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Pueblo, Colorado Has the Answers
by Kage Baker

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Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction

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Marybeth Hatta had survived a lot. Not as much as her parents, certainly; her one failed marriage had ended without drama. The fact that she had been a Customer Serviceperson for a financial institution, and had worked her patient way over years to within inches of the glass ceiling before being laid off when the company was purchased and dismantled for Corporate looting -- well, that wasn't noteworthy either, given the state of California's economy.

It _had_ happened to Marybeth three times in a row, however, over a period of twenty years, and even the girl at the Unemployment office had agreed the odds against that were probably high. It looked funny on a resume, too. At the age of forty she found herself with no job, no Wilshire Boulevard apartment, and no prospects at all. Under the circumstances she was grateful to be able to go home to the tiny coastal town where she'd grown up, to do what she'd adamantly refused to do twenty years earlier when her life hadn't been irrelevant: take a job in her parents' store.

Nothing had changed there. Not the stained green linoleum, not the candy display rack with its rolls of tin Lifesavers, not the ceiling fan describing the same wobbling circle it had described since June 1948, not the bright plastic beach toys and bottles of sun lotion. The little town hadn't changed either, with its rusted hotel signs and weatherbeaten cottages. It was lively with tourists on weekends, but by Five P.M. on Sunday afternoon you could still fire a shotgun down Pomeroy Street without hitting a living soul. Once it had made her want to scream with frustration; now the permanence of the past was comforting. She had learned that the future, far from being inevitable, sometimes drains away like water vanishing into sand.

So she was the Branch Postmistress in the little store now, selling stamps and weighing envelopes for the year-round population, who were mostly pensioned retirees living in the trailer park on the edges of the dunes. All day she sat behind the humidor cabinet and watched the bright glare of the sea outside,

or watched the fog advance or recede between the old pool hall and the secondhand store.

On this particular afternoon her view was occluded for a moment by an old man limping in. The limp identified him for her, because otherwise he looked like most of her customers: past seventy, in a stained nylon windbreaker, wearing a baseball cap pinned with military insignia. He had neither the pink plastic hearing aid nor the reading glasses in black plastic frames that went with the geriatric uniform, however.

"How are you today, Mr. Lynch?" she inquired.

"So-so. Something gave me the runs last night like you wouldn't believe." He smacked an envelope down on the counter and stared at her earnestly.

"Really."

"I think I inhaled some of that bug spray, that's what I think did it," he affirmed.

"Working in your garden?" This one was proud of his garden, she remembered. He had an acre behind his trailer, enclosed by snow fence to keep the dunes from encroaching. He leaned forward now and his voice dropped to a loud whisper.

"Have you ever heard," he wanted to know, "of a bug or a virus or anything that makes the bottom of corn stalks go _soft_?" Wow, his breath was like a crypt. She tried not to draw back involuntarily as she frowned and shook her head.

"Gosh, no. You mean like, rotten or something?"

"Not rotten, no, they're still green and all right -- but they're all bent over! Like the stalk went soft and they melted, then got hard again. Damnedest thing I ever saw. You ever heard of that?"

She had, in fact. Her gaze darted momentarily to the rack of magazines with titles like _Paranormal Horizon, Journal of the Unproven _and _Alien Truth!!! _But she blinked and replied "No, I can't imagine what would do that."

"I just thought, you being Japanese and all, you might know. Your father might garden or something." Mr. Hatta didn't garden; he sat on the couch in his black bathrobe doing crossword puzzles. So did Mrs. Hatta, in her pink bathrobe. As far as Marybeth could tell, they had done nothing else since she'd been home. Marybeth smiled apologetically and shook her head.

"Nope. No idea."

"Well, I'll tell you who will know." He reached for his wallet. "U.S. Government will, that's who. You know those commercials they put on about writing to Pueblo, Colorado for free Government information on everything? No? They're on at Five A.M. I get up at Four-thirty most mornings, earlier when I got the runs like I did, and you can learn a lot from those. I mail this, they'll send me a free booklet on garden pests special for our area -- this part of the coast right here. Now, isn't that a deal?"

"Sounds great." She weighed the envelope in her hand. "One stamp ought to do it, Mr. Lynch."

"Okey-doke." He counted out change. "You should write to them, you know. Pueblo, Colorado. People don't know about all the free stuff they're missing out on."

"I'll have to remember to do that." She smiled, peeling off a stamp and fixing it to the envelope.

"There's the Post Office Box number right there." He reached out to tap the address insistently. "You want to copy it down before I mail it?"

"Okay, sure." She took a pen and copied out the address on the back of a scrap of paper. When she had finished, he took the envelope and dropped it through the OVERSEAS -- OUT OF STATE slot in the wall.

"She's on her way now, all right," he stated cheerily. "Now, you can sell me a bottle of Milk of

Magnesia. The cherry kind."

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A week later the fan was still going around and Marybeth was arranging the various needlecraft monthly magazines in their places when Mr. Lynch came through the door. He looked troubled.

"Good morning, Mr. Lynch." She looked up from a cover featuring a particularly hideous hooked rug. "What can I do for you today?"

"Well, I sort of thought -- " He waved a booklet at her helplessly. It was printed on newsrag, like a tax form guide. "You remember I sent off to Pueblo, Colorado, for free information on garden pests? Well, they sent it, all right, but I think they must be Army guys wrote it -- the language is awful technical. And I remembered your father said you went to College, so I wondered if you couldn't tell me -- "

"You want me to look at it for you?" Marybeth returned to her seat behind the humidior and held out her hand for the booklet. She skimmed through it, reading about Artichoke Plume Moths, Meadow Spittlebugs, Corn Earworms and a host of others.

Mr. Lynch shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"And the problem's getting worse," he told her.

"The diarrhea?" She looked up in mild alarm.

"No, the ... the whatever it is. I can't find anything like what's happening to my corn in that book. It's just laying right over."

"Maybe it's jackrabbits." She went on reading.

"No it ain't, because there's no holes under the fence and no tracks. At first I thought it was those God-damned kids, because I caught somebody looking in my window, but then the glowing started."

"Glowing?" She looked up again.

"I don't know, maybe it's phosphorus or something. Maybe it's something to do with the wilt or whatever's bending the stalks. I look out my window last night and a whole row's shining like it was broad daylight. That ain't normal, is it?"

"It doesn't sound normal." She wondered how to phrase her next question. "Um -- you haven't heard any funny noises, have you? High-pitched whistling or anything?"

"Well, I'll tell you, I couldn't hear it if there was because there's so God-damned much interference on my radio lately. I think they must be running some big machinery over at that Air Force base. It's driving me nuts."

"Okay." She bit her lower lip. "Maybe that's what's doing it, you know, something electromagnetic? I don't think it's a garden pest in this booklet, Mr. Lynch."

"No? Didn't seem like it to me, but the way it was written I couldn't tell anything. Well, you know what? I'm going to write back to Pueblo, Colorado and tell 'em about this. Maybe it's something to do with rocket testing." He dug in his pocket for his wallet. "So I need you to sell me some stamps and a writing tablet. Another box of envelopes, too."

When he had limped out the door with the paper sack that held his purchases, she went straight to the nearest copy of Paranormal Horizons and retired behind the humidior case with it for an hour of uninterrupted reading.

That night she waited until the TV trays had been cleared away and a commercial had interrupted Jeopardy to ask: "Daddy, when Grandpa had the truck farm out behind the dunes before the war ... did he ever mention anything funny happening to the corn?"

"Didn't grow corn." Her father did not look away from the screen. "We grew peas, artichokes, lettuce and cauliflower. No corn."

"Well ... did he ever talk about anything he couldn't explain? Any kind of really strange pests in his fields?"

"No." Mr. Hatta turned his head and the lamplight hit his glasses in such a way that his eyes looked like glowing ovals. He gave a bitter laugh. "Except God-damned G.I.s!"

_Jeopardy _returned and Alex Trebek saved her from another visit to Manzanar. She sighed and went in to wash the dinner dishes.

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The next Saturday dawned bright and hot, but then the wind shifted and a wall of cold fog rolled in, blanketing the town. Tourists retreated, complaining, to their hotel rooms and discovered they would be charged extra for cable TV. The salt mist beaded on everything. Mr. Lynch's nylon jacket was slick and damp with it when he came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Lynch. How's your garden doing?" she asked. By way of a reply, he laid a thick manila envelope on the top of the humidior.

"Well, they wrote back from Pueblo, Colorado," he told her. "But, you know, I was right -- it _is_ some Army guy who writes this stuff. They sent me a letter and a thing I'm supposed to fill out. Now I just wondered, since I know you went to College and all, if you couldn't explain this in plain English?"

"Okay." She tipped out the contents of the envelope and unfolded the cover letter. Below the superscription and date it began:

Dear Mr. Lynch,

Thank you for your interest in our programs. We received your recent letter describing the unusual problem affecting your Early Golden Wonder Hybrid.

It is our opinion that your plants may be suffering from a condition known as Australian Anthracnose Sclerotinia, which is uncommon but not unknown in the United States, especially in cool coastal areas adjacent to military bases. However, this diagnosis cannot be confirmed without further information.

You may be aware that as an honorably discharged member of our Armed Forces, you are entitled to a number of benefits auxiliary to your pension and medical coverage. Pest control is included among these. If you will take the time to complete the enclosed detailed questionnaire and return it in the enclosed postage-paid envelope, we will endeavor to respond within ten (10) working days from the arrival of your reply.

Sincerely,

Lt. John C. Collins

Dept. of Agricultural Safety

"Agricultural Safety?" Marybeth looked over her glasses at Mr. Lynch.

"That's right. People don't know there's government departments where the Army will do things free for them, but it's true, you know." He nodded his head for emphasis. "Now, I got a pen here -- if you wouldn't mind taking a look at the test for me?"

"It's not a test, it's a questionnaire." She unfolded five sheets of closely typed, crudely photocopied paper. She read aloud: "_Please circle either YES or NO after each of the following questions. One. Have any unusual marks appeared on the ground adjacent to the affected plants? These may be fungal blights resembling scorch or burn marks and may be circular in shape, or may appear in a pattern. YES

or NO?"_

"Yep, yep, I've had those." Mr. Lynch nodded again.

"Okay." Marybeth took the pen and circled _YES_. "_Two. Have you noticed a continuous high-pitched noise that may or may not be described as trilling, warbling or whistling?"_

There were many more questions of this kind, some of them seemingly repetitive. Mr. Lynch gave his Yes or No answer to each of them and Marybeth circled appropriately, though with a growing sense of unease. Some of the questions really couldn't have any imaginable connection with gardening, and many were of a quite personal nature. They didn't seem to bother Mr. Lynch, however. When the questions had all been answered, Marybeth folded the pages, slipped them into the envelope that had been provided, and sealed it. She stole a quick look at the stamps, half-expecting a franking mark from Langley, Virginia. No; two ordinary stamps celebrating the Lighthouses of America.

"Well, there you go, Mr. Lynch." She gave it to him. "I hope this helps."

"Hey, those guys know what they're doing." He stuck the envelope in _OVERSEAS -- OUT OF TOWN._ He seemed relieved, energized. "You know what? I could go for a Hoffman's Cup o' Gold. You restock those yet?"

When he had gone she roamed unhappily up and down the aisles, straightening the magazines on doll collecting, on guns and ammo, on Victorian furniture. Finally she drifted over to the paperback kiosks, and spent a long while perusing them. She found the latest title by Whitley Streiber. She took it back to the humidor cabinet and barely looked up from it the rest of the afternoon.

* * * *

"Some old guy's got a package," grunted the mail carrier, sliding it across the counter at her. Surf was up and he was anxious to be done with his route for the day.

Marybeth examined it and saw Mr. Lynch's name. "He wasn't home?"

"Nah. I knocked. Left the sticker on his door so he can pick it up here." The carrier crossed the green linoleum with rapid steps and was out again in the sunlight, in the fresh salt air. Marybeth leaned down and turned the box slowly. It was just big enough to contain a head of lettuce, perhaps, or a jar of candy. It didn't weigh much, nor did it rattle. She looked for a return address. There it was: a Post Office Box in Pueblo, Colorado. She gnawed her lower lip, wondering why Mr. Lynch hadn't answered the mail carrier's knock.

But he limped in an hour later, face alight with anticipation. "My trap here yet?" he wanted to know.

"Is that what it is?" Marybeth reached under the counter and brought it out for him.

"Uh-huh. Got a letter the other day from Pueblo, Colorado saying they were sending it separate." He thrust the yellow delivery slip at her. "Here. Where do I sign for it?"

"Right there. Did they say if they'd figured out what the problem is?"

"Well, as near as I can make out they _think_ it's that thing they said in the other letter, and they think it's carried by some kind of -- I don't remember what they said it was, bugs or spores or something. One of them Latin names. Anyhow, here's this trap or repellent or whatever it is for me to try on 'em, absolutely free. You have to have an FCC license for it, but they said they'd waive that since I'm a Veteran of Foreign Wars." He completed his wandering signature with effort. "Don't tell _me_ this government don't take care of its servicemen!"

"You mean it's electronic?" Marybeth frowned.

"I guess so. They sent instructions with it." He hefted the box and limped toward the door. "I'll let you know how it works!"

"Okay. Good luck, Mr. Lynch," she called after him, craning her head to watch his shadow limp away after him down the sidewalk.

* * * *

There were gulls circling in the air outside, wheeling and crying, and their shadows danced over the street. An old car pulled up and parked under the swirling cloud of wings, a 1956 BelAir, black and pink, beautifully restored. She nodded in appreciation. A child came in through the doorway, silhouetted against the light, and moved down the aisle toward her. She pulled her attention away from the car and looked down into her own eyes. _Mommie, can I have a U-No Bar?_

Blue school uniform, white Peter Pan collar, saddle oxfords, yes, and there was the pink Barbie purse that had been stolen from her desk in third grade. She heard her mother's voice answering: _You know what your father said about candy. Here, have some raisins._

Just as the child began to pout, it vanished. She jumped to her feet, staring. The car was gone, too. She felt an urge to make the Sign of the Cross. But here came Mr. Lynch, limping in haste, and he looked out of breath and upset. She drew on years of Customer Service sangfroid and inquired: "Is anything the matter, Mr. Lynch?"

"Well, that trap don't work, for one," he gasped. "_All _my corn knocked clean over this morning, and these damn things all over the place!" He held up a white sphere. It had a cloudy, frosted-glass quality, like a fist-sized mothball. "All there is in here's a moth! There's bugs and moths and mosquitoes in every damn one of 'em, but they're not the problem. There's tracks now. Looks like some kind of big chicken feet. Say, you got a phone in here?"

Wordlessly she pointed him to the dark oak booth in the corner. He hurried into it and she heard him fumbling around in there, dropping nickels and cursing. After several attempts at dialing he yelled in frustration: "This God-damned phone don't work."

"Yes it does, Mr. Lynch." She went to the door of the booth. "Who are you trying to call?"

"This Eight-Oh-Oh number that came with the instructions." He held out a letter, creased and dogeared from having been in his pocket. She glimpsed the words: -- _Temporal Displacement Unit not perform to specifications, please do not hesitate to call us day or night at the following number -- _

"Did you dial One first?"

"Are you supposed to?" He stared at her in distraction. On the little hammered steel shelf under the telephone, the white sphere was glowing softly. "Listen, could I ask you to dial? -- these God-damned long numbers they got now -- "

"Sure, Mr. Lynch." She leaned in and took the receiver from him. "What's the number again?" He read it out to her and she dialed it. Abruptly there was a jarring clang on the other end of the line and the number began ringing. She handed the receiver back to him and walked quickly away.

Trying not to listen to his conversation, she stared at the postal wall. Under the LOCAL slot was a decal of the little cartoon figure the Postal Service had used to convince its customers that zip codes were wonderful, convenient and necessary. The years had not worn away his crazy little smile. Mr. Lynch raised his voice, pulling her attention back. He was waving the sphere as though the person on the other end of the line could see it.

"NOPE. NOPE. YESSIR. I THOUGHT IT WAS ON FIRE. SEE, I -- UH HUH. UH-HUH. NO, I DIDN'T. ABOUT THREE INCHES. NOPE. SEE, I THOUGHT -- UH HUH. TWO MONTHS AGO. NO, JUST FLAT DOWN. SEE, WHAT I THOUGHT AT FIRST -- UH HUH. YESSIR. YOU WHAT?"

A pair of tourists came in. They bought a _San Francisco Chronicle_ and a package of Hostess

Honeybuns. They were unpleasantly surprised at the price of the newspaper, but went ahead with the purchase anyway. When they walked out, Marybeth glanced over at the phone booth. Mr. Lynch looked happy now, he was smiling and nodding as he scrawled something on the back of the letter.

"OKAY. RIGHT. OKAY. _RELATIVITY CONDENSER_? WHERE DO I FIND THAT? IT'S WHERE? _WHERE_ DID YOU SAY? OH. OKAY." He listened a moment longer and then said, "ALL RIGHT, AND IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE TALKING TO YOU, SIR."

He emerged from the booth, tucking the letter inside his nylon jacket. "I got to go to the market," he told her. "Thanks for your help."

"What did they say about the trap?"

"They think maybe I adjusted it wrong. It's set too small and that's why it's just catching bugs instead of that thing with the chicken feet. Said _that's_ what's carrying the spores, like deer carry that Lyme Tick stuff? They gave me some suggestions, though." He winked at her. "We'll see what's cookin' now!"

He left with an air of importance. Ten minutes later she realized that he'd left the sphere in the phone booth. With some reluctance she retrieved it and walked over to the front window, examining the thing in the light.

Something inside, a vague outline of tiny wings. Yes, that was a moth in there, trapped in a cue ball of etched glass. What happened when you _condensed Relativity?_ Was this a sphere of frozen Time? Could you turn Time into a solid so things got trapped in it? It had no unusual coldness now, no glow. She walked slowly back to the humidor cabinet and sat down, thoughtfully turning the sphere in her hands. A customer came in and paced up and down in front of the magazines, looking for something in particular. Marybeth lifted a little square of plywood set into the floor, revealing the squared cavity in cement that had once held her father's safe. She dropped the sphere inside and covered it again.

"Can I help you find something?" she inquired, standing up.

* * * *

She did not see Mr. Lynch for a week after that. One morning she had just arrived and was unlocking the door when a local customer approached, being tugged along by a Pomeranian in a hurry.

"Morning, Marybeth!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Foster."

"Say, if those movie people aren't done shooting in your store, do you think they might want to hire any extras? I used to work at RKO back before the war, you know."

She just stared, her hand motionless on the key. "Excuse me?"

"I tell you, it looked just like old times in there! All those beautiful old cars parked along the street outside, too. I saw a De Soto and a Packard just like Jerry used to have. Good-looking kid they had behind the counter -- was that Jason Scott Lee?"

"Yes," she said, for no reason she understood.

"I thought so, but I didn't want to get too close. Will they be shooting again tonight?"

She shook her head. Mrs. Foster looked rueful. "Darn. I knew I should have gone home and gotten my autograph book. Well, she who hesitates is lost. Can I get in there and buy an air mail stamp, honey?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Foster." She woke from her trance and pushed the door open, and reversed the hanging sign to let the town know everything was business as usual. It clearly wasn't, but she didn't know what else to do.

After Mrs. Foster had gone, Marybeth did a quick check of the store. Nothing out of the ordinary;

no copies of _Look _or _The Saturday Evening Post_ on the racks. A succession of octogenarians came in for crossword books, laxatives and cigars. A man in a dark suit and sunglasses came in and bought a souvenir: a plastic snow-globe with sparkles instead of snow, swirling around a tiny plastic treasure chest full of clams.

Shortly before noon Mr. Lynch looked hesitantly around the door. His expression was most odd: scared and elated together. He was carrying a small suitcase.

"Why, Mr. Lynch, what's happened?" She stood up.

"Oh, just having my place exterminated," he said casually. "Got to take a hotel room for a couple of days, that's all." He set the suitcase inside the doorway and looked up and down the street before coming the rest of the way in. "You know that trap I sent off for? I got it to work, finally. Got the little bastard, too. It didn't look like any animal to me -- hell, at first I thought it was a circus dwarf or something, but that nice boy from the Government said it was a Giant Rat of Sumatra. It's all froze solid inside one of them glow-balls, only this is a real big one. Took a lot of my corn with it, but I about decided I wasn't going to eat that stuff anyway, not with whatever's wrong with it."

"You mean the -- the whatever it is -- the trap generated a _big_ white sphere." Marybeth glanced involuntarily at the piece of plywood set in the floor.

"That's what I've been telling you!"

"And it caught something that looked to you like a little man."

"Yep. The boy explained about the trap generating a Temporary Field." Marybeth wondered if he meant _Temporal._ "Says it's just like that new equipment that freezes termites. See, those people from Pueblo, Colorado sent some men out here to see if the trap was working okay. They were right there at my trailer this morning, right after I got up. They're going to clean it all up for me, too, even all those bugs I got by mistake. I ask you now, is that thoughtful? And look at this." He lowered his voice and dug in his pants for his wallet. "Look here!" He pulled out and fanned three twenty-dollar bills. "That's to pay for my hotel room. Now, then. Do they know how to treat an old soldier or do they know how to treat an old soldier?"

The only thing she managed to say was, "I don't think you can get two nights for sixty dollars at this time of year, Mr. Lynch. Except maybe over at the Beachcomber."

"The Beachcomber will do me fine," he asserted. "Hell, I don't need the frills. I need to buy a toothbrush and some toiletries from you, though. They said I couldn't use mine any more. Too many rodent genes from the extermination."

"You don't mean _roentgens_, _do you?" She thought about the UFO articles she'd read.

"Yeah! That was it." He looked cheerful. "And I got to go get some underwear at the Thrift Shop, too."

"O-okay." She helped him find a new toothbrush, as well as a can of tooth powder and a tube of Burma-Shave, and rang up his purchases on the cash register. When he had limped out in triumph, she leaned down and lifted the piece of plywood. The sphere was exactly where she had put it, and it was not glowing. Another customer came in. She let the plywood drop back into place.

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After she had locked up that night, she walked up Hinds Avenue as far as the corner of the old state highway, where she could get a good view south to the edges of the dunes. She saw nothing out of the ordinary, and didn't know what she'd expected to see: a glowing white sphere the size of the Hollywood Cinerama Dome, maybe, with scores of hapless trailer park residents trapped in an eternal _Now

_inside? As she walked back down in the direction of her parent's house, a baby blue 1958 Lincoln Continental zoomed up past her, radio playing loud. It sounded like it was playing _That'll Be The Day_. Not the Linda Ronstadt version, though.

* * * *

After dinner she opened the kitchen drawers and poked through them.

"Mom? Don't we have a pair of kitchen tongs?"

"They're in there somewhere." Her mother's voice drifted over the back of the sofa.

She found them at last, and took them to the front hall with a plastic grocery bag. Slipping on a sweater, she reached for her keys.

"Are you going out?" inquired her mother sleepily.

"Just down to the store. I think I left my book."

It was cold on the front porch, and the little figure in flowered pajamas was shivering as she looked up at the stars. She was waiting for one to fall out of the sky, Marybeth remembered; and she almost stepped forward and advised herself to go inside, because the stars would never come within reach. She was not a cruel woman by nature, however, so she just stared fixedly at the child until she vanished, and then moved carefully past the place where she had been, down the steps into the street.

Kon-Tiki Liquors was still open as she crossed the street, but the red and yellow neon beer signs were being shut off one by one. The rest of the town was dark and silent. She experienced a peculiar disappointment as she came around the corner and found her parent's store as dark and silent as the rest. Well, better safe than sorry. She unlocked it, stepped inside and turned to lock the door behind her.

When she turned back, the counter was bathed in daylight, and her young father (God, he _had _looked like Jason Scott Lee) was having a conversation with a stranger in a red Hawaiian shirt.

Man, oh, man, they must have been going a hundred miles an hour, the stranger was moaning. Her father was nodding in agreement. _And they say he probably couldn't even see them in the dusk. Believe you me, that is one dangerous intersection even in broad daylight._ He stubbed out a cigarette under the counter. She drew a deep breath and edged past them. Her father barely glanced at her.

Honey, the new issues of Holiday Magazine came in.

"Okay. Thanks," she said, guessing that the ball of concentrated Time was doing more than warping the temporal flow around itself; Past and Present were becoming interactive. She leaned down to prize up the square of plywood. The sphere was glowing in there like a light bulb. She reached in with the kitchen tongs and pulled it out, and dropped it into the grocery bag. It flickered and went out, and when it did the daylight vanished and she was alone in the darkness of the store.

Out on Pomeroy Street again, she paused and wondered what to do next. After considering a number of possibilities, she walked over two blocks to the empty lot where the C-Air Motor Hotel had been before it burned down in 1966. A rusted standpipe protruded from a patch of cracked pink tiles there, nearly hidden by weeds. Using the tongs, she dropped the sphere into the pipe. She heard it rattling down into darkness. She dropped the tongs in after it and then wadded up the plastic bag and jammed that in too. Maybe the lead in the pipe would somehow shield against the temporal distortion. Or not; maybe it was an iron pipe. In any case, there was nothing she could do about it now. She walked home quickly and washed her hands as soon as she got in.

In the morning, she noticed that her watch was running backward. She replaced the battery when she got to the store, but it made no difference. Finally she turned it upside down and wore it that way.

The next time she saw Mr. Lynch, he looked crestfallen. He shuffled toward her down the aisle,

clutching an envelope.

"You got any alarm clocks here?"

"Hi, Mr. Lynch. No, but Bob's Hardware has them. Did those people finish fumigating your trailer?" she inquired.

"What? Oh. Oh, yeah. It was too bad, though -- I lost the whole garden." He blinked. Was he on the point of tears?

"Well, you probably wouldn't have wanted to eat anything from that crop anyway, you said so yourself," she reminded him.

"Yeah, but all my topsoil's gone too. There's a big round hole now, must be eight feet deep. The boy from the Government said it was Geologic Subsidence. Said it didn't have anything to do with the other problem. Gave me some good advice, though." He nodded somberly and waved the envelope. "I can get free clean fill dirt. All I got to do is write to this Post Office Box in Pueblo, Colorado."

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As the summer wore on, there were occasional reports of odd occurrences -- somebody thought they saw a ghost in the Elks Lodge, and the instances of red tides causing phosphorescence in the surf increased. There were more surfers with old-style longboards in the water, and more little boys with crewcuts playing on the beach -- but Retro was In these days, wasn't it? And the occasional sightings of classic cars, gleaming as if lovingly restored, caused nothing but sentimental pleasure for the witnesses.

She was still a little uneasy about what she'd done with the sphere, but its effect seemed weak and dissipated. No phantom C-Air Motor Hotel rose from the weeds and at least Hatta's News, Cigars and Sundries was no longer the center of the phenomena.

And, really, how could it hurt business? Don't people come to little seaside towns to stop Time, to pretend they'll never grow old or haven't grown old, to relive a summer afternoon forgotten thirty years?

Marybeth went on working in the store, going home to fix dinner for her parents each night. She put a radio behind the counter, tuned to an oldies station, and hummed along as she waited on customers or arranged new stock on the shelves. The older customers complained bitterly about the God-damned Rock and Roll, and she'd apologize at once and turn the volume down until they left the store. Sometimes the news broadcasts mentioned the wrong President, but not often enough to draw attention. Secure, with a watch resolutely running backward, Marybeth Hatta was really rather happy. The past was pleasant at least. You have to live somewhere, after all.

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