

Beyond the End of Time

[by Michael Cassutt](#)

"Beyond the end of Time," she says, all blue eyes, bronze hair, and freckles.

"That would be somewhere in northern California?" I say, since I have asked her where she's from.

"No," she says, her expression starting to shift from indulgence to exasperation. (I've seen it often enough.) But she finishes with a laugh, "Nice try, though."

We are at Peter Deibel's party high in the Hollywood hills, a place I would rather not be. It's a Saturday night in November, unseasonably cold, and I've stopped drinking, considerably dimming the appeal of the bright lights and wildlife. I've stopped drinking because Amy left me, meaning I have to drive myself, meaning I'm exposed to Saturday night specials like the one who injects his PT Cruiser into my lane on the Marmont curve as if I were only a virtual Explorer. Naturally, there's a phone embedded in his ear.

I'm too tired to offer the Cruiser pilot a single-digit salute, or even a blast of the horn, not that either move is easy, given my hand controls. I just want to increase the space between us, because I'm already late.

Then there is the usual challenge of parking: after twenty years I can get out of the driver's seat and into my wheelchair fairly easily, but not if I'm on a steeply sloping street, especially one so narrow that I have to dodge passing cars.

All this to spend three hours with Peter, a man I haven't seen in five years, until his party invitation shows up in my mailbox. Divorce, substance abuse and a gigantic lawsuit have driven my old mentor into exile in Carmel or someplace like that, which is why "Northern California" pops into my head as I talk to ... to ...

"By the way, I'm Clark," I say, holding out my hand.

This tallish woman (well, they're all tall from my perspective) of thirty, pretty but not beautiful, impossibly enthusiastic, bends ever so slightly to take my hand. Her touch is warm. "Jasmine."

"I'm sorry, but that name sounds more like Carmel or Marin than Beyond the End of Time."

"It's sort of a translation from another language."

"Well, you sound like a native speaker. English, I mean. Not Hollywood."

"Neither do you."

"Odd that you should put it that way." My Hollywood career, while successful to objective observers, has always baffled me, because I am completely unsuited to the business. In addition to the obvious irony—an action adventure television director in a *wheelchair*?—I am too outspoken, too impulsive, and, lately and perhaps inevitably, too unemployed. "Where did you meet Peter?"

I expect Jasmine to answer "rehab" or "a nightclub" or "I don't know him, I just came with a friend." What she says is, "About a billion years from now."

I'm not the first person in history to continue a ridiculous line of conversation because he's attracted to a woman at a Hollywood party. I must admit, though, that Jasmine from Beyond the End of Time, aka a billion years from now, is not remotely the typical actress/model/whatever, all boobs and lips and creamy

skin and blond hair, the usual dispenser of this sort of silliness. Before I can offer anything more than a non-committal "Oh, really?" I hear the sound of something smashing in the kitchen. Jasmine focuses her blue eyes on mine and says, "Clark, will you excuse me for a moment?"

Maybe it is because I am rebounding (Amy, my own actress/model/whatever, having finally tired of the role of girlfriend-nurse), but I feel as though I am about to see one of the more fascinating, not to mention attractive, woman in this or any other time, glide across the room, disappearing into the crowd and the night. "Not at all," I say, as smoothly and confidently as I can, which is not too.

"I promise I'll be back," she says. "We have to talk further."

That curious addendum buoys me so thoroughly that I don't notice Peter himself shambling up behind me in his flannel shirt and faded jeans. "Great, isn't she?" he says, meaning Jasmine.

"Intriguing. She said you'd met a billion years in the future."

"Right. It was a very strange space." Now, you can expect Peter Deibel to say things that don't make sense in the real world. Part of this is just his screwy view of the universe as a realm of mysterious powers and alliances, magic formulas and secret histories, which helped him carve out a lucrative career as creator of unusual television concepts. Part of it is off-and-on pharmaceutical intake that made it impossible to see those concepts realized under his control.

At least, this is my semi-informed judgment. Peter and I worked together for most of a decade, but I really don't know him well. Even though I directed twenty episodes of three different Peter-created series over that span, this party marks only the second time we have had what you'd call a personal moment. Even when we were on a series, we never spoke about any subject other than the job.

So I have to choose whether to react with my usual direct skepticism, or go post-modern. I pick the second: "She doesn't look a day over five hundred million."

"Age isn't important to her. The concept is meaningless."

"I wish I could say the same." At that instant, I know why Peter Deibel and I have never truly connected. He raises one eyebrow and half-smiles behind his Frito Bandito mustache. "Sorry," I say, blushing. "You're serious."

"Yeah. Weird, huh?" He offers to wheel me out of the party and toward his office. Feeling like a small-minded shit, I let him.

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Crazy as Peter is in his professional dealings, he always takes great care in his physical surroundings. His home office looks like something from the *New York Times* "Style" section, lots of burnished wood and expensive rugs framing a tiny iMac. Neatly-bound television scripts sit in a row beneath a picture window alive with what are, to my aging eyes, the fuzzy lights of Hollywood. A pair of Emmys and a CableAce award rest in their illuminated nooks.

I offer praise on the design, which he dismisses. "All rented for my new project," he says. "The food, the music, the lighting, even the women are merely an illusion to convince people I'm a player."

Which makes Peter's next statements seem less bizarre, if that's possible. "Jaz is an emissary from another time," he says.

"Beyond the End of Time, she said."

He grins as he collapses into what appears to be a vastly expensive leather desk chair sculpted to his frame. "Not from these parts."

"Well, then, what is she doing here? And how did you hook up with her?" *And why does she want to talk to me?*

"We met at an Other Ones concert about a year ago," he says, mentioning a sort of Grateful Dead survivors group I am surprised to recognize. Peter has been a Deadhead since the 1970s. When I first began working with him, he was always chartering a plane and flying off to concerts on the weekends. I still remember how he broke down when Jerry Garcia died. "It was in Eugene, Oregon. I was hanging out backstage, and wound up talking to her over the snacks." Snacks, in this situation, being recreational chemicals. "She didn't fit in at all." I had noticed this about Jasmine even at this party. It was nothing overt, say, like wearing a silver lame jumpsuit, but she did not seem to belong. "All the ex-hippies and heads were giving her a lot of room." He swung his feet up on his desk, showing me his beat-up Adidas. "At first I was just going to hit on her, but I sort of forgot about it." He laughs. "Forgot about the concert, too."

"Pigpen was probably in the middle of a twenty-minute guitar jam." In all that time on Peter's sets, I have absorbed a smattering of Dead names.

Peter looks over his glasses at me like a professor dealing with a first-year law student. "Pigpen doesn't play guitar, Clark. It was probably Bobby Weir. Anyway, Jaz and I started talking, just the way you were, out comes this 'Beyond the End of Time, a billion years from now,' yada yada.

"I just thought it was one of those weird raps you hear at a Dead concert, but Jaz didn't seem stoned or strung out, or crazy. At least not crazy in the way *I* know crazy." Peter managed to marry several questionable women he met through the Dead, so while he isn't some kind of sanity expert, he has a bit of experience. "So I let her come home with me." Home being Monterey, I recall.

Note that he doesn't say he asked her to come home with me. Let. I actually start to feel a bit jealous. "Sounds like a relationship."

He smiles. "No way. Jaz immediately got hooked up with some job over at U.C.-Santa Cruz, some space survey thing. She was always around to talk to, but nothing was the way it should be. Forget sex. She didn't eat, she didn't drink, she didn't sleep. She never used the bathroom. Can you imagine a chick who never goes into the bathroom?"

"So, then, what is she," I say, "some kind of ghost? This sounds like *Weird Romance*." *Weird Romance* was my first project with Peter, a cable anthology series where the typical story concerned a man and a woman who could not possibly have sex, because one of them was ... well, weird. The silly thing ran for 66 episodes.

"Not a ghost. She has a physical presence. She picks up the phone. She leaves an indentation when she gets up from the couch."

"Good thing you weren't watching her closely." I smile to take the edge off the sarcasm. I am getting testy, probably because I am now expecting some kind of pitch from Peter that involves mental healing, financial support, or possibly religion. "Did she happen to say, during these six months with you, *why* she

was here from wherever?"

"She's got a project. I'm helping her with it, which is why I moved back down here."

"Let me guess ... an idea for a screenplay."

"She's got a lot of ideas, but they've got nothing to do with our former business."

"Now I'm *really* intrigued."

"You should be. Because the first person she wanted to meet down here was you."

I am as suspicious as I am flattered. "A television director who is staring into the open grave of his career?"

Peter closes his eyes, as if searching for strength. "Look, Clark, I hired you the first time on *Romance* because I could see that you were smart and talented." And because Peter was what used to be called a bleeding heart liberal who thought a kid who had broken his spine in a high school auto accident should still have the chance to become Steven Spielberg. "All you needed was a chance. And I can honestly say, you never disappointed me, either. Not on the set." He squirms in his fancy chair. So do I, to the extent I can, because I hear the last countdown ticks on a missile of criticism aimed right at the bridge of my nose. "We never really ...." He moves his hands back and forth in some kind of vertical seesaw gesture.

"Became friends?" I prompt.

"Not that. I think we *are* friends." Which makes me feel shitty. "We were never able to ... join forces and become *more* than television hacks."

"It's never too late." I'm joking.

But Peter is serious. "That's why you're here."

Before I can process this statement, Peter continues: "We spent years figuring out how to tell stories, Clark. We were using Dutch angles and nervous cameras and casting guys with earrings and girls with tattoos. Remember when we decided on *B.C. Cops* that no scene could run over sixty seconds?" *B.C. Cops* was our second project.

"We were very fucking hip and very successful. But really sort of predictable, too. Because all we were doing was wrapping shit in pretty paper. We threw out anything that resembled reflection or an actual idea and replaced it with a rap soundtrack and lots of eye candy. We made it impossible for anyone to recognize the truth if it wasn't packaged the right way."

"Jesus, Peter, a few more minutes of this and I'm gonna start to feel bad."

"You know, Clark, that's what Carter Bales used to say on *B.C. Cops*. Did I ever tell you I based him on you?"

Bang! The missile explodes in my face. "What do you want, Peter? We can't go *back*."

"No. We can go forward with open minds."

A billion years into the future? Beyond the End of Time?

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Some semi-retired actress/model/whatever (by that I mean she's forty) comes to the door, and my session with Peter ends. I flee back to the party, and immediately encounter Jaz, as I now think of her.

She smiles and lowers herself to a couch, so our eyes are roughly on the same plane. "Did Peter explain everything?"

"Not remotely."

"It's not his strength."

"Why don't we save ourselves a lot of time. Just tell me what you want from me," I say, making the conversational equivalent of an Acapulco cliff dive. Jasmine has not become less attractive in the space of fifteen minutes, but I possess the ability to shake off the effects of a beautiful woman's force field—provided I'm out of range.

"That's direct."

"It would be the first thing this evening, after your little dance a while ago and Peter's big secret briefing. Frankly, it's like an episode of *B.C. Cops*."

Actually, by this point I am thinking of my third project with Peter, the one that prompted the big lawsuits. It was called *Syn*, short for synesthesia, and it dealt with a guy whose senses had been scrambled by an accident. I remember *Syn* right now, because I'm seeing cold. But only for a moment. Jasmine's placid disposition returns in a heartbeat. "I suppose we are being silly."

"I promise I'll listen."

"Easy to say *before* you've heard me. You see, Clark, the answer to your very polite earlier question about where I'm from is what I told you. At least, sort of." She glances around quite prettily, then whispers. "I lived in Claremont before going up to Eugene." Claremont being the name of a college town within the greater Los Angeles area. "Jasmine is a name I adopted. Before that I was Jennifer Leigh Camden."

"Now that *really* doesn't sound like a name from Beyond the End of Time."

"Do you still want the answers?"

"I'm intrigued. And not out of patience yet."

"Okay, then." She gets up and lets me roll after her toward a corner of the big living room. The party is still boiling around us. Some kind of fusionoid music is playing on a very expensive system—or perhaps it's live from a combo on the floor below; Peter is capable of that.

And here's pretty much what Jasmine tells me:

The part of her personality that is *not* Jennifer Leigh Camden from Claremont, CA, is a consciousness formed literally a billion years in the future.

This entity, which we might as well call Jasmine, is actually a "cluster" of 70,000 or so individual minds. ("Exactly 70,000?" I say, and I'm really not trying to be funny. "Is there some significance to the

number?")

("No. It varies, sometimes by several thousand. Other clusters have fewer, sometimes only a dozen or so. Our ... messaging software doesn't work well when the number goes above 70,000." She says this all patiently, but I suspect that further interruptions will be dealt with harshly.)

Even the "billion year" figure is just a figure of speech. "That kind of data point has lost its meaning. I mean, we know from ancient history that the year was a common measurement of the passage of time due to the agricultural basis of the early human societies. Planting and harvesting were part of a cycle dependent on the planet's revolution around the sun. But we have not been agricultural for a billion billion seconds."

Oh, another thing. "We live in seconds, fractions thereof. Or in what used to be called millennia, ten to the third power based on the planet's rotation. And many places in between." Whatever. They live a long time. Or a short time, and they make it seem long.

"We have different bodies at different times. Some of them are organic; most are what you would call machines." Figured.

"What brings me here, to you, is the Mapping Project," a term which doesn't begin to explain it.

Here's what I got: the human race, or some chunk thereof, took to heart the Biblical injunction to "name and classify all things". Not just the "birds of the air, the fish of the sea and things that grow on the land," but everything in the whole universe. *Every* galaxy, *every* star, *every* planet.

Every gas cluster. Every pulsar. Every black hole.

No wonder she says, "I will tell you many impossible things, but the first such you must believe is this: our project is one million years old."

"That's a lot of data," I say, taking refuge from this madness in humor.

"We discovered that you needed a memory the *size* of the universe in order to properly map the universe."

At this point my head is hurting. My crotch, which has been disturbingly silent not just this evening, but for weeks (doing nothing to improve my mood, believe me), begins to throb. I'm beginning to imagine that my feet, which I haven't felt in twenty years, are itching.

But it gets worse. Jaz says, "You can't just create a map that's frozen in time. Macro and micro processes are always in motion. So the project expanded until it literally became a working, running model of the universe right down to the fishes of every sea, the birds of every atmosphere." She smiles, as if that will make it all better. "Even you."

"Well, if I'm part of your model," I say, wondering how the hell I am going to make an escape, "I've got some complaints." Specifically about a fender bender one snowy afternoon in February some twenty years ago.

"That's why we're talking."

"If you're talking to everyone in the universe who doesn't like his life, you're going to be busy for a billion years."

"Right now it's just you."

"I don't know whether to be flattered or horrified."

"It depends on how you choose."

"Choose what?"

She sighs and closes her eyes. I suspect I'm turning out to be stupider than she'd hoped. "There are two factions in the Mapping Project. One wants to create a perfect simulation which will replicate the history of the universe in all its glory and pain. Those are the Realists.

"I'm one of the Romantics. We want to make things different, and better."

"For what it's worth, you've got my support."

"Oh, but we need more."

"I'm a has-been television director! There must be two billion people ahead of me on any list of helpful human beings!"

She shakes her head. "Too many of them are already Romantics. You are a Realist."

Jaz might be right about that. For example, I have always been brutally realistic with the women in my life, telling them that the house is full of ramps and low shelves, that making a trip to the grocery store is a major undertaking, that you will wind up being my maid, and, oh yeah, that the sex will be unpredictable at best. "Granted. There are still millions of Realists walking the streets who would be better subjects for whatever you have in mind. What is it again?"

All through this conversation, and I've tried to shorten it and straighten it out, Jaz has given no sign of impatience. She has not grabbed a drink from a passing waiter, or even stood up and stretched. "You are alive at the time in history when the seeds of the Mapping Project first take root."

"The beginning of the Space Age?"

"The end of the Space Age. This is the beginning of the Virtual Age, the Modeling Age. Human beings are not going into space, not physically. That should be obvious by now. Their sensory avatars will, which is how the Mapping started. Others will turn inward, creating their own virtual worlds. Still others will be reconstructing the past in a detail never before seen. That really started with photography and sound recording, but it's expanding into genetic archaeology, too."

In spite of my Realism, I find this intriguing, because this subject is one of my few areas of interest, aside from my failing career—the ability to slice and dice some genetic material that proves, for example, that the Irish and the Basque share the same heritage.

"Are you *sure* this isn't a screenplay idea?" I say. "Because it feels a little expository so far. You need to have somebody show up naked on a side street, let the audience *feel* his story." I smile, picturing Jaz naked. "Or her story."

"We considered all of that. But to force the material into a corrupt and artificial form seemed unnecessary."

"This all sounds like a gigantic simulation." Gigantic isn't nearly enough word for it. I thought about my relatively simple ten-mile drive to Peter's, and all the apartments and mansions and storefronts and offices I'd passed, and all the women and men and children who lived in them, worked at them, slept on the sidewalks in front of them. People born here, or maybe in Pakistan. Perfectly mobile people, and those

like me, each with a story millions of seconds long, and still going.

Then I multiplied for the entire Los Angeles area, that whole sea of lights visible through Peter's picture window. Then I multiplied again, for the rest of the world.

Then the whole universe.

It's not only beyond the end of time, it's beyond *me*. I think I can imagine how disrupted one of my Cro-Magnon ancestors would feel if confronted with downtown L.A.—that was only 35,000 years ago.

Not a billion.

I began to feel as though I'd had a double shot of tequila, an amount and type of liquor guaranteed to make me pass out.

"That's one way to look at it. A hideously complex simulation."

Playing along—there is really no option—I say, "What kind of sim allows the operators to mix it up with the players?"

My reward is a raised eyebrow, a pointed finger, a perfectly early twenty-first century American gesture that says, *Good point*. My moment of triumph is brief. Jaz says, "Oh, this isn't the first time we've run it."

Then I do get chilled, and not thermally, because in spite of several layers of hard-bitten cynicism and skepticism—or Realism—at my core I'm as superstitious as a cave man looking at shadows.

So I'm wondering, am I dead? Did I get killed in front of the Chateau Marmont? Is Jaz the angel of whatever come to deliver me east to Brentwood (aka Heaven) or south of the 10 Freeway (Hell)?

"Okay," I say, about exhausting this evening's supply of questions, "what was it like, being yanked out of the future and stuck in this simulation? Are you really floating in some tank a billion years in the future?"

"It doesn't work like that at all! We had to search and find a person whose life would intersect with Peter's, then with yours. I had to *become* Jennifer Leigh Camden."

"You mean, she existed before? In the original version, I mean, not the remake?"

"Yes. More or less."

"So you had to what, be born? Grow up?"

She nods. "For a long time I didn't know who I was."

"When did you first realize that you were ... not from around here?"

"I always felt I was different." Knowing how lame that sounds, she adds, "which means I was probably just like every teenager who ever lived. But when I was thirteen I started having dreams—very consistent ones, not just about, you know, the far, far future ... but about events I could see happening around me. So I started keeping a journal and saw that the details of my dream world were very consistent, and that some of these dreams came true." She is silent for a moment, examining her hands, as if for hidden flaws. "It wasn't easy."

Those hands are within reach. It seems wrong, somehow, not to take them. "Is there some virginity thing associated with being from Beyond the End of Time?" This seems like a logical question, because our noses are now about two inches apart. The rest of us is even closer.



She laughs from somewhere deep in her throat. "Only when it comes to Peter Deibel." And she kisses me.

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But only once, and the delicious effect fades like a dream on waking. I say, "So where's the proof?"

She laughs so instantly, so happily, that she actually blushes. "There *is* no proof! You have to take my word for it."

"Just, uh, 'sell all you own and follow me'?" I'm not really religious, but I knew that was a quote from the Bible.

"Work with Peter. *Start* the project!"

I can't help laughing. "And why? Why change history? Why reprogram your little sim?"

"Because of all the pain! All the lives thrown away! It hurts even in our sim."

"Well, then, you're really late. You should have showed up a century ago, before Stalin and Dachau."

She gets a very strange look on her face. "They were only the beginning, Clark. It gets much worse in the Virtual Age. Much, much worse."

At that moment, I have had enough enlightenment. I back my chair away from Jaz and the couch. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

"Are you leaving?" She actually seems quite upset at the idea.

"It's late, I'm cold. You're a very interesting woman. I'm not nearly good enough for whatever it is you want."

And then, God help me, I rotate my chair and get out of there.

But not before I see Jasmine stumbling up to Peter, falling into his arms, distraught. And Peter looking my direction as if he's seeing the saddest sight in the world.

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I make it home safely, go about my usual routine on Sunday, start making calls on Monday, hoping to scare up an assignment, and think no more about Jasmine.

Actually, that's a lie. Every few moments I think about Jasmine, this business of living in a simulation run by some weird version of humanity a billion years in the (projected) future, but actually sort of outside our time (and universe?). Then my head starts to hurt and I have to change the subject.

When I drag myself out of the house and wheel over to Ventura Boulevard to do errands, I notice that

people are glancing at me. Now, given that I've been in a wheelchair for twenty years, I'm used to the occasional stare and the glance of pity, and all the gradations between.

But these are different. From the sheer intensity of these looks, you'd think I had the Playmate of the Month wearing high heels and a thong pushing me. I practically flee back home.

And then I do something silly. I dig Peter Deibel's invitation out of Thursday's trash (I hadn't bothered to add his phone number to my Rolodex) and call him, figuring he'll know where to find Jasmine.

The phone rings. Peter's voice, gruff, raw. "Yeah."

"Hey, Peter, it's Clark," I say, and launch right into, "listen, I'm sorry for just taking off the other night, I had a great time and I'd like to give Jasmine a call—" Then I realize that Peter is just sort of breathing on his end of the line. "Peter?"

"I can't help you, Clark. Not with Jaz."

"Why not?"

"She's dead, man. Jasmine's dead."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Peter is perfectly capable of telling me something like that, just to see me go critical.

"She took off right after you did Saturday night. I don't know who with or where they went. But she never came back. The West Hollywood P.D. found her on the sidewalk in front of the Roxy about seven in the morning. She overdosed."

"On what? Was she a user?" *Was her whole story some fantasy fueled by Ecstasy?*

"They don't know yet. But she never used a thing around me. And I know a user, Clark. That's one thing I can see coming."

"God, Peter. I don't know what to say."

"You said enough."

Now I get angry. "Are you blaming me for what happened to Jasmine? She was *living* with you! I talked to her at a party for an hour!"

There is silence on the line. A sigh. "Ah, shit, it was meant to be. She always said so."

I don't pursue this with Peter, because I know I won't like the answer. "What are they going to do? Is there a family? Are there funeral plans?"

"I guess I'm her family. And I'm handling it."

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Jasmine from Beyond the End of Time, aka Jennifer Leigh Camden of Claremont, California, is buried at Forest Lawn that Thursday. The weather is wretched, cold and rainy, autumnal in a way more suited to

upstate New York than to Los Angeles.

The crowd is small, no more than twenty. The only face I recognize is Peter's.

The service is low on the religious scale, with a guitarist and a female minister who might have been a Unitarian. Peter at work again.

I sit there, shivering, listening to guitar music and soothing words, and thinking about the things Jasmine told me. Wondering why I had to reject them so quickly, so thoroughly. What made me the kind of human being who was only happy making up fantasies to amuse people I didn't know, and wouldn't like if I did? Who couldn't accept a wonderful idea presented to me purely, freely, even innocently?

What if we *were* all simulations in some unbelievably gigantic program? Was that any crazier than any other explanation I had ever been offered for my existence?

"I'm sorry, Jaz," I say, offering my words to clouds rolling over Griffith Park, to the cars thundering by on the 134 Freeway.

I wheel back to my car, lever myself inside as I have done for twenty years, and drive home. It is dark by now, my driveway treacherous.

So I am especially careful when I open my door, and swing my chair out of the passenger side, locking it open. I am unusually patient as I grab the tow bar above the driver's side window.

And I am completely surprised when my legs move as they were designed to, absorbing my weight, allowing me to take my first unaided steps in twenty years.

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I spend the evening walking. Clumsily, yes. But I am undeniably mobile.

And I call Peter to tell him. Not just about the walking, but about how I want to work with him on Jasmine's project.

And, feeling truly crazy now, wondering if tomorrow or the day after, Jasmine's grave might turn out to be empty.

The End