

Temporal Shift

by R. K. Wigal
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Dedicated to the memories of John Newland of "One Step Beyond" and of James F. Phillippi who went down with the Submarine USS Thresher in 1963. Mr. Newland inspired this story and Jim Phillippi was my friend.

I had to get away! How I made it to the airport, though, I'll never know. It's like when you're driving on a long road trip and you can't account for the last fifty miles. The twenty seven miles from my rented room to Dulles International were just like that. I was on autopilot.

I dropped off the rental car, checked my luggage, and stepped onto the MD-80, still in a fog. Despite my preoccupation, I noticed a familiar face in first class, a face I recognized from television. His silver hair and sky-blue eyes were unmistakable. I would want to talk to him.

I continued on to my seat in coach, stored my carry-on in the overhead compartment, and then I went to the washroom. I emptied my bladder. As I washed my hands, I looked at my image in the mirror. My brown hair was combed well enough, but my eyelids were in a heavy droop and there were bags underneath my somewhat glazed brown eyes. For a man of nearly twenty-five I looked a haggard fifty. I splashed cold water in my face, toweled off, and then returned to my seat. I sat down and fastened my seat belt. "Damn it," I thought to myself. "I can't wait 'til we're in the air! I have to talk to him now!" So I unfastened my seat belt, got up, and started heading forward. I was nearly at the entrance to first class when one of the flight attendants in coach stopped me.

"Sir," she said, "you'll have to return to your seat. We're about to take off."

"Ma'am," I said, "there's a gentleman in first class I must talk to."

"Sir, you're a coach passenger. You're not permitted in first class."

I pleaded. "Ma'am, please! I'll pay the difference in fares, I don't care, but it's absolutely imperative that I speak to that gentleman."

She could see from the expression on my face that I was in dead earnest. After a few seconds, she said, "Which gentleman is it?"

I pulled the curtain aside and looked in. "Second seat from the front, left side, by the window. He's seated alone."

"Okay. If the gentleman agrees to see you, I'll clear it with Cindy."

Relief evident in my voice, I said, "Thank you."

The flight attendant returned a minute later. "It's okay. Go ahead." After a pause, "And don't worry about the fare."

I thanked her again and entered first class. I walked to where the gentleman was seated. "You're Jason Oldfield. You host 'A Higher Plane' on NBS. My name is Kenneth Armstrong." I offered my hand.

He shook my hand. His hand was soft, his grip firm. "Please, sit down. What can I do for you?" He was looking straight into my eyes.

"I'm not here as a fan. I'm here because, from what I've seen of your show, I gather you're something of an expert on paranormal phenomena."

"I do have a keen interest in the paranormal. I'm very curious about it." Jason was matter of fact and frank. I sensed he was genuine. "Did something happen to you?"

"Yes. I'm not sure it falls within your realm of expertise, but there's no one else I know of to talk to."

Jason said, "Tell me about it and I'll see if I can help."

"Okay. I had a friend in high school," I began. "David Phillips. We were thick as thieves all through high school. When we graduated, I went into the Army and David went straight to college. After a three-year stint in Uncle Sam's mob, I went to college on the GI Bill. Four years later, I had a degree in computer science. David and I had lost touch after high school.

"During college, I worked part time, so I was able to save some money. Before I went into the Army I had never been out of California. While I was in the Army, I was stationed entirely in the South. I had always wanted to come here to DC and see the seat of my country. So, I took my savings and hopped a plane to Dulles. I rented a small room, and then I became a tourist."

The plane started to roll at about this time. We'd be airborne soon.

I continued. "I figured I could spend a month, maybe two, sight-seeing. One would need no less than a full month to see and absorb all the sights in DC and the surrounding area. I spent a week touring the White House, the Capitol Building, and all the monuments along the mall. I was quite impressed with the Lincoln Memorial. I was awed and humbled by the Viet Nam War Memorial. I was most especially touched by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. I toured art galleries, museums, theaters...and a lot more. You name it, I went there.

"I was browsing through the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum one day when I saw someone I thought I recognized. I went over to him. Damn! It was David! We exchanged our 'Hellos,' 'How the hell are ya's,' 'Damn it's good to see ya's,' and then, over coffee, we started catching up on where each of our lives had gone since high school. It turned out that, after David got his BS in physics, he went to work for a research firm owned by his uncle. His father and his cousin worked there also. He asked me about my career plans and I told him I'd probably go back to California and look for something in aerospace. That's when he said, 'Why don't you come to work for us? We could use a good computer man.' I asked him what sort of research they were into and he whispered to me that he couldn't tell me where we were with all the people around. I suggested we go somewhere private. He said he knew just the place. So we got into his car and he drove me to a two story brick building. It wasn't small, but it wasn't all that large either. It looked something like a block house. The sign above the huge steel door proclaimed 'Phillips Research.' There was a pedestrian door at the base of the steel door. We entered through the smaller door after David entered an eight-digit code into a numeric keypad.

"Inside, to the left of the steel door, was a small receiving room where arriving freight was accounted for as it was received. The freight consisted mostly of electronic parts and various items for the computers. The first floor consisted of a large open area behind which were four large main rooms, two of which served as storage, one of which had a backup generator in case of any power failures. The last contained a very special power supply. All this I learned from David. All the doors had numeric key pads and were locked securely. Even the receiving office. There was also a freight elevator and a stairwell. These too were well secured.

"David went to a wall panel, pressed a button and spoke. He told someone who I was and why I was there. I was cleared to proceed. He led me to the freight elevator and punched in another eight-digit code. The door opened and we stepped inside. He then took a key out of his pocket, inserted it into a panel, turned it a quarter turn to the right, and then pushed the button for the

second floor. The elevator started up and he removed the key. I'd never seen such security, not even in the Army.

"When the door opened again, we exited into a small anteroom. I was greeted by three men: James F. Phillips, David's father whom I already knew; Stephen Phillips, David's uncle; and Alfred Phillips, his cousin. We exchanged pleasantries and then Stephen asked me if I was interested in working at his research center. I told him I didn't know. I asked what sort of research they were doing. He made me promise that, whether I took the position being offered or not, nothing that was about to be said was to leave the room. I agreed and signed a nondisclosure agreement.

"Then Stephen told me that they had developed a time machine (thus the very special power supply) and they were experimenting with time travel. Well, I can tell you, being a major fan of science and science fiction, not to mention your own program, I grabbed at the offer with the utmost gusto. I had only a few questions. Did they go forward in time or back in time or both? It turns out they could only go backward in time but they had no problem returning to the present. They hired me to program the computers so they could go forward into the future. David had been doing the computer work up to now, but he was getting tired of it. His main interest was piloting the time machine. He confided in me later that he didn't think he could solve the problem of traveling into the future. I had no such qualms. The computers, six computers in all, both controlled and monitored the temporal excursions.

"Next, I was shown the time machine itself. Twelve feet long, six feet wide and eight feet high, it was ovoid in shape. There was a door to a compartment only large enough for a single rider to sit and operate the controls. The machine's principle of operation is a closely guarded secret. Suffice it to say that it worked. The technical aspects of my job are also classified. What I had to do was rather complex but not at all difficult."

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To his credit, not once during my entire relating of my story did Jason interrupt me or interject in any way. He focused directly on me and listened unconditionally.

"David came to me one day shortly after I arrived. He told me he had Something to show me. He led me into the room that housed the time machine. There was a shelf on one wall. On the shelf was a vase filled with flowers. David told me he'd be right back. He climbed into the time machine, manipulated some controls, and the machine began to whir. I'd never seen the machine in operation before. I just couldn't take my eyes off it. There was an instant in which the machine seemed to blink out, but only for an instant. Soon the whirring subsided and David stepped out. He told me to keep my eye on the vase. I watched it for nearly ten minutes. Then, slowly, the vase began to fade. Within seconds it disappeared completely. I asked him how he did it. He told me that he traveled to yesterday at this time and simply put the vase in a deep desk drawer. He pointed to the desk. I opened the bottom right desk drawer and, sure enough, there was the vase, flowers and all. He went on to explain that, when you travel to a point in the past and you cause an event to occur, that event becomes apparent in the here and now at exactly the same time. That's called temporal simultaneity. The hours vary in the past and present depending on the corresponding time zones, but the events are indeed simultaneous. He then told me that the machine was not only a time travel machine, it was also a time displacement machine. The machine could be programmed with a delay from none at all to up to a full hour, so the event's occurrence could be seen in the present even by the traveler after his or her return. The traveler was not relegated to viewing the event only in the past. The traveler could see the event for himself in the present. Needless to say, I was quite impressed."

The flight attendant interrupted at this time. "Would you like something to drink, gentlemen? I said I'd like espresso (I really wanted a double bourbon, straight). Jason asked for green tea.

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I went on. "At first, all seemed well among the others, but undercurrents soon showed themselves. Sadly, James was a functional alcoholic. For how long he'd been, I never found out. He actually did very little in the way of research, or in the way of any work at all. I hadn't noticed it at first, but he seemed to be depressed much of the time. And he wasn't the least bit talkative.

"Stephen, on the other hand, talked freely. His ego saw to that. He was also quite arrogant. He treated his brother with utter contempt and he wasn't at all subtle about it. Stephen never stopped letting everyone know that he was the man in charge.

"Alfred was his father's son. He was to David as Stephen was to James. Alfred took great pleasure in needling David. He loved to remind David that Uncle Stephen was the big cheese. He especially liked to needle David about his dad, James. 'Care for another whiskey?'

"David, although good natured, was stoical. He took everything in stride, but when all was said and done, he took everything that was dealt him, like it or not. The one thing that gave him pleasure was traveling in time. Alfred had also traveled in time but he didn't like to. I think he was afraid that he might one day be stranded in another era with no way back to his own time. Thus, Alfred never used time travel against David. He didn't want it to regurgitate back to himself. Alfred was more interested in the financial aspects of the venture. In short, he liked money."

Our drinks arrived at this time. We paid and began partaking.

"David and I were sipping coffee at a Starbucks one day," I continued. "We were reminiscing about our high school days. We had a lot of really good laughs. Then, without warning, he became angry and sullen. David then opened up to me as never before, not even in the old days. He told me that it was his father who had dreamed up the concept for the time machine, but his uncle Stephen had somehow pulled the carpet out from under James and secured the patents for the time machine and all its processes. David told me that, although he loved his father very much, he was ashamed of him. His father, he told me, was always too easy going and he let Stephen manipulate him way too much. David also told me that he hated his uncle and his cousin with all the passion in his soul. He said, 'Uncle Stephen is an unadulterated son of a bitch! And as for Alfred: like father, like son. God, how I hate them!' David said then that he was going to get even with his uncle and his cousin. He swore he'd have the last laugh. Then, as quickly as his ire had arisen, it dissipated. The conversation turned to pleasanter things. I figured he'd just been venting.

"A couple of days later, David told me that he was going to take a time trip. I asked him how far back and he told me thirty-five years. I asked him why. He told me that, if he was successful, I'd see it all after he got back. He definitely piqued my curiosity. Again, I was hooked, as when I was first told of the research.

"David stepped into the machine. It whirred...it blinked...the whirring slowed to a halt...and then David stepped out. He had the sort of smile on his face I hadn't seen since high school. It was almost sinister. I asked him if he'd been successful. He told me to watch and see. I asked him what he did. He told me that he went back to a time, a time before Alfred had been born, before he, David, had been born, indeed, before Uncle Stephen had even been married. He had a look of smug satisfaction when he told me, 'I killed my uncle before he was my uncle.' My God! I was struck more than dumb! I was utterly and completely overwhelmed! He also told me that he had set the displacement delay for half an hour because he wanted to be there when his uncle and cousin dissolved. I have to admit, despite my initial shock, I was completely fascinated, and I was ever so curious to see what would happen. Time's famous paradox put to the test."

Then came another interruption. "What would you like for dinner," the flight attendant asked. "Nothing for me," I said. "I'll eat later."

Jason too declined to eat.

"Jason," I said. "We'll eat after the flight. It'll be on me."

Jason chuckled, "I never turn down a free meal. Thanks!"

I continued on. "David had timed his excursion to take place just before the weekly budget and status meeting so that we'd all be together in the same place whenever whatever happened would happen. These meetings were called and controlled by Stephen. I never liked meetings and I felt we could have done quite well without these. Here again, was another control mechanism for Stephen. The meetings fed his ego. As David already had, I was learning to despise Stephen.

"The meeting droned on, but for once I wasn't bored. I was intent on watching the events that were about to unfold. I didn't have long to wait. The half hour was just about up.

"It wasn't a sudden thing. It was kind of gradual. And with my adrenalin pumping the way it was, it all seemed to happen in slow motion. As David had planned, indeed predicted, Stephen and Alfred began to fade. Simultaneously (I nearly missed it), to my absolute, utter disbelief, dismay and horror, David began to fade as well. My brain became pabulum. The three of them faded ever so slowly, it seemed, until there was nothing left at all. Only James remained, and he was now somehow different. I could see none of the old melancholia. His timeline had changed. He was oblivious to what had just transpired. I don't know if he still knew me. I wasn't about to wait around and find out.

"Bidding no goodbyes, I packed my things and left quietly that same day. That was yesterday. I booked today's flight and here I am. So tell me, Jason, where could they be? Did they ever exist at all?"

Jason thought a moment, then spoke. "I don't doubt your story. I've seen a great many strange things during my life and my investigations. Can I help you? I don't think so. The paranormal world is a world of spirits and telepathic connections. Time travel, in and of itself, is a world that follows physical laws, however obscure, and does not touch the occult in any way. However, those who travel in time can encounter the spiritual realm in any timeline. Did Stephen, Alfred and David ever really exist? I'd say yes and no. They did and they didn't. They existed until they were erased through a paradox in time and so they never ever really existed. That doesn't make any sense at all, I know. Nevertheless... Where are they now? I don't know. The one thing I do know is this: if Stephen, Alfred and David did exist at all, from what you've told me, David was right. Stephen truly was a son of a bitch."