



RIME TRAVEL

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TALES OF MYSTERY AND TIME TRAVEL

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Introduction by Donna Andrews

CRIME TRAVEL

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HARD RETURN

Art Taylor

The man and the woman had reached that stage where the relationship would either turn more serious or slowly begin to dissolve. The seriousness wasn't about sex, a threshold they'd already crossed, but a step into some deeper, more emotional intimacy.

It was the woman who made the first move, but it was one the man had been asking for, hoping for, nudging toward.

Tell me something about yourself, he'd said, more than once. *Something special, something not many people know.*

Shared experiences brought people together. He believed this. Sharing them in the moment or a shared story, either one.

They'd been out to a nice dinner, had come back to her place. She kicked off her heels, lit a couple of candles, turned down the lights. They settled down in the living room—her plush couch, two glasses of red wine on a mahogany coffee table, the rim of hers already smudged with lipstick. A photograph on the end table caught a glint from the candle's flicker, caught his eye at the same time. A photo he'd been drawn toward before—her when she was younger, laughing, her head thrown back, her long blond hair falling.

A side of her he hadn't seen. With him, she'd always been more measured, more serious, melancholy even. Her hair was cropped close now.

"I had a boyfriend who...hurt me," she said.

"Broken hearts." The man made a motion with his hand, a throwaway kind of gesture. *Been there, done that.* A little laugh with it.

"Broken something else," she said. "Several things." She touched her arm in two places, touched her cheek, returned her hand to her chest—like she was trying to catch her breath, except she hadn't lost it right then. She wore a necklace, and she touched that instead, like an afterthought.

She began to tell him more about this ex: the bickering between them, the accusations and arguments, endless arguments after a while, the first time he knocked her around, the many times after.

"Then this one evening, the evening that *it* happened"—despite his curiosity, he felt a pang of distress, the way she inflected the *it*—"we were al-

ready broken up by then. Or I'd tried to break up with him at least. Actually, I had another guy at my place that night—nothing serious yet, but wondering where things might go, you know?"

"Like us," the man said.

The woman twirled a pendant at the end of her necklace, a small prism—catching the light from the candles as well.

"I was young and dumb," she said. "Living in a cheap rental house, not hardly the best part of town. Cheap furniture I'd picked up from Goodwill back in college, dragged along with me. Concrete steps on the front had a crack running down the center of them. Sometimes my life felt just as cracked."

"My grandparents had cinder block steps," the man said. "A stack of them piled up, not even connected together." But the woman didn't seem to hear him.

"So that's where I was, this house I'd rented, sitting here with the new guy I was beginning to see, trying not to think about the ex that everything had gone wrong with. Then he called. You can't put some things behind you."

"Nothing's easy. So you screened him out? Ignored the call?"

"It was a house phone, this was back in the nineties, before everyone had a phone in their pocket, before everyone had caller ID. I didn't know who was calling until I answered, and then he was...yelling at me, calling me names, ugly names. I know the new guy could hear. I should've just hung up. But I was trying to emphasize that it was over, trying to tell him not to call anymore—trying to reason with him, to be reasonable with someone who...wasn't." She took a deep breath. "And then he said something about how not only was he going to keep calling, and not only was I going to keep talking to him, but if I hung up, then he was going to come over there in person, and then..."

The man looked at the photo of her. She'd been happier once, and then this *it* had happened. It was coming together now—and who knew? Maybe talking with him about it would be a step toward healing.

"And then?" he said softly, urging without rushing.

She only shook her head.

"Did you hang up?"

"I did. And I regretted it almost instantly. I could feel it, in my bones suddenly, how it had been the wrong thing to do, how it was probably going to cost me. And cost the new boyfriend too, him thinking he was in for just a fun night. Don't they all?" She toyed with the necklace again, insistently now—*compulsively*, he thought. "But even if I hadn't hung up, would that have changed anything? In the long run, I mean? At the time, I felt like if I was clear with my ex, if I stayed firm, if I just made the right decisions..."

But looking back... Some things maybe you can't avoid. That's what I've learned."

The candles flickered as she said it—startling him. Was there a window open somewhere? It couldn't have been her talking that had done it, her breath or his either. The candles were on the coffee table, too far away.

"So I guess this ex, he came over anyway?" The man shifted on the couch, turned more fully toward her. Attentive. Concerned. "The way he'd threatened?"

She nodded slowly, then shook her head. "We should've called the police," she said. "I see that now, saw that too late, or maybe that wouldn't have made a difference either. But instead we left. The guy I was with, I told him, let's just get out, go somewhere. So we left. Locked up the house, even though my ex, he may have made a key. I knew that. We went down the steps and started walking up the street. No hurry, it was a nice night, cool air, crisp, so we were...strolling—until I turned and saw my ex about a block behind us, coming around the corner of my house.

"Had he been watching us, me and this new guy? Had he been right there the whole time? Calling from the pay phone on the corner? But he would've seen us leave, I remember thinking that, because he was walking up the steps, he was banging on the door, and then—suddenly—he turned. Like he sensed me. Like he was an animal or something, smelling his prey, even that far away. I saw him see me.

"It was a cool night, like I said—cold really. I'd felt chilly stepping out. But suddenly I was raging hot. Anger and frustration and...fear most of all, no other way to say it. The way he looked at me, that hatred, something deep and dark and...*lunging* about his expression. And everything else on the street, it was like it began to go out of focus, to spin and swirl, like the ground underneath me was shifting somehow.

"I don't know if I said it or not. *Go. Let's go. Now!* But saying it, thinking it, I *went*. Up the street. Fast, but not running—no. I remember what I'd been told about hiking. If you see a bear or a wolf or...don't run, because if you run, they'll *know* you're prey. But going, *going* was necessary, getting away, getting anywhere but there..."

Listening to her, the man knew that this was the moment he should reach out his hand, should take her hand in his, say something like *I know what you mean* or *I feel like I'm there with you* or *I'm here with you now, you're safe now*. Relatability builds connection, he believed that. Shared experiences. Talking. Listening.

But when he did reach out, did take her hand...

The flickering candles, the glint of light off the picture and the prism, the sound of her voice too, hypnotic in its flatness, and the story itself—as he took her hand, so very cold it seemed, stunningly cold, everything

changed.

He was there.

Not only *felt* like he was there—her storytelling drawing him in—but actually there. Some physical step back in time, into her time—seeing her there running up the street ahead of him, seeing it as if through the eyes of that new man she'd been telling him about, feeling the crisp night air she'd described, and feeling too the *smack smack smack* of his feet against the sidewalk, his own feet rushing after her. Away from the house she'd described? Away from that ex?

“Wait,” he called out. “Wait, stop.”

She slowed, turned—surprised. “We can't stop. He'll get us sooner.” Her face was the same, he recognized, but not the same—younger than herself but the same woman still, and the same solemnity about her. She wore low-slung pants, a top too thin for the weather, black with a silver sundial, a pair of Skechers. “We need to *go*.” She started ahead again.

Could this be the same woman whose hand he'd taken on the couch? The same but transformed? Had he somehow traveled here with her? Or had he been transported here alone, to step into that other man's experience, to see firsthand this younger version of her? Someone who had no memory of—

Of what? Past? Future? Present? Where were they?

The street was two-lane, a small neighborhood—low-rent like she'd described it. Squat houses, small porches out front, folding chairs, clunky swing sets, some lawns tended, others overgrown. It was well past dusk, streetlights on overhead, TV screens shining from living room windows, the glow from each giving all of it the feel of a dreamscape.

Keeping up with her brisk walk, he touched his chest, his face. He was real.

A police car came barreling down the street, siren wailing. The man had the feeling the police might be coming because of them. But the car kept going—emergencies elsewhere, no knowledge of what the woman with him was facing, and him too.

“They didn't stop,” he called out.

“They won't,” she said. Her certainty confirmed it: she was a younger version on the outside, but haunted like the older one, the future one.

“You know what's ahead.”

She nodded grimly.

He heard another siren, spotted more lights coming toward them. “But it could be different this time. We're here—*I'm* here.”

He glanced at her. Her expression held something pitying in it, the way her lips turned down, that crinkling at the corner of her eyes, the sense of collapsing—that was the only way to describe it—inside the eyes them-

selves. “I don’t think there’s any way to avoid *it*,” she said—that same emphasis again on the *it*.

But he felt sure that things could change, felt determined to prove it. The police car sped toward them. He stepped into the street, waved his hands wildly. The officer veered to avoid him, pulled to a stop.

“See. Have a little faith.” But again her look, again that shaking of her head.

The officer got out, started toward them. But at that moment a door burst open at one of the houses on the street, two men spilled out onto the sidewalk between them. One of them had a knife.

The cop rushed toward the men, dancing around one another, the knife swinging. “Hey, hey, hey!” He pulled out his gun, pointed it at them.

“He thinks you signaled him to stop because of the fight.” She pointed to the men, the knife making contact, the policeman leaping forward. “The cut isn’t bad. You’ll be a hero for saving his life.”

Beyond the policeman and the fight, the man caught sight of the ex, walking at his same steady pace, coming at them relentlessly.

Like the Terminator, the man thought. Like Yul Brynner in *Westworld*—two of his favorite movies. He was surprised by the solace he felt thinking that—that whatever was happening here, he was still who he was in the middle of it. His favorites, his memories.

“Let’s go,” the woman said, tugging at his arm.

She quickened her pace. He struggled to match it—to keep up but not run ahead. To nudge her forward. To not look back.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“There,” she said—a corner convenience store, perched at the intersection of three roads, a corner slimmed to a point. Neon beer signs shone along a row of windows. Cigarette ads covered the door they pushed to get in. A peeling sticker carried the picture of a camera, announcing that the premises were under surveillance. The man took small comfort from it.

“Are we safe here?” he asked as the bell chimed over the door. The inside was only a few short aisles, with refrigerated cases lining the back wall of the store. A magazine rack equal parts comic books and pornography. A row of chips and candy. Stacks of canned vegetables and tinned meat. Were they going to hide behind the Spam? He looked for a restroom sign, some back room, someplace to hide.

“He’s come back,” the woman said—talking not to him but to the clerk behind the counter, the bulk of a wrestler, a thick beard on him. “Can you stall him a little?”

The clerk seemed to know her, knew the story, gave a firm nod—“I’ll do what I can”—before he reached under the counter.

“This way,” the woman said before the man could see what the clerk

was after. Another entrance on the far side of the store, and another bell tinkling as they pushed through it. And was it an echo of that same sound from the first doors as theirs closed behind them? How far behind was that ex? How long could he be stalled?

“Now we run,” the woman said. She took off ahead of him, sprinting along the new street back in the direction they’d come from. He hustled to keep up.

“Where are we going now?”

“Back to the house.”

“To your house? Where you just left?” It had the logic—the *il*logic—of a dream, of a nightmare. No sense to it at all. What was her strategy? Was there a plan at all? “Why didn’t you just stay there?” Frustration in his voice, disbelief—he heard it himself, couldn’t keep it out.

“Because that wasn’t what I did,” she said.

“Whoa whoa whoa.” He reached forward, grabbed her arm, pulled her to a stop. “You’re just repeating the same thing that happened that night? What good is that going to do?”

She tugged her arm from his hand.

“What good is anything else?” She threw up her arms, dropped them to her side. “You saw what happened when you stopped the police car.”

“Did that happen the first time too?”

She shrugged. “Nothing changes.”

“And the clerk at the store back there,” he said. “Look at me. The clerk—how long does he stall your ex?”

She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“He’s not that lucky,” she said. “Every time, he—” She cut herself off, defeated, ashamed. “I’m telling you. We need to run. Now.”

From back at the convenience store, a gunshot.

The man’s head flicked toward it. When he turned back, she was running again. He took off after her.

Another two-lane street, parallel to the first, an echo of it. More houses, more porches, a deeper darkness now, one of the streetlights struggled to cut through.

She turned abruptly down a small alleyway, then angled through a yard. Soon they were back at her house—the aluminum siding she’d described, the crack in the concrete steps, up to the front door. She didn’t seem to fumble with her key but dropped it anyway—in her hand one second, then on the ground. “Every time,” she said, half under her breath.

The living room was just as she’d described it too—cheap furniture, threadbare, dorm castoffs, and a smell like a dorm too, thick with memories of late nights drinking and smoking. A stack of paperback books beside a worn leather chair, a crocheted blanket draped across it. A fireplace with a

pile of ashes, and above it a mantle lined with photos—groups of college students, the woman in a glamour shot wearing a seductive smile, an older couple who might have been her parents. Among them stood the same photo of her from back in the present, loose and laughing, that long blond hair, but in a different frame now, the edges dinged, the glass on this one cracked.

He heard the deadbolt click on the door, turned to see her hand raising to link a chain lock as well.

“He’s coming this way,” she said. “He knows we’re here.”

“We need to do something,” he said. “Do you have a gun? Or a bat or—?” She was shaking her head, slowly. “The phone,” he said. “The phone that he called you on. Where—?” He caught sight of it as he was asking—on the wall just inside a small kitchen. “We’ll call the police. We’ll—”

Still she shook her head.

“He cut the lines,” she said—not with suspicion but certainty, even before he got the receiver to his ear, before he heard the emptiness there. She’d known. “The guy at the convenience store, he called the police already. They’ll get here, but it’ll be too late.”

She was closing the blinds now, uneven venetians, a couple of slats broken, but she didn’t hurry about it, easing them down slowly, swiveling them shut. *Going through the motions*, he thought. She began to push an end table in front of the door but without energy or urgency.

“You don’t seem very distressed about all this,” he said, and that did stop her short. She stood up from the table, still sitting short of the door. She seemed to puzzle over his comment.

“You can’t change what’s already happened,” she said finally. “Happened over and over.” She reached toward her neck, her fingers playing at nothing. He thought of the prism that had been hanging there—back in the present. “I feel like I’m reliving *it* constantly”—her same emphasis on the word *it*, rousing that same tremble of fear inside him. “Eventually you get numb.”

He didn’t feel numb. He felt everything—sharply. His body tensing for fight. The thrum of his blood. Pulses of adrenaline.

He watched her hands, the absence of that prism, the image of a sundial on her shirt. What was the switch to get them out of this? Take them back? Away from the broken blinds and the glaring streetlight and back to those warm candles she’d lit. Away from the worn sofa and back to that plush couch where they’d been having wine. Out of the past and into some future.

“Your hand,” he said. “Give me your hand.” Another puzzled look, but she stepped toward him, reached out, palm up. He took her hand in his, felt the warmth where there had been coldness before. He waited...but nothing happened.

He sighed, dropped her hand. As he leaned against the kitchen counter, he saw a knife block against the wall. He pulled out the biggest of the

blades. Whatever was ahead, he needed to be ready.

“The guy,” he said, remembering suddenly. “You told me there was a guy with you, a new guy you were seeing. What happened to him?”

She wouldn’t meet his eyes at first—same as when he’d asked about the clerk. In her silence, he heard some dim echo of the gunshot from the convenience store.

Then another sound outside—a real one, something scraping the edge of the house. Feet on the steps and a pounding on the front door, pulsing with each blow.

The deadbolt struggled. The chain on the door swung and jangled. The ex’s voice seethed and bellowed. “You let me in— You don’t know what— You’ll pay, you’ll pay, both of you—”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said finally, but the man could barely hear her over the raging outside. She turned toward him—the wilt of her lips, the vacancy in her eyes.

He thought about the night air, the way it whipped at him as he ran, the feel of his feet slapping against the pavement. *His* feet. He touched the frame of the doorway where he stood—solid, firm. The photo on the mantle—he could run his fingers across that too, he knew, feel the spiderweb of the cracked glass.

The pounding at the door grew louder. The Terminator, come back with a vengeance.

His favorites, his memories. All of him here.

The man lifted the knife in his hand, tested its heft, the actuality of it.

Without thinking, he ran his thumb down the edge of the blade.

He felt the sting, saw the blood begin to flow, brought his thumb to his lips—reflex.

He had just tasted it—that metallic tang—when the hinges gave and the front door burst inward.

* * * *

“I’m so, so sorry,” she said. “But you...you wanted to know.”

Art Taylor has won the Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, and Derringer awards for his short fiction, and his work has appeared in the *Best American Mystery Stories*. He’s also the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. He edited *Murder Under the Oaks: Bouchercon Anthology 2015*, winner of the Anthony Award for Best Anthology or Collection. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University. Find out more about his work at www.arttaylorwriter.com.