

ALSO BY MASON BELL

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BRENDEN'S FAST LANE TO THE FUTURE

MASON BELL



Brenden's Fast Lane to the Future

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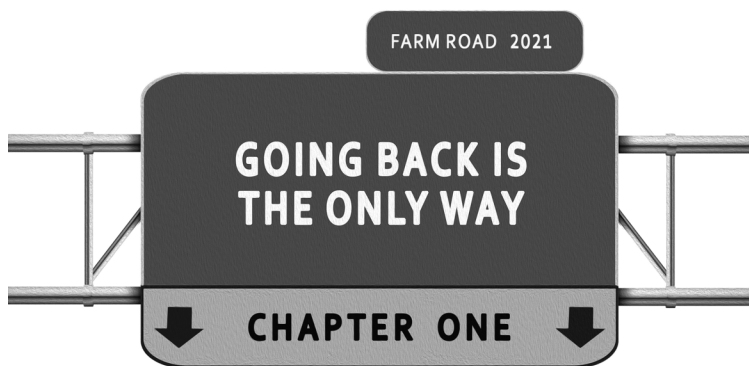
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*The distinction between the past, present, and future is
only a stubbornly persistent illusion.*

-Albert Einstein



COVID RAN through my school like a food poisoning on Taco Tuesdays. Me and my friends stayed home for most of the year until the school called us back to class, and I actually wanted to go because being home all day was super boring. The principal invented a bunch more rules about touching and breathing too close to others. But none of that compared to the day my dad showed up at the school.

It all started when I was rushing to math class. Dad stood at the end of the blue eighth-grade locker hall. Heat poured over my face when he pulled back the cuff of his shirt to check the time. His brows tensed so tight they made one giant unibrow.

But I hadn't been in a lick of trouble all day. I woke up on time and made my lunch as always—and even remembered to lock the door before running to the bus stop. Dad showing up at the attendance office could mean only one thing.

Dad's trembling hand waved for me to hurry, so I ran. No need to upset him any further. His arm reached around my shoulder and dragged me down the hallway. We both stopped at the buzzing of the attendance door lock and waved at the woman working the desk.

"Thank y'all for taking the time to get vaccinated," she said, walking toward us and patting my spikey hair. "I wish all our kids were as health-conscious as you, little man."

I've worn it shaggy since elementary school but shaving it high and tight, at my dad's suggestion, was the worst idea ever. Long hair kept adults' hands far from my head, but this spikey hair seemed to attract attention.

"Apologies," Dad said, "but Brenden and I have to be going, or we might miss our appointment."

"Sure, sure, honey. Be safe!" The burnt waffle scent on her plaid dress stayed with us even after she'd disappeared back into her office, where several women giggled

as we left. Nothing is more embarrassing than having a dad that all the teachers flirt with. It's because he's so tall, I think.

Dad waved to the women through the glass wall and grabbed my shoulder. "Come on, Squirt. Time's a-wasting."

"Why am I getting the shot? I'm only eleven and a half," I whined as Dad pushed me out the double doors to the parking lot. "My teacher said I had to be twelve."

"I'm the one seeing the nurse."

"Didn't Mom already make you get vaccinated?"

Keys flipped on his packed keyring, and he turned to me. "I have a plan to save us all from this virus. And to do it, I have to pretend I want a booster shot."

We pulled from the parking lot and turned onto the main drag through town. I didn't have to ask him why I was involved—I already knew the answer when I saw the Green Monster parked in the school's circle driveway. My elbow rested on the green Festiva's window. The hot September air warmed my face from the frostbite I'd gotten from the school's air conditioners.

The car jerked to a stop and spun into the neighborhood clinic that fixed my broken arm when I was five years old. I don't remember it happening, but Mom always tears up when we pass the building. She usually talks nonstop, but never once has she spoken about the awful day I fell off the swings and cracked my forearm in half.

"Just sit quietly in the waiting room," Dad said, roping the strings of his mask around his ears. "When I come out of the exam room, be ready to move."

A nurse at the door checked our temperatures with a small plastic gun and shooed us to the waiting room for vaccine appointments. Dad sat in the chair six feet away from mine that had worn-out springs in the middle. I didn't mind him being so far from me. He seemed high-strung, and I really didn't want to get in his way.

"Mr. Graves?" the nurse in purple duds called from the far door. A smile wrinkled at the corners of her exposed eyes as she escorted Dad into the long hallway.

An older woman with gray hair tied in a bun looked my way and nodded. I nodded back. Mom said it's my giant brown eyes that always catch the attention of the older generation. They usually offer me a warm caramel square from their knit cardigan pocket, but the pandemic changed everything about being in public.

The clinic's white walls and pumped-in jazz music didn't ease the odor of nursing home spewing from the patients' clothes. We'd visited Grandma every Sunday afternoon, but I never grew used to the urine-alcohol smell. My dad missed Grandma after the lockdowns put an end to our visits. Lots of good it did—she got sick anyway.

"Mrs. Blankenship?" Another nurse called into the near-empty room.

Dad smiled politely and squeezed past her into the waiting area. His nervous eyes caught mine. "Time to go. You need to get back to school and learn all your history." He grabbed me gently by the arm and walked heel to toe in a stiff, robotic kinda way.

"Am I really going back?" I whispered. "Why did I have to come, anyway?"

"Just get to the car. We have some-time to be."

My short fingernails dug into the straps of my backpack. "Do we have to?"

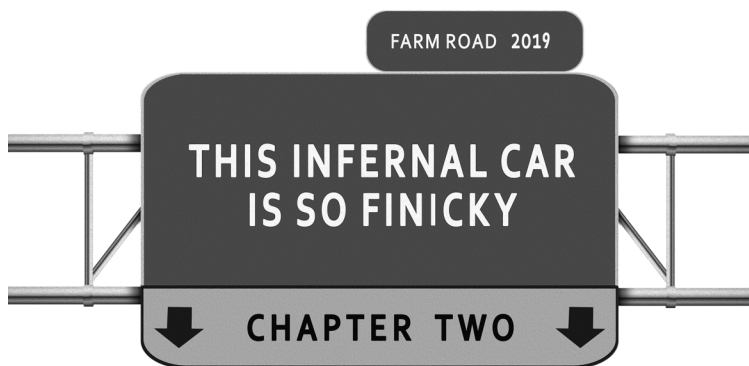
"I know you love school!" Dad said a little too loud and unconvincingly. The nurse checking temperatures at the door gave him the stink eye. He pulled me close. "Going back is the only way, and I need you to make it work."

“Can’t we have just one year without time traveling?”

“After I fix this, we’ll travel to anytime you want.”

“Okay, but no history lessons. We do whatever you’re planning and get back home.”

“That’s my boy! To the Green Monster!”



MY EYES BULGED from their sockets, stung dry by the wind from the rolled-down window. The older model Ford Festiva, lovingly called the Green Monster by my mom, raced from the highway and down the exit for Farm Road 2019. I didn't remember anything historical happening in 2019, but Dad was the teacher, and he knew just about everything—a walking trivia game.

Tall brush grew over the curb of the highway and stretched toward the faded yellow line of the street. The car shook. I tugged the seatbelt tighter and waited for the streaking rainbow of lights that made a screaming coyote sound as it washed over the car. But it never came, which was strange because the time-traveling Festiva had never failed before.

Maybe it knew Dad was trying to change the timeline of the entire Earth. Who knows what could happen?

Dad pulled to the curb and rubbed his temples. "All I want to do is travel back to 2019 and stop the pandemic from ever taking hold in the country. We can save so many lives. This infernal car is so finicky!"

Mom says when Dad gets an idea, there is no changing his mind. But she didn't have to tell me that. Last month he wanted to go on vacation, but with the airplanes grounded, there was nowhere to go except Farm Road 2000 and a quick trip back to his senior year of college. Dressed in plain blue jeans and t-shirts, I got to experience all the excitement around Y2K. It was the first time I'd seen Dad happy since Mom left.

"Why isn't it working?" Dad looked over his time travel logbook. "I was going the normal speed and braked three times like I always do."

"I bet it doesn't work anymore." I grabbed for the tall weed outside my window. "Anyway, who's to say the vaccine would still work after traveling into the past?"

Dad didn't answer my question, but his eyes darted over the sun-cracked dashboard like he was searching for an answer. Each day of the lockdown, he'd yell across the

street to the neighbor about how the world had gone mad. They would have looked less crazy if they'd texted instead. Anyway, he had that mad gaze like everyone else.

He snapped from his thoughts. "We need to circle back around and try again."

"Why can't we just go home? We can play video games until Mom shows up for her week. I think the download we started last night might be finished."

"If we don't go now, I'll have to return to my apartment, and the time travel never works without you on the right rear seat." His elbow draped over the seatback. "I must try to stop this pandemic before it mutates again, or this may never end."

I understood the pain in Dad's eyes. The virus moved slowly across the country but quickly mutated and became a nightmare. Vaccines kept most people from the hospital, but it came too late for Grandma Doris, who lived in a nursing home down the street. Even after the vaccines, we never got to see her, even at the funeral. Dad never cried so hard. Not even when Mom suggested they separate and trade off weeks living in our family home to "spare the kids."

The car leaned as it whipped around the u-turn under the small four-lane highway. A quick look for oncoming traffic, and Dad slammed on the gas. A steep incline to the highway had the Green Monster struggling to reach the main traffic screaming past. Semi-trucks rolled alongside our very slow car that had somehow lived longer than anyone had ever expected. But when your time travel machine is an economical two-door hatchback, you make it work.

Down a second exit, another u-turn, and Dad re-entered the highway. He shifted taller in his seat and gripped the steering wheel. "This time, it will work. You're on the right seat? Good."

Exit Farm Road 2019 came up on the right, again. I held my breath and stared straight ahead. My hands grew clammy. Don't get me wrong. I want to help the grandmas and return to my normal life, but time travel never turned out the way me and Dad intended. Like when we landed on the grassy knoll to see President Kennedy in Dallas. Dad wanted to prove a theory, but the police just wanted to question him for carrying a phone in his pocket that looked like a detonation device.

Radio on. Radio off. Two wiper passes. A final honk of the horn and the car jerked three times. Dad shielded his

eyes from the brilliant flash rolling over the hood. I covered my own eyes, and my breathing grew shallow and fast.

The coyote screamed, and I tucked my head into my lap and stayed there until the flashing stopped. Me and Dad looked at the road. Nothing looked unusual, but really, we didn't travel back too far—not like the time we opened our eyes to a herd of bison surrounding the car. They were farm bison but still scary as heck.

“Did we make it?” I asked.

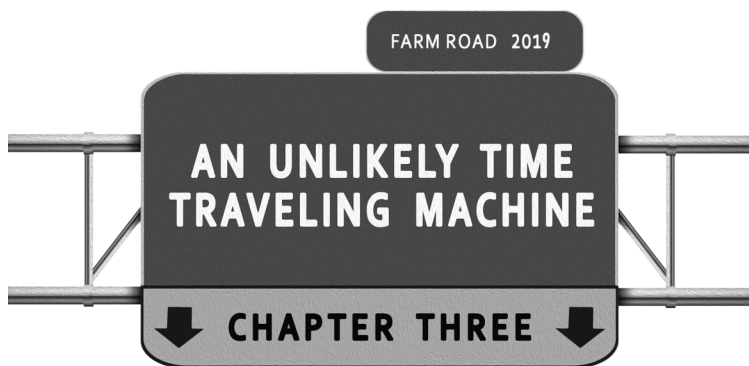
Dad pointed to the football field surrounded by a chain-link fence. “Look how full the stands are.”

“No one's wearing a mask?”

“Right, because no one knows about the virus yet. Yes, people are sick, but they figure it's the flu. I think we made it alright, but we have to be sure.”

Dad turned into a gas station on the right corner and pulled a quarter from his pocket as he walked to the row of newspaper racks. The quarter clinked, and the spring on the door screeched before slamming closed. He glanced to the right-hand corner of the paper and gave me the thumbs up.

Now all he had to do was get the vaccine to the important people and explain what he knew before Mom showed up at the house. She'd worry and call all my friends if I was gone too long. That's what moms do, I guess.



I KNOW what you're thinking. Aren't you more excited about time travel than being home on time?

No, not really.

Dad had been a history teacher in our small town since before I was born. Learning that his old college car had transformed into a time travel machine was like a gift from the gods—choosing him for higher educational purposes. His obsessive personality took on the challenge.

Our maiden voyage to the first space shuttle launch in US history had us standing alongside men in business suits on the top of this grassy hill. We stared through binoculars at the tiny capsule. Heat from the flaming boosters

made us sweat, and everyone smelled like rocket fuel as they congratulated each other on the mission's success. I've never seen anything like it! They even named the shuttle Enterprise after that space tv show.

But Dad made index cards with facts about the shuttle's historical significance and how it would lift all humankind from some *cold war haze*. If you ever thought anything was cool, my dad could make it very uncool very fast.

We went on lots of trips after that. The Dust Bowl during the depression and the toppling of some famous wall in Germany. All instructional. All boring!

What I really wanted was dinosaurs. I wanted to be like that guy in the movie and look up at a massive brontosaurus' head and watch him nom on leaves. Who wouldn't want to ride on its back while wearing a cowboy hat?

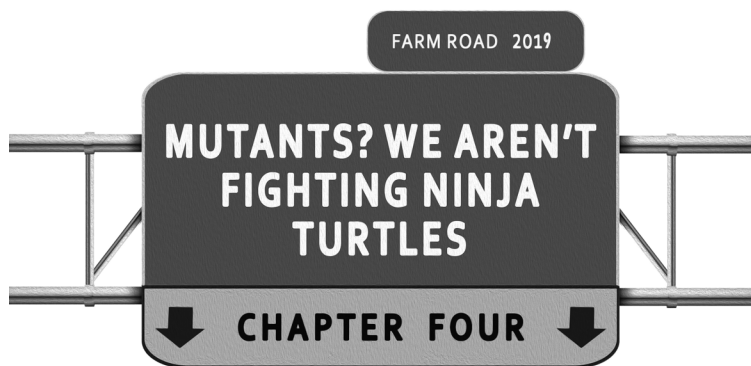
Dad explained that Farm Road numbers were all positive, and to travel to the pre-historic age, we'd need a negative number. He seemed to believe his own logic, but I have my doubts. I think he doesn't want to go because dinosaurs are pre-historic, and he can't bore me with the details.

And the details of how this cheap car travels through time are sketchy. Dad said when I was a baby, I only slept well when riding in the Festiva. My car seat was on the right side of the back seat. It was 4:47 pm when he exited the highway and took Farm Road 1985 because the uneven road always rocked me to sleep. He said the car flashed and screamed, dropping us in the middle of a packed parking lot of my dad's little league football game.

I don't know if any of this is true. I was just a baby crying my head off. But Dad swears by the story, and besides, who would lie about time traveling in a Festiva? That hot rod, pocket corvette I keep on my windowsill would be loads more exciting!

Maybe time travel would be more fun if my older brother Rod went with us. You'd like Rod. He rides dirt bikes and eats nothing but hot dogs and pizza. I know what you're thinking, and yes, he can stink up a room really fast. But he's a risk-taker and finds the fun in everything.

But here I sit in the back of a green, egg-shaped car given to my dad by a friend who got it for free after buying an F-150 new from the dealer. Yep, the Green Monster's a sad, sad car and an unlikely time traveling machine.



MY FOREHEAD RESTED on the rubber window seal and rocked side to side. The punch of gasoline vapors drifted through the massive window and up my nose. Going back in time made me a whole two years younger, but the rear-view mirror said I still looked twelve.

That growth spurt I had last summer and the awful high and tight haircut I got last week didn't disappear in the least. Imagine if my body shrunk and grew with each trip. I might turn into silly putty and have the superpower to stretch from the couch into the kitchen for the plastic container of cookies Mom keeps on top of the fridge.

Dad hurried from the gas station store and slid into the driver's seat. "We are in the right time. I saw Bob at the register inside the station." His eyes watered as he picked

up the small cooler with the vaccine bottle stashed inside. “I miss that guy, and if I do this right, I can go fishing with him next week, like old times.”

Dad jabbed his elbow into the passenger seat and popped open the glove box. The paper map tore along the worn-out folds. He flicked the poster-sized paper and laid it on the steering wheel to trace the route he marked in red.

Our journey to the 2019 exit had started early this morning. Dad scratched his head. “With the highway system being so complicated, the drive to deliver the vaccine will take longer than I’d hoped. If one town closes the highway for construction, we’d be rerouted and thrown off track. We could end up in ancient Rome.”

A knot tied in my gut. I’d never considered time travel within time travel. Not even Dad could untangle the mess we’d get into.

“Yep,” Dad said, folding the map. “We’ll stick to the service roads when we get to the big cities overpasses.”

We pulled out of the gas station and sped down the frontage road. Grocery stores and fast-food restaurants were packed with people eating and waiting in line. My left eyelid twitched. It had been months since anyone could hang out in big groups. But we were currently in 2019,

long before the coughing and loss of taste ruined the only thing us locked-down zombies had left—pizza delivery.

By the way, zombies are freaky. Old Dracula and Frankenstein movies are the bomb. But the newer zombie movies and games on the internet are off-limits. Mostly because I can relate to them. When my parents split, my body felt numb, and my brain like it was seeping from my nose.

Having my parents switch weeks in our family home after the divorce was like getting a health pack in a video game. My avatar nearly died a few times, but seeing both my parents always made me feel better, just not the same as before.

“Where are we going?” I asked my dad, who tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs.

“A&M, out there in College Station. We won’t arrive till late tonight. There’s a hotel off the highway where we can stay. A good night’s sleep, and we can find that researcher from the news article.”

At this point, I’m not sure what news article he’s talking about. He reads all the time. I rested my head on the window and watched the miles of farmland whiz past. A

cow, painted larger than life on the side of a delivery truck, pulled from behind our sluggish car and zoomed down the hilly road.

“Is A&M where they made the vaccine in 2021?”

“No, Son. But they have something just as good. Last week, I saw an article about a researcher and his team who discovered a drug that fights off all the variants of the virus. A big-name drug manufacturer is buying the formula to mass-produce it.”

“It stops all of them? Even the delta? That means we could stop the stronger mutants from getting around.”

“Mutants? We aren’t fighting Ninja Turtles, though it would be more fun. You mean mutations.” Dad looked right and pulled into the slow lane. Cars raced past and out of sight. “If this Liu character can study the virus before it spreads across the country, he can make the drug sooner and save thousands.”

“But why can’t we just tell the president. He’s the most powerful person in the world and can stop the virus before it starts.”

“I like your thinking but going straight to the president is not practical. Besides, were in 2019, and no one knows of

the coming storm. The label of crazy is easy to get stuck with today.”

Yeah, Dad knows all about being called crazy. Dad tried to tell Mom that the Green Monster could time travel when I was about five. She was furious that he'd tried to explain his disappearances with such a lie. Now that I'm older, I can see why she was mad. Once, we came home with a Polaroid of me, Dad, and Martin Luther King. It doesn't get more suspicious than that.

“Don't worry,” Dad said from the front seat. “I worked out a plan. Gone over the details and dangers. The first thing we'll do when we return to 2021 is bring your grandma a three-layer chocolate cake!”

My giant smile waned. Dad seemed convinced his plan would work. But a pandemic is a big deal. How will a man and his son stop a virus that scientists hardly understand? I really want it to work, and I do love cake, but visiting my grandma who might be zombified by us screwing up time, not so much.



LET me skip the part of this story where we get to the hotel and sleep because it was a nightmare. Imagine trying to rest, two years in the past, with a dad who snores like a troll. Sharing a single hotel room wasn't as much fun as he made it out to be. Here we go.

Burnt sausages and old grease coming from the kitchen held my queasy stomach hostage. We ordered our breakfast and slipped into the plastic booth. I kept my attention on the beetle crawling along the outside windowsill that disappeared behind the Sponge Bob cooler holding the stolen vaccine. But I looked away when the morning sun peeked from behind the water tower on the other side of the highway.

Dad flipped the orange striped number in his fingers while I watched the fry cook wrap up breakfast sandwiches faster than anyone I'd ever seen. A round woman appeared from nowhere and laid a tray of food on the table. "Y'all want hot sauce or napkins?"

A pile of napkins and ketchup packets dropped on the table. Dad nodded a thank you before unwrapping the eggy sandwich like a delicate Christmas present. "The research area inside the university will be difficult to maneuver."

"But you have a plan, right?" I asked.

A wink and half-grin lifted my spirits. "When don't I have a plan, Squirt?"

Dad was right—and talking about his plans always gave him wide eyes and tented brows, like the evil villain in Disney movies. That was what worried me. His gaze was distant, and he quietly munched away on his sandwich, watching the cars race by on the highway.

"I bet this research guy is very busy." The warm hash brown left a slick of grease on my fingers. "My teachers are always doing something, and a college teacher would have even more to do."

“Right now, in 2019, they’re doing some kind of protein research. It’s in 2021 Liu and his team become rock stars.”

“Because of the drug they make for the virus?”

“Yep,” Dad said, taking a sip of his Coke. “Today, we’ll head out to the ET building and scope out the place. The fall semester just started, and it should be bustling with kids.”

“No one is gonna believe us. All this time travel and sneaking around feels like those monster movies where people get eaten for being stupid.”

Dad’s eyes dropped to the table, and my heart skipped. Why did I have to say that? My Dad is lots of things, but not stupid. “Sorry, Dad—”

“No, you’re right. It’s stupid of me to involve you in this. If this weren’t important, I wouldn’t take the chance. Time travel in that confounded car only works with you in the back. I’ve tried using other people and even your mom once, but you seem to be the key.”

“Did you try with Rod?” My body tensed as I waited for the answer I wanted to hear. There was no way it would have worked with Rod. Time travel was my thing—Rod had his dirt bikes.

“I did, and boy, can that kid complain! *How long will this take? Where are we going?*” Dad rubbed my spiky hair. “He’s not the time travel type, I think. To be an adventurer, you must be willing to lay aside spontaneity for smart decisions, which we both know Rod is not good at doing.”

Dad looked at his watch and took another sip of his Coke. He lifted his travel logbook to the table and opened it to a page with a taped university map. The school’s buildings were laid out in a grid style like the fake towns used in math test questions.

“If we head down Texas to University Drive, we’ll be there in no time.” Dad stared at the map, then looked up at me. “If I could choose any travel buddy, I’d still choose you. Let’s scoot.”

We piled our wadded wrappers on the tray and trekked the slippery floor to the soda machine. Dad refilled his Coke and my strawberry soda. The bubbles popped in my nose as I sipped the froth. Three lids later, I secured the winning size to my cup because the time-traveling Festiva didn’t have cup holders, and wearing strawberry soda wasn’t really my thing.

With the cooler tight to his chest, Dad opened the door, and we took our assigned seats in the Green Monster, not wanting to jinx the time travel.

Plan or no plan, it was amazing to be outdoors and around other people besides my family. Maybe there would be time to hit an arcade before we headed home?

FARM ROAD 2019

WHERE HAVE I SEEN THAT FACE BEFORE?

CHAPTER SIX

OUR DRIVE along the busy streets of College Station felt like a lifetime. I'd never seen so many cars turning into rushing traffic. And most of the drivers looked no older than Rod, and he was the worst driver I knew. He'd broken lots of bones falling from twisting bikes to the hard clay dirt of a racetrack.

The muggy air left my skin sticky and clammy, both very gross. We passed lots of stores that had A&M somewhere in the business name but really had no idea where we were. I leaned my head on the windowsill of the door, and a kid in the next lane over waved at me from his car seat. I envied him and the cold air blowing from the vent that dried his snotty nose to a crust.

Every time Dad stopped at a red light, he inched the small cooler in the passenger seat closer to himself. He hadn't said much about what was keeping the vaccine cold, but it had to be dry ice. Because if the thing was damaged, what would be the point of our time travel Hail Mary.

Our Festiva sat behind a long line of traffic, so far back that I couldn't make out the tiny letters of the green street sign hanging on the light post. A car stalled in the turn lane, but none of the honking drivers offered any help. Dad threw his head back into the headrest. "It's not that hard, people."

Dad put on his hazard lights and jumped from the car, leaning into the back seat window. "Wait here." He walked to the stalled-out car that looked in worse shape than the Green Monster. Rust covered the hood, and paint chipped off the roof.

A black-haired girl talking on her mobile phone pointed to the street sign. Dad's sudden appearance startled her. She hung up and wiped away her tears. Dad's reassuring gaze turned to the grassy median, where he waved to another man approaching from the traffic.

Dad and the man with thin-rimmed glasses pushed the car along the left turn lane against the red light and into a parking lot farther down the road. Only a few of the

young drivers weaved around them. Dad shook the man's hand, then they played a real-life game of Frogger to return to their cars.

The Green Monster pulled up to the thick white line on the roadway. Dad's eyes kept glancing in the rear-view mirror at the car behind them.

"There's something familiar about that guy," Dad said, almost to himself. "Where have I seen that face before?"

I peered over the headrest. "Of course, he looks familiar. He kinda looks like a teacher. Maybe you worked with him before. Don't all you guys know each other?"

"Funny, Squirt!" The red light flicked green, and honking started from the line of cars behind us. Dad waved and turned onto Bizzell Street. He slowed at the giant building that was the opposite of the public school buildings Dad worked at, meaning it was new and very expensive looking. I searched for the name of the building but couldn't even find a street number.

Dad pulled to the curb. "That's the one."

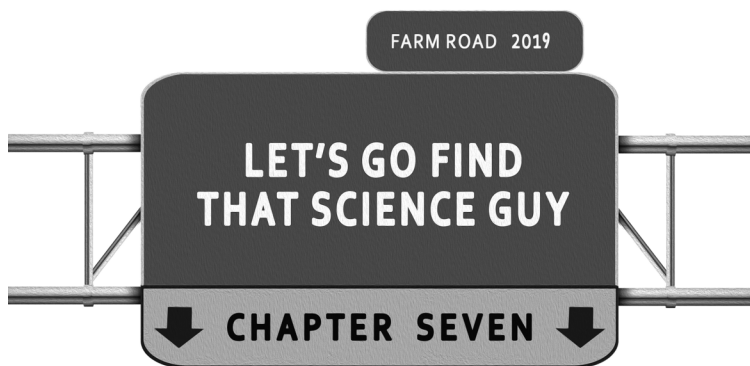
"Which one?"

“Where we need to take the vaccine. Liu works here.” Dad craned his neck to the car pulling around us and turning into Lot 47.

“Is that the guy?” I asked.

“It can’t be.” Dad stretched his leg and pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to me. “Why would it be so easy?”

“It is him!” I said. “This is great! Now we give him the vaccine and get back to 2021.”



NO ONE HAS EVER CONSIDERED my dad a hero, or even a risk-taker, for that matter. His favorite place was the beat-up chair on the back porch with a super thick book about a president or some ancient war. His motto in life was “learn from the past, so you don’t screw up.” Mom says his obsession with history is weird, and I agree.

Years ago, I had to enter the science fair. Markers and trifold poster board with some hand-drawn bar graphs aren’t my ideas of a fun time, but the school made every kid participate. Don’t get me wrong, I know science stuff is important, but I’m really more of a free spirit kinda kid.

My dad thought my argument was nonsense. So, we loaded the Festiva and drove south to Farm Road 1961 exit. The entire way, Dad explained 1961 was the year the

first US man orbited the Earth. His name was Adam or Alan or something like that. Anyway, we traveled back in time and watched the news footage of the lift-off outside a television shop with about two dozen locals. No one said a word about how bad the black-and-white tv looked. It was like being in my own episode of that twilight show my dad likes to watch after midnight. But Dad seemed fine and kept telling me to pay attention to the rocket shooting across the screen.

“Why couldn’t we just watch this on YouTube?” I asked.

“Shh!” a finely dressed man said. He must have been a lawyer. Come to think of it, all the people around us were dressed fancy, like the lawyers on those accident commercials.

The newsman returned to the screen, and we walked back to the Green Monster that was surrounded by a bunch of onlookers criticizing the car’s boxy shape, labeling it a lousy import.

And as predicted, Dad gave me a lesson in math and science on the trip home, explaining how we have the past to thank for things like video games. He laid it on thick, I tell you, but I still didn’t want to do the science fair.

But that was years ago, and today we were on a mission to save the world, which was pretty cool in a superhero kind of way.

Dad stared at the giant building on the left, and I could almost hear the gears grinding in his head. He flicked on the hazard button, and the ticking continued when he pulled to the middle lane just outside Lot 47. Bucket lights from the garage's ceiling flashed into the car through the sunroof but stopped as Dad parked in the back row and sat still while the car idled. "I need to think about how to approach this."

"I thought you had a plan. You do have a plan?"

"Of course," Dad gave me a fading smile. "I just need to think over the finer details. They can be tricky."

"As tricky as time travel?" I fought back a smirk. "Everyone in the world thinks time travel is just for the movies, but here we are two years in the past. I think I'm the only kid that has actually seen that president at that wall event."

"And what president are you referring to?"

"Um, well—"

"It starts with an R."

“Reeves!”

“Reagan. Reeves is an actor.” Dad turned his attention to the building. The front doors barely had a chance to stay closed as kids trudged inside.

My heart pounded at the maskless kids touching the door with their bare hands. Mom says I have the principal to thank for this new phobia. Instead of regular schoolwork, I learned how to not get sick. But no one really explained how touching stuff and breathing too close to other kids was suddenly more dangerous than bullying.

That had to be why Dad risked being caught with the stolen vaccine. If he could pull this off, the virus and the mutations and the lockdowns would never happen. I could go back to school and have lunch with my friends again and be freed from the plexiglass box that surrounded my desk—even though the plastic walls shielded me from the kid in the back who shot spit wads.

“We have to do something,” I said with new excitement. “Sitting here won’t change the future. Maybe we should just take a look inside the building. It’s not like back home where everyone is scanned and counted to track the virus.”

"You're right. There's no reason for people to be suspicious of us. We are just a dad and son looking for our daughter to...to...give her the lunch she left on the counter!" he said, lifting the lunch box over the headrest.

"Why didn't you use the dark blue cooler? It looks less kindergartener."

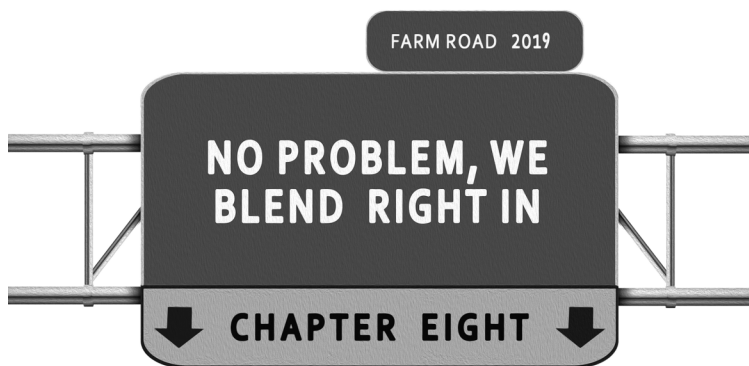
"We should get the most use we can out of our stuff. Now, this lunchbox is the first Sponge Bob item to travel back in time!"

I tipped my backpack and dumped my school stuff into the left seat. "I can carry it so people don't look at us funny."

"Where's the joy in that? We are all born to be unique—part of the crazy puzzle of life."

Dad hit the nail on the head. This entire trip back in time, nearly everyone getting sick, and the Sponge Bob lunch box were all things that qualified as crazy. But if we could change the future, there might be a way to save Grandma Doris and avoid the fighting that split my parents.

"We came all this way," I said, rolling up the car window with the cracked knob. "Let's go find that science guy."



WE PASSED the brick sign on the building's lawn that read Emerging Technologies. A super-smooth sidewalk led to the building and would have been perfect for the outdoor skates I got for my birthday this year. And because I was in the past, I wouldn't have to wear a mask outside and sweat like a dog while doing it.

A small part of me wanted to put on a mask. I knew the pandemic didn't really take hold until 2020, but Dad had told me it was a thing in late 2019, which happened to be where we were. I squeezed Dad's hand tight.

"Yeah, Squirt?"

"Don't you think you should wear a mask? You're old and might get sick?"

"I'm not that old! Besides, I've had the vaccine."

"The 2019 you hasn't."

Dad scratched his head. "If I got the vaccine in 2021 and traveled back to 2019, does that mean it never happened, and I am at risk?"

"That's what I said."

"Look at it this way. Somewhere in Texas, there is a 2019 version of me doing something insanely cool."

"I doubt that."

"So, this body would be a duplicate—the version of me that has gotten the vaccine. Right?"

"Maybe."

Dad grabbed for the door handle of the giant brick building, and a kid wearing huge headphones barreled out. I stepped to the side to avoid a collision. Dad nodded at the kid and held the door for me. The building was bustling with kids hunching over books and tossing Cheetos into their mouths.

"No problem," Dad said, straightening his collar. "We blend right in."

He was right. My baggy clothes and backpack were like the other kids, but there was an important missing piece. I reached into the tiny side-zipper of my pack and tucked my AirPods into my ears.

“Good idea, Squirt. You pretend to be a student admitted early because you were homeschooled, and I’ll pretend to be a teacher.”

“But you *are* a teacher.”

“Another seamless plan!”

The information counter was loaded down with brochures and business cards. Dad asked where the researcher guy’s office was located, and suddenly the two were locked in conversation about some civil war battle—a normal day for my chatty dad.

My nose lifted at the sweet scent of donuts in the air, pulling me to a table decked out in cookies, donuts, and brownies. A bucket of water bottles sat on the edge.

The straight-haired girl at the table offered me a cookie, and I took it. The wrapper broke off a chunk that I tossed into my mouth. But I almost choked when the guy we traveled through time and space to find showed up. A plan of my own grew. I ripped the AirPods from my ears and slouched my shoulders, dropping the college kid act.

Liu walked with his steaming cup of what I assumed was coffee to the elevators. Coffee was a good guess because most adults drink the stuff all day long. I jogged around the slow students and rammed straight into the guy's back. He screeched as the hot coffee spilled on his hands. "What? Hello?"

"Excuse me, sir," I said with my most sad, please don't be mad, eyes. "I thought you were my dad."

"No worries," Liu said, starting for the elevators.

Panic made me sweat. A fake cry slipped from my wide-open mouth. Liu looked back. "Are you hurt?"

"I can't find my dad, and he walked off, and I haven't seen him in nearly two hours. Plus, I'm alone on this campus and starving, and I have a...a...blister on my big toe." That was some quick thinking on my part!

Nervous students pulled out their own AirPods and stared at me before sliding the plastic back into their ears. Liu put his coffee on top of the trash can. "Don't worry. Together, we can find him. What does he look like?"

His worried parent look made me want to confess that I wasn't a baby, and that I had an iPhone with a picture of my dad on it. But I kept all that to myself. How do I even

know if my phone worked in the past? I barely got a signal in my normal house in my normal time.

“My son!” Dad said, running toward Liu and me. “You found him. Thank you so much. Where have you been, little Squirt?”

“Not so difficult,” Liu said. “Have a good day.”

Dad flinched when I elbowed him and the words barreled from his lips. “Haven’t we met before?”

“Sorry?”

“This morning. Yes, that’s right!” Dad rushed to Liu—his hand angling for a shake.

“The stalled car?” Liu asked. “Oh, yes. That happens more than you’d think, and it’s always the adults that help push. Are you new to the area?”

“You could say that.”

This small talk was going nowhere. I dropped my backpack and dug around the bottom where my rock collection mixed with the crumbs from my half-eaten Cheez Its snack. My English rubric with the blazing red D was perfect. The paper easily ripped in two and the dull pencil I had was good enough for a quick message.

. . .

This is a vaccine from the year 2020. Check the label.

A pandemic started in 2019, which I guess is this year, and will devastate the world.

Dad said there is stuff in the vaccine that will help with your research.

Keep this very cold and don't fail because the grandmas are dying.

With the cold vial and note in my hand, I stumbled toward Liu and slid them into his sweater pocket.

"Oh!" Dad said. "Don't mind him. Just a little on the clumsy side for his age."

"No worries," Liu smiled. "I'm glad you found your dad. I'll see you in the next traffic jam."

"Yes, thank you," Dad said to Liu, who grabbed his coffee and hustled to the elevators. "What was that about, Bren?"

Dad nearly toppled to the floor at the empty lunchbox. "Where is the vaccine?"

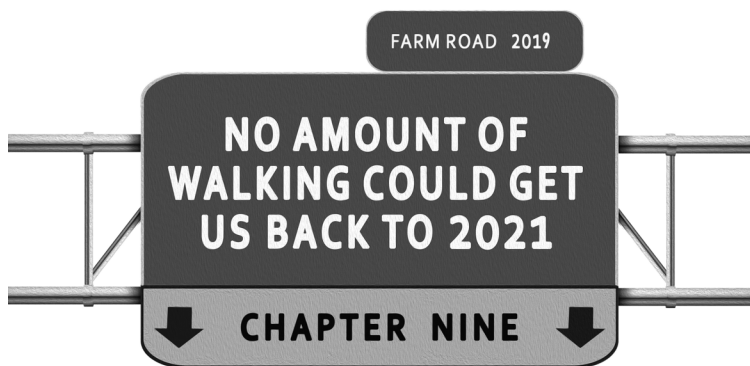
"I passed it to the guy. Mission accomplished."

“What if he doesn’t see it? And don’t forget it needs to be kept cold.”

“I explained all that in the letter.”

Dad’s worried unibrow returned. He rushed for the elevators, pushing the wandering students out of his way. The elevator door started to close, but we could see Liu alone inside, holding the vial in his hand and reading the note. Liu glanced at me as the door closed.

“I think he got the message.” I took Dad’s hand. “Let’s go home and see if it worked!”



WALKING behind Dad from the building gave me a minute to glance at my phone. It's lunchtime back at school. What I wouldn't give to be sitting on that cold plastic seat eating my PB & J instead of lurking around a college campus. But I panicked when Dad's shoes disappeared from my sight.

"No! Wait!" Dad yelled as he made a run to Lot 47's driveway. A large black wrecker with red lettering pulled out of the lot with our Festiva hooked, rolling on its two back wheels.

My loose sneakers flumped on and off my heel as I chased after Dad, whose arms waved in the air to stop the tow truck. But Dad ran out of gas and slumped onto the bus station bench. I stopped and leaned my sweaty palms

on my knees, watching the wrecker turn onto the main road.

Time travel isn't for the weak. Once, we crossed paths with Nazi soldiers in Germany. Those guys had some real anger issues. Then there was the time we walked into a riot at the capitol. That was insane! But none of those *adventures* beat losing the car altogether. How would we get home? No amount of walking could get us back to 2021.

"Mom is gonna kill us," I said to Dad.

"If we don't get the car back, she won't have the chance."

A horn blasted from the street when a shiny bus squealed to a stop right in front of us. The door swung open.

"Howdy! Need a lift?"

"We do," Dad said. "Our car was towed, and we're from out of town."

"Oh, honey! Y'all get on in here and have a seat. My shift is almost over, and I'll drop you by the impound lot on my way home."

I'm not allowed to get rides from strangers, but Dad was an adult and could make those kinds of choices. Faced with returning home or living in a time when we

might run into ourselves, I like to think he made the right call.

“We’d appreciate that.”

“We all need a little help now and then. Get comfy.”

The door closed, and the bus jerked into a forward motion. My school bus wasn’t nearly this fancy. Instead of spring seats, there were cushions. Instead of smelling like a skunk, it smelled like that potpourri Mom kept in the bathroom.

The beast of a vehicle rolled slowly down Texas Avenue, rocking gently with each dip in the road. I lay my head on Dad’s arm, and he rubbed my hair. “You can sleep if you like. We’ll be here a while.”

My eyes blinked open and my head lifted from its awkward tilt on the vinyl cushion. I jolted upward worried about how long I’d slept. Dad was gone. From behind the cold metal of the seatback, I found him laughing with the bus driver with a big smile on his face.

The bus slowed before it turned into a fenced parking lot where other busses idled in neat rows. Drivers’ badges swung as they walked side by side to the small wooden

building in the middle of the lot. We were closer to getting back that relic of a car that sent me on the strangest adventures, like traveling back in time to visit College Station. Whoopee!

My feet stumbled down the aisle toward Dad when the driver put the bus in park. Her pearly white teeth gleamed in my direction. "There he is. How was your nap, Sweetie Pie?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Bren, this is Bethany Sue," Dad said.

"Nice to meet you."

"You too, darlin. Now, see that gold Honda down there? That's my ride. I need to sign out, and we'll be on our way."

Bethany Sue clutched the handrail with each ginger step to the cracked blacktop. Her quick waddle caught up with another driver, who gave her a hug and chatted like best friends.

We stepped off the bus, and Dad wrapped his arm around me. "We'll eat soon. Anything you want."

"I wish Mom was here. She always knows what to do."

"She certainly does. Your momma is the best. Even better than my own."

"You miss, Grandma?"

"I do," Dad said. "Just like you miss your mom right now."

"My mom's not dead. But maybe yours isn't either. Liu looked very smart, and I bet he'll make something to stop the virus."

"I don't doubt he will."

Bethany Sue hurried toward us and clicked the lock on her key chain. We opened the back doors and slid inside. The engine chugged a few times before turning over. Country music and cold air blasted from the dash.

"Sorry about that!" she said. "I do like a good tune. So, the tow yard is on the edge of College Station, about ten minutes from here. It'll take longer than normal because kids are being released from school and all."

"We're very grateful," Dad said. "Can I pay for a tank of gas?"

"Not on your life! Helping people is good karma, and I need all the good karma I can get."

The ancient car's shocks squeaked like the bus when we pulled onto the main street. Every dip and bump on the road wanted to crack my tailbone. I used to think the Green Monster was bad, but this car was worse, and it even had air conditioning.

Two metal buildings towered over a skinny road that looked more like an alleyway. Both had faded paint and rusted roofs. Powerlines draped overhead were bigger around than the water hose in my backyard.

The golden Honda lurched to a stop in front of a hand-painted sign that read B&B Towing. "I can wait here till you get your car."

"That'd be great. Bren, you stay with Bethany Sue. I'll be right back."

Dad stepped from the car. Dread filled my belly. I didn't want to go into the haunted looking building but staying behind with a stranger was just as bad. What if Bethany Sue worked for the mafia, and she kept me for ransom?

"What grade are you in, Honey?" Her voice from the front seat scared the beans out of me.

"I'm in sixth grade. Sixth, I mean."

"That's a fun age. You're discovering who you are and what life has in store for you. Oh, child! I bet your momma is proud."

"She might be. I don't see her often enough."

"Your parents are split."

"How did you know?"

"A girl can tell." Bethany Sue rubbed her forehead. "The separation does get better with time. I know people always say that, but it's true. Last year, my divorced parents moved into a nursing home and finally started talking after twenty-three years. Said they were the only people they knew in the building, so it made sense."

"Your parents are in a nursing home?" A knot formed in my throat. "You have to get them out of there. It's not safe when the virus comes."

"They got the flu shot."

"Not the flu. Something much worse is coming. Something—" I caught my breath as Dad knocked on the window.

Bethany Sue stepped from the car and shook her head. "That's your car? It ain't worth the money you paid to get it back!"

“This car means everything to us. Here’s some gas money or karma bills, if you like!”

“Alright, but it looks like you might need it more than I do.” Bethany Sue gave Dad a giant bear hug, then turned to me. “Time makes things right, Honey.”

“That’s the plan,” I said.

Dad and me waved goodbye and slipped into the Festiva. I’d never been so happy to be in the right rear seat. “Where to now, Dad?”

“Farm Road 2021 or bust!”

DO YOU THINK THE CAR IS READING OUR MINDS?

CHAPTER TEN

THE RECTANGULAR WINDOW of the fast-food joint slid open and spread its glorious scent of French fries into the back seat. Dad tossed the colorful kids' meal bag to me. The tiny burger with a dab of ketchup and the four fries were gone in minutes. Two sips from my kid-sized cup, and it was empty. It's just as well. I have a problem with motion sickness, and the less food in my gut, the better.

"Dad!" I yelled from the back seat, waking him from his hypnotic driving state. "Dad, do you think the car is reading our minds?"

"Like a fortune-teller or more like your mother?"

"Haven't you ever wondered how the car takes us to the exact place you want to be? When we went to 1961, it

dropped in the middle of town where we watched that Arnold guy circle the Earth.”

“Alan. Alan Shepard is his name.” Dad squinted at me in the rear-view mirror. “But I haven’t considered this theory. We did make it to the signing of the Declaration of Independence without much effort.”

“And how did we even get home from colonial America? There’s no Farm Roads that far back. Remember we used the radio buttons like a video game cheat, and the car dropped us right in front of our house.”

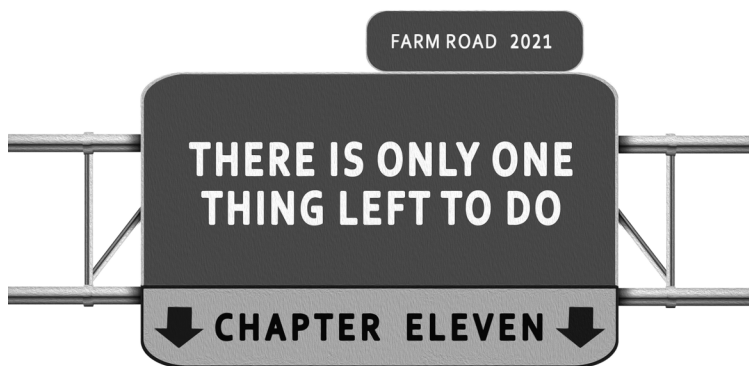
“So, you’re suggesting that time travel has little to do with the Farm Road and their numbers?”

“Maybe. What if someone or something is controlling the time travel? What if there are consequences to using the car?”

My eyes jumped to the green traffic sign that hung over the road and sparkled under a floodlight. Farm Road 2021 exited in half a mile. Dad pushed the Festiva to its top speed, racing toward the future and our own time.

“When we get to the house, we’ll give your theory a good think,” Dad said. “For now, let’s just know it will work.”

Three taps on the brakes and the rainbow washed over the car's hood, delivering us to the driveway behind Mom's car—right where we wanted. My seatbelt tangled in my right arm when I tried to rush from the car. Instead of easing the belt back into the door, I tossed it on the seat and ran for the house, hopeful the trick worked.



ME AND DAD trudged up the walkway to the house. Time travel had changed one thing about the present—the cat painting on the mat was now a giant letter G, probably for our family name. Mom jerked open the door, and Dad froze.

Stress melted off her face when she grabbed my head and sniffed her nose through my hair, her motherly love on display. “Where have you been? I’ve been calling you for hours.”

“Well,” Dad said, walking into the house and hanging his sweater on the coat rack. “There was a thing that needed our attention—Mom, in fact.”

“Your mother? That’s where I’ve been. The doctor said she was responding to the medicines better than they’d hoped.” She reached for his hand. “They said she should recover just fine and leave the hospital this evening.”

“From the virus?”

“From the bladder infection. I’m not sure if it’s caused by a virus, but does it really matter? She nearly died.”

Dad glanced at my slack jaw and shrugged. We’ve only just returned to 2021, and already Grandma was still alive. But this proved nothing. Maybe her immune system was stronger than before.

“Did you see her?” Dad asked, leaning closer to Mom. “I mean, did you hug her and feel her heartbeat?”

Mom glanced at Dad and back at me. Her questioning squint usually came after a teacher called home to report me sleeping in class again. Dad gulped, and I realized I wasn’t the only one who got the “fess up” treatment.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“At the fields!” I shouted, hoping to calm her anger. “Dad took me to the baseball fields to play a little catch.”

“For nearly two days?”

“Well.” Dad escaped into the kitchen, but Mom followed him. “We went to a field on the other side of the city and...and...Oh, why bother!”

Mom moved closer to him and crossed her arms tight. “Yes?”

“We took the car out for some time travel.”

I held my breath. Last time Dad tried to tell her about the time travel, she moved out of the house. Something about him not trusting her and being afraid of commitment, whatever that means.

My head turned dizzy, so I took a long breath and kept my eyes locked on my parents.

“And you went without me?” Mom dropped her arms. “You said I should go with you and see for myself.”

Dad’s eyes grew wide. He walked into the living room, and I hurried behind him. The tv’s dark screen turned white when the channel guide appeared. The remote flicked to the news where the perfect-looking people are kept separate from the rest of us mortal beings. A woman with very stiff hair announced the stage shows for the yearly rodeo held downtown.

“Honey!” Dad yelled to Mom. “Is there Covid in the nursing home?”

“You mean here? In the States?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what the news lady said?” Mom rushed to the tv and shoved her palms in her back pocket.

“They haven’t said anything about the virus.”

“That’s good.” Mom stood next to him. “It could’ve been as bad as the Spanish flu with air travel and all.”

“And it wasn’t?”

Mom felt Dad’s forehead like he was playing hooky from school. “Of course not. Are you sure you’re feeling alright? I can call the doctor?”

Dad paced in front of the brick fireplace, tapping his thumbs. “Bren and I traveled back to 2019 and delivered a vaccine to the researcher at A&M. When we left, the world was being ravaged by variants. Now, everything seems normal.”

“The guy’s name was Liu,” I added for credibility. “We dropped it into his pocket, but we don’t know what he did with the thing. He could have thrown it away.”

Mom covered her mouth and sat on the sofa's middle cushion, pulling Dad next to her. "Around Christmas 2019, the CDC warned of a virus spreading fast through China, but it was stopped from spreading to other countries with a new drug made earlier that year."

"No way!" burst from my lips.

"You two and that Green Monster changed the past! Even after all that talk about damaging the future?"

"The world was on fire." Dad rubbed his eyes. "Would it have been better if I'd sat back and done nothing? The virus never spread, and the lockdowns were averted. How can that be bad?"

"Lockdowns?" she asked. "The country would never shut down for a virus and risk the livelihood of so many people who live and die by a single payday."

"You mean we never had to wear sweaty masks?" I asked. "And kids are still in school?"

"Yes, and that researcher won the Nobel Prize for science. Don't you remember any of this—"

Realization washed over Mom's face. Her hands trembled when she jumped from the couch and pulled me close. Dad flinched when Mom turned her glare to him. "Are

you saying you don't remember the last two years? That some kind of auto-pilot robot took your place?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Dad said. "It's possible that we existed in two dimensions."

Mom released me and pointed to the table. Both Dad and I knew the drill. He took his assigned seat at the head, and I sat on his left. The steaming kettle clinked against the coffee mugs on the tray she carried from the kitchen a few minutes later.

We sat in silence for twenty minutes. Occasionally, Mom took Dad's hand. I couldn't imagine what they were thinking, but it didn't matter. We were all together in the same room, like old times.

Screeching from Mom's chair startled me. She dropped her fists on her hips. "There is only one thing left to do."

"What's that?" Dad asked.

"We visit Grandma Doris. If what you said is true, you haven't seen her in ages. Then we hop into the Green Monster and go to the future. I want to see what kind of mess you've created."

Dad put his cup on the table. "We've never gone to the future. I'm not sure the Festiva does that."

“There’s only one way to know for sure,” I said. “Can we try it, Dad?”

“Alright! But first, we visit Mom in the nursing home and bring her the biggest chocolate cake we can find.”

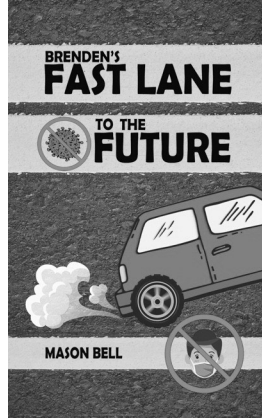
Dad stood, grabbed the keys to his non-time traveling car from the front door’s hook, and took Mom’s hand. She didn’t argue with him, *and* she patted his wrist like she used to do.

My feet froze in the doorway. Me and Dad really did change the future. We really did save Grandma from the virus and, maybe, a lot of other grandmas, too!

“You coming, Squirt?” Dad asked, flipping the keys on his chain. “I bet your grandma misses you.”

“Yep! I wouldn’t miss this for all the dinosaurs in the world!”

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A news article told of a research group at A&M University who discovered an antiviral drug for Covid. Instantly, this became the fundamental premise of this short story, in which travel was the answer.
How could it not?



My first car, a green Ford Festiva, seemed the perfect vehicle for time travel because of its amazing gas mileage.
And just like that.
Boom! I had a story.

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