X Minus One

by Jim Coles, III (June 2022)

Meeting an Agent, James Hart Dyke, 2010

The sound in the distance seemed odd, a different sound than Jerry Maze had heard before. Not loud, but the buzz tone penetrated and sank deep inside his head pulling him from the dark peace of sleep. Jerry began to awaken, groggy, and confused by the strange noise.

He lay in his bed, eyes still closed but slowly coming to his waking senses. The familiar noises of an early June morning on Bay Street in Little Great Neck began to compete with the odd humming buzz. Then it came to Jerry, he knew what the noise was—it was that new electric alarm clock radio that his mother

had bought yesterday.

“But Jerry,” his mother had said as she set the tan plastic box on the dresser in the bedroom upstairs from the storefront deli his parents had owned for forty years, “this is the newest thing—ten tubes—and a science guy like you should have all the newest things.”

With eyes still closed, Jerry groped for his smokes and lighter that lay on the bed table but made no effort to turn off the humming. As he had for so many mornings since moving back in with his parents so he could save money, Jerry half rolled over, inserted the Chesterfield into his mouth and flipped the Zippo. A deep drag drew smoke into lungs and within seconds he felt the energy of nicotine coursing through his veins. He opened his eyes, focused on the tan rectangle with the red hands over the white face and tried to remember where the switch was that would turn the damned thing off.

He found it on the second try … a bar on the top did the trick. Jerry sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, then stumbled past the Royal upright typewriter and stack of typing paper on the roll top desk adjacent to the door, and headed down the hallway to the bathroom at the back of the narrow apartment. As he cleaned up he thought back to yesterday’s conversation about the radio with his mother.

“Mom, I’m not a science guy … I write radio plays for X Minus One Radio Theater. I do science fiction … you know, Martians and space invaders and weird stuff … but thanks for the new clock, I’ll look great when I get my house. I know you two won’t have much extra money until the sale of the deli is complete, so I appreciate the thought and the gift.”

His mother, always and forever the essential Brooklynite, replied “I know Jerry, but someday you’ll be famous like that Orson Wells man and then you and Jenny can visit your father and me in Connecticut. You remember how that radio show scared

us? It all seemed so real that your Dad made us all get on the boat and go across the bay to Great Neck to stay with his brother. You remember that, don't you?"

Jerry remembered, chuckling as his mother retold the story for the thousandth time. But clearly, it was the *War of the Worlds* broadcast that had inspired his young mind, energized him to read literature and get good grades during his high school years, and which led him to use his GI Bill benefits to major in play writing at City College of New York when he came home from the Army in 1946. It was the vision of becoming a famous radio—and soon TV—scriptwriter that had led him to his job at Westinghouse Theater Productions.

He'd been with Westinghouse Productions for three years now, and the recent wage increase to $62.50 per week, along with the GI Bill home loan he'd earned, meant that he'd have enough money within a year to marry Jennifer Goodman, a girl from Queens whom he'd been seeing for more than a year. The increased wage and her savings meant they could make a good down payment on the bungalow over by the dunes in Garnerville Beach. Even though the house was over-priced at $6,500, he liked it, and his GI Bill loan would keep the payments to about $50 per month. The waves lapping against the bay beach were soothing and the fenced yard would be perfect for the children he and Jennifer dreamed of having together. He'd rented the house during the summer of 1951 and waves had comforted him as he wrote the script that had won the Westinghouse job for him. Someday soon he'd own that house.

Once dressed, Jerry walked downstairs and as he waved his goodbye to his father, Jerry grabbed the deli sandwich and tin travel cup of black coffee his mother had laid out for him by the cash register. At 8:45 a.m., right on schedule, he began the two-block walk to the train station where he'd pay thirty-five cents and catch the 8:50 Long Island Railroad commuter train to Manhattan.

Jerry was startled by a blaring car horn as he passed Limbaugh's Bakery near the corner of Bay Street and Broad, and at the same time he noticed an odd electric sizzle in the air around him, then he felt himself falling …

Moshe Abazin sat in front of his monitor, sucking the tip of the ponytail that hung over his right shoulder. He hummed a fractured version of some rock tune as he keyed figures into the Cray-6 computer's artificial intelligence software, and watched as new values appeared at each variable point in the equation. Suddenly, his full attention was focused on the monitor as the equations began resolving within the LED screen's matrix.

"Hey, Mitch, come look at this … I think we've confirmed the gravity well principle," Moshe gushed in his Midtown New York staccato. He added the final values to the equation, and looked on with delight as more elements of the equation lit up.

With the last elements inserted into the theoretical formula, he could predict how much energy they'd need from the small linear reflector accelerator the Defense Advanced Research Programs Agency people had installed in his Long Island research lab.

"Mitch! Come look … you were right … Mitch! Whooo-eee, we can do it," Moshe screamed, as his partner Mitch Cross abandoned the 2004 College World Series he'd been watching on ESPN, and raced across the room so he could see the equation resolve on the thin monitor.

"By God Moshe, we've done it! Now we must send an E-mail to Doctor Harris and get him up here from DC. With any luck at all, he'll let us fire-off the accelerator for two or three microseconds," Mitch said as he began pulling files together into a DARPANET message that would soon be on its way to the Director of the Unified String Theory Research Team.

Although excited, Mitch knew that before Harris would agree to the test, DARPA's other labs would have to duplicate and verify their results, but he was certain the names Moshe Abazin and Mitchell Cross would go down in history as the inventors of the world's first virtually free, non-polluting electrical generation system.

In the days that followed electrons flew between Long Island, the headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, and the six other DARPA labs that were engaged in the New Energy Project, a project that held the potential to free the United States from the Middle Eastern stranglehold on energy that had helped drive the nation to war two times in just over a decade.

And one morning in late June, Doctor Joe Harris arrived at the lab with good news—the other labs had confirmed the results and the President's Science Advisor and National Security Advisor had approved firing the reactor. The test would proceed as soon as the system could be fine-tuned; changes made to the national power grid, and a cover story put in place in the event the test affected the power grid.

At 8:48 a.m., July 10, 2004, the temperature inside the accelerator's impact chamber was stabilized at 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Outbound breakers from the research facility's power distribution relays were opened. The national power grid operators and affiliated operating utilities activated the power absorbers that had been added to the grid. Within minutes the power grid headquarters announced that the system was ready to receive the extra power.

With a simple nod from Harris, Moshe pressed the 'enter' key on his keyboard. In the blink of an eye, circuit breakers engaged and electricity created by the center's small steam-powered generator flowed into the reactor. Magnets directed the electron flow in the current stream into the small Argon-Plutonium Oxide power rods in the reactor core, which sent a massive flow of energy into the accelerator's magnetic field

where trillions of subatomic particles raced to nearly the speed of light before crashing into a ten pound cube of pure silica stationed with the accelerator’s impact chamber.

Sacrificial sensors inside the impact chamber recorded the events occurring there until they were consumed. The scientists in the control room some 500 feet away were shielded from the massive energy discharge by layers of meters-thick concrete but even at that distance, they felt a static charge in the air that made the hairs on their arms stand up.

In the instant following the sub-atomic collision light flared thousands of times brighter than the sun, then collapsed into a pinpoint-sized speck of blackness more intense than midnight in a deep cave. Gravity bent inward upon itself for a few milliseconds, the silica imploded into nothingness, without making any heat. During the event’s split-second of existence electrons, neutrons and a dozen other sub-atomic particles behaved as if insane. In the five seconds of the event’s aftermath 2.5 million megawatts of electricity—as much as the US and Canada combined produced in a year—streamed through the outbound breakers into the national electrical grid.

All across the nation systems overloaded and newly installed automatic safety breakers kicked out, leaving large sections of North America without power for several seconds as the excess power went to ground. The short-lived blackout rolled across the country, but within a minute of each outage, the national power grid began coming back on line as the new safeties reset. The preparations had paid off, but not even the new equipment could absorb all the power this new energy source had produced without some interruption. Now it would be up to others to tell the cover story to the media.

Inside the control room Harris, Abazin and Cross sat stunned … the theory worked better than the equations had indicated it should. The event had produced a full order of magnitude—ten

times—the power they'd expected; but they smiled large and slapped each other on the back, anyway. The theory and formula would require more polishing before conducting the next test, but it had worked. The temperature inside the reaction chamber had risen less than one degree. No radiation had been produced and the silica had vaporized completely, leaving no residue or wastes. Clean, cheap energy awaited them—as did fame, international acclaim and personal riches. Both Moshe and Mitch were poised to patent key elements of the equations, with DARPA's blessings.

Scant seconds into their celebration Moshe noticed a change in the impact chamber temperature reading as backup sensors stationed outside the chamber came on-line. A monitor display began blinking 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, and the mass indicator showed the presence of 141.56 pounds of matter. All the men in the control room gasped when they saw a man's face inside the impact chamber.

Jerry Maze still held the tin coffee cup but his hand shook so badly he couldn't bring it to his mouth and coffee spattered out of the cup onto his suit coat. Two steps ago he'd been walking to the Long Island Railroad train station and now he was here … but where was here? Here was a dimly lit square room about ten-by-ten by eight feet, with large, twisted metal plates of some kind extending from smooth concrete walls. Bare wires, all cut at the same point and connected to nothing, hung from the ceiling. A steel door was set into one of the walls. Only seconds earlier he'd found himself sitting on a pedestal in the middle of the room. And the room seemed to have the same static electric charge in it that he'd noticed while walking to the train station. The static made his hair stand up and his skin tingle. Fear, raw fear, consumed him. He slipped off the pedestal, shrank to his haunches, and crouched in one of the corners.

Moshe and Mitch looked at each other, their faces blank for a moment, then comprehension set in—a gravity well is

essentially a black hole, a place where gravity is so intense that it bends the fabric of space. Nothing, even light, can escape its attraction. And according to Unification Theory, the fabric of space around the black hole twisted and bent, possibly funneling to a point in time and space many light years from its location. Somehow, this small artificial gravity well had reached to some other point in space—or time—and had pulled something into the impact chamber. Nothing in Unification Theory or Unified String Theory had predicted this sort of outcome for a gravity event this small and of such short duration, but a man—a human being—had been brought from somewhere and he now sat terrified in their impact chamber. They had to do something, fast.

Moshe and one of the accelerator technicians took a golf cart and rode the 500 feet from the control room to the impact chamber and hurriedly opened the steel door. Before them, crouched in a corner, was a man wearing a brown worsted wool suit, white shirt, pale green tie, black oxford shoes and a tan Fedora hat; a metal cup grasped so tightly in his shaking hands that his knuckles were white.

“Hello … it’s OK, pal. Just relax, everything will all right,” the tech said as pulled the door open and began to enter. The man seemed uncomprehending and tried to shrink further into the corner, but as the technician extended a hand, the man seemed to relax.

“You speak English? Thank God. Where am I,” he pleaded as he took the technician’s hand and began to stand up. At that moment, Moshe entered the impact chamber, his ponytail flopping over one shoulder as he stooped to pass through the hatchway. The man in the corner seemed surprised, then chuckled, almost giddy with fear. This had to be some sort of crazy dream … maybe he hadn’t awakened this morning after all, and he was still home dreaming, but he allowed himself to be led out of the chamber, his eyes taking in everything around him—but his brain neither understood nor comprehended what he

saw.

The golf cart ride up the long tunnel was eerie to Jerry. The vehicle made almost no sound and the corridor was lined with thick wires and big metal plates. The cart stopped at an intersection and the man with long hair said to follow him. They walked into a brightly lit room with half a dozen TV screens connected to small gray boxes sitting on desks. Two anxious-looking men stood in the room. No one spoke for a few seconds, then Moshe blurted out, “Hello, I’m Doctor Moshe Abazin. These are doctors Joe Harris and Mitchell Cross. You’re on Long Island at a physics research center. Can you tell us your name?”

Jerry stood quietly for a moment, looking around the room, trying to make sense of what he was hearing and seeing. He saw that the screens weren’t TVs, at least not the kind of TVs he knew … these were huge, at least twenty inches wide, but they were flat and they had color on them … these were not the big cabinet, eight-inch black and white screens that were slowly working their way into homes all over New York. The room was cool and a low-pitched whirring created a background sound.

“I’m Jerry Maze. I live in Little Great Neck, on Bay Street,” Then he tentatively asked, “Who are you people and how did I get here?”

In the discussion that followed Moshe learned that the last thing Jerry remembered was leaving for work in June 1954. Somehow, the gravity well had reached back nearly 50 years and plucked this man off the street. And while the three men learned a good deal about Jerry, he learned almost nothing about them or how he had come to be there.

Harris worked the phones with DC and within an hour had developed a policy: Maze would be held at the Long Island facility, he’d have minimal access to information about the United States in 2004, and he would be sent home as soon as

DARPA’s scientists could figure out how to send him there. The less Mister Maze knew of the future, the less the likelihood that he could do something that could change history.

Weeks went by, how many he didn’t know because with no windows in the building his days and nights blurred together. The people who worked there seemed to come and go at irregular times, so it was impossible to determine the number of days by the shifts worked. Jerry spent most of his time in a small apartment within the facility and had only limited access to a lounge where he and Moshe sometimes chatted about Jerry’s work in radio and his life on Long Island.

Although he talked with Moshe and occasionally Mitch, he learned little about the world outside the facility. Moshe explained that he couldn’t tell him much because to do so might create what’s called a time conundrum. After some amplified explanation Jerry got the drift of the idea and agreed that he shouldn’t learn too much, but he kept his eyes open and he listened carefully.

Jerry formed a picture of this time and place, but with no way to verify it he left it as speculation. He did learn that computers had gotten smaller, faster and smarter than the UNIVAC computers that were making headlines in 1954—and that they controlled most aspects of modern life.

One day while sitting alone in the lounge Jerry found an old *Newsweek* Magazine stuffed behind the cushions of one of the overstuffed chairs. The magazine contained stories on the space shuttle program, the Hubble space telescope, unmanned probes to Mars and the outer planets, and the war in Southwest Asia. But it was the ad pages that made his eyes grow large. They told of an America in which cars were rolling computers, and homes were smarter than the people who lived in them. News shorts in the magazine told of medical advances, civil rights for Negroes and women, and changes in the American family and social structure. His view of this world took better shape,

but he didn’t pursue questions about life in 2004 for fear they’d never let him go if he knew too much.

And although he wasn’t allowed in any of the labs, Jerry noticed the brand names on the items he could see. He recognized some of the company names: Xerox, Sylvania, Grumman, Teledyne and General Motors. Some, such as Intel, Johnson Controls, and Bay Street Electronics, or BSE, were unfamiliar, but were clearly important because so much of the equipment bore their names. But other products carried strange, Japanese sounding names, and that confused him because Japan had been flattened in the recent war. He also noticed that Moshe often made notes on a small handheld computer made by IBM. Just before retiring each day … or night … he wrote the names of those companies on a scrap of paper he’d picked up and stuffed into a pocket.

At long last Harris returned to the Long Island facility and told Jerry that his team believed they’d figured out how to send him home … but there was some risk to him because he’d have to be in the impact chamber when the gravity well energized.

“Your choices are somewhat limited, Jerry … you can stay here, if you like. We’ll give you a new identity, a job and relocate you, or you can try to go home. Here’s the problem, you disappeared in June 1954 and you weren’t there—or here—anymore so you’re not listed anywhere. We won’t know for sure whether you make it or not until your name shows up in the phone book or in IRS files … the risk will be all yours. We just can’t know the outcome until we try,” Harris told him.

The idea of living in this new future was intriguing but Jennifer and the beach house were waiting, and in the end, Jerry decided to go home. Within days preparations began for the experiment.

“Jerry, I need to remind you again that what you’ve seen here

could cause a change in history so you'll need to keep this all quiet once you get home," Moshe told him as they walked down the accelerator tunnel toward the impact chamber. Jerry fiddled with the knot in his pale green tie and pushed it back to the center of his collar. His suit felt odd after so many weeks of casual dress in clothing made of materials that no one from 1954 had seen or felt.

A group of technicians had just finished tests on the new accelerator wiring system as the two men entered the impact chamber. Instead of silica, a tiny block of yellow pancake Uranium ore rested on the podium, covered by a lead foil wrapper.

"Jerry, you can still back out of this and stay here. We've tried to explain the risk to you, but let me try it this way—we think the gravity well works something like a yo-yo … the super mass forms at one end then drops through a sort of tunnel to a some point where it attaches to whatever is at the other end and pulls it back to the point of origin. We think that at the power level we generated the gravity well is a pretty weak yo-yo … the silica weighed about 14 pounds—a pretty small load to push down the tunnel it and brought you back because at 141 pounds or so, it could move you. That's a factor difference of en-to-one.

"Now we think that to send you back we must create a much more powerful gravity well … one that can push you back down the tunnel to your point of origin. Several things could happen…you could be killed and turned into loose atoms, you could go too far and end up landing before you were born, or you could even be blasted to another place entirely. We just don't know what will happen to you, or what will come back when the gravity well returns here. I really wish you'd reconsider and stay here," Moshe said adamantly.

"Moshe, thanks for the peek at the future, but I have to go. I'll protect what I've learned here, but I have to go home no

matter what the risk. I don’t belong here and we both know it,” Jerry said. After a quick embrace and extended handshake, Moshe sealed the door and hurried back to the control room.

Tension ran high in the control room. The theory for sending Jerry home required an exponential increase in energy within the black hole, but if enough energy could be injected Jerry should return home at the exact instant he’d left. Yellow Pancake Uranium was the perfect critical mass material for the experiment because it is reasonably safe to handle and unless it has been artificially enriched, it can neither melt down nor explode inside a hot reactor but when bombarded with accelerated neutrons it should provide all the energy needed to create the yo-yo effect. And if the black hole behaved according to theory, there’d be no radioactive waste after the event dissipated. The unanswered question was if the test worked, what would bounce back to the impact chamber once Jerry was gone?

Nobody knew for sure that they weren’t sending this nice man to his death but the decision had been made and millions of dollars had been spent to make the shot and to modify key stations in the national power grid so the huge amount of power created by the event could be absorbed almost without notice.

Jerry waved at the camera and gave the thumbs-up sign: Go! He was ready.

With nerves on end, Mitch keyed in firing instructions, power built up in the reactor then particles surged, the light erupted followed by the dark distortion that was the gravity well.

“He’s gone,” Moshe said to nobody in particular and the team began collecting data on the massive energy discharge, some ten orders of magnitude greater than the first test, that marked the beginning of America’s liberation from energy

slavery, even though the energy production had been massive the national energy grid operators were ready to absorb the increased supply and there was no power interruption anywhere in the national grid system.

Harris opened the Greater New York City and Eastern New Jersey phone book and turned to the page he'd previously marked. His finger slid down the page, but the name Jerry Maze still wasn't listed. If the shot had been successful, Jerry's name should have appeared instantly in the listing.

Back up sensors and the camera came on-line. The chamber was empty, but the pressure gauge showed the room to be pressurized at ten atmospheres—just short of becoming water … the yo-yo had brought back air and squeezed it into the small room. In time, the air would leak out with no harm done.

Jerry's left foot hit the ground in front of him … the air seemed to slam in on him from all sides making him stumble slightly. The car horn he'd heard just before his departure was still blaring and he felt the same faint static charge that had made his hair stand out a bit just before he'd tripped into the future.

His composure regained, Jerry smiled and looked at his watch … actually he looked at the watch Moshe had given him … an Elgin auto-winder, one of the mechanical marvels introduced at the 1952 New York Exposition … the time was 8:48 a.m. He'd have to hurry to make the train. He smiled and hot footed it to the station, paid for his ticket, then grabbed his usual seat on the third car of the commuter train. But instead of chatting with the others in the car, Jerry read the notes he'd made and began thinking about what to do now. He was distracted as he made his way to his office on 46th Street, just off Broadway.

Once at his desk, Jerry called a college friend who now worked on Wall Street and made a date for drinks after work. Then he began typing and by lunchtime he had the outline for a radio

play.

“Boss, I have an idea for the show. He’s the script outline. If you like it, I can have a full script in ten days,” Jerry said as he laid the typewritten outline on the desk.

At 5 p.m., just as he was getting ready to leave the boss came out, dropped the outline on Jerry’s desk and said, “Jerry this is too wild, even for our show. I’m sorry, but no one will ever believe that computers can shrink to something so small it will fit in your hand … or robot probes to Mars. And this other stuff about time travel … too strange. But I like your enthusiasm, son, so you give me a play about Venusians and a busty blonde and you can have the credit line.”

Jerry smiled, “Thanks, boss. This was just a wild idea. I’ll get to work on the Venusian story first thing tomorrow.” In a few minutes Jerry left the office and headed toward Branigan’s Bar on 44th Street, where he placed an order for 500 shares each of IBM, Xerox and Sylvania.

Epilogue

With the shot complete and all the data stored, the control room team began leaving the lab. Moshe, as usual, was the last to leave.

The black Lincoln limo pulled up beside the blue Honda Civic parked at the rear of the DARPA Long Island Research Facility parking lot just as Moshe Abazin approached. A man wearing a black chauffeur’s uniform with the letters BSE monogrammed above the left breast pocket stepped from his vehicle and spoke to Moshe.

“Sir, the gentleman in the car would like to speak to you. Please join him in the limo … ”

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Jim Coles, III, a Kansas City, MO, native, is a retired Army Public Affairs Officer who now lives in the woods of South Alabama, after a 35 year career that took him to virtually every corner of the planet. Coles says he writes just for fun, and is always flattered when his stories are read.

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