

The House on Infinity Street

Allen M. Steele

I heard this story from my late friend Shelby Weinberg. Like myself, Shel was a science fiction writer. If his byline doesn't ring any bells, though, don't feel ignorant; not many SF fans knew him by that name. Even the pseudonym he used, Hamilton Yale, has become obscure; his novels went out of print years ago, and his short fiction is seldom anthologized any more. Shel and his literary alter ego have become just two more victims of corporate American publishing; for every mega-bestselling author whose books take up entire shelves at your local Barnes & Noble, there's a multitude of others whose life work has disappeared as surely as if it's been dumped into a landfill.

But while he was among the living, Shelby Weinberg was a regular at science fiction conventions, particularly in the Northeast. Most cons in New England are reader-oriented, so if you're older than fifty and still get your SF fix primarily from books and magazines instead of TV, movies, or games, you might recognize Shel as the face behind Hamilton Yale, who wrote stacks of Signet, Ace, and Ballantine paperbacks.

Shel lived in Worcester when I knew him, but he was a native New Yorker. If the Brooklyn accent didn't give him away, the Yankees cap he defiantly wore in Red Sox country did. It takes guts to sit in the cheap seats at the Fenway and heckle the Sox, but Shel had 'em. Guts, that is; common sense is another matter entirely.

That said, Shelby was one of the finest writers I've ever known, and one of the first I met on the con circuit when I became a writer myself. At the first con I attended as a pro, Boskone in 1989, our mutual friend Frank M. Robinson introduced me to the short, barrel-chested older gent whom I'd only known until then as Hamilton Yale. This was just before a panel the three of us were put on together, and after that Shel and I became friends. Until he passed away in '04, the two of us were frequent co-panelists; I guess con committees knew that Steele and Weinberg could be counted on to entertain the fans for an hour or so.

That's how I heard this story. Shel didn't tell it to me during a panel, though, but later, after we'd gone off by ourselves to have a drink in the hotel bar. If he ever told anyone other than his late wife Phyllis and maybe a colleague his own age like Frank, I don't know. Considering how

we've lost most of the Golden Age SF writers over the last several years, I may be the last person alive to know about Graystone Literary Services.

And perhaps that's just as well.

* * *

It happened this way:

Shel and I were at Albacon, a small SF convention in upstate New York that's been an annual get-together of New England SF fans and writers for many years. As usual, the program chair, our departed friend Wombat—his real name was Jan Howard Finder, but hardly anyone called him that—had put the two of us on a panel along with our colleagues Catherine Asaro and Hal Clement (another person who went by a different name, Harry Stubbs, when he wasn't in the SF social scene).

I guess Wombat was stuck for fresh ideas that year, because the subject he picked for the four of us to discuss is one of the oldest and most worn out: "Where Do You Get Your Ideas?" Writers hate, hate, *bate* to get asked that because, when it comes right down to it, no one who writes for a living can really answer it well. Oh, they can *try*, but they rarely want to admit the truth about whatever that true thing might be. Which is worse: admitting that you got the brainstorm for that Hugo and Nebula-winning novella of yours while sitting on the crapper reading *Detective Comics*, or that you quietly lifted it from one of Shakespeare's less-known plays? Most of the time, though, you really just don't know, which is an answer that's both honest and unsatisfying at the same time. Try telling someone that and you'll get an incredulous look; either they'll think you're an idiot or they'll suspect you have something to hide.

So I could've strangled Wombat for giving us that topic. Catherine, Hal, Shelby, and I gave it our best, but none of us came back with anything that even remotely answered the question. And since it was a panel topic that often comes up at SF conventions, it was only inevitable that someone—I forget who it was; it may have even come from an audience member, since there were a few novice writers among them—delivered the reply we've all heard before: "I get my ideas from Schenectady."

That line has often been attributed to Harlan Ellison, who delivered it on the same panel at a different convention untold years ago. According to legend, Harlan told the audience, with a totally straight face, that he got the ideas for his stories from a mail-order operation in Schenectady, New York, that specializes in selling ideas to professional authors: you send 'em some loot, and in return they send you a story idea that you flesh out into a salable story. Harlan claimed that several people actually believed him; they even asked for the company's name, address, and how much they charged.

It's a great one-liner, one that never fails to get a laugh from those who've never heard it before, so it earned a knowing chuckle from the audience when it was reiterated once again. But then Shel muttered something under his breath; if he hadn't been sitting beside me, I might not have heard him.

"Not Schenectady," he said softly. "Deerfield."

I darted a look at him. "Deerfield, Mass?" I whispered. As it so happens, I live near Deerfield. A remark like that is bound to get my attention.

Surprised that I'd heard him, Shel nodded reluctantly. He didn't say anything for a moment, though, like he was weighing whether or not to explain himself. Then he held a hand to his mouth and whispered back, "I'll tell you later, after this is over."

We got through the rest of the panel, and once the hour was up the four of us rose from the table and surrendered the room to the next panel coming in, Shel and I headed down to the hotel bar. Neither of us drank anymore—Shel, who'd given up booze before I was even born, was one of the senior colleagues who warned me that writers who are heavy drinkers almost always come to a bad end; I eventually took them seriously—so we went there because it was unlikely that fans would come there in midafternoon. Sure enough, the place was deserted except for the bartender, who fetched a Coke for me and an iced tea for Shel before returning his attention to the newspaper he'd spread out across the bar.

"So what's this about Deerfield?" I asked once we found seats at the table furthest from the

door. "That's close to where I live."

"Yeah, I know," Shel said. "Ever heard of Graystone Literary Services? Or a fella named Edward Graystone?" I shook my head. "Didn't think so . . . and I'd be worried if you did." He took a sip from his iced tea and used that as an excuse to think things over, then went on. "Look, Allen, I'll tell you all about it, but you gotta promise me something first."

"Sure. What is it?"

"Keep your mouth shut about this until I'm gone. After I've passed away, you can tell anyone you want, even write it up as a story . . . maybe you can make a few bucks. But till then, don't tell *anyone* what I'm about to tell you. Understand?"

"Okay, Shel. My lips are sealed."

A reluctant nod, then he let out his breath. "Okay, then, here goes . . ."

* * *

Shelby Weinberg was barely out of his teens when, around 1937, he decided to become a writer. A lot of writers I've known over the years got started when they were kids. I was just fifteen when I began sending my first stories to magazines, but I didn't make my first professional fiction sale until I was twenty-nine. Shel started as a teenager, too, but his learning curve was shorter than mine; he was just shy of his twentieth birthday when he made his first sale, a creepy little piece called "Your Heart Will Be My Dinner" for *Spicy Mystery Stories*.

With a title like that, you're not likely to get noticed by the Pulitzer committee. So like many other would-be literary giants, Shel sought to preserve his estimated reputation by hiding behind a pen name. Hence Hamilton Yale, which sounded very Connecticut white-bread and Ivy League and not at all like a second-generation Lithuanian Jew from Brooklyn.

To write for a living in the 1930s usually meant writing for the pulps. During the lean years of the Great Depression, few writers could not afford to refrain from banging out stories for a half-cent per word. Even those who'd later be regarded as great American writers, like Tennessee Williams, Dorothy Parker, or Raymond Chandler, wrote pulp fiction. And not just one kind of story either; pulp writers couldn't afford to specialize in only a single genre.

So Shelby Weinberg (aka Hamilton Yale and also Lt. John Morgan Stern USN, Maxwell T. McCoy, and Shirley Westfield), who'd lately moved from his family's house in Brooklyn to a one-room apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, wrote sea adventures and westerns and romance and science fiction. The last was his favorite genre, and Shel would continue writing SF as Hamilton Yale long after Stern, McCoy, and Westfield died (as Stephen King later put it) of cancer of the pseudonym. After a rocky start in which he had twice as many rejections as sales, he finally learned his craft well enough that he was able to successfully produce two or three 4,000 to 6,000-word stories a month, or a 40,000-word magazine novel in six weeks. Shel wasn't quite the fiction factory that better-known writers like Earl Stanley Gardner, Frank Gruber, or L. Ron Hubbard were, but readers liked his stuff and editors found him an agreeable person to work with, so while many young men his age were standing in soup lines or breaking their backs in WPA make-work projects, Shelby Weinberg was able to not only support himself but even help pay his family's bills as well, which was important since his father had died shortly after the stock-market crash.

Writing for the pulps was a tough racket, though, and guys like Shel needed all the help they could get. One of the places they got it was from the American Fiction Guild. This was an early writers organization, a precursor to later groups like the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America or the Mystery Writers of America. Its members were almost exclusively writers of popular fiction; literary luminaries such as Ernest Hemingway or John Steinbeck wouldn't have sat comfortably beside lesser talents like Lester Dent or Walter Gibson, even though the average issue of *Doc Savage* or *The Shadow* sold twice as many copies as *The Sun Also Rises* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. Almost all of them lived in the greater New York area, which in those days was pretty much a prerequisite for a career pulp writer.

"The AFG's big draw was its monthly luncheon," Shel told me as we sat in the corner of the hotel, nursing our respective nonalcoholic drinks. "Once a month, we'd get together, about seventy-five to a hundred writers, at the dining room of the 44th Street Hotel. Lunch was fifty cents

a plate, a little steep—”

“Oh, yeah, right.” I’d just seen the bar’s lunch menu. Eight dollars for a cheeseburger; three bucks for fries.

“Hey, this was back when a lotta times your lunch was Automat tomato soup.” He caught my questioning look. “You went to an Automat, snared a bottle of Heinz 57 from a table, shook about half of it into a bowl, and poured hot water over it. Stir it up and viola, tomato soup.” Now I knew why Shel always cleaned his plate, even when he wasn’t all that hungry. “The monthly dues were cheap, though, and the first meeting was free. And if you couldn’t pay your dues that month ’cause no one was buying your stuff, you could always plead your case with the president or treasurer and they’d cut you a break.”

“Okay, so what was the benefit of belonging to the AFG? Other than complaining about editors . . . I’m assuming you did a lot of that, too.”

“Things were less competitive in the old days,” Shel said. “Everyone knew each other, and while we had the usual rivalries and cliques and so forth, there was pretty much an understanding that we were all in it together. Besides, the pulp market was so big . . . seriously, there were dozens upon dozens of mags back then . . . no one ever felt things were so crowded that you had to knock down the other guy to get ahead.”

“Must have been nice.” I was thinking of the way SFWA had become lately.

“Yeah, it was, and one of the ways we used to help each other was by swapping story ideas. Y’know, everyone understood that there were very few plots or plot twists that were truly unique, and there wasn’t any one of us so brilliant that his ink-well never ran dry. We also knew that the pulp editors couldn’t read *everything* being published, not even in their own genres. So if a buddy of yours was hurting for an idea or a plot twist and not feeling particularly inspired that week, you’d help him out by telling him something that worked for you lately. Didn’t have to be much, just a good hook or a neat gimmick—”

“Like a dagger made out of ice, so that the murder weapon melts by the time the cops show up.” That’s one of my favorites from detective pulps; I’ve lost count of how many variations I’ve seen of that one.

“Uh-huh. So long as your buddy didn’t submit his story to the same editor who bought your version, he could get away with it. What was great about this system was, if you gave another Guild member an idea, it was tacitly understood that, when you got stuck yourself somewhere down the line, you could hit him up for an idea because now he owed you one.”

“Bet a lot of readers thought you guys were stealing from each other.”

“Sure they did, and they still do. But it wasn’t stealing or even borrowing so much as it was taking out a loan, because if you got an idea from your buddy, he could always come back to you later if and when he came up short in the idea department.” He smiled as he spoke, remembering days of old and friends long passed.

“Nice system.” I couldn’t help but be envious. I’d given ideas to other writers, too, but not always voluntarily.

“Yes, it was.” Then the smile faded. “But Graystone Literary Services . . . that was something else altogether.”

* * *

Shel had been making a living as a pulp fiction writer for three years when the inevitable finally happened: he got blocked.

It’s a rare wordsmith who never gets writer’s block. They’re right up there with guys who sell the very first story they send out; sure, it can happen, but you have as much chance of winning an eight-figure lottery with a single scratch-card you’ve bought at random. Any writer who tells you they never get blocked is telling a fib. We all do; some just get it worse than others.

That’s what happened to Shelby Weinberg. One day, he ran dry, just like that. He sat down at his desk to begin a story, and nothing came out. He knew *what* he wanted to do, knew what he had to do, but words failed him. He tried all the little tricks writers often do when they come up short—take a walk, eat a sandwich, read the paper, take a hot shower followed by a cold rinse—and nothing worked. Even when he tried to write a different story—that’s my trick, and

it seldom fails—all he did was become frustrated even more. He was blocked, but good.

“To make matters worse,” Shel went on, “I’d just cracked *Astounding*. This was shortly after Campbell took over—” he meant John W. Campbell, Jr., one of the most important editors the science fiction field has ever had “—and only last week I’d gone down to Street & Smith Building to have a meeting with him. Mr. Campbell told me that he liked the short story I’d sent him last month and he was buying it, and that he wanted to see more from me. And when you’ve got someone like Campbell paying attention to you, you don’t keep him waiting. He gets another story from you and he gets it ASAP.”

I understood. The Street & Smith pulps were among the best-paying in the industry, so breaking into *Astounding* and its sister fantasy magazine *Unknown* was something everyone who wrote genre fiction tried to do. But Campbell demanded a higher standard from his writers; you couldn’t just dust off some oater you failed to sell to *Wild West Weekly*, turn the sheriff into a space sheriff and the cattle rustlers into Martians, and expect to sell the lousy thing to *Astounding* the way you would to *Planet Stories*. So Shel’s problem wasn’t negligible. He had rent to pay and groceries to buy, and nobody who writes for a living can afford to sit back and wait for inspiration to arrive on the wings of an angel.

“As it so happened, the monthly meeting of the AFG was coming up. So after banging my head on my desk for a week or so, I went down to the 44th Street Hotel. I was too broke to pay my monthly dues, but the secretary let me slide, and Norvell Page—” Norvell W. Page, the Guild president; as Grant Stockbridge, he was the legendary author of *The Spider* series “—spotted me fifty cents for lunch. When he asked why I was hurting and I told him, Page took me aside and let me know about Graystone Literary Services.”

“Sounds like a literary agency.”

Shel nodded. “That’s what I thought, too, but Page explained that it was something different.”

Page told Shel that Graystone Literary Services operated out of a post-office box in Deerfield, Massachusetts. It specialized in just science fiction; no other genres, not even fantasy or horror. How it worked was that a writer would send a letter to this P.O. box, introducing himself and explaining his problem, and enclose a self-addressed and stamped envelope. If he was fortunate, a few days later his SASE would come back, and when he opened the envelope, what he found inside was a story idea.

“Well . . . not exactly an idea,” Shel said. “It wasn’t like someone had written a story synopsis or even a hook. If that’s all you wanted, you could get that from Plotto.” That was an infamous writing gimmick of that period, a wheel-shaped cardboard “plot generator” used by hacks who cranked out nothing but garbage; no self-respecting writer used it, not even in desperation. “What you’d get was a single sheet of typewritten paper, and on it was a short paragraph describing something . . . an imaginary piece of technology, a fictional scientific discovery, or something else that was futuristic and didn’t exist yet . . . that you were to use as a springboard for a science fiction story.”

“That’s it? That’s all?”

“Uh-huh . . . that and a small printed card, instructing you to remit payment to Graystone Literary Services in the form of 10 percent of your story’s payment once it sold. Cash only, no checks.”

In my head, I quickly did the math. Back in those days, a six-thousand-word story sold to *Astounding* for a penny a word—one of the top rates in the pulp business—would earn sixty dollars. That doesn’t sound like much, but in the ’30s sixty bucks was a typical month’s rent. So 10 percent of that came to six dollars, which was sufficient to keep you eating for a week so long as you didn’t go out for a steak dinner at Delmonico’s.

“There wasn’t an invoice?” I asked, and Shel shook his head. “Sounds like they were operating on the honor system.”

“They were, but Page warned me not to even think about welching. Whoever these people were, apparently they kept a close eye on the pulps. They read everything being published, and if they spotted a story that made use of the item they sent you and you hadn’t paid for it, the next time you hit ’em up for an idea, your letter would be returned unopened. Not only that, but the

Guild president . . . namely, Page himself . . . would soon get a note from them, informing him of what had happened and threatening to blackball every Guild member until the scofflaw coughed up.”

“Yeah, I imagine people would be reluctant to cheat if they figured the Guild would come down hard on them.”

“Right. Losing face in the Guild was something you wanted to avoid. So I thought it over while I ate the first decent meal I’d had all week, and when lunch was over I went back to Page and asked for the address. When I got home, I wrote a dear-sir letter to Graystone, introducing myself and telling him that Norvell Page had recommended their services to me, and that I understood the terms of the agreement. Would they please help me? I sent off the letter and went back to staring at my typewriter.”

Shel paused to get the bartender’s attention and ask for some peanuts—at least they were free—then went back to his story. “I didn’t have to wait long. Not even a week went by before my SASE came back, this time return-stamped with the Graystone name and their address in Mass. When I opened the letter, I found two things inside: the card I told you about and a folded sheet of paper. Just one thing on it, one little typewritten paragraph.”

“And that was . . . ?”

Shel closed his eyes and was quiet for a moment, digging deep into his memory. “‘In the future.’” he recited after a few seconds, “‘there exists a small device, no larger than a deck of cards, that many people carry with them. It will answer any question spoken to it. This device can be used anywhere and understands any language, and it enables you to access a global information bank. The only problem is that the answer you receive is not always to the question you asked, and the information is sometimes either wrong or inaccurate.’”

“That’s it?” I asked, and Shel nodded. “That’s not a story. It’s just a hook.”

“Of course not, but any SF writer worth his salt can take something like that and build a decent story around it. Besides, that’s not the point. What does that thing sound like?”

“Like a smartphone.” Then I understood what he was driving at. “Well, I’ll be damned . . . are you telling me they described something like an iPhone or an Android *in 1939*?”

“Yup. That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Back then, of course, I had no idea that this thing was very much like something we wouldn’t see for another seventy years. It just sounded like a swell idea I could turn into a story.”

Which was what Shel did. This time, when he took a walk around the block, he returned with a story to write. He wrote it about three days, called it “Information”—one-word titles like that were popular at *Astounding* at the time—then went down to the Street & Smith Building to hand-deliver it to Campbell himself, a common practice that was acceptable among New York writers during the pulp era. Campbell liked the story and bought it, and *Astounding’s* readers enjoyed it enough that, in the magazine’s monthly readers poll, they gave it a second-place win, just behind the latest story by Anson MacDonald, aka Robert A. Heinlein.

Because the reader’s poll paid a modest cash bonus to its winning authors, the windfall was sufficient to reimburse himself for the 10 percent commission Shel was obligated to send Graystone. He wasn’t blocked any more, but he liked not having to scrounge for inspiration on his own, so not long after he sent six bucks to the address in Deerfield, he asked again for another germ for a SF tale.

“This time, what I got was ‘a space station constructed in Earth orbit by America, Russia, Europe, and Japan, which has cost billions of dollars to build and operate but can only be occupied by no more than six people at a time.’”

Something chilly slithered down my back. “That’s the ISS,” I said quietly. A space station that should have been much more than it actually turned out to be. Maybe China will get it right if they ever build their own permanent orbital station.

“Uh-huh. That’s a pretty fair forecast, I’d say. That story practically wrote itself. I called it ‘Population Explosion’ and sent it off to Campbell, but he didn’t like it as much as ‘Information.’”

“Really? What was his beef?”

He shrugged. “Campbell wouldn’t accept the premise that all those countries would spend

so much money and put so much effort into building a space station that had such limited use. I tried to sell it to *Amazing*, but it wasn't exciting enough for Ray Palmer, who wanted me to have the place taken over by hostile Martians. I tried to sell it to *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder*, but it didn't have the kind of swashbuckling action that would've landed it at *Planet*, and *TW* wanted more girls and ray-guns. Even *Astonishing* kicked it back, and I thought Fred Pohl would take *anything*. In the end, I had to settle for a sale to *Marvel Stories*, the lowest rung on the ladder." Shel chuckled and shook his head. "Marty Goodman couldn't publish a science fiction magazine worth a crap. He finally gave up and folded the magazine, then got into the comics racket and recycled *Marvel Stories* as the title for his first release. He didn't do too badly in the end."

"So I've heard. And did you keep buying material from Graystone?"

"Not after that, no. The check from *Marvel* was so low, it hurt to have to carve out 10 percent to send them. And by then I didn't really need them any longer. The two things they'd sent me were enough to help me break the block, so I decided not to use their service anymore."

But by then, Shel's curiosity had been aroused. He started asking other Guild members if they'd ever used Graystone Literary Services, and while he wasn't surprised to find that others had, too, he was interested in the ideas they'd been sent. "I'm not going to give you those writers' names," Shel told me, "but some of the things they were told were . . . um, let's see, a means of focusing ordinary light-rays so that they became thin, powerful beams capable of a number of different purposes—"

"That's a laser."

"Panels that resemble ordinary glass but, when hooked up to an electrical conversion system and left outdoors, are capable of turning ordinary sunlight into usable electrical power—"

"Solar panels."

"Semi-autonomous robots that can be used to explore the deepest parts of the oceans, and even reach and explore sunken ocean liners like the *Titanic*—"

"DSRVs . . . holy crap, Shel, are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. And I'm not the only person in the Guild who got wind of this and began to wonder what was going on." Shel paused. "The other guy was J.J. O'Leary. He was a good friend, but I wish like hell I'd never met him."

* * *

Joseph J. O'Leary—J.J. to his friends—was another member of the American Fiction Guild, one of the youngest of a predominantly young crowd. He was a third-generation Irish kid from the Bronx, a young tough guy who'd managed to make his way off the street corner and into pulps by way of a good imagination and swift hands at the typewriter. Joseph J. O'Leary is not well-remembered today among the fictioneers of the '30s—when I went looking for his stories, I didn't find them in any of the retrospective pulp anthologies, not even the massive ones edited by David Hartwell and Otto Penzler—but it wasn't for lack of effort on his part. Something else happened.

"J.J. was a B-list writer trying to make it onto the A-list," Shel said. "He was good but not great, y'know what I'm saying? He could tell a yarn that was decent enough for what it was, but most of the time you'd forget what you'd just read ten minutes after you finished it. Most of his who-dunits were bought as filler material for lower-rung hero mags like *Phantom Detective* or *Operator 5*, while his science fiction was usually in *Thrilling Wonder* or *Startling*. He produced a lot of stories but I can't remember his byline making it to the cover more than once or twice, and he never got the cover story itself, not even once."

"That must have burned," I said.

"For a hard-charging young gun like him? You bet. And man, did he ever want to crack the big leagues . . . *Black Mask* most of all, since that was the place where writers like Hammett and Chandler got their start."

As he spoke, Shel snapped open a peanut and popped the nuts, one at a time, into his mouth, dropping the discarded shells into an empty bowl the bartender had brought over for the purpose. "But *Black Mask's* editor was Joseph T. Shaw, and he was just as hard-to-please as Campbell was

over at *Astounding*. *Black Mask* was the place where the hard-boiled school of detective fiction got its start in the '20s, just as *Amazing* was where modern science fiction got its start about the same time, and Shaw had very definite ideas about what he expected from his writers. And while J.J.'s dicks . . . oh, stop grinning, you know what I mean . . . J.J.'s detectives could shoot, swear, and screw with the best of 'em, he wasn't very good at setting up and solving the kind of complex, twist-ending mystery story that Shaw knew his readers expected from *Black Mask*."

"I think I understand," I said. "His stories had polish but not much substance."

"Uh-huh, and polish can only get you so far." Shel reached for another peanut. "It didn't help that the kid seemed to believe that he could crack *Black Mask* if only he could impress Shaw in some sort of personal way. Since Shaw was a regular at the Guild meetings . . . I don't think he was a dues-paying member, but no one would've dared to turn him away if he showed up; hell, half the members would've arm-wrestled each other for the privilege of buying him lunch . . . that was the best way J.J. figured he had of showing off. So when he heard about Graystone Literary Services—"

Shel suddenly got tired of peanuts. "I don't know how he got wind of them," he said as he dropped a half-open peanut back in the serving bowl and pushed it away. "Club like that, nothing stays secret for very long. I just know that he sidled up to me after a meeting. He pulls me aside and says, 'Hey, Shelby, I wanna find out what's behind this whole Graystone thing. What say you and me look into this?'"

"Why did he come to you?"

"Well, first, we were pals. Second, back when I was a kid, my folks used to send me off to summer camp in the Berkshires. J.J. figured that made me a expert in small-town New England, and seeing how his idea of rural living was a walk through Central Park, maybe I was." He shrugged. "I didn't care about impressing Shaw by solving a real-life mystery, but I have to admit that I was pretty curious myself about what lay behind Graystone. So I said, yeah, count me in, and a coupla weeks later we bought a couple of bus tickets for Deerfield."

Shel didn't say anything for a moment or two. He tucked his hands in his trouser pockets and stared at the bowl of peanuts, a frown across his aged face. Then he let out a quiet sigh.

"Stupidest thing I ever did," he said softly.

* * *

It was a sunny Wednesday in early autumn when Shel and J.J. caught a regional bus to Deerfield. Sitting in the very back of the groaning, swaying vehicle, the two of them quietly rehearsed their plans. However, they self-consciously avoided speculating where the trail might lead them or what they'd find. Neither of them came right out and admitted it, but it was clear that they both suspected the same thing.

Not only was someone in Deerfield selling ideas for science fiction stories, the ideas they sold had a certain ring of verisimilitude. Although it was too soon to tell whether the technology forecasted in those ideas would ever come true, they seemed just too damn *plausible*, even for a science fiction story. And if they weren't merely being concocted from thin air and gray matter, there was just one way someone would be able to come up with stuff like this in the first place.

"Time travel?" I asked, dropping my voice as far as it would go. Shel didn't respond verbally; he just closed his eyes and slowly nodded. "You can't be serious. Really, Shel . . ."

"Want me to finish?" He opened his eyes to glare at me. "Or do you wanna just tell me what a crazy old coot I am?"

My face felt warm. "Go on," I murmured and shut up. Shel coughed to clear his throat, then continued.

Shelby and J.J. hadn't been sitting on their hands for two weeks before they boarded the bus. They'd planned ahead. Shel began by asking other Guild members if any of them were familiar with the town of Deerfield, claiming it was research for a mystery story set in a real-life locale. None of the other writers knew much about the town, but it turned out that some of them knew a magazine illustrator from western Massachusetts: Hubert Rogers, a frequent cover artist for *Astounding*, *Unknown*, *Detective*, and other Street & Smith pulps. Rogers was from Whately, the next town over; he was able to tell Shel everything he needed to know about Deerfield,

including the location of the town post office and whether there happened to be an inn in town.

Meanwhile, J.J. devised a phony query letter to Graystone. Under the pseudonym “Brett Sterling”—a house-name occasionally used by Better Publications writers—J.J. asked for an idea for a science fiction story to be written for *Thrilling Wonder*. Since *TW* was a Better pulp, the implication was that one of their writers was blocked and needed help. This way, if J.J. and Shelby’s plan went awry, any correspondence sent to Norvell Page would concern a pseudonymous author. A bit sleazy, yes, but necessary if Shel and J.J. wanted to remain in good graces with the Guild.

Before sending the letter, J.J. combed the office supply stores of Manhattan until he found exactly what he wanted: a bright orange envelope, the sort one might use for a greeting card, so vivid that it could be seen from a distance. This was the one he used for the SASE; for good measure, he added a handwritten postscript to the typed letter, apologizing for using a leftover birthday-card envelope because he’d run out of the ones he normally used for business correspondence.

In speaking with other Guild members who’d used the service, Shel and J.J. had learned that queries were answered promptly, usually within a week. Estimating that it would take no more than three days for a letter mailed from New York to Deerfield, J.J. didn’t put the letter in the mail until just a couple of days before he and Shelby got on the bus to Massachusetts.

Deerfield was a country village in 1939 and still is today. Although nearby South Deerfield looks like any other small town in America, the original town that was founded in 1664 has changed little since colonial times. The regional bus that Shelby and J.J. boarded at Penn Station that morning dropped them off in front of the A.G. Pratt general store that afternoon. They were only two passengers to disembark, and no one paid much attention to two young men wearing city clothes and carrying cardboard suitcases.

As the bus rumbled away, they looked about at where they’d landed. To the right of the general store was a small hotel, the Pocumtuck Inn. To the left of the store was the post office, a small, square building with a gabled roof. A little farther down Old Main Street was rather forbidding Brick Church, its white steeple rising high above the surrounding oak and elm trees, their leaves blazing with autumnal color. A bronze Civil War monument stood in the middle of the town commons. It was late afternoon, so they could hear boys playing softball behind Deerfield Academy, the boarding school just across the commons. A few motorcars and even a horse-drawn farm wagon were parked in front of the Hall Tavern across the way.

The air held the faint aroma of fresh-cut hay and old manure carried upon a warm breeze drifting past the nearby farms and cow pastures. Just as Hubert Rogers had told them, there wasn’t much in Deerfield. It was a town where time stood still. A nice place in which to disappear.

They walked over to the inn. No other guests were checking in that day—Deerfield wasn’t yet a tourist destination—so they had their pick of rooms. J.J. asked the old gent who was the innkeeper to put them in an upstairs room with windows facing east. He claimed it was so they’d get the sun when it came up, but the real reason because he’d already observed that, from that side of the hotel, they could see the post office just sixty feet away. He and Shel confirmed this when the innkeeper took them upstairs; the post office’s front door was visible, and so they’d be able to easily observe anyone coming or going.

“J.J. was thinking like the detective in one of his stories,” Shelby said. “We went across the street for dinner that evening, and while we were there, J.J. asked a few questions and learned what we needed to know.”

“And no one was suspicious?” I asked.

“Nope. We were posing as a couple of real estate agents from New York. The Depression had caused quite a number of farm foreclosures and a lot of property in town was up for sale, so no one was suspicious. He and I had rehearsed our line of inquiry on the way up, and the tavern owner and a couple of townspeople answered all the questions we’d come up with . . . well, except one. Nobody had ever heard of a company called Graystone.”

“If they were farmers, I doubt they would’ve known about something like that or cared if they

did.”

“Uh-huh, but we did learn that the mail bags were dropped off at the depot by the 7:15 north-bound. The town postmaster was always waiting there at the depot to pick it up. She’d drive straight to the post office to start sorting it out, and the mail would all be in their proper boxes by 11:00 A.M. at the latest. People usually started coming by the post office to pick up their mail shortly before lunchtime, and the post office stayed open until 5 P.M., when the postmaster locked the doors and went home.”

Shelby smiled. “Once we had that information, we were ready. We just hoped that our timing was right, that our mysterious benefactor had already received J.J.’s letter and was ready to answer it.”

* * *

The following morning after an early breakfast, Shel and J.J. left the hotel to take a short walk around town. They did this to maintain the fiction that they were real estate agents scouting for property, but their real purpose was to acquaint themselves with Deerfield. They also searching for any signs outside the homes they strolled past for Graystone Literary Services; no such luck. They were soon back at the Deerfield Inn, ready to put their plan into action.

Shelby had brought along a pair of binoculars, and the two had decided that one guy would sit at the window and watch the post office while the other guy would stay downstairs, sitting on the front porch rocker with the local newspaper. If and when the person upstairs spotted someone walking into the post office with a bright orange envelope in hand—the SASE of the query letter J.J. had mailed just a few days earlier—he’d whistle to the guy on the porch. The second man would drop the paper, hurry over to the post office, and go in. If possible, Shelby and J.J. hoped this person would get there in time to catch that individual opening P.O. Box 450 and removing mail addressed to Graystone Literary Service. If not, he’d wait for the other guy to come over from the hotel. The two of them would then confront the owner of the P.O. box and ask the questions they wanted to have answered.

They tossed a penny to see who’d remain in the room to act as spotter. J.J. lost the coin toss, so it was his job to sit at the window. Shel went back downstairs, found that morning’s issue of the *Greenfield Recorder*, and went out onto the porch. He pulled one of the rocking chairs over to where he could clearly see their room; it was in the southeast corner of the second floor, so J.J. was able to watch the post office through one window and signal Shel through the other. So Shel sat down, opened the paper, and waited.

An hour went by, then another. Alone and in pairs, the citizens of Deerfield, Massachusetts, arrived at the local post office to get their mail, part of their daily routine. It was a small town and the weather was pleasant, so just about everyone walked there; only two or three times did anyone drive a car and park it outside, and those who did were also buying groceries and sundry other items at the general store. Shel quickly realized that he and J.J. made the right decision. From the downstairs porch, he couldn’t see the post office clearly enough to tell whether someone was carrying an orange envelope. Although there was a bench and a couple of rocking chairs outside the general store, they were perpetually occupied by a handful of old duffers who obviously parked themselves there each and every day, eating sunflower seeds and making conversation with anyone who’d stop and chat.

Shel had been on the porch for a little more than two hours, and was beginning to think about signaling J.J. to switch with him for a few minutes so that he could go inside and use the restroom, when he spotted the orange envelope.

“I saw it before J.J. did because the guy carrying it was holding it in his right hand along with some other mail,” Shel said. “So his body and the rest of his mail prevented J.J. from seeing it right up to the moment until he stepped off the sidewalk and started walking toward the post office’s front steps, and I was already on my feet when I heard J.J. whistle.”

The man carrying the orange envelope was about thirty to thirty-five years old, tall and gaunt to the point of being unhealthy. He walked with long strides, shoulders hunched over and head thrust forward as if he was always about to duck under a door lintel. He wore a tweed jacket and a plain brown tie, and his tan felt hat covered dark hair cut short on the sides but touching his

shirt collar in the back. Watching him, Shel was reminded of the actor Jimmy Stewart.

The thin man already disappeared inside the post office by the time Shel got there. Shel glanced back to see if J.J. was coming, but his friend was nowhere in sight. Shel hesitated, decided that he couldn't afford to wait another moment, and followed his quarry into the post office.

The front lobby was small and brightly lit, the midday sun streaming through a pair of front windows. There were two townspeople in the lobby when Shel came in: a heavysset older woman who'd stopped at the service window to chat with the postmaster, and the man Shel was following. He'd just collected a handful of letters from Box 450 when Shel came in, and as Shel watched he turned to the service window, and—politely excusing himself to the lady, who stepped aside for him—pushed the orange envelope through the outgoing-mail slot along with the other letters he'd brought with him.

The thin man paused to leaf through the handful of mail he'd just collected from his box. Shel covered for himself by putting a couple of pennies on the service window counter and asking the postmaster for a postcard and a stamp. He'd just done this when the door opened again; the thin man, still looking through his mail, nearly collided with J.J., who'd finally made his way over from the hotel.

They pardoned each other and, as the door started to swing shut behind the thin man, J.J. caught Shel's eye and gave him a questioning look. Shel silently nodded toward the man who'd just departed, then both of them hurried out of the post office. The thin man had just reached the narrow sidewalk and turned right when Shel and J.J. came up behind him.

Many years later, Shelby Weinberg recalled the exchange as if it had happened just yesterday:

Excuse me, sir?

Yes?

Are you with Graystone Literary Service?

Excuse me?

Graystone Literary Service ... is that your business?

Umm ... yes, that's my business, but I don't see how it's any of yours.

No offense, mister. It's just that ... well, we're a couple of writers, and Shelby here has been one of your clients, and we'd like to speak with you.

No, I'm afraid not. I don't wish to be rude, but I don't want to talk about this. Now if you'll pardon me ...

Where do you get your ideas?

I make them up and sell them to people like you. That's all. Good day.

"Then he turned and walked away," Shel said, "leaving J.J. and me standing there. He clearly didn't want to talk to us, and if it had been up to me alone, I would've dropped the matter then and there."

"But I take it J.J. didn't want to let it go," I said.

Shel shook his head. "He felt like we'd come a long way, and somehow that entitled us to an explanation. The two of us stood there and argued about it for a few seconds until finally J.J. noticed that this fellow had already gone about fifty yards ... lucky for us he hadn't driven a car ... and was about to get away. So J.J. hurried after him, and that gave me no choice but to tag along."

The two young writers followed the thin man down Old Main Street past the church and the commons. The fellow was still poking through his mail, so he didn't look back, and Shel and J.J. didn't try to catch up but instead quietly shadowed him as if they were private eyes in one of their hard-boiled detective stories. Shortly after they passed the boys school, the thin man turned to the left and—failing to notice that he was being followed when he looked to see if any cars were coming—walked across the street to a narrow lane that intersected Old Main. Shel and J.J. quickened their pace to keep him in sight, but as they crossed the road, Shel happened to glance up at the street sign.

"I almost laughed out loud when I saw where we were," Shel said. "Wells Street. I mean, *of course* some guy we suspected of being a time traveler would have to live on Wells Street. What

could be more appropriate?"

Wells Street was a residential lane, just a couple of hundred yards long, ending at another intersection, this time with the state highway that divided Old Deerfield from South Deerfield. Unlike the eighteenth-century colonial saltboxes and nineteenth-century gothic manors that lined Old Main Street, the houses here were modest and more recently built, the sort of homes you'd find anywhere in small-town America. There were no sidewalks here, so the thin man walked along the roadside; Shel and J.J. hung back but kept him in sight.

They followed him to an ordinary, two-story house¹ and watched as he strode up up the front steps to the porch. He went in through the front door, which Shel noticed he hadn't bothered to lock behind him when he left; apparently no one locked their front doors in Deerfield, particularly not if they were just walking into town to get their mail. The two young writers waited until he'd disappeared, then followed him up the walk and onto the front porch. There was a small, unused mailbox beside the door, and within its name slot was a small piece of cardboard penciled *E. Graystone*.

"So J.J. knocks on the door," Shel said, "and a few seconds later this fellow Graystone opens it, and for a second or so he just stares at us with his mouth open. I start to say something, but he cuts me off. 'I thought I made myself clear,' he says. 'I don't wish to speak with you about my business. Now please go away and leave me alone.'"

He started to close the door, but J.J. was persistent. He literally planted his foot in the door the way a salesman would, and when Graystone tried to slam it hard enough to make him draw back his foot, J.J. planted his right hand against the door and stiffened his elbow. And all the while, he kept talking, telling Graystone again that he and Shel had come a long way to meet him, that Shel and many other writers had used the ideas he'd sold them for stories they'd published, and all they wanted to do was have a little chat about where and how he was getting his inspiration.

"And still he refused to talk," Shel went on, "only now he was angrier than before, because J.J. literally had his foot in the door and wasn't budging a bit. But then I heard a screen door open and slam shut, and when I looked about I saw that his next-door neighborhood had heard them carrying on and come out her side kitchen door to see what the matter was. Mr. Graystone noticed her, too, and apparently he didn't want to get anyone's attention, because he stepped out of the way and gestured for us to come in."

* * *

Shel paused to finish his iced tea. His straw made a slurping sound; the bartender heard this and looked up, and Shel pointed to his glass and nodded. "So now we're in his front room," he went on, "and I don't know what J.J. was expecting, but if he or I thought it was going to be like one of the futuristic stage-sets from *Metropolis* or *Things to Come*, we were disappointed, 'cause it didn't look like that at all. Just an ordinary room with ordinary furniture, a few antiques like the pair of wingback armchairs next to an RCA cabinet radio, but mostly the sort of stuff you'd order from the Sears catalog."

The bartender walked over and swapped J.J.'s empty tea glass for a full one. "So J.J. and Graystone keep going at it," Shel said, "with J.J. demanding to know how Graystone got his material, and Graystone telling him he'd get those swell ideas of his while in the bathtub or doing yardwork, but because he didn't have the talent to become a writer himself he'd sell 'em to writers instead. J.J. wasn't buying it, though, so he's talking and Graystone is talking back, and pretty soon neither of them were paying attention to me. So I begin to poke around."

"Next to the living room was a small parlor. I strolled in there, and it's obvious that it's been set up as a kind of home office. There's a rolltop desk, and on the desk is a Smith-Corona typewriter with a ream of paper to one side and a small stack of letters on the other, all of them unopened and addressed to Graystone Literary Services. And everywhere else in the room . . . on the sofa, on the coffee table, on built-in bookcase, even stacked up on the floor . . . are piles upon piles of science fiction magazines. *Amazing*, *Astounding*, *Astonishing*, *Thrilling Wonder*, *Fantastic*, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, even hero pulps like *Doc Savage*, *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, and *Captain Future* . . . he's got everything, some of them going back ten years

or more.”

“That must have been impressive.”

“It was, but . . . well, there was something about the room that seemed off. I didn’t know what it was, but I had a feeling that something that should’ve been there was missing. I couldn’t put my finger on it, though, but J.J. and Graystone were still going at it, so I kept looking around.”

Shel picked up his tea glass, took a sip, and went on. “Next to the parlor was the kitchen and connecting the two was a short hallway that was sort of a walk-through pantry, with food shelves on one side and the basement door on the other. I decided to peek into the kitchen and give it a little look-see, and on the way I lay my hand on the doorknob and tried to give it a little turn. The door was locked, though, which I thought was kinda weird . . . y’know why?”

I had to give it a moment’s thought. “Didn’t you say that Graystone walked in through the front door without unlocking it first?” I asked; Shel smiled and nodded. “So if he left his front door unlocked, why would he keep the basement door locked?”

“Yup. I noticed that, too. So that’s two peculiarities . . . or at least one that was obvious, because I still didn’t know what raised my hackles about the parlor. Anyway, the kitchen was next, and it was like the living room and the parlor. Everything seemed ordinary about it. In fact, it was even kinda old-fashioned. It had an icebox . . . the nonelectric, nonrefrigerated kind that kept things cold with a big cake of ice that would deliver a couple of times a week, y’know?”

I’d seen ones like that in museums, so I nodded. “Uh-huh, and even the oven is old school,” Shel continued. “Electric ovens were just coming in, so most homes didn’t have them yet. Even gas or propane ovens were something you’d see more often in the city than out in the country. So this one was a wood-fired oven, cast-iron, with a little stack of cut firewood stacked on the floor next to it. There’s also phone on the wall . . . and again, it’s the antique variety, with a speaker and a dial on the front and a receiver with a cord on the side.

“Anyway, everything in the kitchen looked normal, and I was just about to sneak back to the front hall where J.J. is arguing with Graystone when I did something no one ever thought twice about doing back then . . . I lit a cigarette.”

This was the 1930s. No one knew about the dangers of secondhand smoke, because no one knew about the link between cigarettes and cancer. Everyone smoked everywhere, and people seldom demanded that you to put out your smoke. “And I’d just taken a drag when heard a weird sound, like nothing I’d ever heard before . . . a loud beeping, rapid and high-pitched . . . coming from the ceiling above my head. And so I looked up, and there it was . . . a smoke detector.”

“A *smoke detector*?”

“That’s right. An ordinary, battery-powered smoke detector . . . in 1939.”

“Holy . . . so Graystone really *was* a time-traveller!”

“In retrospect, yes, that’s a pretty obvious conclusion. But since I hadn’t a clue what that small round thing attached to the ceiling was . . . I mean, I didn’t even realize that it was *plastic* . . . or what had caused it to start beeping and flashing a little red light, when Graystone came running into the kitchen, with J.J. right behind him. He sees me standing there, staring at this thing with my mouth hanging open, and his face goes white, and then he just snaps.”

“He lost his temper?”

“Uh-huh. He just goes berserk, starts screaming at J.J. and me. ‘Get out! Get out of my house! Get out right this instant!’ And he grabs each of us by the arm and shoves us across the kitchen and out the side door almost before any of us get a chance to even open it. ‘Go away, get out here! Never let me see you again!’”

“Sounds like you upset him just a bit.”

“Oh, yes, I’d say he was rather perturbed. And he wasn’t the only one. J.J. and I started walking back the way we came, but we’d just reached the end of Wells Street when here comes the town’s only police car, an old black Model-T with a star painted on the doors, and behind the wheel is the chief himself, fella name of Henry Hassler . . .” He chuckled and shook his

head. “Sorry, but I’ll never get over that name. Anyway, Mr. Graystone’s neighbor heard the commotion and became concerned, so she’d called it in, and when neither J.J. or I could give a good explanation for what we’d been doing at Graystone’s house, Chief Hassler put the cuffs on us and hauled us off to jail.”

* * *

Shelby and J.J. were arrested for trespassing on private property and spent the night in jail at the Deerfield police station. But the following morning, before Shel could suck it up and make a long-distance call home to Brooklyn and beg his older brother Jackie to travel up to Mass and post bail for him and J.J., they were released. It turned out that, just an hour earlier, Graystone had unexpectedly come down to the police station and talked things over with Chief Hassler, letting him know that he didn’t have anything against the two young men, and he didn’t want to press charges.

Once Graystone was gone, the chief opened the cell and let them out. He then drove Shelby and J.J. back to the hotel, where they were given ten minutes to gather their belongings and check out. Once they were done, the two writers were escorted to the train station, where Chief Hassler watched as they bought tickets to New York City. The chief waited on the platform with Shelby and J.J. until the 10:05 southbound arrived, and when it did, he instructed the conductor not to let them out of his sight until they reached Penn Station, and told Shel and J.J. that if either of them showed their faces in Deerfield again, he’d arrest them on sight and think of an appropriate charge later.

That should have been the end of it, but it wasn’t.

“All the way home,” Shel said, “I had to listen to J.J. rattle on about how he was certain, absolutely dead sure, that Graystone was from the future.”

“It sounds like you were unconvinced.” I’d finished my Coke some while ago and now I was absently chasing the melting cubes around the glass with my straw. “What about all the stuff you’d seen?”

“It wasn’t that I was unconvinced. Far from it. I was just as sure as J.J. was that Graystone was a time traveler, and it wasn’t just because that thing on the kitchen ceiling neither of us could identify and I wouldn’t see again for another forty years. I’d finally figured out what rubbed me wrong about his parlor.”

“What did you did see?”

“It wasn’t what I saw . . . it’s what I *didn’t* see. All those pulps, but not a single science book.”

At first I didn’t get it, then I thought it over for a moment or two. Anyone who writes science fiction professionally, or even as just a hobby, is bound to amass a collection of nonfiction science books, as both reference and inspiration. My own office has bookcases along three walls, stuffed with hundreds of books on space exploration, astronomy, physics, biology, chemistry, cybernetics, anthropology, and so forth, with almost as many in the basement. And my science library is modest compared to that of some of my colleagues. So even if Graystone was only feeding ideas to SF writers, then he ought to have science reference material of his own, not just a roomful of pulps.

That is, unless the things he was telling science fiction writers of 1939 were things that already existed in the future year from which he’d come. Then he’d need nothing more than his own memory and experience.

“So you had your proof—” I began, then stopped myself. “Oh.”

“Uh-huh . . . ‘oh’ exactly. We didn’t have a damn thing. The smoke detector could be made to disappear or explained away as something he’d invented himself. The absence of science books meant nothing, really. And as for whatever he had downstairs in the basement—” he shrugged “—I imagine he could have made that disappear, too.”

He paused, then sighed. “And in fact, it did.”

Shel and J.J. argued about what they’d seen, or didn’t see, all the way back to New York, and by the time their train rolled into Penn Station, they were no longer in agreement about what to do next. Shel had no desire to return to Deerfield. There was no way Graystone would ever

let him or J.J. back into his house, and Shel took seriously Chief Hassler's warning against showing their faces in town again. But J.J. was stubbornly insistent about going back. He was certain there was something in Graystone's basement that would absolutely prove that he was a chrononaut; this *must* be the reason why the door was locked. And since they now knew that Graystone left his house every day around noon to go to the post office, and that he usually left his front door unlocked when he did, this gave them a window of opportunity. All they'd need to do was jimmy open the basement door and . . .

Shel said no. Trespassing was one thing; breaking and entering was another. And he had no desire to do hard time at the Mass state prison. So he told J.J. that, whatever he intended to do, from now on he was on his own.

"J.J. was sore at me," Shel said. "Called me a chicken, said that I was missing a golden chance to really make a name for myself. But I don't think he was trying to enhance his literary reputation, such as it was. I think he'd become obsessed with the idea of finding someone from the future. 'If Graystone has a time machine, I want a ride in it' . . . he said that more than once. People who write science fiction generally have an innate curiosity about what may happen tomorrow, but J.J. didn't want to settle for speculation or educated guesses. He actually wanted to see for himself what lay ahead."

Shel paused to look away for a moment. "And who knows? Maybe he did . . . because I never saw him again."

* * *

A couple of weeks after Shel and J.J. returned to the city, the American Fiction Guild had its monthly luncheon. For the first time since he'd become a member, Joseph J. O'Leary didn't show up at the 44th Street Hotel.

"The moment I realized that he was a no-show," Shel said, "I knew something was wrong. J.J. *never* missed a meeting. If he'd fallen onto the subway tracks and lost both legs, he would've crawled there. As soon as the meeting was over, I went to his apartment. His door was locked and no one answered when I knocked, and his landlady told me that she hadn't seen him all week. Not since he'd dropped off his monthly rent check and let her know that he was heading up to Massachusetts for a few days."

Shel waited a couple of more days before taking further action. Although a week had passed since J.J. had taken the train back up north, Shel figured that, if the Deerfield cops had caught him in town again and placed him under arrest, J.J. would call him from jail, if only to beg Shel to come up and post bail. When that didn't happen, he reluctantly turned to the only person he thought could help him: J.J.'s father, Joe O'Leary Sr.

Father and son were not very much alike. The elder O'Leary was a former firefighter who'd bought a neighborhood bar in the Bronx after being forced into retirement after coming down with chronic emphysema. He was the sort of hard-nosed working-class guy who tended to look down on people like his son, men who'd "never done a hard day's work in their lives" as he put it. Nonetheless, he still cared enough about J.J. that, when Shel told him most of what had happened (leaving out, of course, the part about him and J.J. suspecting that Graystone was a time-traveler), Joe O'Leary took the seldom-used family car out of storage and, together with Shel, drove up to western Massachusetts to investigate.

Along the way, the two of them decided to bite the bullet and go to the police. They reasoned that, if J.J. had returned to the house on Wells Street and been caught trespassing, Graystone had summoned the police, and J.J. was probably already in jail, and the only mystery was why he hadn't called anyone back home. But if J.J. *wasn't* in jail, then he was missing, and they must assume that foul play was somehow involved.

Shel and Joe O'Leary arrived in Deerfield around midafternoon and went straight to the police station. The chief was there, and he remembered Shel. But no, J.J. wasn't warming a jail-cell cot in the back of the station, nor had the Deerfield police department received any complaints about him. So that left the Graystone house.

Chief Hassler knew little about Mr. Graystone other the fact that his first name was Edward. He'd moved to Deerfield just a few years ago and rented that house as his residence,

but otherwise kept to himself; the chief wasn't aware of the Graystone Literary Agency. Nevertheless, he agreed to escort Shel and J.J.'s father over to his house.

No one answered the door when Chief Hassler knocked; peering through the window, they saw that the place was dark. Shel also noticed that the "E. Graystone" card had been removed from the porch mailbox. And this time, the front door was locked. Since many people hide an extra door key outside their home, Joe O'Leary made a quick search; sure enough, there was a key beneath a loose brick at the base of the front porch stairs. With the chief's permission, he used it to let themselves in.

The moment the three of them walked in, it was clear that Edward Graystone had moved on. The furniture was still there—it had come with the house—but all of Graystone's personal belongings were gone, including the typewriter and the stacks of pulp magazines that Shel had found in the parlor. Everything else, though, had been cleaned out: clothing, toiletries, cookware and utensils, even food from the pantry and the icebox. Two small screw-holes in the kitchen ceiling were all that showed where the mysterious object had once been; Shel hadn't told either the senior O'Leary or the chief about this thing and decided to continue keeping that part of the story to himself.

The basement door was now unlocked, though, and Shel went down to see if he could discover what Edward Graystone was hiding. Yet it was empty of everything save the coal furnace and an electric water heater. It appeared as if something large and heavy had recently been dragged across the floor, because Shel noticed recent scuffmarks on the concrete, but what it had been and why it had been removed was another mystery.

Yet the basement wasn't entirely vacant. One object had been left behind for Shel to find.

"Let me show you something, Allen." As he spoke to me, Shelby Weinberg reached into his back pocket. "I found this on the basement floor, in plain sight just as it had been deliberately left there. Maybe it was, or maybe it had dropped by accident. I dunno, but I picked it up before either the chief or J.J.'s dad saw it, and I've been carrying it on my person ever since."

Opening his wallet, Shel fished a small card out of an inside pocket. He handed it to me, and at first I thought it might be an ordinary business card. Yet it wasn't made of paper or cardboard, but neither was it plastic or even metal. Instead, it was made of some material that was both lightweight and very strong; I guessed that it might be graphene or another ceramic polymer. It was burnished silver, almost but not quite reflective, and as I turned it over in my fingers, something embossed on one side of the card caught the light and became visible. Two letters, and two letters only:

QM

"What do you think that means?" I asked.

"Think it over," Shel replied. "If you're dealing with time travel, what form of theoretical physics comes into play?" He didn't wait, but gave me the answer himself: "Quantum mechanics."

"Okay, that makes sense . . . but why?" I turned the card over and over in my hand, watching the QM disappear, appear, and disappear again, less like offset printed matter and more like a hologram. "Why leave this where it could be found?"

"Never mind the card. The real question is, why do any of this? If Edward Graystone was indeed a chrononaut, as I think he was, then why take up residence in 1939 and feed previews of futuristic science and technology to science fiction writers of the time?"

I thought it over. "Maybe he was trying to alter the course of future events," I said after a moment or two. "I think science fiction has that effect, a subtle influence on real-life science and technology. People sometimes think that we're trying to predict the future, but that's not it at all. If you can successfully depict something as being possible in the future, then someone else may come along behind you and do what they can to make that change."

I paused, then added, "Do you think that's what Graystone may have been up to?"

"Uh-huh, and that's why he made J.J. disappear, too. He got too close. Perhaps when he came back, he saw something the second time around that made Graystone believe that he couldn't be trusted not to reveal." Shel took the card from my hands. "That's my theory, at

ANALOG

least . . . but there's a couple of things I haven't figured out."

"Why leave that card where you could find it?"

Shel clipped the card back in his wallet. "That's one, yeah, but also—" he was quiet for a moment, as if marshaling his thoughts "—if Edward Graystone was out to alter the course of future events, was he trying to do so for the *better* or for the *worse*?"

I didn't have an answer for that. The only person who did had vanished in 1939.

Footnotes:

¹ To protect the privacy of the house's current occupants, I'm refraining from divulging its street number or describing any distinguishing exterior details that might reveal its exact location.

Allen M. Steele has been a regular contributor to Analog since 1995, when his story "The Good Rat" was published. That story, along with two others subsequently published in Analog, were Hugo Award nominees. "The House on Infinity Street" reflects Allen's longtime interest in the history of science fiction and is also based on an actual panel he was on at the Albacon SF convention some years ago with two other Analog writers, his colleague Catherine Asaro and the late Hal Clement.