



Backward Step

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If you went back in time and stopped your grandparents from meeting each other, you would never have been born. But then if you had never been born, you wouldn't be able to go back to stop them. Would you?

"John," said Mrs. Booth to her five-year-old son. "You just sit there and watch 'Inspector Gadget' on the TV while I go down the street and get some milk. I'll be back by the time it's over."

"I love 'Inspector Gadget,'" said John.

Mrs. Booth reached the front gate and then stopped. She felt a little guilty, leaving her son alone in the house. But she knew he wouldn't budge. Not for another twenty minutes. Not until the show was over.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Booth," said a voice.

She jumped in fright and then stared into the eyes of a teenage boy. He thrust an old exercise book into her hand. "Read this. Please, please, please read it."

"I'm not interested in buying . . ." she began to say.

"I'm not selling anything," he said. "And it's not a religion. This is important. This can save your life. You're in great danger. Please read it."

"Now?" she said.

"Right away. Please, it's really important."

There was something about the boy. He seemed very nervous. And she felt as if she knew him. The boy's hands were shaking. "Well," she said. "Just for a second." She gave a little sigh and opened the old exercise book.

I am fourteen. Nine years ago I was also fourteen. And nine years before that I was fourteen, too.

It is creepy. It is weird. But I think I have figured it all out. It makes sense to me now. It is the only explanation. No one will believe me, of course. They will just say I am crazy.

Look—I'll try and explain it to you as simply as I can. I've put one and one together and come up with two. Or should I say I've put nine and five together and come up with five.

No, no, no, that's just talking in riddles. I'll start at the beginning. Or is it the end?

Sorry, there I go again. Look, have you ever wanted strange powers? You know, to be able to fly or read thoughts or be very strong? I'll bet you think it would be great. But think again. It could be dangerous. You could end up hurting yourself. Like I did.

I am famous. Yes, there wouldn't be too many people around here who haven't heard of me. I'll bet you think it would be great to be famous. Pictures in the paper. On television. People wanting your autograph. That sort of thing.

It's not really that good. You never know whether people want to be your friend because they like you or because you are well known. And then there are kids who get jealous and give you a hard time and push you around. I would rather be ordinary and have ordinary problems.

I became famous at five. They called me the boy from nowhere. There was a great fuss. It was in the papers. A five-year-old boy just suddenly appeared, sitting in the back seat of the class. Right next to a girl called Sharon Coppersmith.

That boy was me.

Sharon Coppersmith screamed and screamed when I arrived. Or appeared. According to her I just popped out of nowhere. One minute the seat was empty. The next minute there was little old me. Five years old, sitting next to her in a history class.

All the big kids crowded around. They were glad to have something to break up the lesson. They laughed and offered me candy and made a great fuss. The teacher thought that I had wandered in from the street.

I just looked up and started crying. I was only five but I remember it just like it was yesterday. Who were all these big kids? Where was my mummy? Where was the nice big boy who wanted to help me?

"What's your name, little fella?" said the teacher.

For a while I couldn't get a word out. I just sat there sobbing. In the end I managed to say, "John Boof, firteen Tower Street, Upwey, seven five four, oh, oh, six two free free."

"John Booth," said the teacher. "Thirteen Tower Street, Upwey. Phone 754, 0, 0, 6233. Well done. Don't cry, little fellah. We'll have you home in no time."

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The principal's office seemed huge. He wore a pair of those little half-moon glasses and kept peeping over them at me while he spoke into the phone. "Are you sure?" he said. "754, 0, 0, 6233. No John Booth? Never heard of him. How long have you lived there? Three years. Well, sorry to have troubled you."

I just kept licking the salty tears that were rolling down my cheek and wondering how I got there.

I had been watching "Inspector Gadget" on television. I remember the man saying something like, "A brand-new episode." Then a big boy was talking to me. He just popped out of nowhere. He was nice. I was holding his hand and then *poof*, he was gone and there I was sitting in this schoolroom full of big kids. With everyone looking at me and wondering where I had come from.

"Look," said the principal to his secretary. "Pop him in your car and see if he can show you where he lives. If he can't find the place, you'll have to take him to the police station. His parents will come for him sooner or later."

I knew that I didn't have a father. But I didn't know that my mother had died nine years earlier.

The secretary was nice. She strapped me into the seat next to her and gave me a little white bag with jelly beans in it. "Don't worry, love," she said. "We'll soon find Mum. You just show me the way to go. All you have to do is point."

She drove around for a bit and I thought I recognized some of the houses and places. But they were different. Looking back I can describe it as like being in a dream. The streets were the same but different.

"There," I suddenly yelled. It was the water tower. I could see it in the distance. It was right next to our house.

"What?" said the nice lady. "The water tower? You couldn't live there, love."

"Neks door," I said.

She smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere."

There was only one house next to the water tower and it was my house. At least it was like my house. It had the same rock chimney and the same fountain in the front yard. But it was painted green instead of blue. And the trees were huge. And the chicken shed had gone. But it was still my house.

"Mummy," I shouted. I had never been so happy in my life. I didn't stop to think that you can't paint a house in one day. And that trees can't grow overnight. When you are five you think adults can do anything. I raced up to the front door and ran inside. Then I just stopped and stared. Our furniture had gone. There was no television. My photo wasn't on the wall.

"Mummy," I screamed. "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy." I scampered into the kitchen. A very old lady looked down at me. Then she looked at the secretary who had followed me in and started to scream.

The old lady thought we had come to rob her.

After all, we had just walked into her house without even knocking.

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Well, after a lot of talking, the secretary managed to calm the old lady down. They had a cup of tea and the old lady gave me some green cordial.¹ "Mummy," I said. "I want my mummy." I didn't know what this old lady was doing in our house. I didn't know where my toys had gone. I didn't like the new carpet and the photos of strange people. I wanted everything to be like it was before. I also wanted to go to the toilet.

I ran upstairs, through the big bedroom and into the little toilet at the back. When I came back I heard the secretary saying, "How did he know where to go?"

The old lady just shook her head. None of us knew what was going on.

The secretary took me out to the car but I didn't want to get in. I didn't want to leave the house that was supposed to be my home. But the secretary was firm and she put me in the front seat. As we drove off, she checked the house number. "Thirteen Tower Street," she said to herself with a puzzled look.

¹ cordial: a sweet alcoholic beverage

The police were puzzled too. "We'll look him up on our computer," said the sergeant. "His parents have probably reported him missing by now."

He tapped away for several minutes. Then he scratched his head and just sat there staring at the screen. "There is a John Booth missing," he said. "He disappeared nine years ago, aged five. That would make him fourteen by now."

"Well, this little boy is not fourteen," said the secretary. She squatted down and looked into my eyes. "Are you, John?"

"I'm five," I said.

The sergeant tapped for a while longer. "The missing boy lived around here," he said. "Thirteen Tower Street." He crouched down and patted me on the head. "Where were you when you lost your mum?" he asked kindly.

"Watching 'Inspector Gadget,'" I said.

"Is that still on?" said the secretary.

The sergeant rummaged through a newspaper. "No channel has 'Inspector Gadget' on," he said. "Not any time this week."

"Maybe he's from another state," said the secretary.

The sergeant went off for a while and the secretary tried to read me a story. But I didn't want it. I only wanted my mother. Finally the sergeant returned. "I rang Channel Two," he said. "'Inspector Gadget' is showing in fifteen countries but nowhere in Australia. The nearest place is New Zealand."

"Maybe he's a Kiwi,"² said the secretary.

The sergeant squatted down again. "Say fish and chips," he said.

"Fish and chips," I said.

"Nah," said the sergeant. "He's a dinkie-di Aussie,³ aren't you, mate?"

I didn't know what it meant but I nodded anyway.

After that, the secretary left and a policewoman looked after me. Everyone was getting more and more excited. "Wait until the papers get ahold of this," said the sergeant.

They were looking at an old newspaper. There was a picture of a mangled car. And a picture of five-year-old me standing in front of the water tower.

² **Kiwi**: slang term for a person from New Zealand

³ **dinkie-di Aussie**: slang for a genuine Australian

The sergeant shook his head. "A kid goes missing nine years ago," he said. "Then an identical kid turns up today. He says he lives at the same address. He says he has the same name. He knows all about 'Inspector Gadget,' which hasn't been shown here for nine years. He is even wearing the same clothes. This boy is the world's first time traveler. He has jumped forward nine years."

There was one thing they didn't tell me for a long time. I wanted my mum but they couldn't go and fetch her. She was killed the day I disappeared. A car knocked her down while she was crossing the road to the store.

Talk about a fuss. Everyone wanted to see me. Take my photo. People from the university wanted to study me. Fortune-tellers and mystics claimed they had moved me in time. I was on television all over the world.

In the end, my grandma came and got me. At first I didn't recognize her because she was much grayer and had more wrinkles. But as soon as she spoke I knew it was her. "You're coming with me, John Boy," she said. There was no arguing with that voice. I ran over and hugged and hugged her until my arms ached.

She tried to stop them taking photos. She tried to keep off the professors and psychics. She tried to give me a normal life. But of course she couldn't. She was old and she didn't really want to bring up a child again. "Your mother was enough," she said. "Having a child and looking after it with no father. And now it's me looking after you."

So here I am nine years later. An oddity. Grandma is doing her best. But she is old and tired and we are both unhappy. I have no friends. No mother. No father. I'm famous. Everybody knows me. But nobody likes me. Being famous has mucked up my life.

Nine years ago I traveled in time. Today I found out that I can do it again.

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I was walking along the street in a sort of a daze. There was a lot of traffic. Trucks, cars, motor bikes. The air was full of fumes and noise. I checked the time on my watch. Four o'clock.

A huge gasoline tanker was bearing down. I didn't see it. I just stepped out in front without looking. There was a squeal of brakes. Blue smoke and a blaring horn. There was no time to get out of the way.

I knew that I was gone. There was no escape.

Suddenly, *poof*.

I was lying on a seat on the other side of the road. An old man sitting next to me looked as if a ghost had just appeared in front of him. He screamed and ran off as fast as he could go.

What had happened? How did I get there?

I looked at my watch. Half past four. Where had that half hour gone?

Suddenly it all fell into place. I was the boy who could travel in time. I must have been run over by the truck and badly injured. Maybe people had carried me over to the bench. I would have wished that I could go back in time to just before the moment I stepped in front of the truck. And that's what happened. For just a second there would have been two of me on the footpath. The injured me would have grabbed the hand of the other me before he was hit. And wished ourselves half an hour in the future.

But then the injured me never would have been injured. In fact, he would have missed those thirty minutes, too. So he never did any of it. He never happened. He must have disappeared as soon as I landed on the seat where he had started from.

And the old man saw a boy appearing out of nowhere. I had come from half an hour in the past.

I had gone back in time. And saved myself by bringing me into the future. I could travel in time just by wishing it to happen. There was no doubt about it. Thirty minutes. If I could do thirty minutes I could do nine years. I could go back to the time when I was watching "Inspector Gadget." I could stop my mother going to the shop. Then she wouldn't be killed and I wouldn't have to live with Grandma. I would be happy growing up with my mother.

But what if it went wrong? What if I made a mistake and arrived too late? Something deep inside was warning me. I felt as if I had been in this situation before. I was cautious. Then it struck me.

I *had* been there before.

I remember me at age five looking at "Inspector Gadget." It was just as the closing credits were rolling. The end of the show. A big boy had just appeared out of nowhere. He was upset. He was searching around the house calling out "Mum." He looked out of the window. There was a policeman coming up the drive.

Suddenly I realized what had happened all those years ago. The fourteen-year-old me had gone back nine years in time. But I had

arrived too late. "Inspector Gadget" was over. My mother was dead. A policeman was coming up the drive to tell the five-year-old me that his mother was dead. I wouldn't have let that happen. I wouldn't have left him to live all those years with an old grandma who didn't want him. That's when I would have panicked. When I didn't think clearly.

I must have grabbed my hand. The big me must have grabbed the hand of the little me. And wished us nine years into the future. I wanted to take the five-year-old into the future and look after him.

Poof. The five-year-old me landed nine years into the future. The fourteen-year-old me just vanished. By taking his five-year-old self nine years into the future he ceased to exist. He had missed all those nine years and hadn't grown up. He was the boy who never was.

Suddenly a five-year-old child landed in the future. On his own. He didn't know how he got there. And neither did anyone else.

That's what I think happened, anyway. That's my explanation of how I jumped nine years.

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I went home and sat in my room. Grandma was taking a rest. She was tired. Much too tired to be worried about me.

What if I went back again? What if I was really careful? What if I went back to the front gate just as my mother reached it? At the beginning of "Inspector Gadget." I could tell her not to go to the store. Then she would not be run over.

I closed my eyes and wished myself back.

Mrs. Booth closed the exercise book and stood up. She could hear the strident voices of "Inspector Gadget" floating through the window. She looked at the fourteen-year-old boy carefully. She was sure that she had seen him before. But she was a little cross. "Why have you picked on our family?" she said. "You have described me and my mother and my child. You've been snooping around. Why didn't you do your assignment on your own family?"

The fourteen-year-old boy was crying. "You are my own family, Mum," he said.

She still gripped the exercise book tightly in her hand. Her mind was in a spin. The boy was crying real tears.

"Your story doesn't make sense," she said. "If I go back inside, obviously I won't get run over. And none of what you have written will happen."

"That's right," he said.

"And you will never have been here."

The boy's lips trembled just a little. "That's what I want," he said.

Mrs. Booth turned and walked back to the house. When she reached the door, she turned and looked back. She felt as if she had been talking to someone.

But there was no one there. ❀

