



Closing The Loop

So you stand on this spot. This place. Then you jump back. Ten years, twenty years, five minutes. Is that what you're trying to tell me? Is that what you are saying, Gray? Are you telling me you can TIME TRAVEL?

I knew Carrie would take it badly. I guess that's why I've avoided telling her for so long. I mean, no-one wants to deliberately upset their own wife, do they? I mean, come on, life's hard enough, right?

But here's the thing. I've always been able to do it. Mainly when I was a kid, I have to admit. I used to call it flipping, then. I'd flip back twenty minutes and take tests again, after we'd already swapped papers. Once I'd marked Aiden Reilly's maths and knew all of the answers I'd got wrong.

I'd flip an hour before bedtime and go and play in a different room. Watch a different T.V. channel. It was cool. Fun. I assumed most kids knew how to do it. I did it a LOT.

Recently, though, I'd begun jumping again. These days, the element of choice wasn't part of the equation. It felt like starting, in fright. I'd jerk, blink. Be somewhere else. Explain your way out of that one, Graham, old chum... I'd be in my office one moment, a construction site the next, a field the next. One of these days, it could be tar pit, for all I knew. A swirl of gas. I mean, where would it end?

So far I'd always flipped back within my own lifetime. Then, up until recently, I'd always been able to choose when I went, as well.

Carrie wanted me to see a doctor, of course. Straight away. See, she thought I was imagining the whole thing. But then I knew she was going to say that.

Again.

I think it would have been alright if we weren't planning to have kids. An eccentric husband is one thing, but I guess the thought of a downright crazy father for your children is a little bit less attractive as a prospect. I guess her main thought was that I should have started all of that crazy talk *before* we started trying for the baby. I saw it in her eyes.

The month before there was anticipation and fear that she might not be pregnant. Then, I saw dread and a deep down horrible fear that she might be. I didn't blame her. I was scared too.

What if the kid had it too? What if they had it stronger than me? Or if it was more unstable when you inherited it? I mean I was the only case I have ever heard of. A prototype. A practice run. I started to flip when I got to school age. Disgusted one day at the thought of another rainy play-time, I began to daydream about the previous Thursday's glorious sunshine and *bop*, there I was, waiting to go out into the playground and have the best kick-about of my entire life all over again.

At five, I was young enough to just accept my good fortune and not question the mechanics of it. I simply looked forward to trying it again the next time I felt a bit fed up. But what chance would a baby have if it suddenly flipped into the path of some car on the road the previous day? Or into the bath the night before when we weren't watching? Jeez, what if we were travelling? On a jet, a high speed train?

I made my decision to leave her the day I found the last pregnancy test screwed up underneath some rubbish in the outside bin. She had so obviously made an effort to hide it that I felt angry for a moment. Then I thought, hey, you're the loser rummaging around in a bin bag in the garden. I had been looking for a letter I'd thrown away accidentally. At least that was my story. Truth was, I'd found what I was looking for. I suspected she'd taken another test and I was more afraid than she was what the result might be.

I packed my bags the same afternoon. If I got away clear now, while the test was still negative, we'd never have to find out the worst that could happen.

The boy was waiting for me in the hallway.

At first I thought he had broken in. He was slumped on the carpet, his hands in his hair. Every part of his body was battered, exhausted. He looked up at me as I came bustling out of our pink, flowery bedroom. The weight of my matching leather cases bunched up the muscles in my arms.

'So that's what you look like,' he said, straightening slightly. I saw his legs tense beneath him and my first thought was to run. I thought he was planning to hit me, to rob me and then turn over the house. Then I saw the purple edges on his eyelids, the flicker of exhaustion at their corners.

'Hey, Dad. My name is Pete. Pleased to finally meet you.'

He put out a hand as if he was planning to shake mine, then he fainted.

I dropped my bags, but he was down on the ground before my feet had even moved. I think he banged his head. There was blood on him, but I couldn't tell if it had already been there or if it was fresh. I could feel myself beginning to jerk, to want to blink, to flip, but I held myself in place.

I still don't know how I managed it, but the hell I was going to let myself be flipped out of this situation. I guess there are even stranger things in life than time travel. Like those eight stone women who lifted whole lorries off their trapped children, or cats who have fallen fifty floors and survived with only a severe winding. This moment was a bit of a combination of both of those things. My son. My boy. In front of me.

I reached him in two strides and knelt down, never once doubting who he was. He had my eyes. My same, straggly gingerish beard. My stupid long skinny legs.

He opened eyes like Carrie's only as I put my handkerchief to the cut on the side of his head. They stopped me dead in my tracks. Green eyes, ringed with brown. Unmistakable.

I turned my attention back to the cut. It was an old scab, re-opened by the fall. He was so skinny, so frail. It frightened me to feel the fluttering of his pulse underneath the dirty brown tan of his wrist.

'Been looking so long,' he murmured. 'So long. Have to stop you leaving. Have to keep you here. For me. You have to stay and tell me things. Stop me doing it. Make me stop the looping. It makes you fall apart. You have to tell me to stop it happening so much. My body is so used up. So old. I think I must have lived three lives already...'

He was unconscious in my arms like a great filthy marionette with its strings all twisted and broken. I still hadn't taken a good deep breath since the first sight of him and I could feel my chest begin to tighten. My breath whistled through my lungs like the last coach through Deadwood.

'What the... Gray? Who the hell is that and why is he...? Oh Jesus, you need your inhaler, Gray, can't you hear yourself! What the hell is happening here?'

I closed my eyes and held onto the stranger who had called me Dad and I didn't have the first clue what one earth I was going to tell the mother who didn't even know she was pregnant with him yet.

He woke raving.

'I've been experimenting,' he began, grasping my lapels so tightly Carrie threatened to call the police. Hushing her, I stared into his eyes while he spoke, watching a bit of both of us looking back at me.

'I've tried it lots of ways. It's like a muscle you know, you get better the more you do it. I evolved, Dad. I can go sideways too. I can go forwards.'

His gaze was glassy, mad with knowledge. It was frightening but impossible to look away from, It was like staring into fire, like swallowing down spume from the sea.

'Who is this man?' Carrie asked me, her voice trembling with uncertainty. 'Gray, who *is* he?'

'I see everything. What might be, has been, will be and could have been. It's wonderful, terrifying and compelling all at the same time. You have to stop me. You have to promise to stay today so that you can stop me. She tries, but I never listen to her. I always wanted to talk to you. She'll never understand. She only worries, she can never really understand. Don't leave. Please don't leave today.'

'Gray! What is he talking about? What is happening here?'

I feel sick. Elation vies with horror in my gut for precedence. He is so young, so broken. I stop myself marvelling that I have made this human being, that this

skin, these bones are part of me, that some of myself has gone forward into him. Forwards, not backwards, where I am always looking, but onwards, into the future.

'It hurts,' he says softly, and on this outward breath, he slumps back in my arms and disappears entirely.

Carrie is ashen with disbelief. She keeps staring at my arms, which are still cupped around fresh air as if I am holding an invisible body. I close them together, but she is still staring. The blood. Of course. His blood is still on my skin. I rub my damp palms over the stains and feel the mingling of his DNA with mine again. My boy. We have a son.

I want to take her in my arms and tell her what it all means. I want to cradle her close and show her how wonderful it feels to know what secrets nestle inside her body. She pushes me away as I get closer and I begin to perceive how it all might turn out if I stay. Her eyes are full of accusation. She doesn't see the wonder of what we have just experienced, she doesn't see anything but blood and fear and madness to come.

I feel the flip trying to overcome me and taking her hands just for a moment, I squeeze hard.

'Sorry,' I try to mouth as I throw myself backwards into the feeling. I let the sick feeling subside with my eyes still closed. It goes quicker this way.

It is a few weeks earlier.

I am alone in the house. There is a telephone in my hand and Carrie is talking to me down the line from her office.

'I'm coming home now,' she purrs. 'I've checked the chart and it's the perfect time. I'm on my way. I'm so glad I caught you in. I'll be ten minutes.'

I make a neutral sound and hang up the phone. I remember this day. I remember the excitement she brought home with her, the anticipation of her touch, the feel of her in my arms. I recall us laughing as she lay on our bed with her legs up the wall to maximise the chances of fertilisation, like some magazine had recommended.

'This is the one, Gray. This is the time!' she will murmur to me later, if I stay. She will lay my hand on her warm belly and she will imagine what our child might look like.

I don't even bother to pack the bag. What will I need, after all? Suddenly it is very clear in my mind what I need to do.

I am going to go to the top of the NCP carpark in town. I will flip back to 1972, when I know for certain it hadn't been built and I will smash this thing out of existence for good.

I will change this path.

I will stop this.

I am glad we met, just this once, but the paradox stops here.

Right now.

This is the end of the line.