

“The Time Traveler’s Dog”

A short story

By T.D. Smith

Twigs cracked and popped beneath Sam’s feet as he ran down the narrow, winding gravel and dirt path through the woods. His dog was out again, his best friend in the world and object of greatest affection. This was the third time this month, which would not have been a problem aside from the danger of getting lost for good or hit by a car or something. Sam was really fast, the best runner in his gym class, and able to catch him, usually. Today, however, the escape happened right before Sam’s first day of school. If he did not catch the beloved dog soon, he would be late for school and be marked tardy, a tarnish on his otherwise perfect attendance record, something Sam took pride in. Thrown completely off guard, and breakfast slushing around in his stomach, Sam, struggled to catch the canine.

After pausing briefly to listen to the sounds of the woods and searching for any anomalies, Sam suddenly heard the jingle of dog tags somewhere nearby. It was him! Slowly his dog, brown with yellow streaks, with floppy, pointy ears, came trotting onto the path from around a mighty oak some hundred yards ahead of Sam. Digging deep for energy, Sam sprinted down the path. The dog whirled and saw him, then spun back around, taking off down the path in the opposite direction.

Huffing, puffing, and hearing the crunching and crackling of leaves beneath his feet with each stride, Sam powered on, willing himself forward as quickly as he could.

He would catch him.

He *had* to.

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Professor Stapleton threw up his hands into the air in exasperation. The device he was working on clunked down on the lab table. He couldn’t figure it out, couldn’t quite get his invention to work, and he was so very close, too! He placed his hands behind his head and held his arms out bent at the elbows, thinking. He had been working furiously, constantly since the incident three days prior. Hugo, another scientist with a grudge against their research company and a nasty temper, had stolen one of the professor’s weapons and ship, and done it: he laid waste to the giant space colony orbiting Earth, Frontier 1, and the company’s masterpiece. Before anyone could apprehend him, the depraved man had used a weapon, a piece of the professor’s research, to blow up the colony’s reactor. He had rent both Frontier 1 and himself to smithereens.

The professor had been too weak and feeble to stop Hugo, to fight him. He had resisted him, sure, even getting in a few solid punches. In the end, however, Hugo prevailed and overpowered him with some sort of ogre like strength, superhuman energy, the source of which

Sam knew not. Hugo stole Sam's painstakingly researched inventions and committed an atrocity with them.

He blamed himself.

Lamentation followed long periods of staring into nothingness, completely silent, followed by isolation and distance from people.

The professor had an epiphany there, alone, and sad, in his lab.

He locked himself in and worked ceaselessly, relentlessly for the next three days. He knew he could fix this, fix everything!

He *had* to.

Once his newest, and daresay his greatest, invention was complete, he would be able to unwind everything, sort it out, and fix it.

Now he sat frustratedly taking a short break, stuck and upset his proposed solutions were proving unfruitful, hands locked behind his head and rocking back and forth as his extended feet pushed against the lab table, two of his chair legs hoisted off the ground. He sat there rocking, stressed, and thinking.

Then his thoughts turned to Hugo once more. His old pal turned enemy: poor, distressed, disillusioned Hugo had become a deranged, psychotic, and unrelenting monster. After a while his focus drifted inevitably to his youth, to happier, better times. The good old days.

He thought of Hank.

Good old Hank, his best boyhood friend. There was no greater friend he could have had. Hank was so loyal, loving, patient, and kind. He was the kind of friend who loved you for who you were, absolutely, without condition. He loved fiercely, and always wanted to play. Energetic, fun Hank. How he missed his childhood friend. So forgiving and understanding he was, too.

Hank. Such a perfect paradigm of humanity was he, and such the opposite of the great villainy the professor now sought to undo. So much so, in fact, that of course he could not be human! Hank was the professor's childhood dog, the third one his family had owned, and by far the best, and the one that had been most his. Good old Hank.

Thoughts of Hank and their juvenile misadventures, their play, how much he had loved and been loved back, and that final, fateful day old Hank disappeared came flooding back to the professor there in that lonely laboratory and he sat remembering, alone, in a daze.

Then he snapped back to the moment, and felt a sudden rush of inspiration. He dropped his feet down to the ground, scooted his chair forward, grabbed his instruments and unfinished invention, and began crafting once more.

He had an idea. Eagerly, he plowed forward, hoping in wonder that it would work.

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Sam stood bent over, hands clutching his knees, perspiring profusely and exhaling heavily.

He had chased his dog over hill and dale, out of the woods and back in again, for several intervals of minutes, innumerable to him without a watch or clock. The dog had burst from the brush and bounded past him, and Sam had followed him, incessantly and persistently. Then, suddenly the dog had banked a hard left, and to Sam's astonishment, disappeared entirely. There were no sounds. No doggy panting, paw pads patting, toe nails clacking, or bushes and brambles rustling and breaking. What must have been tens of minutes passed, and it was now easily the waning half of the hour, it had to be, Sam knew. He was surely already late for school now.

But he didn't care about that. He didn't care about any of that! A pox on school, all he wanted was his beloved pup home safe and sound. Nothing else mattered.

Sam glanced around silently, holding his breath, searching for any sound, any sign that might lead him to his best friend.

He heard nothing but leaves rustling in the wind, birds cawing far away, and bugs chirping. Sam had the sneaking suspicion he was all alone in the woods.

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The professor was profusely sweating now, a wet stain on the chest of his lab coat growing, expanding ever upward and outward and slowly turning his white coat see-through at a constant rate. He was sitting at the edge of his seat, struggling with the apparatus, gripping needle-nosed pliers trying to twist a wire into a coil and bend it around an elemental rod in a previously unconceived fashion.

Oozing from his pores and grappling with the twisted wire to no avail, he once again threw down the contraption in vexation.

Sitting back, his thoughts drifted for a second time that day to Hank. Hank would not want him to give up so easily.

...what an absurd notion! Hank was a *dog*! He wouldn't comprehend what he was doing here and its importance! Still, Hank's kind spirit... he would have believed in him and his abilities to successfully accomplish whatever human thing it was he was trying to achieve, wouldn't he? These thoughts fired through his brain rapidly.

Then, at last, he realized, yes. *Yes of course* Hank would have.

With sudden renewed vigor, the lab coated researcher began his toil once more, determined now more than ever to get his contraption to work.

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Walking slowly and sullenly up a hill, now out of the woods and on a long, winding gravel road, Sam gradually rose up a hill.

Gloom and doom swimming in his head, sure his dog was gone forever, Sam's eyes casually, unconsciously drifted upward, focusing on the inclining road ahead.

Some distance beyond him he spotted a brownish, yellow-striped spot.

It was him!

Sam's dog stood there on the hillside, his pointed, floppy ears perked up listening.

Sam broke into a sprint.

The dog looked back and made eye contact with him, now winded, panting, and overheated in the growing warmth of the lingering summery morning air. The dog detested having to run again. Reluctantly turning around and breaking into a labored trot, the dog looked back occasionally at his boy, who was closing with increasing proximity with each glance, running full force, full throttle, until finally the animal stopped. It had been a particularly fun game of chase, but now he was tired and ready to give up. He felt the young man's hands clamp down on both sides of his fur covered ribcage.

"Got you!" the boy declared disdainfully.

No sooner had thoughts of happily returning the dog through his parents' door before departing to school where he could fully focus without worry for his canine friend, than Sam heard a hissing sound, complimented by a rumbling and a rushing, popping sound. Gravel jumped this way and that, making way for the tires growing nearer to them up the windy, steep hill.

A car was coming!

As the driver came upon them, the dog became excited, and, having gained a second wind, tugged and broke free from Sam's grip. Sam fumbled, his fingers flailing and loosening their grip on the dog's collar, until they slipped out and let go entirely. The dog went to one side of the gravel road, then lunged back into the woods, while a bewildered Sam, whose heart was sinking fast, went to the other side.

Stunned, Sam looked on as his dog slipped away and disappeared again.

Dejected, Sam hung his head, tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

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Professor Stapleton held up his newly completed, novel device in elation, eyes wide, a grin spanning the width of his face.

Eureka!

He had done it.

Connecting the corkscrew wire in his desired way successfully, the little lights on the invention's panel now glowed in the way he had hoped they would. Their softly glowing illumination danced in his eyes.

The professor plugged in the main power supply then, bringing the dials, which turned slowly at the pace of Earth's time as typically functioning humans experienced it (one second at a time, that is.) Carefully screwing in the long, metal rods that served as levers into the apparatus, his eyes widened in realization of the endless possibilities.

He could see Hank again.

No, he *would* see Hank again.

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Sam sniffed, forcing dribble back up into his nostrils. It was now a little after noon, and he was tired, discouraged, and his efforts had been fruitless thus far. He had not found his dog even after hours of searching and chasing. Walking down the gravel hill with a limp now, Sam headed toward home with his head hung low. He scratched at a growing, red, itchy rash on his left leg and occasionally nursed the oozing red holes in the skin of both his legs where thorns had nicked him with spittle and his thumb.

Eventually, Sam neared his house, shingle roofed with red shutters and white siding nailed atop its wooden walls. With each light footstep that drew him nearer and nearer home, his vision swirled and unfocused. Blinking, his eyes rid themselves of his unshed tears, and fell, making small spots in the dirt below. Sam's vision corrected when this happened, and he was surprised to find himself crying.

Dejected and defeated, Sam slumped his way up the front stairs, heading in reluctantly to tell his father, who had only just returned home after circling the neighborhood again searching for the dog, having left work after Sam's phone call, of his failure. He tried already desperately to push thoughts of the coming long and sleepless night spent awake and alone without Hank, worrying about his beloved canine, yet they came creeping in anyway.

Sam had just set his hand upon the front doorknob, when he heard an odd sound. It was an electronic buzzing noise, full of rushing wind and electric crackling. Sam darted his glance to the corner of the house, from where the sound seemed to be originating. He thought he could see a flashing green light flickering and reflecting off his neighbor's similar white walled house.

Then, after the noise stopped, to his utter astonishment, Sam saw Hank, his best friend, the dog he had chased all morning, emerge from around the corner. He trotted up to Sam and casually plopped down at his feet. A tidal wave of joy hit and filled Sam, washing away all previous fear and worry instantly. Next, another breaker hit him; this was one of cautious relief that continued to be so until after the two of them were inside

and the foaming, frothing wave became pure relief and Sam finally relaxed. Presently, Sam plopped down and embraced his dog, holding him, both arms wrapped around his neck. He cooed at the dog, not a trace of malice or scolding in his tone. All was forgiven instantly. Hank affectionately licked the boy in the face.

After a few moments of catching up, Sam and Hank happily retreated into his house and closed the door.

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Professor Sam Stapleton traveled backward through time and space over and over.

The invention worked!

He saw dinosaurs.

He saw far away and long ago. Civilizations long fallen and dead in his own time sprawled before him, vibrant and alive. Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Rome, he visited them all in their heydays.

The Professor saw distant future civilizations where interdimensional portals were commonplace means of travel that could take one directly from Earth to a completely terraformed moon. Additionally, he experienced thought-generated meals, food completely synthesized from telekinesis.

He saw many bizarre, amazing, wonderful things.

Not one of them compared to hugging Hank again.

Initially, Professor Sam took his newly completed invention, a circuitous cube with levers, and inserted it into the wall of his large, cylindrical concrete tube with its thick plastic doors so that the levers were accessible to one from the inside. The whole structure stood in the warehouse of the lab, about two stories tall. Inside it had three small decks, with the control deck on the ground level, and a winding metal staircase leading to the other ones. Sam stepped into his time machine and having plugged in the control apparatus that he finally had working, he set the clocks, turned several dials, and flipped a switch. After that, he gradually pulled down a glittering metallic brass lever.

On a screen inside the cylindrical compartment, Sam saw the last three days swirl and unfold backwards, but its characters were transparent, choppy, and their edges seemed to crackle and jump, like ghosts on an old VHS tape. He saw himself on his viewer, un-working his time machine contraption on the lab table until it was just scattered parts, wires, and screws again. He saw himself get up, walk backwards, pace, and, eventually, leave.

With the twist of a knob, Sam's machine moved through space as well, following his former self. He witnessed an inconsolable ghost of himself push away concerned family members, friends, and coworkers in the days just following the incident.

He saw the incident itself unfold in reverse, the explosion moving backward, receding into and finally undoing itself.

Hope fluttered in his heart.

It could really work. He *could* go back. Surely, he could change things.

He wasn't ready to confront Hugo, though. Not yet. Besides, he needed to try to save him first. But before he did any of that, there was something else he wanted to do.

Sam flipped his switches and spun his dials, changing the settings of his clocks, then pulled down hard on the brass lever, going back further, and quicker, to a different place and time.

He did so continuously, looking, observing, and recording the dates Hank had run away. He remembered as he looked on from the open door of his time machine: images, moving pictures in his head of himself chasing young, agile Hank through the woods.

When he found a suitable time and location, Sam stopped his machine, and the time machine resumed passing through time at the same pace as Sam usually did, one second at a time into the future, and reality regained its normal opaqueness, clarity, and solidity outside.

Opening the door, Sam was face to face with Hank again.

Immediately dropping to his knees, a childlike grin on his face that had been absent for what felt like so long since the events leading to the time machine's creation and those immediately preceding it had happened, and the professor spread his arms wide.

"Hank! Here boy!"

Hank ran into the time machine, to his now suddenly grown friend. Licking the man in the face and surprised to find an older, larger person with a rough beard on the previously smooth chin, but wagging his tail profusely nonetheless, Hank cuddled up against the professor's chest as he hugged him. A wide doggy grin stretched across Hank's face. He knew who this was, recognizing his features and scent, though they were grown and somewhat different than what he was used to.

Standing and stroking Hank's head lightly, Sam closed the door to the time machine, then manipulated several levers, buttons, and dials.

Then, Sam and Hank went and beheld marvelous things across history together.

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Young Sam was chasing Hank again. He couldn't believe this recurring event was unfolding yet another time. Yet, here he was, huffing and puffing warm, spindling jets of twisting fog-breath into the cold November night air as he ran through bramble and bush once more.



Coming to the crest of a familiar hill with a gravel road, he saw a doggish silhouette against the pale moonlight, bullish, stout, and with a short canine snout. He recognized this to be Hank, and he increased his pace.

Hank took off (of course!) away from Sam.

Sam turned the same corner along the path he had seen Hank dart around moments before, and beheld an eerily familiar flashing, a pale green glow, and a similar electric swishing and buzzing noise as he had a month or two prior.

Then Hank was gone.

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Professor Sam's time ship was now filled with fifteen different versions of Hank from different times he had run away. Hank had run away far more than fifteen times in his tenure, but Sam, having gotten quite carried away, could scarcely fit another body into the cylindrical concrete chamber. All about the time machine a Hank clambered about here and there and up and down the spiral staircase. Sam had managed to time travel and collect each of these Hanks, catching them mid excursion in the woods, without his past, childhood self seeing anything but the time machine's glow as it departed. Sam remembered the light and its accompanying sounds from his childhood now.

Sam had been working out intermittently, going for runs with various versions of Hank in various locations and times across history.

They ran alongside the hero Pheidippides all the way to Marathon, beholding him cry "victory!" to announce the Greeks prevailing over the Persians, prior to collapsing.

They ran alongside packs of velociraptors through ancient jungles and fields.

Sam spent time doing push-ups and sit-ups too, as well as practicing self-taught karate moves.

Eventually, in much better shape and tone, having rudimentary combat skills, and a renewed sense of self-worth and confidence Hank helped him regain, Sam knew it was time. Looking at his pack of dogs and smiling, Sam set the dials of the time machine to their necessary, inevitable destination, and pulled the lever.

Time spun and twisted like a kaleidoscope outside the vessel, until it pulled them to the part of space and time Sam needed to be: Frontier 1 Space Station, just minutes before the disaster. The time machine landed, materializing in the command center.

Sam hesitated nervously behind the door. He could do this, he knew he could. It had to be done. During his travels with Hank, he had gone backward in time, tried to help his friend Hugo repeatedly. Each time it had gone wrong and ended in some kind of disaster for Frontier 1. Sam was just a man, and even a man with a time machine could not prevent this madman's decisions, such as the nature and intensity of his final collapse into insanity and depravity at the end, despite all Sam's efforts to help.



He had to confront Hugo. It was the only way.

Sam opened the door and stepped into the command center.

A surprised and alarmed Hugo, tall, with long feelers that had once been hair spanning down the length of his back, green skin, scaly and dry, and pointed teeth, stood grimacing on the floor of the control deck in the middle of the command center, clutching the dreaded proton gun that he and Professor Sam had created, and with which he would soon shoot the station's reactor.

Sam looked at him. He could hardly believe this man was the same species as himself, and that this bastardization, this distorted caricature of his former friend Hugo had once been a man he was close to, and even admired. The lab accident had transformed him into the demented hobgoblin that frowned before him now, the unavoidable fixed point in time from which there was no return wherein Hugo turned evil, and from which Sam could not rescue him. In his grief following the accident, Hugo had become even more grotesque, changing and morphing himself into an abomination through whatever experimental augmentation he could scrounge up.

Sam felt sorry for him. He had been a great man. But there was simply no excuse for his atrocities. He had to be stopped in this moment, in this place, before he committed his final one. In the days spent in his time machine with his multiple versions of the same dog, Sam had tried to go back and prevent the accident that transformed Hugo into a monster in the first place. Each time, Hugo either had a worse accident or eventually something even worse befell him that Sam had traveled back again to undo. Every time Hugo became disillusioned and committed the same heinous acts. No matter what Sam did, it always ended in the destruction of Frontier 1. Sam realized that there was something rotten inside Hugo's heart. A quality that like a seed, sat in his heart, dormant, only germinating and thriving once tragedy befell him.

The wretch could just as easily have fought against this dark impulse, have striven to be good, to overcome his plight, and to be better and stronger than before, using it as a force for good. Many good people develop this way, benefitting in the long term on a personal level from tragedy. Like diamonds under pressure for eons they emerge a glittering new creation from the black rough. Not so with Hugo, though the opportunity presented itself to him.

Instead, he chose the opposite path. Sam could not undo this, not even with a time machine. Some men, he realized, were going to do evil things no matter what and there was nothing he could do about it. He had no power over the thoughts, emotions, or choices of others, ultimately. But in this instance, he *could* do something to stop the evil man's actions. He *could* nevertheless make a difference.

Contemplating this, and stepping forward, Sam spoke one last time to his fifteen Hanks.

"Stay boy." Sam said. Each one of them stayed. He closed the door to the time machine behind him, then stepped up onto the control deck to confront Hugo. Hugo the hobgoblin stood astonished at Sam's sudden apparition, this inconceivable event, and looked at his old friend spitefully.

"You should not have come here, Sam." Hugo hissed.

“I have to stop you. You *can't* do this, Hugo. I had to find a way to stop you. Didn't you think I'd find one and meet you here?”

Hugo laughed bitterly and briefly.

“I knew you'd try. It's a shame, Sam. You're really a good guy. I didn't want to have to kill you.”

Hugo raised the proton canon and aimed it right at Sam, who had taken up a defensive pose.

“I'm a *monster*. They did this to me. And they will pay. I've done awful things, terrible things. The monster will die with them!” Hugo elaborated egomaniacally.

“No, Hugo.” Sam said. “You did this to yourself. A horrible accident happened to you, sure. But you *chose* to do evil. All the bad things you did were your own doing. These innocent people on the station are not to blame. You are. You put it right when you said it. Hugo, you *are* a monster, but that's all your fault.”

Hugo roared in anger at being told the truth. He raised his weapon and fired a vaporizing bolt at Sam.

Sam had anticipated this move, reading Hugo's body language (a trick probably learned by hanging out with dogs for so long) and ducked, dodging the blast. It hit the concrete wall of the time machine, which absorbed most of the blast, sending small chunks of plaster flying and leaving a smoldering, black hole on its side.

Professor Sam Stapleton lunged forward then and fought Hugo. He knocked the proton ray out of his hands and across the floor, and the eyes of the tied and bound astronauts in that control room glittered hopefully.

Sam fought Hugo and held his own, at first. He ducked, dodged, and got in some solid blows on his foe.

Then Sam began to lose, badly.

Hugo struck Sam again and again, knocking down his fatigued arms so that he could not block him. Then Sam took hit after hard hit, Hugo's enhanced strength, (whether by some chemical or genetic means Sam knew not) causing him intense pain and injury more than any mere man would.

After the umpteenth painful, jarring blow, Sam knew that if he kept this up, Hugo would kill him. He could hear the fearful whines of his beloved Hanks from behind his time machine door. They knew he was being harmed and all fifteen dogs whined worriedly in unison.

Sam staggered backward. He forced his violently shaking hand up onto the knob, and with the last of his strength and resolve, and opened the time-machine door, closing and locking it behind him. Then, Sam laid down on the floor, struggling to maintain consciousness, his head pounding, spinning, and being licked softly by multiple tongues of concerned old Hank.

A savage beating rained down on the door from outside, rocking the time machine itself.

“SAM!” Hugo cried. “SAM! GET OUT HERE AND FACE ME, YOU COWARD!”

Sam was certainly no coward, but would not have been able to face his enemy even if he wanted to, so bruised, bleeding, and near unconsciousness was he.

He glanced at one of the Hanks. They looked at each other with an eye-locked glance, and in that moment Sam and his old dog exchanged an understanding nonverbal cue.

BAM! Another pound on the door.

CRACK! The door shook and split on its hinges.

The Hank Sam had looked at turned and joined his other selves, and each of them lightly growled, stood in a warning stance, and the hair on their spines stood on end.

BOOM! The door burst open and tall, green, menacing Hugo stepped into the time machine, murderous intent flashing in his eyes.

The Hanks growled fiercely and viciously now. They *knew* this was the man who had harmed their best friend.

Without hesitation, they all simultaneously sprang.

A look of surprised confusion flashed on the enemy’s face for a moment, then he was pounced upon and taken to the ground by a pack of furious dogs. They tore into him and no convention, chemical nor mechanical, no augmented strength, could have protected Hugo from the ferocity of the furious Hanks, or the element of surprise they carried with them. He was disabled and bleeding in seconds.

Standing and regaining wakefulness and awareness more fully than before, Sam called out.

“Hank, no, stop!”

Sam’s dogs all stopped in obedience immediately and sat on their haunches.

“Good boy.”

Sam then tended to the wounded man, stopping the bleeding with gauze pads he found aboard Frontier 1, and hoisted the man, tied up, into a chair.

A few minutes later, having freed the astronauts, who called the Interstellar Police, whose flashing blue and red capsules were already en route to Frontier 1, Sam quietly turned and disappeared into his time machine. It swirled, hissed, and buzzed, and dematerialized in a flashing green light.

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The space authorities never found future Sam; the version of Sam contemporary with that timeline was still knocked out cold in his laboratory.

Hugo was imprisoned after thorough investigation, detention, due process, and fair trial having been provided.

In his cell he gnashed his teeth and spat words cursing Professor Stapleton and his interfering, as well as his meddling dogs.

Eventually, though, after years, the rehabilitation began to take hold on Hugo. Much of the self-inflicted augmentation was reversed, and psychiatric and pharmacological aid helped ease the pain and stress in his heart. Finally, he began to regain his humanity, and the furious burning hatred in his heart died down.

After so much time feeling pain, disdain for humanity, and disenfranchisement, Hugo began to heal. For the first time in what felt like ages, he felt remorse for his actions.

It had worked; Sam had really, truly saved his old friend Hugo.

The Interstellar Police never recovered the proton gun or found any trace of its plans. They, like this alleged “future Sam” Hugo so adamantly insisted existed, had disappeared suddenly and mysteriously.

The crisis had been averted and Frontier 1, too, was saved.

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A younger Sam was perspiring again, wet drops of sweat matting strands of his bowl-cut, dirty blond hair into wet clumps that sent salty, streaming fluid trickling down his freckled brow.

He soldiered on once more, as he had before, and would over and over again, running with all his heart after the dog he loved, each time he would manage to escape and run away.

Finally, he heard a now familiar buzzing behind him and deftly turned just in time to see the last sparkles of the green light fading away, and, lo and behold, Hank, sitting there, wagging his tail in greeting and excitement.

Something odd was going on with Hank and the green light. Something special. He could feel it. Hank was a special dog, after all, or at least to him he was. Young Sam never found out what the green light and strange noises were until much later, but he saw and heard them many more times as a boy, nonetheless.

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Professor Sam closed the door to the time machine and pulled his takeoff lever. He had just put back the second to last version of Hank into his own time, safely just near where he knew his past, juvenile self, would find him. Exhausted from exciting adventures, Hank would surely go right up to young Sam and let him take him home.

He was certain of this, in fact, for he remembered it.

Finally, Sam touched down his time machine at a time just around an hour after midday, several months prior to his most recent drop off, just around the front corner of his childhood home. He hugged Hank tightly, then bid him exit the machine. Sam lingered long enough to watch Hank respond to hearing his young version's voice call out to him, and saw as he disappeared around the corner, trotting towards the elated boy on the steps of the house around the corner. Then, Sam closed the door and pulled the lever and dissolved back into time warp.

"I suppose that's the last time I'll ever see Hank." Sam remarked to himself, sadly. Then, contemplatively, "The last time I ever saw Hank..."

Sam remembered himself then, 17 years old at the time, many years after the events at which he had just dropped his final Hank off, on that fateful, most gloomy of nights.

Hank was much older then, had started to have trouble ascending staircases, and had patches of white fur interspersed all through his coat.

As if knowing his time had come, Hank slipped out unnoticed under the fence (he assumed) that night. Sam had searched high and low for days to no avail. He had never seen Hank again and no body had ever been recovered.

Then, it dawned on him.

He had never seen or heard the green light and its accompanying cacophony of sounds in the dark woods that night. Hank, loving, loyal, faithful Hank, had always been safe. He had never been in any danger at all, because Sam had been watching over him all those years and keeping him safe in the time machine on every occasion he ran away.

What if?

Sam spun dials, mashed buttons, and pulled levers once again. After changing course and flying through time for a bit, his time machine materialized into his parents' old back yard at night. Opening the door, Sam saw him: an older version of Hank, sitting wagging his tail, knowingly. He looked as if he were waiting for Sam, expecting him to whisk him away for another, final adventure!

So Sam did.

"Here, boy!"

And Hank came, running, into the time machine.

They did not have a whole lot of time, Sam and Hank, for Hank was growing old. Yet, now they had all the time that ever was and ever would be to explore and spend together adventuring in the beloved dog's twilight years. What more could any boy ask for? (And he *was* indeed a boy at heart, still, and so, too are any that ever loved a dog so when they were young.)

Not only did Sam have all those years before with Hank while they were both young, and all the intervening time in the time machine when he had gone back and kept him safe, but now

he was fortunate enough by some cosmic movement to get even more time with him and go on wild adventures beyond imagination. Sam knew that Hank had escaped many more times than the fifteen he had already rescued him. He could go back to the other times, too, and getting Hank, have further adventures. He knew he surely would do this thing.

Further, pondering on these things in his heart of hearts, Sam realized he had learned a deeper truth. All of life is loss. We gain nothing in this life without losing something we had before. The wisdom and comfort of the golden years is purchased only with the barter of childhood innocence and idealism. Yet, we only become our best selves, the strongest, brightest, and wisest versions, through progressing through lives filled with loss. Hank taught Sam about this time and time again. Sam would lose Hank repeatedly, and chase after him with all his might. The final time, Sam lost Hank for good, or so he had thought. In chasing him, Sam learned the most important lesson of all from Hank. The most valuable things in life, friendship, love, relationships, are worth chasing after with all our might, and well worth anything lost along the way, whether it be sweat, blood, energy, or any naïve notions of our youth. The reward of relationships unquestionably outweighs the risk.

Smiling happily, and with Hank doing the same in his own doggy way, Sam patted his best friend on the head, and together they stepped into the time machine to receive their reward.

“Hank, my old friend,” said Sam, “let’s go see what we can find.”

Then he pulled the time travel lever again, and with an electric rattling and flashing pale green light they set out to travel across history and the entire cosmos in exploration, together.

The End.