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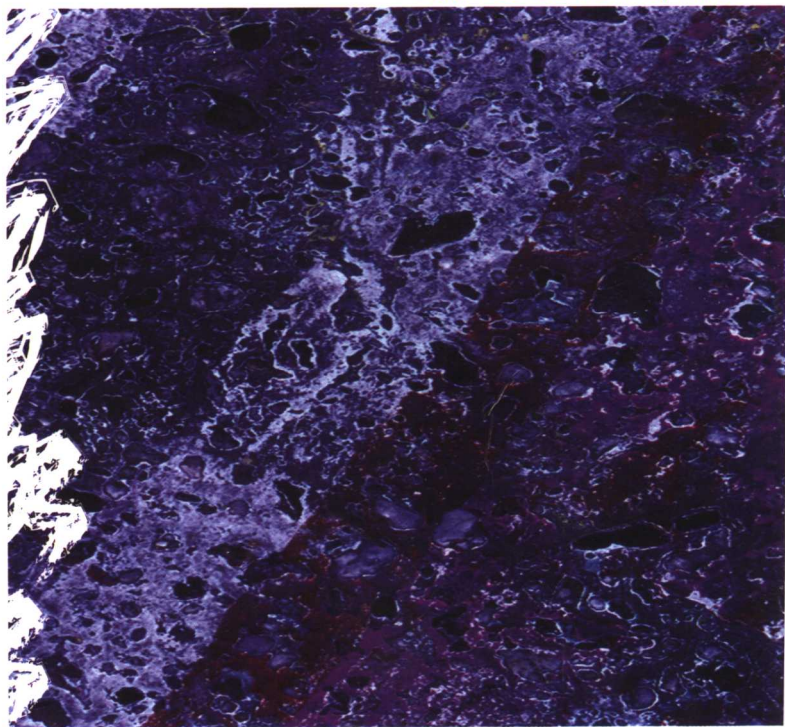
SAILING THE SEAS OF CHRONOS

— STORIES OF TIME TRAVEL

畅游时间的海洋

时间旅行故事集

Oscar De Los Santos, Ph.D.



上海外语教育出版社

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总 序

继《漫游科学天地,解读生命奥秘》(*Questions of Science, Answers to Life*,上海外语教育出版社,2004年)之后,美国科普作家 Oscar De Los Santos 又向中国读者隆重推出《浩然奇境》科幻小说系列。

在这套系列里,作者以其厚实的功底,独特的视角,丰富的想象,潇洒生动的笔触,引导读者在无尽的时间、空间里漫游,展示宇宙和生命的浩繁、绮丽和奥秘,融知识、娱乐、启迪于每一篇故事中。系列中的每一部作品既有自己独立的主题,又相互关联,组成一个个连绵不断、意趣无穷的浩然奇境。

作者在书末对时间、时间旅行等有关问题做了进一步论述,并附上详细的文献单,为对科幻小说研究感兴趣的读者提供难得的参考资料。书中大量的语言现象脚注为读者提供了方便。

腾飞的中国需要数以千万计的具有现代意识的高精尖人才。这类新型人才不仅专业知识要扎实深厚,而且要富有想像力,能以极大的热忱和敏锐的眼光关注有关人类世界及天地间所有根本性的问题,而这种对于整个宏观世界的关注和感悟,必将为其专业的发展提供无限的灵感和动力。这套科幻小说系列将帮助和激发读者去思考、关注和感悟那些有关人类自身和生存环境的根本性的问题,从中得到无限的启迪和乐趣,并汲取鲜活的当代美国英语的养分。

愿你早日捧上这本难得的好书,在科幻小说提供的浩然无尽、绮丽奥秘的宇宙里尽兴地神游。

Bon Voyage!

祁寿华

2004年秋于美国康州

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I would like to thank my colleague and friend, Professor Shou-hua Qi, and Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, for the wonderful opportunity to publish these stories. My heartfelt appreciation also goes out to the Writing Wackos Group. Finally, I extend love and gratitude to my soulmate, Kelly.

This book is dedicated to

Sam Salas

with affection and thanks for a lifetime of friendship!

CONTENTS

The Destiny Paradox	1
Windsurfer	12
Presence	24
Hall of Mirrors	41
When the Autumn Moon Is Bright	53
Tomorrowland	69
Afterword	86
Appendix	92
About the Author	96

THE DESTINY PARADOX

Dr. Joseph Markham's hover-car⁽¹⁾ cut through the thin night breeze. The sky was clear and the moonlit bay calm as his hover-car cruised a few feet above the waters of Long Island Sound.⁽²⁾ Markham was en route to Time Corp, on the eastern tip of the island. The physicist watched moonlight brighten tiny white caps heading toward shore. He wished he were as calm as the night. But how could he be? As far as he was concerned, his mission to the lab was a matter of life and death.

Markham passed Greenport⁽³⁾ on his right and glanced to his left. Old Saybrook,⁽⁴⁾ Connecticut's lights twinkled in the distance. Two minutes later and another shift in course toward the south took him around Plum Island and Gardiner's Island.⁽⁵⁾ Then he spotted the distant lights of the Time Corp complex straight

(1) hover-car: a flying automobile.

(2) Long Island Sound: Here, the body of water between Long Island and Connecticut.

(3) Greenport: a city on Long Island.

(4) Old Saybrook: a city in the state of Connecticut.

(5) Gardiner's Island: a small island near Long Island.

ahead.

Over the years, Time Corp had been home to a number of secret government funded projects. Conspiracy buffs^[1] had, from time to time, unearthed strange rumors of bizarre experiments taking place inside the vast complex. Stories of particle accelerator experiments and attempts to conquer the laws of time and space had long circulated around late night conversations, television talk shows, Internet sites, books and magazines. Eventually, the activity within the Time Corp buildings became as suspect as the alleged UFO studies taking place in the Nevada desert around the place more commonly known as "Area 51." Only a privileged few knew just how accurate such speculations truly were, and Dr. Joseph Markham was among that select group.

The physicist maneuvered the hover-car over the site's security parameter and prepared himself for a final I. D. check.

"Vocal identification required," said a pleasant female voice from the car's speakers.

"Markham, Joseph Edward."

The computer paused for a half second, then spoke: "Clear. Welcome, Dr. Markham. There is an overabundance of parking space at this hour. Feel free to land on any of the empty car pads near your building."

"Thank you, Melanie," Markham replied. He still felt self-conscious being so polite to the computer. Try as he might, he wasn't like so many of his friends who considered the electronic entities every bit as "alive" as human beings. Indeed, one of his acquaintances — a professor at Harvard — was lobbying to marry a

[1] conspiracy buffs: people who study strange unsolved mysteries or mysterious events. They frequently find bizarre and convoluted plots to further complicate the mystery. Sometimes they uncover what they claim to be a massive cover-up behind an event — an assassination, for example — that seems easily solved. Whether they are right in their claims or simply paranoid about the world and its systems of organization is often debated.

computer housed in an artificial human body.

"You're welcome," Melanie replied.

Markham grinned. The mainframe's designers had even given the computer a human name and a female voice to blur the boundaries between human and machine. Well, let Roger at Harvard marry his own creation. Markham knew that only flesh and blood would suit his own tastes. No computer could ever replace his beloved Rachel, the very reason for this wee hours sojourn to the lab tonight.

Four minutes and four more security checkpoints later found Markham sitting comfortably in his laboratory deep within the recesses of Time Corp. He stared at an electronic clipboard and made a few notes with a digital pencil. Then he fired up the vast machines surrounding his workstation. In front of his streamlined desk and computer console, a flat letterboxed viewing screen lit up with a soft purple glow.

The time porthole was ready.

So was he.

Now he would know the truth about Rachel.

Markham suspected that he was being absolutely ridiculous in making this night trip to his office. He was not a superstitious man, yet he had been unable to shake the terrible feelings of concern over Rachel's health and safety that descended upon him hours ago. Even after Tom and Martha Walker left the Markham house after a pleasant evening, the physicist's mind couldn't stop wrestling with his fears concerning Rachel. He tossed and turned for three hours before giving up on sleep. Finally, he got up, dressed hurriedly and headed to Time Corp.

Was it Martha Walker who brought up drowning sometime after dinner? No, it was Rachel, Markham recalled. She read about a young girl's recent drowning in a cove in Amityville^[1] and couldn't stop thinking about the incident.

[1] Amityville: a city on Long Island.

"I've always had a fear of drowning," Rachel finished her story.

"I know," said Martha Walker. "And I've always been puzzled by your fear."

"Same here," Tom Walker added. Joseph's African friend had a booming voice and all eyes turned to him immediately. "It's your own particular irrational fear," he continued. "Most people have at least one or two."

"What bugs me about yours, Rachel," continued Martha, "is where you live. You and Joseph own a beach house, for goodness' sake."

"Well," said Rachel, "a part of me loves the water. But another part of me is completely petrified of it. That's why I only go in and wade along the shore and let the waves lap up around my ankles."

"Sometimes, when she's really feeling brave," Joseph Markham added, "my wife will let the sea kiss all the way up to her knees."

They laughed and the talk shifted back to other perplexing fears. Martha Walker confessed to a flying phobia. "As safe as it's gotten, I can hardly stand to take a ride in a jet bus or intercontinental commute."

"Now you know why we don't take long vacations abroad," said Tom Walker, stroking his wife's arm affectionately. "And to think that we could be in Paris in about a half hour these days. But Martha won't hear of it."

"It's true," said Martha. "I can't even stand using the hover-car to make a quick run to the market. I'd rather take the old clunker."

"Surely you don't mean —"

Martha's nod silenced Joseph. "Yes, the Ford, the old ground-car, four inflated wheels and all."

"But the roads have gotten positively atrocious," said Tom. "When the Ford finally dies, we're dumping it and sticking to our Hover Accord."

More laughter, then Tom mentioned that his college roommate

was terrified of spiders. "Some of us played a nasty trick on him. I won't go into it, but he never quite forgave us."

"Then there's snakes," Joseph Markham said. "I know many people who can't stand them."

"What about the fear of tight and cramped spaces?" said Martha. "I've heard of such problems in many."

"And the opposite, too," Rachel added. "Fear of wide open spaces."

"What about the two of you?" Rachel Markham turned to her husband and Tom Walker. "Martha and I confessed. What scares you two?"

Joseph Markham watched Rachel's emerald eyes and long blond hair glinting in the candlelight. He turned and admired Martha Walker's coffee-colored skin and high cheekbones framed by ebony hair.

"Well, guys?" Martha asked.

"I'm fearless," Tom said, springing up from his chair and heading for the bar.

"Sure you are," Martha teased. "That story he just told about spiders? It was about himself. He can't stand them."

Tom filled his glass and nodded. "Okay, I'll admit it, but it stays in this room, understood? Now you, Joseph. What really scares you?"

"Well," Markham laughed self-consciously. "Only one thing. Losing Rachel."

"Hear, hear," Tom said, raising his glass and everyone drank before he continued. "You know, I've read certain theories about irrational fears. Some people believe such phobias are grounded in our past, in something tragic that happened to us in a previous life."

"Please, Tom," Joseph chided. "You're a scientist, my friend and work partner for a decade and a half. I've never known you to be religious or to spout off tired mumbo-jumbo."

"Well," said Tom, "I'll admit that I wonder about these things every now and then. What if we're afraid of spiders because one bit us in the past and killed us? What if a person fears tight enclosed

spaces because he was crushed to death in a small elevator that crashed to the ground floor? What if —”

Rachel was about to reply but Joseph stood, yawned and mumbled something about the long week. Tom nodded and said that he was glad it was Friday so that he could sleep late tomorrow morning. The Walkers were soon out the door and Joseph and Rachel Markham quickly stacked dishes in the kitchen washer. By the time they had done so, the auto-clean 'bots had vacuumed the dining room rug and kitchen floor and misted the counter with cleanser, leaving the instant dryers to do their work. As they walked upstairs to their bedroom, Markham felt a mounting concern for Rachel's safety. Why? It must have been the conversation, nothing more, he told himself. Several hours later, he decided to find out for sure.

Now, sitting before his workstation in Time Corp, Markham was a few keyboard strokes from the truth. Suddenly, he felt a stab of guilt. Tom Walker should have been by his side at this moment. *But why jeopardize my friend's career along with my own? No. Better to leave Tom out of this for now.*

Markham held little back from his best friend and longtime colleague. He often joked that he found not one but two life partners the year he met Rachel and Tom. Years later, the team of Markham and Walker was well known for its contributions to wormhole technology and the Windows to the Past project at Time Corp. It was Markham and Walker's tireless brainstorming that led to Operation Dilate and Observe several years ago.

Albert Einstein, Nathan Rosen, Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking^[1]

[1] Albert Einstein, Nathan Rosen, Carl Sagan, and Stephen Hawking: Physicists Einstein (1879 - 1955), Rosen (1909 - 1995) and Hawking (1942 -) contributed ideas toward advancing the theories of time travel. Sagan (1934 - 1996) was a physicist who popularized many scientific concepts in the last half of the twentieth century. He was a great explicator whose books, lectures and United States Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television series (*Cosmos*) made difficult scientific concepts more readily accessible to the layman.

and other great scientists had posited that time travel was indeed a reality, at least on paper. Time bridge speculations, quantum physics and string theory all emphasized that there were countless channels interconnecting places in space and time in a way that defied conventional laws of physics. Years of work paid off when the first channels — or wormholes — were identified and made concrete in humanity's dimension. Yet there was no manner of knowing exactly where these wormholes led, no way to control their destination into the past and future, no way to make them useful.

So the situation remained until Joseph Markham and Tom Walker introduced Operation Dilate and Observe. Through the team's innovations, wormholes were dilated long enough to send stabilizers through them. These machines enlarged and prolonged the openings. In time, stabilizing units allowed engineers to further dilate the wormholes and send increasingly larger equipment into the channels. Further, the flexible framework of the wormhole stabilizers made it possible to alter the trajectory of the wormhole. The original destination of the wormhole no longer mattered. Time Corp could determine, to a substantial degree, *the where and when* of the wormhole's route and destination.

Of course there were limitations. A wormhole could not be stretched infinitely and it usually collapsed in a few hours. Still, there were countless other such portholes existing right next to each other, and it was getting easier to identify them. One day, Markham was certain, they would find a way to stabilize the openings for days and weeks at a time, instead of merely hours. Then they would be able to send humans through these wondrous tunnels. For now, however, cameras and listening devices would have to suffice.

Project Dilate and Observe was humanity's auditory and visual gateway to days gone by. A few years after introducing the project, Markham and Walker drafted a blueprint for targeting wormholes that would allow glimpses into the future. It was not well received.

Within days of submitting their proposal to Time Lab's nebulous upper echelons, the team received a strict order: "Concentrate on the past and leave the future alone for now. No exceptions." Apparently, the ethics committee wanted to concentrate on one major problem at a time.

Regulations be damned, Markham thought. *I can't leave the future alone tonight. I must know what happens to Rachel.*

He could do it too, thanks to his secret experiment: Project Final Outcome.

How curious that Tom Walker should bring up that nonsense about people's fears and past lives tonight. In fact, Markham suspected the exact opposite to be true: the foundation for such fears lay not in the past but in the future.

Markham's personal secretary didn't know it, but she was largely responsible for his clandestine project. One day, she sheepishly asked Markham to stand on a short stepstool and pull down a large box from a high shelf. Janice confessed to a terrible fear of heights. "I'm always wondering if I'm going to get killed by taking a nasty fall. I mean, why else should I fear heights? Is death by falling destined to be my final outcome?"

Shortly after that incident, Markham drafted Project Final Outcome. He took out the same classified ad in a number of electronic newspapers throughout the world:

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PROJECT.
ANSWER ONE SIMPLE QUESTION: DO
YOU HAVE AN UNREASONABLE FEAR
OR PHOBIA? IF SO, DESCRIBE IT. ALL
REPLIES KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

Markham received thousands of responses and read through each one carefully before settling on fifty volunteers. In the following weeks, he conducted short interviews with each of the fifty. Among them, Judy K. from Columbus, Ohio was terribly frightened of driving over bridges. Shen Chung of Shanghai told

Joseph of his morbid fear of lizards. Magda V. was obsessed with stockpiling water canisters throughout her cramped efficiency apartment in Mexico City. Mortimer C. of Montreal shared Edgar Allen Poe's^[1] great fear of being buried alive.

And of course, his dear Rachel feared the ocean with as much intensity as she loved it.

Why?

Joseph intended to find out.

Tonight.

The portal dilator was ready. Markham could find out if Judy K. from Columbus died in a bridge accident, if Shen Chung died in a forest, consumed by lizards, if Magda V. died of thirst in a desert, if Mortimer C. was buried alive, if Esme L. of Paris, who was petrified of old gangster films, was shot to death, and if his own Rachel drowned in the bay.

Markham's hands moved over the keyboard. One last key to punch and he would have his answers.

Should he do it? Should he allow himself to glimpse the future? Could he do something about those final outcomes? No. Not really. It would still be years before the machine was perfected enough to send a human being back or forward in time. What then, did he hope to accomplish by discovering whether Rachel drowned or didn't drown? Could he safeguard her completely? Could he literally pinpoint the day and time of her death? And then another thought struck him: what if in the process of digging for Rachel's ultimate fate he unearthed his own? Did he want to know how and where he died?

He thought about it a while longer, then shut down the computer. He had violated enough laws for one night. Markham was astonished to find himself in complete agreement with the Time

[1] Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849): A great 19th century American writer who contributed significantly to the invention of the modern day short story and mystery story.

Corp ethics division. The future should remain a mystery for now, in every way.

It was dawn when he arrived back at the cottage in Oyster Bay.^[1] His two-story beachfront property looked like a child's playhouse from above. That changed rapidly as the hover-car descended and he worked the dashboard instruments. Below, the garage roof began a swift retraction. When the car was almost parallel to the house, he spotted Rachel waving through the kitchen window and he returned her wave. They were both lifetime early risers. Soon they would share their morning coffee before Rachel set about to putter in the garden on her day off from Media Center where she wrote and uploaded an hourly Web news program.

Joseph secured the hover car in the garage and watched the roof seal itself shut with an echoing clang. He walked toward the cottage. The bathroom light blazed upstairs. He smelled coffee as he stepped into the kitchen and let out a sharp whistle. It was a familiar signal and Rachel would soon send down her higher pitched reply.

He was halfway through his first mug of brew and reading the news on the Web terminal on the kitchen island when he realized that her reply never came. Then he became conscious of the sound of running water from above.

Joseph's fears returned full force. He bounded up the stairs, opened the bathroom door without knocking and found Rachel under several inches of water. Her bathrobe still lay across the clothes hamper.

He didn't need a master detective to figure things out. While Markham parked the car, Rachel came upstairs to get cleaned up for the day. She filled the tub as she flossed, brushed her teeth and clipped her hair up. It was all part of her usual morning routine. But today, when she reached down to shut off the faucet, she slipped on a damp spot on the floor, lurched forward and slammed

[1] Oyster Bay: a city on Long Island.