

The Knight Temporal

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This story was first completed on Tuesday, January 4, 1994 and was most recently revised on Sunday, March 7, 2010.

This document is approximately 4,125 words long.

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Chapter One

How'd I get here? How'd I get the way that I am? The last thing that I remember before it happened is getting drunk. I woke up in an alley, like this, behind a little bar in Ventura.

What difference does it make? However it happened, the fact is that I'm trapped in a field. According to Webster, a field is a region or space in which a given effect exists. Does that explain anything? Maybe you'd rather believe that someone cast a spell on me. A spell is a strong compelling influence or attraction. Webster again. What's the difference? Both of those definitions mean the same thing. They mean that something happens and that nobody knows why. If you're a scientist, then you call it a field. If you're a wizard, then you call it a spell.

I call it a bubble. That isn't accurate, either, because bubbles have pretty definite boundaries. This thing that I'm in just fades with distance. It's pretty much constant, as near as matters, for about 10 feet away from me. Beyond that, it starts to fade. By 20 feet, it's gone, as near as matters. It took me a small fraction of a millisecond to learn most of what I need to know about my bubble. Of course, that just depends on how you look at it. To me, it seemed like several weeks. To me it was several weeks. To the rest of the world, it was a fraction of a millisecond.

Learning to live in my bubble was tricky because, to me, the rest of the world seems to be standing still, or very nearly so. At first, I wasn't sure if anything outside of my bubble was moving at all. I figure that I must be moving millions of times faster than everyone else. It's been, well it's hard to tell, maybe several years by my time and I'm still not certain if anything outside of the bubble has actually changed except, of course, when I caused it. Living that way is tricky. I don't know why I'm still alive.

The first time that I almost killed myself was the time that I went to sleep in front of a roaring fire. My bubble moves with me through the real world. Ahead of me, as the bubble moves around things, they begin to speed up. Behind me, as the bubble moves away from things, everything slows down. If I stand still and throw something, it slows to a stop at about 20 feet from me and hangs there. Now, think about CO₂. I didn't and I nearly died. The CO₂ couldn't diffuse out of my bubble. Look, I don't know why this thing works this way. I'm only telling you how it works. The thing is, I didn't really need the damned fire. I've never been cold inside of this bubble. I just felt like watching a fire burn, so I built one. Then I went to sleep and nearly died of suffocation. I woke up gasping and disoriented. I crawled for about 15 feet and got some air. I have to be careful about certain things, like sitting for too long in one place on a motor cycle, or I use up my air. I don't think that sleeping is a problem, so long as I'm careful about fires. After all, a hemisphere 40 feet in diameter has a lot of air in it. If I get up on something tall, I have the entire spherical volume, but I don't like to get up on tall things any more. Just to be safe I went into a store and took a cheap wind-up alarm clock. As long as it's near me in the bubble, it runs at my speed. I sleep for a couple of hours and then I move over about 40 feet. No problem.

The Knight Temporal

One of the next things that I learned was to stay away from other people. When other people get into the bubble they start speeding up to my speed. I have to stay at least 10 feet away from anybody else, 15 feet is better. Of course, if I get lonely, or horny, or whatever, I can approach someone just for a little company. It's always a little tough to explain what's happening, so I don't do it very often.

At first, I thought that survival would be a breeze. In town, it's pretty easy. I just detour around people and take what I need. In the country, it's a little more tricky. I've done some hunting and I thought that it'd be easy to sneak up on a jack rabbit, or a deer, or whatever. That's true, except for the last 10 feet or so. The closer I get, the more the animal can evade me. I tried shooting at them, but bullets don't work very well over a distance of more than about 14 feet and, even as far in as 12 or 13, you're likely to just make the animal mad. The best technique that I ever discovered was to just keep letting the animal escape from the bubble and then approaching it again. That was a young deer. Every time that the bubble moved around the animal, it became aware of me and ran. When it left the bubble, I just caught it again. Eventually, I wore it down. I did that only once and, that one time, I let the animal go. It was cruel to the animal. It had tried so valiantly to escape and it looked so hopeless, laying there and staring up at me, gasping for breath, that I just couldn't bring myself to shoot it. Also, it's a lot easier to just walk into a store and steal a meal. It's pretty easy to find a hot meal, ready for the waitress to deliver it, in a restaurant. I'll bet that I'm creating a real mystery in my wake.

Another problem is water. I can't just walk up to a water faucet and get water out of it. Sure, the water in the closest 10 feet or so of the pipe will dribble out but the water further away in the pipe can't move at my speed. About the only way to get water is to find a supply of bottled water. I found a little wagon that I fill with bottled water to take with me whenever I go far from town. Until I figured that out I didn't dare get far from Ventura. Bottled water set me free.

Another thing. The bubble is, after all, a sphere. That means that it effects things underground. I try to avoid setting up a picnic over an anthill. I've learned that any randomly selected 40 ft. hemisphere of dirt will have all kinds of bugs in it. Also, any randomly selected 40 ft. hemisphere of air will probably have at least a few hungry mosquitoes in it. Every form of refuge has its complications.

Another thing that I learned the hard way was about jumping. A couple of days after I got my bubble, I jumped off of a bridge, for a swim. It was only about 15 feet down but, as I neared the mid-point, where not much of anything solid was inside of my bubble, I fell pretty slowly. I waited most of the day to hit the water. That is, it seemed like most of a day to me. It's fortunate that I didn't try something stupid like hang-gliding. As it was, I got pretty hungry. One thing that I noticed was that, as my bubble began to move into the water, I fell faster. It seemed that I hit the water at about the right speed for the height of the bridge. After that, I spent several weeks loading food and water into my pack and jumping off of things. I was careful not to jump off of anything too high. After all, I seemed to hit the ground at the same speed as if I didn't have the bubble. Anyway, it's weird. I know it's free fall, because I don't feel any weight. If I turn loose of something, say, a bottle of wa-

ter, then it just floats in front of me where I turned loose of it. I fall very slowly from my own point of view, except for the last 10 or so feet. Now, I carry as much food and water as possible inside of the bubble with me, in my pack, just in case I fall off of something. I also keep my little wagon well stocked. I avoid high places when possible.

Anyway, here I am, trapped inside of a bubble of time. I have a theory that it has something to do with the end of the world, but I'm not sure exactly what. For a long time, I didn't know that the world was ending but now I think that maybe it is, at least the world as we know it. I found out by accident. This is what happened.

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Chapter Two

Eventually, I left Ventura and went north along the coast. Sometimes I stole a vehicle, sometimes I walked. I was just wandering. What else was there for me to do? When I got to Santa Cruz, I turned inland, to Skyline Boulevard. I continued north and, before long, I was faced with the problem of crossing San Francisco. I guess that going up the peninsula was a mistake. If I'd gone around the south end of the Bay, instead, then I wouldn't have ended up in a bottleneck. Anyway, I sat in Daly City for a while, in an empty park, to think about it. For a while, I thought about backtracking and going around the Bay toward Oakland. I don't know exactly why but I decided, instead, to ride through San Francisco and across the Golden Gate Bridge on a motorcycle that I found conveniently available. I'd have to abandon my little wagon of supplies but I figured that I could replace everything in Sausalito. I figured that if I just went whizzing by the crowded places, I'd be O.K., so away I went. I tried to stay away from the traffic on Highway 1 but, even so, I'm afraid that I caused some unusual fender-benders. At the time, I worried a lot about it. Now I know that it doesn't really matter. What with detouring around one thing and another, I ended up going north along the east end of Golden Gate Park. That's where my plan fell apart.

Crossing Haight Street on Stanyan, I glanced to my right and noticed a bright light shining down Haight Street. I've always liked Haight Street. No matter how things changed, Haight Street always had interesting people. It was always lined with interesting businesses. On Haight Street, the 60's never died. Anyway, I saw a bright light. How the Hell do I even see light? I shouldn't be able to, not at the speed that I'm living. When I ponder that, I tend to think of the bubble as a spell, rather than a field. Anyway, there was that bright light. I got off the bike and walked that direction, and there it was, hanging in mid air. It was just hanging there, not moving. I couldn't see what it was for. It looked like a small sun, seen through some kind of a photographic filter, lumpy mottled surface, and so forth, except for a few spiky projections. There were one or two little fragments of some kind of debris suspended in the air close to it. I retrospect, it's obvious what it was but just like all of the other stuff that I've learned, I hadn't the foggiest notion at the time. Curiosity killed the cat, they say, but I guess that I have more than nine lives. Or maybe I'm just damned lucky.

I went searching and, over on Fulton, I found one of those service trucks that the power company uses that has a long hydraulic boom. I thought that I'd move the truck under the light, raise the boom, climb up it, and investigate. It wouldn't work, of course. I could start the engine, but I couldn't move the truck. The rear of the truck was too far away from me. The wheels wouldn't turn. I just kept stalling the engine. It's just as well. I'd never have gotten it through the traffic.

I walked back to the intersection and stood there with my hands in my pockets, just looking up at the thing. I still couldn't figure out what it was. As I stood there staring, something nagged at my attention. I tried to shade my eyes and looked more carefully. At first I didn't notice what was happening because I was looking directly

The Knight Temporal

at it. The movement was directly toward me along my line of vision, Also, it was still very slow. Then I saw it. The light was growing an arm in my direction, reaching for me. When I noticed it, the thing was already a couple of feet into my bubble. I turned and ran. It followed me, dissipating gradually, but not before it scorched the seat of my pants.

It took me about half a block to outrun it. Then I went around the block, zigzagging to avoid people, and examined what I'd created. Where the arm had followed me down the sidewalk, the first several yards of it hovered near smoking surroundings, then scorched surroundings, then normal surroundings, as the arm gradually became more diffuse along its length. I'm afraid that, in my haste, I'd run too close to a few unfortunate pedestrians who, I hope, had already made their peace with God. Naturally, the effects of the thing had stopped as soon as my bubble had gotten out of the way. What I saw was a snap-shot of those effects, midway to completion.

I stood there looking at that big ball of light, at the arm that had reached for me, at the scorching that it was causing in it's near vicinity, and then I took a more careful look at my surroundings. Everything facing the ball of light glistened. That was when I figured out what it was. It was a nuclear explosion, still small, almost at the instant when it blew up. Those fragments up there must have been bits of the exterior of the thing. There it was, floating over Haight Street, exploding before my very eyes. I'd gotten too close and a small, a very small, an exceedingly small portion of it had leaked into my bubble. That's why I speculate about the end of the world. A nuclear explosion in San Francisco isn't a thing to be taken lightly, no pun intended, even by someone who lives in a time bubble. Up in the air like that, I doubt if it's an isolated terrorist thing. Must have been a missile. Who? Beats me.

My first impulse was to just get the hell out of town. In fact, I started to leave. I was all the way back to the motorcycle before I hesitated. If it had been any place in the world but the Haight-Ashbury, I'd have left. But it was the Haight-Ashbury. I sat there on the motorcycle, looked back at that God Damned bomb exploding over Haight Street, and I cried. I just sat there and cried, thinking that anybody would drop a bomb on the Haight-Ashbury. All of those beautiful people were going to die.

I went back to the end of the arm, and I teased it. I got it to reach for me, just a little, and then I ran. That worked, so I had a plan. I needed lots of running room so I spent about three weeks, my time of course, moving people out of my way. That was a very interesting project. You walk up to someone and try to persuade him that he isn't crazy just because everything in the world has suddenly stopped. That might be a little easier on Haight Street than anywhere else in the world, but I'm not sure. Then you try to convince him that the big ball of light in the air is a nuclear bomb exploding. Then you try to convince him that if you walk away from him, he won't live another half second. Then you tell him that you want him to walk over to the Mission District with you, and then you're going to walk away from him. Great. I learned a lot about people during those three weeks.

Eventually, I had some running room, and I began to tease the bomb. I must have run thousands of miles during the next year or so, my time. I stretched explosion

arms as far as I could get them. The hard part was getting as much material into them as possible before they filled the width of the street, because if I walked beside one, it tended to spread sideways. I didn't want to get trapped. I developed a tactic of teasing sections completely loose from the arms. After I'd managed to get a segment of the explosion teased loose, I'd maneuver it into a side street. It was tricky. I had to take the arms apart and move the pieces into side streets, so that I could get back to the main explosion. Anyway, I worked at it and eventually I had bits of the explosion stashed all the way east to 101 and all around Masonic as far as the Presidio. That's only 2 or 3 miles, total, but it's a hell of a long way to run over and over again, with a nuclear explosion chasing you. Of course, the explosion was getting bigger all of the time. I'd originally hoped to convert it into some kind of a low yield event, sort of a fizzle. Maybe I removed about 10% of it before it had filled the width of the street. Maybe I'm flattering myself. By then there was a lot of heat damage already apparent on the surrounding buildings. There was also a very serious shock wave at the leading edge of the thing. I could see that the shock wave wouldn't tolerate any resistance. And speaking of the shock wave, there's just no way to describe the sound that leaked into my bubble every time that I teased the explosion. It was the sound of Hell itself, and you can bet that it boosted my motivation to move right along.

Eventually, it became clear to me that I couldn't prevent what was going to happen. I had to give up. Maybe it was a mistake to try at all. I don't know. When I finally decided that I couldn't spread the explosion out fast enough to convert it into just a big hot spot, I tried to get as many people as possible out of town. The Mission District wasn't nearly far enough away. I'd moved people over there just to get some running room around the bomb. Anyway, if I wanted to save people, I'd have to get them a lot further away. I tried. Another bummer. Everybody had to do something else or to go somewhere else first, before he'd leave. That is, of course, when anybody would even believe me. Some who did believe me wanted to steal my bubble. They thought that I was working for the CIA and carrying some kind of a generator that they could just take. It was a mess. One babe with Devil tattoos and a halter-top decided that I was the Six Million Dollar Man and that the generator was an internal prosthetic device. When she tried to cut it out of me, I finally had enough of altruism. After that I gave it up and left town.

To this day I regret losing San Francisco but, damn it, I just couldn't save the place. The worst part of the whole ridiculous tragedy is this. I know that San Francisco is mostly still there. The heat damage might be fairly widespread by now, but I doubt if the shock wave has even reached the Civic Center. There's just nothing that I can do about it. I can't help wondering if that's why I was given this bubble and if, somehow, I just failed to do the job that was intended. The only bright spot, sorry about the unfortunate choice of words, is that I seem to be immune to radiation sickness. I don't know how to reconcile that with the fact that I can still see light and feel heat. It's a mystery to me but I suppose that I don't need to worry about being downwind.

The Knight Temporal

When I decided to leave, I considered where to go, in the light (there I go again) of my understanding of things at the time. There's a lot of high-tech stuff south of the city, all the way to San Jose. I wondered if there might be more bombs going off down that way. It was pure guesswork. I really didn't know. Anyway, I'd already been south. I'd been headed north when I'd discovered the bomb so I decided to continue north.

I couldn't go across the bridge. It was just too damned crowded. It's tricky to stay away from people on something like a bridge. So, I abandoned the motorcycle and took a boat. The current through the Golden Gate can be treacherous but, of course, that didn't make any difference to me. It was like a glacier. I stopped halfway across and looked back but the explosion probably wasn't quite big enough to be visible from down on the water. I couldn't tell for sure because of the fog. Sitting there in my boat, looking helplessly at the doomed city made me feel more depressed than I'd ever felt before. I gazed up at the bridge and thought about one of its traditional uses. Sometimes people just jump over the edge. Then I laughed so hard that I got tears in my eyes. It'd take me a million years to reach the water from that far up. Ah, Hell.

Laughing helped and I sat there for a while enjoying the view. I wondered if the bridge would survive the blast. Probably not. I wondered what time it was. I'd awakened at about 10 o'clock in Ventura that morning, about 3 years or so ago. Three years? I don't know. I guessed that maybe a second or two might have passed in the real world since then. Hell, I don't know. My opinion about the time difference is just an opinion. The difference might not even be constant. Maybe I move faster at some times than I do at others. I don't know. I guessed that it was probably a few minutes after 10, in the morning. The last time that I'd bothered to look at a clock had been in San Luis Obispo. I couldn't see that the sun had moved any but at least a little time must have passed in the outside world. I hadn't hurried and it had been a long trip from Ventura.

When I reached the north shore, I tied my boat securely to a dock. I don't expect it to survive the blast but you never know. Then I shrugged my pack onto my back, picked up my salvaged Haight-Ashbury street sign, the only part of San Francisco that would survive, and headed into Sausalito. I had to find a little wagon and a lot of bottled water somewhere.