

Death, Taxes -- and the Past

by
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The computer screen displayed some fireworks and then went blank. Jed Warrell snarled his lips, let out a loud grunt, and executed a swift three-finger salute on his keyboard. This was about the millionth time he had booted his computer today -- at least it seemed so to Jed. *Why am I always the one that gets the tight deadlines around this place?*, thought Jed. *Why won't they give some of this work to somebody else?*

Jed knew the answer before he finished asking. The other two programmers working on this project had both given their resignation notices, effective immediately, early this morning. No explanations were given, and no one knew where they were going. An emergency meeting had been called at 10:00 a.m. to discuss the crisis. Jed was informed that it would take a week or so to find and hire some new programmers. And then there was the training time. Jed's supervisor, Harvey Muddleman, had said what Jed knew he would say. "Jed, we are going to have to ask you to work overtime until the new programmers are in place. You know as well as I that we cannot afford to be late with this project. We lost several large contracts when we were three months late with the Cringle project last year. Stansell Enterprises will not be happy if we're late with their software. They are depending on having this software ready when they open their new warehouse in the fall. Can we count on you?"

Jed had wanted to shove his face under his supervisor's nose and say, "Hell no, you can't count on me! I'm sick and tired of working overtime. Every time I turn around it's more overtime." However, Jed, being the meek mannered and loyal person that he was, simply smiled and said, "Yes, sir!" After all, Jed really did love his work. He had been programming computers since he was a child. But there was more to life than programming. Jed loved to play tennis, read books, watch movies, and especially spend time with his girlfriend.

Jed's thoughts faded as the computer screen came back in focus. The prompt was asking him for the date and time. "Dad blame it!" squawked Jed, "When are they ever going to get me a new battery for the clock in this machine?" Jed looked at the digital clock next to his computer. The green hatches glowed 10:15 p.m. Jed carefully typed in the date and time.

7-23-91 10:15

Just as he struck the ENTER key, a blinding flash of light tore through the darkness outside Jed's third floor office. "What the heck..." gasped Jed as he bolted from his swivel

chair and rushed to the window. As he peered intently out the window, he suddenly realized that it was not a flash of light at all. It was sunlight, bright steady sunlight. IT WAS DAYTIME!! Jed began to sweat profusely, and his body was shaking uncontrollably. Neurons were firing in Jed's brain at an unprecedented rate. Perhaps it was a dream, albeit a very realistic dream. Perhaps his perception of time had been warped by some strange means. Perhaps ...

"What are YOU doing here?" It was a familiar voice.

"Wha..?" gasped Jed as he whirled to view his visitor.

"What are you doing here?" It was Marilyn Rosewell, a good friend who was a secretary with the company. "I thought you were supposed to be in that emergency meeting at 10 o'clock." A strange look contorted her face. "In fact, I saw you heading toward the board room twenty minutes ago."

Jed tried to regain his composure. He walked slowly in the direction of his chair and eased himself into it. He looked directly at Marilyn and calmly said, "Harvey asked me to come back for some files we needed for our discussion."

"Ohhh!" Marilyn's face relaxed. "I thought I was going nuts or something. Here is that report you asked me for. I was going to lay it on your desk." Marilyn put the papers on the corner of Jed's desk and then looked intently at Jed. "Say, the meeting must have started out rough. You're sweating all over."

"Yeah," Jed responded. "Look, I hate to rush you off, but I need to get back to that meeting."

"I understand," Marilyn said sympathetically as she turned to leave. Just as she reached the door, she turned and said, "Jed, I wish you luck. Maybe you can get by with a minimum of overtime."

"Thanks!" Jed replied, still trying to maintain his composure.

Marilyn exited the office, and Jed immediately collapsed in his chair. "What's going on here?" Jed said aloud. "It's as though it is morning again. Am I caught in some kind of Twilight Zone time trap where I'm destined to repeat this day forever and ever?"

Then he remembered. When he had returned from the meeting this morning, Marilyn had made an allusion to a conversation they had had in his office AFTER the meeting started. He had been too busy to question her at the time, but now it made sense. He HAD been in his office this morning AT THE SAME TIME HE WAS IN THE MEETING! *How could this be?* pondered Jed. *Here it is, the 23rd of July at --* Jed looked at

the digital clock -- 10:19 a.m. *Just a few minutes ago it was 10:15 p.m. Wait just a second, that has to be the connection. Same time, wrong part of the day.* Jed glanced at the computer monitor. It struck him like a sledge hammer. He had typed the time in as 10:15 rather than 22:15. He looked again at the digital clock; it read 10:20 a.m. *That's it, Jed thought. I typed the time in wrong. But wait, that still doesn't explain how I was propelled twelve hours into the past.*

It really didn't matter to Jed at this point. He just knew he needed to return to his own time before he met himself. He had seen all the "Back to the Future" movies, and he knew all the dangers involved in that. Jed quickly pecked out a new time of 22:20 on the computer and pressed ENTER. The light of day turned instantly into the black of night.

Jed leaned back in his chair and took in a deep breath. He slowly released it. "What an experience!!" he exclaimed aloud. As he relaxed, the neurons began firing once again. *My computer allows me to travel in time. I can discover the past or the future with the press of a few computer keys.* The possibilities seemed endless. Then it dawned on him. He would not have to spend all that overtime working on his project. He could just travel three months into the future, copy the project disks, and bring them back to the present. "Yes, that's the ticket," muttered Jed just as reality set in. There was a paradox in this entire scenario. If he went into the future and retrieved the completed project disks, then no one would have actually written the software. How could this be? Everyone knows there is no such thing as a free lunch, don't they? But who knows what strange wonders lurk amidst the corridors of time? Perhaps it WAS possible. After all, many science fiction writers had predicted as much.

Jed decided it was worth a try. After all, what's the worse that could happen? Either the project disks will be there or they won't. What was there to lose? Jed decided that the best time to travel to would be early on a Sunday morning. Nobody was ever around the offices at that time. He grabbed a box of blank diskettes and quickly looked at his calendar. He chose October 27. This day was one week past the project deadline. Jed eagerly punched the date and time into his computer.

10-27-91 3:00

Jed pressed the ENTER key. The computer screen went blank. "Oh no!" exclaimed Jed, "Something's gone wrong!"

A booming blast of thunder made Jed jump in his seat. After the fear drained from his muscles, he looked out the window. It was pouring down rain. A sheet of undulating water was running down the outside of the glass causing the street lights below to go in and out of focus. This was obviously not July 23. The night of July 23 had

been a cloudless night with stars shining brightly. He must have made the time jump. Panic overtook Jed. The computer was not working. How would he get back? Jed glanced at the power strip on the floor. The switch light was not on. "Yes!" cried Jed joyously. "I am not stranded after all. Somehow the power strip was switched off during the jump. May have been the storm." He lurched to the floor and flipped the switch back to the on position. He heard the reassuring whine of the hard disk as it began to spin. The monitor began to glow. The boot sequence completed without the need to enter the date and time. Jed said sternly, "It's about time they got my clock battery replaced!"

There was no time to waste. The storm could shut the power down at any time. Jed's hands darted for his diskette case only to discover that there was no diskette case. There was no digital clock either. Jed turned the desk light on and looked around the room. A couple of filing cabinets and a bookcase were missing. Something was greatly amiss. There was no time to waste. *Perhaps the files are on the hard disk*, thought Jed. He loaded up a file manager and searched the hard disk partition on which he always stored his project files. There they were. But wait. The files were all old. The newest file on the disk was dated July 23, the day from which he had just come. "What does this mean?" stuttered Jed nervously. "Will something happen to me so that I cannot return?" He mulled the situation over in his mind. Should he just return to his own time or try to find some answers? His curiosity won out. "Perhaps I can find some answers in Harvey's office."

Jed jumped to his feet and ran out of the office. At the end of the hall, he skidded to a stop and stepped through the door of Harvey Muddleman's office. Jed turned on the ceiling light and quickly opened the drawer labeled "Stansell Enterprises" in one of Harvey's filing cabinets. He lifted out a hefty file folder and laid it on the desk. Upon opening the folder, Jed's blood temperature dropped five degrees. There was a memo from the president of the company with a large red stamp that said "PROJECT CANCELLED." The memo was dated July 24. "How could this be?" Jed wondered aloud, "The project was such a high priority on July 23." All of a sudden, things began to fall into place. The project was cancelled on the 24th. That explained why there were no project files on his computer past the 23rd. "But if the project was cancelled, where did that leave me? Was I laid off? Did they put me on a new project?"

Jed started riffling through the papers in the file and then through other papers on Harvey's desk trying to find additional answers. He could find nothing about what his fate was to be. Then he looked at the corkboard. There was an answer. Not about HIS fate, but rather about the COMPANY's fate. It was a memo to all managers from the board of directors. It was dated July 25. The memo basically said that the company had over-extended itself. Due to the loss of several contracts over the previous year and the large debt they had incurred with the new office building, they could no longer stay in

operation. They were asking several managers to stay on board to help wrap up some odds and ends while an attempt was made to sell the company.

Jed understood. The company started constructing the new office building about one and a half years ago when the company's business was booming and expansion was desperately needed. However, when they were late with the Cringle project, probably their largest contract ever, the word got around that the company was faltering. Several other major clients had cancelled their contracts over the following year. The company had tried desperately to assure their clients that all was well and that they were expanding in order to meet their needs. Some clients had stuck with them, but many left. The new building was completed six months ago, but apparently the damage had been done.

A sense of determination swept across Jed. He knew what he must do. He would have to change the past. He knew the consequences of doing so could be severe, but he also knew that the consequences of not doing so were definitely severe. Jed rushed out of Harvey's office and back down the hall.

Jed had been oblivious to the increasing intensity of the storm. As he entered his office, the desk light dimmed and then brightened. The computer screen did the same. Time was of the essence. He had to travel over one year into the past and inform his younger self that the Cringle project **MUST** be completed on time. Jed sat down in his chair and reached for the keyboard. A blinding flash of lightning lit his office. Thunder roared. The power dropped once again. The computer was still functioning. Jed quickly typed in a date and time.

4-17-90 9:00

Just as Jed pressed the ENTER key, he saw another intense flash outside and observed the desk light flicker out. "NOOOO!" he screamed...

A fresh morning breeze blew across the sweat-soaked body of Jed Warrell. It was a beautiful April morning with a bright sun glaring in the eastern sky. In the space of a fraction of a second Jed realized he was outside. There was no wall in front of him. No computer desk. No computer. No CHAIR under him. But worst of all, NO FLOOR under him. He was on the third floor of an uncompleted building with nothing but a steel frame surrounding him. *How stupid can I be?*, thought Jed. Dread filled every fiber of his being as he felt the weight of his own body pulling him downward, downward, downward...

The impact as he hit the ground below was extremely painful, but Jed was still conscious. He laughed through his pain as he thought about a joke he had heard years

ago that said, "Falling has never bothered me. It's that sudden stop that I don't like." Jed heard some unintelligible murmuring nearby. He slowly opened his eyes. Several construction workers had gathered around. Finally he understood what they were saying. "Are you okay? Can you get up? Can you walk?" Jed cracked a smile and strained a few words, "Don't you just hate it when you travel back in time and find there is no floor to support you?" Someone yelled, "This man's hysterical; call 911!" Jed fainted.

When Jed regained consciousness, he was on a stretcher, being carried to an ambulance. It was at that instant that the synapses in a remote part of his brain released a memory. It had been on an April morning in 1990 that he had heard about an accident at the construction site of the new office building. Harvey, who had been there observing, had sworn up and down that the injured man looked just like Jed. No one knew who he was or how he had gotten up on the steel frame of the building. Also, Jed never found out what happened to the unfortunate accident victim. One thing was for sure, he had never come to see Jed.

THE END