Round Trip to Hell

by Søren Sørensen (October 2024)

Dead City (Egon Schiele, 1912)

The road is covered with sleet, the air obscured by thick murky haze. The truck grudgingly drifts ahead, raindrops drumming atop its roof, while my consciousness, muddled just like the surrounding landscape, is whizzing aback, reviving a disarrayed pack of snapshots, entangled episodes of my life,

or my father’s life, which seem to be intertwined like no other human lives.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks.

I give her a gaze, offering no answer.

She understands.

I call her Swan, maybe because of her beautiful neck, or just because her real name, Svanhildur Sigurðardóttir, is a little too long. Yes, she is Sigurður’s daughter, but not the way I am Jonathan’s son. My father has never met my mother, let alone the rest, and I have not seen her either. That was one of the rules of the game I involuntarily became part of. They both knew everything and gave their consent, but no one ever asked me. Maybe they did ask me, as I was part of my father then. I don’t know why my father agreed. I wouldn’t, definitely, despite being identical to him. Or am I?

He was a genius, which was the main reason of the Operation. The other reason was the onset of a rare disease that was prognosed to rapidly devour his brain, leaving little chances for survival. My father’s brain was so precious. He was the scientific director of the Hielschrier National Lab, where he had invented a way of returning the past, i.e., the images of events that occurred millennia ago. His idea was to use cosmic lenses naturally created by galactic constellations to divert light and bring it back into the Solar system, where detectors installed in spacecraft would convert the signal into images from the past. One could watch a movie depicting the real Neanderthals making their tools, herds of mammoth grazing in steppes, or Alexander of Macedon invading India. The Lab could not afford losing Jonathan, the genius, so it was decided to produce a clone of him.

Yes, I am a clone, an experiment, a product of asexual reproduction of my father. My embryo, my mother’s oocyte carrying a nucleus extracted from my dad’s skin cell, was the

only one that survived out of hundreds involved in the project. I am very expensive, perhaps the most expensive human being on earth. My mother gave me life but nothing else. *Is that not enough?* you may ask. I don't know; sometimes I feel like I am a thing rather than a human. I inherited from my father everything except for memories. Sadly, I also inherited the eroded telomeres and consequently reduced replicative potential of my DNA, condemning me to premature aging and early death. I am 24 years old, but my DNA is 43 years older than me!

Jonathan died two years after I was born. I was raised in a facility resembling a university campus and was given the best education possible. My life in the campus was that of a prisoner, although I had a chance to socialize with people from other facilities during holidays. That's where I met Swan. Have I ever been happy? No such recollections before that moment. She is not a clone but had volunteered to become a participant of a high-risk experiment driven by a mix of despair and lust for adventure.

I thoroughly studied my father's work and was able to not only master his theory but go further and beyond. Jonathan's invention of returning the past contained elements that could be used to model events belonging to any segment of time, including the future. Fascinated by these ideas, I focused on completing what was left unfinished. The facts that the past is invariant and that all events are governed by the laws of nature led me to a conclusion that the past predicts the future, i.e., the future is invariant as well. It can be projected into a quantum vacuum state by temporal decompression of past events, then materialized into a spacetime metric via photon-phonon energy conversion coupled with a high frequency superconducting resonator. Hybridization of resulting artificial atoms into molecules creates a material medium presenting the future. I decided to escape into the future rather than die in my twenties.

Swan was the only person aware of my plans. Moreover, she wanted to join my escape project.

All parts of the device were in place but one: a source that could provide around 300 gigajoules of energy to activate it. My survey of the near future pinpointed an upcoming thermonuclear test that at a distance of 3-4 kilometers would provide just enough energy. Being a devout pacifist, Swan insisted we should do something to prevent the test instead of taking advantage of it, but I was determined to employ the unique opportunity for the escape.

Swan arrived in a hijacked truck. We loaded the device onto the trunk and hit the road around midnight. The test was set for 6:00 am. The device had to be positioned at a perfect orientation to absorb the energy, otherwise the whole thing, including me and Swan, would annihilate momentarily. We were sitting in the cab, wearing fire- and radiation-proof gear and gas masks, our hearts throbbing. The blast struck, followed by a sensation of anesthesia; we were either dead or transferred to another world. A barren wasteland unfolded before our eyes, dominated by black and grey shades, the sky overcast by soot, columns of dark, gloomy smoke rising here and there. I kept driving and driving—no sign of life. The hillside was covered with a layer of coal, the remains of trees. The serpentine of molten asphalt led us into a ghost city of rubble and wreckage. We arrived at a place that seemed to have been the central square of the city. Under normal conditions, we could get out, walk into a bistro near the fountain and have a cozy lunch. But no. The sight was too disheartening, piles of burnt-out or melted, ashen ruins of buildings, disfigured carcasses of cars and black soot everywhere. Dante’s inferno, where the apple trees were replaced by thorns with poison, would have been a garden for a leisurely stroll compared with what we were seeing.

“This can’t be the result of the test,” Swan said. “If this is hell, where are the devils?”

“I know,” I reacted. “This is a post-WW3 world. Even the devils didn’t survive.”

“I was right! We had to do something to prevent this,” Swan bellowed. “I mean, we *have* to do something to prevent this.”

“I agree, I am so sorry,” I said.

“Turn on the radio, please,” she pleaded, visibly shaking.

I turned the knob; there was a ghastly, monotonous noise, the effect of the nuclear electromagnetic pulse.

“It’s possible that you and I are the only live people, or the only living things, in the whole world,” I muttered.

“How could your prediction of the future miss this?” Swan seemed to be entering a panic attack. “What are we going to do? We are two miserable losers!” She embarked on erratically hitting me with both hands.

I tried to hug her, pretending to be calmer than her.

“Is the self-destruction the ultimate product of human intellect?” Swan sobbed. “We can’t stay here. Do something to get back! We’ve got a message for the humankind.”

I checked the ergometer—the accumulator was close to depletion. Returning seemed to be out of question unless the device could be charged somehow. We could use the superconducting resonator to record multiple wavefronts and create holographic images of what we were witnessing, add a message and send back to the present time, but again, we had to charge the accumulator first. Waiting for another nuclear test was not an option. The only source of energy was the radiation that was being emitted from everywhere, which was a solution and a problem at the same time. The energy had to be focused to charge the device quickly, or we had to wait for years. How to focus the radiation energy? I started recollecting my father’s notes, piece by piece, about

recreating images from an arbitrary time point. I was not able to recall all details. Jonathan, the genius, would certainly have a solution. But am I not identical to him? If Jonathan could do it, I can do it as well.

I was not sure if it was day or night; the sky was dark and ominous, the time was unreal. Swan was in a state of nothingness, silent, just staring at a point. Suddenly she started murmuring a familiar tune:

Choo, choo, train a-trackin' down the track
Gotta travel on, ain't never comin' back
Ooh, ooh, got a one-way ticket to the blues…

I was feeling terribly tired after the sleepless night followed by a whole day of misery. Swan's lullaby sent me into a nap. What I remember next was that Jonathan appeared in front of me and said: "The energy can be compressed in short pulses, creating highly entangled quantum states of photons." Then he described the technical part of the whole procedure of sending holographic images and texts from the future to the present time. I got up with a clear picture of what should be done. A panoramic view of the ghost city was constructed, the message was put on it and sent to the Hielschrier's main office H-mail address. I was not certain if and how they will receive the message, but that was all I could do.

It was completely dark now. We were sitting in the cab totally exhausted, in our heavy gear, neither wake nor asleep.

"What will happen if they get the message and prevent the war?" Swan asked.

"They may receive the message, but I don't know if the future can be changed. We are already in the future."

“But the future depends on the past, right? If they change the course of action, then they will change the future.”

“So, we are in one of possible futures?”

“I think so.”

“Well, I will try to use the pulsed laser to get back, but still the capacitors need to absorb more radiation energy,” I said without believing in my words.

After some time, probably the next day, I noticed that everything in the surrounding was becoming fainter, like the whole landscape was slowly disappearing. Swan was submerged in a deep slumber. Then I realized what was happening; our time in the future was over. We were actually the only real matter—the rest was transient. I knew the artificial atoms had limited life-time but should have recognized that as an effect of the time-travel, a day in the future was equivalent to several years in real time. Suddenly, we plummeted into a free-fall-like flight and landed at the site of the test, years later. It was raining. The sky was grey, but I could see trees, grass, a pond at a distance, something I thought will never see again. I made a wild skreich. Swan opened her eyes in terror and started inspecting the surroundings in confusion.

“What is this?” she said. “Are we dead, or am I dreaming?”

“We are back, Swan,” I responded, hugging her like a bear.

I started the engine and we moved forward. My life had already gotten prolonged by several years, but I paid no heed to it. What I had seen was stuck in my head for the rest of my days. The place was familiar to me; little had changed. The rain gradually ceased and the sky became clearer. We noticed something strange hanging in the sky above the horizon far away. As we drove closer, we started discerning a horrendous picture of a dreary dead city, ruins of buildings surrounded

by hideous black smoke and soot. In the forefront of the hologram we could read a message made of little glimmering stars: “Do not convert our precious planet from paradise to hell!”

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Søren Sørensen is a full-time physics professor and an occasional poet with a mind of a scientist and a heart of an artist. He uses the pen name Søren Sørensen because his philosophy is like that of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish poet and philosopher, and the founder of existentialism (and his real first name sounds like his).

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