one."

As James scrutinized Kevin, an idea popped into his head. "So when was time travel invented, huh?"

Kevin stood back up and began to pace a little bit. "Why does that matter?"

James crossed his arms in front of him staring at Kevin. "You aren't a time traveler, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean however you got here, you don't normally do this."

"You got that right, kid."

"So who are you?" James asked.

The sound of police sirens remained in the background.

"I don't think I have the time to go into all this right now." Kevin said, looking back in the direction he came from.

"If you're a time traveler, you'd have all the time in the world, wouldn't you?"

"I told you, no one likes a smart-alecky kid."

"Yeah, and no one likes being lied to," James retorted.

Kevin and James stared at each other. Kevin got his breathing under control and now all they heard was the sound of the wind through the trees, the occasional bird call, and faraway sounds of vehicles driving by. No more police sirens.

"I have no idea when time travel was invented," Kevin said eventually. "I was walking down the street when I saw a crowd gathered around someone in the middle of the street. He had been hit by a car and judging by the sheet over him, he didn't make it. Police and paramedics looked at him, interviewed the driver, and kept the crowd back. They all said he came out of nowhere. My foot kicked something. At first I thought it was an MP3 player." Kevin saw the confusion on James' face. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small almost cylindrical device with a wrap around screen. The display showed the current date and had a timer counting down on it. "A music player. Anyway, I picked it up trying to determine who it belonged to. I tried to turn it on to see if there was a name and instead I see a timer counting down and today's date, in 2017."

"I futz around with it a little and I realize that instead of an MP3 player, its screen is asking me what date I want to travel back to and that it only has enough juice for two jumps and only a few hours life left in total. I figure it's a joke or something, but then I look over at the dead guy and start to wonder. So I tried to figure out when I would want to travel to."

"So you came here? Now? What's so special about here?" James asked.

"I grew up here. I knew this was a field in 1985 and it still was in 2017, so I figured it would be safe to jump here. Last thing I wanted was to get hit by a car just when I went back in time. So I set the device for 1985, and pressed the button. I was sure it was a joke, but then I saw you in your parachute pants and Walkman. That told me it really worked."

"So you only have enough power to go back to 2017?" James asked.

"I hope so. I don't think I could go through the dot.com bust again." Kevin said.

"The what now?" James asked.

"Never mind. Anyway, I just need to set the time back to 2017 and I'll get out of your hair. It's probably in your best interest to never mention me to anyone you meet."

"Wait!" James said. "Why did you come here? What's so special about today? Do the Russians attack or something?"

Looking sad, Kevin shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It's... just... well, my father is going to have a heart attack tomorrow and die."

"So you wanted to warn him, get him to the hospital?"

"I thought of that, but there is no way they'd believe me, a stranger to them. Besides all of the damage to his heart is already done, there really isn't anything I could do to stop it."

"But you could...," James said, struggling to find a solution.

"Exactly," Kevin replied. "There really isn't anything I could do. Anyway, yesterday, my dad gave me a new baseball glove. My mother told me to put it away, but I just left it lying around and today, our dog chewed it up. After my father died, all I could think about was that the last thing he gave me I just let get destroyed. I never forgave myself for that. So when I saw this time travel device, I thought I could fix that. At least now, I won't have that guilt."

James stood quietly for a moment. "So you came back in time so you could clean up your house a little?"

Kevin chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I did. Anyway my Mom came home earlier than I expected and caught me in her house. I barely got away."

Kevin looked at the time travel device. "There isn't much time left on it. Guess I need to get out of here. Thanks for the help."

"No problem," James said. "Wait! Before you go, can you tell me something about the future?"

"I'm not sure I should. What if I tell you something and it causes it to never happen?" Kevin asked.

"C'mon man, you've got to tell me something. Anything."

Kevin struggled to think of something, during which he adjusted the time machine to return to 2017. Smirking he held the device up, thumb poised on the activation button. "Ok, remember this and it will make you rich. Buy WalMart, Microsoft, and Google."

Kevin brought his thumb down and disappeared in a flash.