

YOUR DOOR  
WAS OPEN

a short story

Sam Cooper

### **The abstract.**

I am an expert on many subjects. Temporal physics, for example. And old vinyl decks, and New York bagels, and the holiday line of antique tractor ornaments from Hallmark. The list goes on.

Until recently, I believed I knew the worst thing that could happen to a man. When you trade in time manipulation, you see the biosphere and the clock go to war in terrible ways. Most nights I lie awake, steeping in the memory of an intern whose face stayed in the past while his bones jumped into the future. *Mismatched* is too soft a description. I thought that was as bad as it could be.

But no.

The worst thing is to be suspended in the resin of time, knowing you only have so long before the fluids that hold you solidify. And you must choose your last move.

### **A warning for you.**

Don't play with temporal physics.

Or fall in love.

Both are a tragedy.

### **Days in the Company.**

You left the office door open when you went on a coffee break. I looked inside, of course, and I saw the message on the desk. Loose ink trailed off the papers and dripped into the drawers. You must have plunged your whole thumb into the inkpot and finger-painted

each letter. The message covered the detritus of your work, swallowing forms and reports, diagrams, paperweights, and scattered pencils. Nothing was safe from its reach.

BACK IN TIME  
DON'T COME LOOKING

I laughed.

The labyrinthine smell of incense caught in the back of my throat. When I stepped further into the room, it curled around my shoulders and patted my back. The burner sat on the windowsill and whispered smoke into the air. You must have lit it before you walked out. It was the perfect placeholder for your body, just perfect, because it was as thin and spectral as you, and at the same time equally consuming.

I bent over the desk to read the message again. That was when I saw a second meaning. I took it to be a suicide note.

••••

I remember the day well. I remember breathing sharply and running to the alcove where we kept the coffeemaker, still trying to blink the message out of my eyes. Martha was the only one there. She poured decaf out of a dusty-looking carafe and squinted up at me. Her voice twanged. "Have you blown something up, Paul?"

I heaved a breath. "William. Was he here?"

She nodded down the hall. "Said he was headed to the car park."

I ran. My tie whipped over my shoulder and trailed behind me. My shoelaces unwound and slapped my legs. When I reached the stairs, I took them four at a time. I hit the ground level and sprinted through the atrium, pushing people out of my path like dominoes.

Cold outside. It was a dreadful promise.

Your gold Plymouth sat in the corner of the car park like it always did, but now there was a blue haze over the area. I slowed. Fire burned in my legs and my lungs. As I crept to the driver's side, I braced myself for blood and broken glass. I braced for the sharp smell of a discharged firearm. Maybe a second note. But there I was beside the door, and I saw only clean upholstery inside. An empty seat.

My shoe nudged a rock. At least, I thought so. But it was your Device. The last four years of your work encapsulated in a little stopwatch. Blue smoke whistled out of the seams, and the face read didn't tell the time. It said this: February 2068.

It was February 2074.

••••

We'd broken up, you and me.

When I spoke with HR about the matter, they said it was likely in the Company's best interests. I asked if we could perhaps move our offices so they wouldn't be across from each other. Perhaps we could even transfer departments. I was just as good with temporal psychology as I was with physics, I said.

Jeffrey from HR dismissed me. "There's no free space."

"I'll trade with Henry in 503b."

“Leave your personal life at the door, Paul.”

So we began the next four years silently digging holes in each other’s hallway nameplates. It wasn’t that we were interested in what the other was doing. It was that we wanted to confirm our *own* work was most important.

On coffee breaks, we made light conversation. Christ, it was hard to be acquaintances with someone you’d seen naked. We’d peeled back each other’s layers, William. We couldn’t unsee the truth of ourselves. So between sips of coffee, we diluted the silence with little anecdotes from our work. This is how we learned that the Company had a sense of humor.

See, we’d both been tasked with capturing temporal manipulation technology in a smaller package. My assignment was simple: focus on moving forward. Only forward.

And William, your assignment was to move back.

• • • •

My Device was a pocketbook.

I got it working a month before you disappeared. I disappeared it right off my desk into tomorrow, and the next day when I arrived at work it sat there belching blue smoke. Pages from the pocketbook curled and crisped. Melting circuits leaked out of the CPU. We had a lovely fire drill that day. It was 12 degrees and windy outside.

In my next experiment, I sent a pen with the pocketbook. The two objects came into the next day with only a few scorch marks, but now there was a message on the page.

*Paul, I will tell you every chance I get. You are an asshole. If you set the office on fire, I will lose my progress and I will make sure you lose your life.*

*Sincerely,*

*William S.*

This made me believe you still loved me.

Uncertain why.

The next time I sent the pocketbook and the pen, I aimed for a whole week into the future. I shifted the coordinates so it would appear in the bottom drawer of your desk. And before I ordered the temporal jump, I wrote my own message on a page.

*If you stay out of my office, perhaps yours won't burn down so quickly.*

*Sincerely,*

*Paul F. Asshole*

• • • •

When we lived together, we had a boxlike house. It sat in a row of homes that all looked the same. It was hard to tell who belonged where, so the neighbors set themselves

apart by planting flowers, hanging flags, and trimming their bushes into geometrically typical shapes. *You* set our house apart by cutting the grass diagonally. It took you forever to mow. You were so proud.

There was only one house on the street that never dressed itself up as anything other than the factory default. It sat across from ours gathering leaves in the gutters and dust on the windowsills. In the two years we lived in that neighborhood, we never saw who owned the place. But they always collected their mail.

Your office felt like that now.

*You* felt like that.

• • • •

There was a knock on my door the day the pocketbook was scheduled to arrive. I'd been sitting on nails since it left. I thought it unfair that the pocketbook jumped immediately into the future and I, the creator, had to plod through the mud pot of time to catch up. But today we'd finally meet.

"Come in."

It was you, William, holding the smoking pocketbook with a silver handkerchief. No, with your tie. You always wore silver ties on Wednesdays. I smiled weakly and gestured for you to sit.

You forced a dissatisfied hiss through your teeth. "My notes, Paul."

"Yes?"

“They’re singed at the edges. Of all the places you could have invaded, the drawer where I keep my lab notes was the worst.”

I shrugged and spun a pen between my fingers. It catapulted itself into my coffee and splashed amber liquid on a stack of contact cards. “I’m sorry.”

Mostly about the coffee.

You dropped my Device onto the desk. It made impact beside my mug and send a puff of smoke whirling into the air. If I wasn’t so enraptured with the fact that we were within three feet of each other for the first time in years, I would have noticed the way your shoulders drooped. I would have noticed the shade under your eyes and the way your curly hair had become wiry instead. You didn’t just look tired then, William, you looked older.

But I stayed silent in that moment. It’d been too long since I was close enough to see my reflection in your glasses.

“So, your Device works,” you said.

I nodded. “It tends to catch fire.”

“At least something is predictable.” You began straightening your tie, pulling silver silk through your fingers like it was water. “When did you send it?”

“A week ago. This is my longest experiment.”

The stillness of your face told me you were impressed.

I drummed my fingers on the desk. “I’m thinking of sending an intern next.”

“Please.” You smiled, let the tie fall back to your chest, and leaned against my bookshelf. “Send the Miller boy.”

We laughed at the thought of HR knocking down our doors with an ethics audit. It would be Beth. The shoulders of her suit jacket were too wide to fit through the door and her



eyebrows always promised retribution. *You simply can't incinerate interns you dislike, Paul. Most of them are the children of our shareholders!* I did my best impersonation of Beth the HR rhinoceros. Laughter curled my hands into treble clefs, and you, William, had to hold my bookshelf to stay upright. Blood pooled in your cheeks like it always did when you were tickled.

I wasn't sure what to say after that, so I told you to have good luck with your project.

"Thank you."

I asked what your Device was.

"A stopwatch," you answered, quieter. "Hard to tell if it works sometimes. I'll always be moving in the opposite direction of my progress, which hardly seems fair."

"I understand."

"I wish you did."

You left me alone then, and I washed my longing away with a few cups of tea and an old record. The hiss and pop of vinyl was the only noise I could stomach as I worked. And that afternoon, I worked harder than before. My fingers cramped from typing code, splicing wires, and setting components in place with long-necked tweezers.

By the end, I had a new pocketbook.

I waited for the worker bees of floor five to commute home. The corridor lights dimmed. The AC shuddered off. Then, in the dark, I walked to the gaping maw of the elevator bay. There was plenty of room here, and a fire extinguisher, too. I took the pocketbook out of my coat and sent myself into the future.

Felt like ice.

I landed in a moment, eight hours later, in the same dark elevator bay. Invisible wind washed smoke over my face. A cloud of sparks fell from the Device and scorched my right pant leg. Immediately, the air of the re-engaged AC wheeled through the burn holes and crawled across my skin. I inventoried myself for injuries—scalp damage, missing organs, disconnected limbs, the usual—but I was all there.

And I was *here*.

My gut instinct was to rush to your office and tell you everything. To compare notes, make plans, and celebrate. Even after I realized it wasn't possible, my stomach churned with the thought of you. Christ, it was hard. Because now I could see the future. I could find a place where you and I were not cleaved in two by an office hallway.

I only had to be brave enough to go.

• • • •

Those dizzying nights of success lured me into a corner. I saw less of you, William. Or I saw less of the impression of you. You know how it is. That feeling of imminent success is difficult to explain to someone who has never experienced it. It's like knocking an arrow only to wait for the target to show itself. So I stayed alert.

And we grew further apart.

As if by design.

• • • •

You disappeared then.

• • • •

The week after, I found myself in my office with Beth from HR. Her powder blue blazer caught the light in all the wrong ways. It made the room airy. I'd worked hard to transform my office into a dungeon with all the dim lamps, undusted bookshelves, and empty frames on the wall. Beth's pastel broke my focus.

"I'm here to address your comments," she said. "This can be brief if you're open."

I swallowed. The taste of coffee still clung to the back of my throat. "I heard you were closing the investigation."

"Because we will not find him, Mr. Farmer."

"He left his Device. The stopwatch. I think he wants to be found."

"Let me rephrase." She settled back into her chair, crossing one leg over the other. "We will not play games with him. He knows his contract forbids behavior that may endanger the Company, and yet he still takes these risks."

"Aren't you worried he might have hurt himself?"

She cleared her throat. "Mr. Farmer, when you reported the incident in the car park, you used the word 'suicide'. Hurting himself seems like something you'd know about. Walk me through your statement."

"It was the note on his desk."

"Which said nothing of suicide, by the way."

"I just felt it."

She looked down at a folder in her lap and bit her lip. Through the reflection of her glasses, I saw a photograph of William beside a photograph of myself on the page. Company IDs. Even before she spoke, I knew the next question.

“William was your partner, yes?”

“He was.”

She looked up at me, folding her hands over the pages and tilting her head.

A headache bloomed behind my eyes. *Christ*. “You can’t ask what you really want to.”

“No, Mr. Farmer.”

“He was never suicidal when we were together, if that’s what you were wondering.”

She wrote on the page, satisfied. “Tell me why you were worried, then. As it pertains to the Company.”

“I was distracted in my work. I didn’t notice how tired he was until it was too late.”

“Tired?”

“He was capturing time travel in a stopwatch. Isn’t it obvious what was happening?”

She pressed her lips together. The skin under her nose turned blue.

“The Company orchestrated this,” I snapped. “They gave us each only one piece of the technology. They—”

“Mr. Farmer.” She leaned forward. “We’ll air your grievances later. Focus on Mr. Schaefer right now.”

The headache—it was cleaving. I capped my knees with my hands and gritted my teeth. “William only had the temporal passcode to the past. That is what the Company gave him. How could he test his Device without traveling there? Clearly, he was getting older. He’d spent too much time waiting out his experiments to return to his own timeline.”

She said, “Hmmm.”

“And I’ve done the opposite. I’ve skipped time.”

“This impacts his disappearance how?”

“Think of it.”

“Mr. Farmer, this is not a test. Not a game.”

“I just want you to understand.”

Beth did not.

“How would you feel if you were always trying to catch up to everyone else?” I asked.

“Eventually you might want to stay where you had the most success, even if it was far away.”

She seemed bored by this sentiment. “You assume.”

“You think it sounds foolish?”

“I think it sounds speculative. In the days before his disappearance, William Schaefer was reporting only positive results with his work. We don’t see why—”

“Did it not occur to you that he was lying?”

That was that.

Eventually she left, powder blue trailing out of the room in a long, dreadful stream. It took the afternoon to forget the feeling of her questions. The feeling of my answers. I listened to music and sat still for hours, but I felt justified in my inaction. If the Company would pay me to talk about you, they would pay me to think about you, too.

### **The house across the street.**

So I stole your stopwatch from Company Records.

It was a rainy Tuesday. There was nothing careful about the heist. I left wet footsteps on the floor, and I even acknowledged the security staff with a curt nod. My alibi was this: I was there to look for an old experiment on homeostasis in the temporal flux zone. I was a scientist, after all, not a spy.

After lunch, I rushed to the top level of the car park. The raindrops on my shoulders were a countdown. Twenty, ten, five, one. Zero. I held my breath and clicked the button on your stopwatch. The breath I took was useless. Temporal wind ripped the oxygen out of my very blood and sent the emptied cells crashing against the walls of my body. I whirled through time for an aching long moment—probably less than a millisecond—and crashed down on the same car park floor.

It was sunny four years ago, today.

I breathed, breathed, breathed. Then I pocketed the stopwatch and left.

I passed my own car on the way out of the garage, empty of course, and saw your Plymouth next to mine. This was four days before we separated. It was a time when proximity in any form was electric and necessary, and the rush of memories that came with the sight of our cars was nearly too much for my head. I ran the rest of the way.

To a taxi at street level, I said, “Take me to the west end.”

The driver raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been through a sprinkler, have you?”

My jacket. The rain.

I smiled and winked, “Lab accident.”

He drove me west to where the neighborhood streets crawled over stubby hills. I directed him to the slope where my old house sat in the line of similar homes. Here there

were children riding bicycles and old men walking their dogs. Nobody had anything better to do, and they looked happy about it.

“Let me off.”

I walked the rest of the way with my rain-spattered jacket tucked under my arm. When I reached my old house, I turned away from the door and faced the darkened home across the street.

The blinds were down on every window but one: the room on the top floor. I knew the layout well because every house on this street shared a floor plan. The room at the top was the sacred space of every homeowner. We’d turned ours into a library, William. Do you remember the cold days we spent reading in chairs that swallowed us whole? Do you remember when it snowed, and we took off everything but our blankets? I hope you do.

A girl flew past me on a bicycle and trilled her bell. It echoed in my ears.

I crossed the street to the plain house and climbed the stairs. The stale air of the porch wrapped me up. And then I caught the deep, spicy aroma of your incense. Without stopping to knock, I put my hand on the doorknob and wrenched it open.

In one hand I held your stopwatch. In the other, I held my pocketbook. They felt magnetized, charged to pull closer.

“William?”

My voice sank into the walls. The entryway was bare except for an empty coat rack and a bookshelf full of old scientific journals. Paper spilled onto the tile like melting candle wax. This was certainly your house.

I called your name again, and that was when I heard the sound from the kitchen—a match. *Sktchh*. I took slow steps through the living room, past the doors to the yard, and into

the kitchen where you stood with your back to me. The only light was the match you held. It was a sunflower bloom that spread over the stovetop, the cupboards, and up to the curls of your hair.

You breathed out. "Paul."

"Turn around," I said, surprised at the command in my voice.

You stayed still. Then you turned a knob on the stove and held the match to a burner. Blue flame sprung up by your hands. You capped the fire with a silver kettle. "I'll make you some tea before you go back."

I was confused. "You left your stopwatch, William. I brought it to you. I brought my pocketbook, too, so we can—"

"No." And that was when you turned to face me, shaking the match out with a flick of your wrist. The crow's feet at your eyes had deepened. Your hair had faded. "Go back to the Company, Paul."

I couldn't speak.

You pulled two mugs from the cabinet and lowered tea bags into each. "I didn't leave my stopwatch for you to find me. I left it so I couldn't travel again."

"How long have you been here?"

"Two years."

My stomach turned. "Ever since we've lived across the street."

"Yes."

"Then you're here to watch us when we were younger."

"Sometimes." You leaned against the counter, eyes on the floor. "I don't always watch, though. I wanted to be close to when we were happy."



“Then come back.” I swallowed. “It can happen again.”

Finally, you met my eyes. “I don’t love you now, Paul.”

My hands weighed like an anchor. They stuck me to the floor. I was aware there were tears in my eyes, but the world was too distant for it to make a difference. I swallowed again.

“Why did you come here? Really?”

“All I wanted to do was remember.”

I brought my hands together, stopwatch and pocketbook in one place. “I won’t ask you to take me back”—I held them out, an offering—“but I *am* asking you to return.”

“I don’t want—”

“They gave you the wrong job, William.” I set both Devices on the countertop and wiped my eyes. “You were always too sad for this. You can’t live in a time that’s already happened.”

“I’ve . . . accomplished what I was supposed to.”

“Then come accomplish something else.” I walked to the stove and turned the burner off. The kettle wheezed away what little energy it had gathered. “It doesn’t have to be by my side. I won’t make you a prisoner.”

You shook your head. “Paul. I don’t want to be rid of you. I just don’t . . .” You paused. “Things are not the same.”

I placed the pocketbook in your hand. “You can remember this time from anywhere. And you don’t have to decide what you’ll do next until you are in that moment.”

You closed your eyes.

I read the meaning there. I took it to be permission.

So opened my pocketbook and hit the jump key. The air lifted. The heavy smell of incense and tea leaves and gas burners whirled through my head. I felt your hands on my arms, the tickle of your curly hair on my forehead as the temporal plane pushed us together. Then pulled us apart. And we landed on wet concrete as the rain poured down, extinguishing the sparks on our clothes.

You knelt to catch your breath. "My ID . . . It doesn't match my age anymore."

And I laughed. I put on my jacket, the one with water stains on the shoulders and the smell of smog on the collar. It felt right to match the rest of the world. I know you felt it, too, because you stood beside me and folded your arms tight. Furrowed your eyebrows. Closed your eyes and swayed like you did when the song of a rainstorm was too sweet to ignore.

"Paul," you said.

"Yes?"

"I left my house key in the past."

Of course you did.

**In time, we'll see the future.**

It doesn't matter which way you go. The memories will follow.

It isn't the worst that could happen.