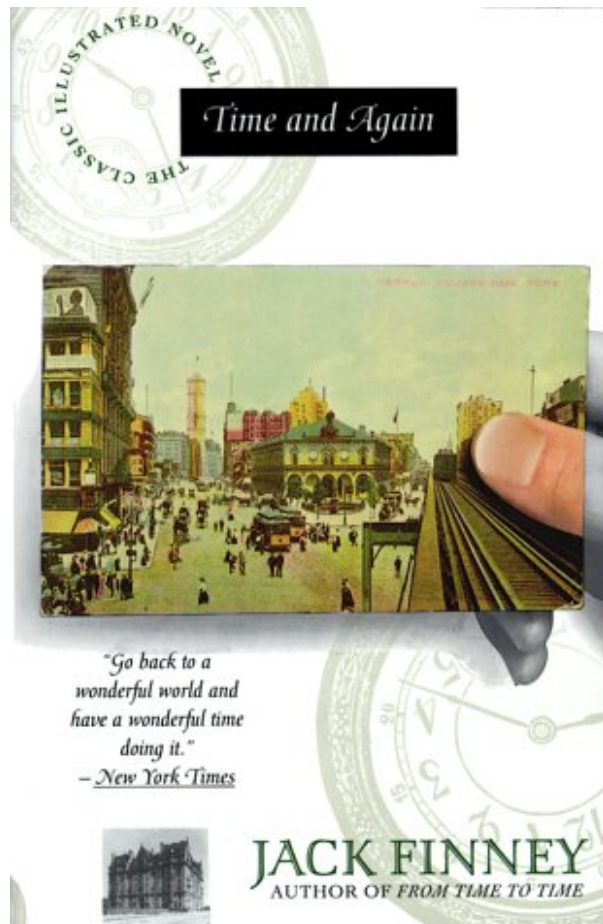


TIME AND AGAIN BY JACK FINNEY



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Time and Again



*"Go back to a
wonderful world and
have a wonderful time
doing it."
- New York Times*



JACK FINNEY
AUTHOR OF *FROM TIME TO TIME*

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Review

"New York Times" Go back to a wonderful world and have a wonderful time doing it.

About the Author

Born in 1911 the American author Jack Finney wrote numerous SF novels, thrillers and mysteries, several of which were adapted to film. He is best known as the author of THE BODY SNATCHERS, which became the hugely popular and influential film, THE INVASION OF THE BODYSNATCHERS. He was awarded the WORLD FANTASY AWARD for Lifetime Achievement in 1987. A long time resident of California he died in 1995.

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Chapter 1

Is shirt-sleeves, the way I generally worked, I sat sketching a bar of soap taped to an upper corner of my drawing board. The gold-foil wrapper was carefully peeled back so that you could still read most of the brand name printed on it; I'd spoiled the wrappers of half a dozen bars before getting that effect. This was a new idea, the product to be shown ready for what the accompanying copy called "fragrant, lathery, lovelier you" use, and I had the job of sketching it into half a dozen layouts, the bar of soap at a slightly different angle in each.

It was just exactly as boring as it sounds, and I stopped to look out the window beside me, down twelve stories at Fifty-fourth Street and the little heads moving along the sidewalk. It was a sunny, sharply clear day in mid-November, and I'd have liked to be out in it, the whole afternoon ahead and nothing to do; nothing I had to do, that is.

Over at the paste-up table Vince Mandel, our lettering man, thin and dark and probably feeling as caged-up today as I was, stood working with the airbrush, a cotton surgical mask over his mouth. He was spraying a flesh-colored film onto a Life magazine photo of a girl in a bathing suit. The effect, when he finished, would be to remove the suit, leaving the girl apparently naked except for the ribbon she wore slanted from shoulder to waist on which was lettered MISS BUSINESS MACHINES. This kind of stunt was Vince's favorite at-work occupation ever since he'd thought of it, and the retouched picture would be added to a collection of

others like it on the art-department bulletin board, at which Maureen, our nineteen-year-old paste-up girl and messenger, refused ever to look or even glance, though often urged.

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It was an ordinary day, a Friday, twenty minutes till lunchtime, five hours till quitting time and the weekend, ten months till vacation, thirty-seven years till retirement. Then the phone rang.

"Man here to see you, Si." It was Vera, at the switchboard. "He has no appointment."

"That's okay. He's my connection; I need a fix."

"What you need can't be fixed." She clicked off. I got up, wondering who it was; an artist in an advertising agency doesn't usually have too many visitors. The main reception room was on the floor below, and I took the long route through Accounting and Media, but no new girls had been hired.

Frank Dapp called the main reception room Off Broadway. It was decorated with a genuine Oriental rug, several display cases of antique silver from the collection of the wife of one of the three partners, and with a society matron whose hair was also antique silver and who relayed visitors' requests to Vera. As I walked toward it my visitor stood looking at one of the framed ads hung on the walls. Something I don't like admitting and which I've learned to disguise is a shyness about meeting people, and now I felt the familiar slight apprehension and momentary confusion as he turned at the sound of my approaching footsteps. He was bald and short, the top of his head reaching only to my eye level, and I'm an inch short of six feet. He looked about thirty-five, I thought, walking toward him, and he was remarkably thick-chested; he'd outweigh me without being fat. He wore an olive-green gabardine suit that didn't go with his pink redhead's complexion. I hope he's not a salesman, I thought; then he smiled as I stepped into the lobby, a real smile, and I liked him instantly and relaxed. No, I told myself, he's not selling anything, and I couldn't have been more wrong about that.

"Mr. Morley?" I nodded, smiling back at him. "Mr. Simon Morley?" he said, as though there might be several of us Morleys here at the agency and he wanted to be certain.

"Yes."

He still wasn't satisfied. "Just for fun, do you remember your army serial number?" He took my elbow and began walking me out into the elevator corridor away from the receptionist.

I rattled it off; it didn't even occur to me to wonder why I was doing this for a stranger, no questions asked.

"Right!" he said approvingly, and I felt pleased. We were out in the corridor now, no one else around.

"Are you from the army? If so, I don't want any today."

He smiled, but didn't answer the question, I noticed. He said, "I'm Ruben Prien," and hesitated momentarily as though I might recognize the name, then continued. "I should have phoned and made an appointment; but I'm in a hurry so I took a chance on dropping in."

"That's all right, I wasn't doing anything but working. What can I do for you?"

He grimaced humorously at the difficulty of what he had to say. "I've got to have about an hour of your time. Right now, if you can manage it." He looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but...if you could just take me on faith for a little while, I'd appreciate it."

I was hooked; he had my interest. "All right. It's ten to twelve; would you like to have lunch? I can leave a little early."

"Fine, but let's not talk indoors. We could pick up some sandwiches and eat in the park. Okay? It's not too cool."

Nodding, I said, "I'll get my coat and meet you here. You interest me strangely." I stood hesitating, looking closely at this pleasant, tough-looking, bald little man, then said it. "As I think you know. Matter of fact, you've been through this whole routine before, haven't you? Complete with embarrassed look."

He grinned and made a little finger-snapping motion. "And I thought I really had it down. Well, it's back to the mirror, and more practice. Get your coat; we're losing time."

We walked north on Fifth Avenue past the incredible buildings of glass and steel, glass and enameled metal, glass and marble, and the older ones of more stone than glass. It's a stunning street and unbelievable; I never get used to it, and I wonder if anyone really does. Is there any other place where an entire cloud bank can be completely reflected in the windows of one wall of only one building, and with room to spare? Today I especial??? enjoyed being out on Fifth, the temperature in the high 50's, a nice late-fall coolness in the air. It was nearly noon, and beautiful girls came dancing out of every office building we passed, and I thought of how regrettable it was that I'd never know or even speak to most of them. The little bald man beside me said, "I'll tell you what I've come to say to you; then I'll listen to questions. Maybe I'll even answer some. But everything I can really tell you I will have said before we reach Fifty-sixth Street. I've done this thirty-odd times now, and never figured out a good way to say it or even sound very sane while trying, so here goes.

"There's a project. A U.S. government project I guess you'd have to call it. Secret, naturally; as what isn't in government these days? In my opinion, and that of a handful of others, it's more important than all the nuclear, space-exploration, satellite, and rocket programs put together, though a hell of a lot smaller. I tell you right off that I can't even hint what the project is about. And believe me, you'd never guess. I can and do say that nothing human beings have ever before attempted in the entire nutty history of the race even approaches this in absolute fascination. When I first understood what this project is about I didn't sleep for two nights, and I don't mean that in the usual way; I mean I literally did not sleep. And before I could sleep on the third night I had to have a shot in the arm, and I'm supposed to be the plodding unimaginative type. Do I have your attention?"

"Yes; if I understand you, you've finally discovered something more interesting than sex."

"You may find out that you're not exaggerating. I think riding to the moon would be almost dull in comparison to what you may just possibly have a chance to do. It is the greatest possible adventure. I would give anything I own or will ever have just to be in your shoes; I'd give years of my life just for a chance at

this. And that's it, friend Morley. I can go on talking, and will, but that's really all I have to say. Except this: through no virtue or merit of your own, just plain dumb luck, you are invited to join the project. To commit yourself to it. Absolutely blind. That's some pig in a poke, all right, but oh, my God, what a pig. There's a pretty good delicatessen on Fifty-seventh Street; what kind of sandwiches you want?"

"Roast pork, what else?"

We bought our sandwiches and a couple of apples, then walked on toward Central Park a couple of blocks ahead. Prien was waiting for some sort of reply, and we walked in silence for half a block; then I shrugged irritably, wanting to be polite but not knowing how else to answer. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Whatever you want."

"All right; why me?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked, as the politicians say. There is a particular kind of man we need. He has to have a certain set of qualities. A rather special list of qualities, actually, and a long list. Furthermore, he has to have them in a pretty exact kind of balance. We didn't know that at first. We thought most any intelligent eager young fellow would do. Me, for example. Now we know, or think we do, that he has to be physically right, psychologically right, temperamentally right. He has to have a certain special way of looking at things. He's got to have the ability, and it seems to be fairly rare, to see things as they are and at the same time as they might have been. If that makes any sense to you. It probably does, because it may be that what we mean is the eye of an artist. Those are just some of what he must have or be; there are others I won't tell you about now. Trouble is that on one count or another that seems to eliminate most of the population. The only practical way we've found to turn up likely candidates is to plow through the tests the army gave its inductees; you remember them."

"Vaguely."

"I don't know how many sets of those tests have been analyzed; that's not my department. Probably millions. They use computers for the early check-throughs, eliminating all those that are comfortably wide of the mark. Which is most of them. After that, real live people take over; we don't want to miss even one candidate. Because we're finding damn few. We've checked I don't know how many millions of service records, including the women's branches. For some reason women seem to produce more candidates than men; we wish we had more we could check. Anyway, one Simon L. Morley with the fine euphonious serial number looks like a candidate. How come you only made PFC?"

"A lack of talent for idiocies such as close-order drill."

"I believe the technical term is two left feet. Out of fewer than a hundred possibilities we've found so far, about fifty have already heard what you're hearing now, and turned us down. About fifty more have volunteered, and over forty of them flunked some further tests. Anyway, after one hell of a lot of work, we have five men and two women who just might be qualified. Most or all of them will fail in the actual attempt; we don't have even one we feel very sure of. We'd like to get about twenty-five candidates, if we possibly can. We'd like a hundred, but we don't believe there are that many around; at least we don't know how to find them. But you may be one."

"Gee whiz."

At Fifty-ninth Street as we stood waiting for the light, I glanced at Rube's profile and said, "Rube Prien; yeah. You played football. When was it? About ten years ago."

He turned to grin up at me. "You remembered! You're a good boy; I wish I'd bought you some thick gooey dessert, the kind I can't eat anymore. Only it was fifteen years ago; I'm not really the young handsome youth I know I must seem."

"Where'd you play again? I can't remember."

The light clicked green, and we stepped down off the curb. "West Point."

"I knew it! You're in the army!"

"Yep."

I was shaking my head. "Well, I'm sorry, but it'll take more than you. It'll take five husky fighting MPs to drag me back in, kicking and screaming all the way. Whatever you're selling and however fascinating, I don't want any. The lure of sleepless nights in the army just isn't enough, Prien; I've already had all I want."

On the other side of the street we stepped up onto the sidewalk, crossed it, then turned onto the curve of a dirt-and-gravel path of Central Park and walked along it looking for an empty bench. "What's wrong with the army?" Rube said with fake injured innocence.

"You said this would take an hour; I'd need a week just for the chapter headings."

"All right, don't join the army. Join the navy; we'll make you anything you like from bosun's mate to lieutenant senior grade. Or join the Department of the Interior; you can be a forester with your very own Smokey-the-Bear hat." Prien was enjoying himself. "Sign up with the post office if you want; we'll make you an assistant inspector and give you a badge and the power to arrest for postal fraud. I mean it; pick almost any branch of the government you like except State or the diplomatic corps. And pick any title you fancy at no more than around a twelve-thousand-a-year salary, and so long as it isn't an elective office. Because, Si -- all right to call you Si?" he said with sudden impatience.

"Sure."

"And call me Rube, if you care to. Si, it doesn't matter what payroll you're technically on. When I say this is secret, I mean it; our budget is scattered through the books of every sort of department and bureau, our people listed on every roster but our own. We don't officially exist, and yes, I'm still a member of the U.S. Army. The time counts toward my retirement, and besides I like the army, eccentric as I know that sounds. But my uniforms are in storage, I salute nobody these days, and the man I take a lot of my orders from is an historian on leave from Columbia University. Be a little chilly on the benches in the shade; let's find a place in the sun."

We picked a place a dozen yards off the path beside a big outcropping of black rock. We sat down on the sunny side, leaning back against the warm rock, and began opening our sandwiches. To the south, east, and west the New York buildings rose high, hanging over the park's edges like a gang ready to rush in and cover the greenery with concrete.

"You must have been in grade school when you read about Flying Rube Prien, deer-footed quarterback."

"I guess so; I'm twenty-eight." I bit into my sandwich. It was very good, the meat sliced thin and packed thick, the fat trimmed.

Rube said, "Twenty-eight on March eleventh."

"So you know that, do you? Well, goody goody gumshoes."

"It's in your army record, of course. But we know some things that aren't; we know you were divorced two years ago, and why."

"Would you mind telling me? I never did figure out why."

"You wouldn't understand. We also know that in about the last five months you've gone out with nine women but only four of them more than once. That in the last six weeks or so it seems to have narrowed down more and more to one. Just the same, we don't think you're ready to get married again. You may think you are, but we think you're still afraid to. You have two men friends you occasionally have lunch or dinner with; your parents are dead; you have no brothers or sist --"

My face had been flushing; I felt it, and took care to keep my voice quiet. I said, "Rube, I think I like you personally. But I feel I have to say: Who gave you or anyone else the right to poke into my private affairs?"

"Don't get mad, Si. It isn't worth it; we haven't snooped that much. And nothing embarrassing, nothing illegal. We're not like one or two government agencies I could name; we don't think we're divinely appointed. There's no wiretapping or illegal searches; we think the Constitution applies even to us. But before I leave I'll want your permission to search your apartment before you go back tonight."

I felt my lips compressing, and I shook my head.

Rube smiled and reached out to touch my arm. "I'm teasing you a little. But I hope you don't mean that. I'm offering you a crack at the damnedest experience a human being has ever had."

"And you can't tell me anything about it? I'm surprised you got seven people. Or even one."

Rube stared down at the grass; thinking about what he could say; then he looked up at me again. "We'd want to know more," he said slowly. "We'd want to test you in several other ways. But we think we already know an awful lot about the way you are, the way you think. We own two original Simon Morley paintings, for example, from the Art Directors' Show last spring, plus a watercolor and some sketches, all bought and paid for. We know something about the kind of man you are, and I've learned some more today. So I think I can tell you this: I can lust about guarantee you, I believe I can guarantee you, that if you'll take this on faith and commit yourself for two years, assuming you get through some further testing, you will thank me. You'll say I was right. You'll tell me that the very thought that you might have missed out on this gives you the chills. How many human beings have ever lived, Si? Five or six billions, maybe? Well, if you should test out, you'll become one of maybe a dozen out of all those billions, maybe the only one, who just might have the greatest adventure any human being has ever had."

It impressed me. I sat eating an apple, staring ahead, thinking. Suddenly I turned to him. "You haven't said a damn thing more than you did in the first place!"

"You noticed, did you? Some don't. Si, that's all I can say!"

"Well, you're too modest; you've got your sales pitch worked out beautifully. Will you accept a down payment on the Brooklyn Bridge? My God, Rube, what am I supposed to tell you? 'Sure, I'll join; where do I sign?'"

He nodded. "I know. It's tough. There's just no other way it can be done, that's all." He sat looking at me. Then he said softly, "But it's easier for you than most. You're unmarried, no kids. And you're bored silly with your work; we know that. As why shouldn't you be? It doesn't amount to anything, it's not worth doing. You're bored and dissatisfied with yourself, and time is passing; in two years you'll be thirty. And you still don't know what to do with your life." Rube sat back against the warm rock, staring off at the path and the people strolling along it through the sunny fall noon-hour, giving me a chance to think. What he'd just said was true.

When I turned to look at him again, Rube was waiting. He said, "So this is what you have to do: take a chance. Take a deep breath, close your eyes, grab your nose, and jump in. Or would you rather keep on selling soap, chewing gum, and brassieres, or whatever the hell it is you peddle down the street? You're a young man, for cysake!" Rube sliced his hands together, dusting off crumbs, and shoved several balls of waxed paper into his lunch sack. Then he stood up quickly and easily, the ex-footballer. "You know what I'm talking about, Si; the only possible way you can do this is to just go ahead and do it."

I stood up too, and we walked to a wire trash-basket chained to a tree, and dropped our wastepaper into it. Turning back toward the path with Rube, I knew that if I took my wrist between thumb and forefinger my pulse rate would be up; I was scared. With an irritation that surprised me, I said, "I'd be taking a hell of a lot on the say-so of an absolute stranger! What if I joined this big mystery and didn't think it was all that fascinating?"

"Impossible."

"But if I did!"

"Once we're satisfied you're a candidate and tell you what we're doing we have to know that you'll go through with it. We need your promise in advance; we can't help that."

"Would I have to go away?"

"In time. With some story for your friends. We couldn't have anyone wondering where or why Si Morley disappeared."

"Is this dangerous?"

"We don't think so. But I can't truthfully say we really know."

Walking toward the corner of the park at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, I thought about the life I'd made for myself since I'd arrived in New York City two years ago looking for a job as an artist, a stranger from Buffalo with a portfolio of samples under my arm. Every now and then I had dinner with Lennie Hindesmith, an artist I'd worked with in my first New York job. We'd generally see a movie after dinner or go bowling or something like that. I played tennis fairly often, public courts in the summer, the armory in the winter, with Matt Flax, a young accountant in my present agency; he'd also brought me into a weekly Monday-night bridge game, and we were probably on the way to becoming good friends. Pearl Moschetti was an assistant account executive on a perfume account at the first place I worked; ever since, I'd seen her

now and then, once in a while for an entire weekend, though I hadn't seen her for quite a while now. I thought about Grace Ann Wunderlich, formerly of Seattle, whom I'd picked up almost accidentally in the Longchamps bar at Forty-ninth and Madison when I saw her start crying out of overwhelming loneliness brought on from sitting at a table by herself having a drink she didn't want or like when everyone else in the place seemed to have friends. Every time I'd seen her after that we drank too much, apparently following the pattern of the first time, usually at a place in the Village, a bar. Sometimes I stopped in there alone because I knew the bartenders now and some of the regulars, and it reminded me of a wonderful bar I'd been to a few times on a vacation, in Sausalito, California, called the No-Name Bar. Mostly I thought about Katherine Mancuso, a girl I'd been seeing more and more often, and the girl I'd begun to suspect I'd eventually be asking to marry me.

At first a lot of my life in New York had been lonely; I'd have left it willingly then. But now, while I still spent two or three and sometimes more nights a week by myself -- reading, seeing a movie I wanted to see that Katie didn't, watching television at home, or just wandering around the city once in a while-I didn't mind. I had friends now, I had Katherine, and I liked a little time to myself.

I thought about my work. They liked it at the agency, they liked me, and I made a decent enough salary. The work wasn't precisely what I'd had in mind when I went to art school in Buffalo, but I didn't know either just what I did have in mind then, if anything.

So all in all there wasn't anything really wrong with my life. Except that, like most everyone else's I knew about, it had a big gaping hole in it, an enormous emptiness, and I didn't know how to fill it or even know what belonged there. I said to Rube, "Quit my job. Give up my friends. Disappear. How do I know you're not a white slaver?"

"Look in the mirror."

We turned out of the park and stopped at the corner. I said, "Well, Rube, this is Friday: Can you let me think about it? Over the weekend, anyway? I don't think I'm interested, but I'll let you know. I don't know what else I can tell you right now."

"What about that permission? I'd like to make my phone call now. From the nearest booth, in fact, at the Plaza"-he nodded at the old hotel just across Fifty-ninth Street-"and send a man over to search your apartment this afternoon."

Once more I felt a flush rise up in my face. "Everything in it?"

He nodded. "If there are letters, he'll read them. If anything's hidden, he'll find it."

"All right, goddammit! Go ahead! He sure as hell won't find anything interesting!"

"I know." Rube was laughing at me. "Because he won't even look. There's no man I'm going to phone. Nobody's going to search your ~ crummy apartment. Or ever was."

"Then what the hell is this all about!"

"Don't you know?" He stood looking at me for a moment; then he grinned. "You don't know it and you won't believe it; but it means you've already decided."

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Si Morley is bored with his job as a commercial illustrator and his social life doesn't seem to be going anywhere. So, when he is approached by an affable ex-football star and told that he is just what the government is looking for to take part in a top-secret programme, he doesn't hesitate for too long. And so one day Si steps out of his twentieth-century, New York apartment and finds himself back in January 1882. There are no cars, no planes, no computers, no television and the word 'nuclear' appears in no dictionaries. For Si, it's very like Eden, somewhere he could find happiness. But has he really been back in time? The portfolio of tintype photographs and sketches that he brings back convince the government. But all Si wants is to return ...

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Features

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- Science Fiction
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Chapter 1

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"That's okay. He's my connection; I need a fix."

"What you need can't be fixed." She clicked off. I got up, wondering who it was; an artist in an advertising agency doesn't usually have too many visitors. The main reception room was on the floor below, and I took the long route through Accounting and Media, but no new girls had been hired.

Frank Dapp called the main reception room Off Broadway. It was decorated with a genuine Oriental rug, several display cases of antique silver from the collection of the wife of one of the three partners, and with a society matron whose hair was also antique silver and who relayed visitors' requests to Vera. As I walked toward it my visitor stood looking at one of the framed ads hung on the walls. Something I don't like admitting and which I've learned to disguise is a shyness about meeting people, and now I felt the familiar slight apprehension and momentary confusion as he turned at the sound of my approaching footsteps. He was bald and short, the top of his head reaching only to my eye level, and I'm an inch short of six feet. He looked about thirty-five, I thought, walking toward him, and he was remarkably thick-chested; he'd outweigh me without being fat. He wore an olive-green gabardine suit that didn't go with his pink redhead's complexion. I hope he's not a salesman, I thought; then he smiled as I stepped into the lobby, a real smile, and I liked him instantly and relaxed. No, I told myself, he's not selling anything, and I couldn't have been more wrong about that.

"Mr. Morley?" I nodded, smiling back at him. "Mr. Simon Morley?" he said, as though there might be several of us Morleys here at the agency and he wanted to be certain.

"Yes."

He still wasn't satisfied. "Just for fun, do you remember your army serial number?" He took my elbow and began walking me out into the elevator corridor away from the receptionist.

I rattled it off; it didn't even occur to me to wonder why I was doing this for a stranger, no questions asked.

"Right!" he said approvingly, and I felt pleased. We were out in the corridor now, no one else around.

"Are you from the army? If so, I don't want any today."

He smiled, but didn't answer the question, I noticed. He said, "I'm Ruben Prien," and hesitated momentarily as though I might recognize the name, then continued. "I should have phoned and made an appointment; but I'm in a hurry so I took a chance on dropping in."

"That's all right, I wasn't doing anything but working. What can I do for you?"

He grimaced humorously at the difficulty of what he had to say. "I've got to have about an hour of your time. Right now, if you can manage it." He looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but...if you could just take me on faith for a little while, I'd appreciate it."

I was hooked; he had my interest. "All right. It's ten to twelve; would you like to have lunch? I can leave a little early."

"Fine, but let's not talk indoors. We could pick up some sandwiches and eat in the park. Okay? It's not too cool."

Nodding, I said, "I'll get my coat and meet you here. You interest me strangely." I stood hesitating, looking closely at this pleasant, tough-looking, bald little man, then said it. "As I think you know. Matter of fact, you've been through this whole routine before, haven't you? Complete with embarrassed look."

He grinned and made a little finger-snapping motion. "And I thought I really had it down. Well, it's back to the mirror, and more practice. Get your coat; we're losing time."

We walked north on Fifth Avenue past the incredible buildings of glass and steel, glass and enameled metal, glass and marble, and the older ones of more stone than glass. It's a stunning street and unbelievable; I never get used to it, and I wonder if anyone really does. Is there any other place where an entire cloud bank can be completely reflected in the windows of one wall of only one building, and with room to spare? Today I especial??? enjoyed being out on Fifth, the temperature in the high 50's, a nice late-fall coolness in the air. It was nearly noon, and beautiful girls came dancing out of every office building we passed, and I thought of how regrettable it was that I'd never know or even speak to most of them. The little bald man beside me said, "I'll tell you what I've come to say to you; then I'll listen to questions. Maybe I'll even answer some. But everything I can really tell you I will have said before we reach Fifty-sixth Street. I've done this thirty-odd times now, and never figured out a good way to say it or even sound very sane while trying, so here goes.

"There's a project. A U.S. government project I guess you'd have to call it. Secret, naturally; as what isn't in government these days? In my opinion, and that of a handful of others, it's more important than all the nuclear, space-exploration, satellite, and rocket programs put together, though a hell of a lot smaller. I tell you right off that I can't even hint what the project is about. And believe me, you'd never guess. I can and do

say that nothing human beings have ever before attempted in the entire nutty history of the race even approaches this in absolute fascination. When I first understood what this project is about I didn't sleep for two nights, and I don't mean that in the usual way; I mean I literally did not sleep. And before I could sleep on the third night I had to have a shot in the arm, and I'm supposed to be the plodding unimaginative type. Do I have your attention?"

"Yes; if I understand you, you've finally discovered something more interesting than sex."

"You may find out that you're not exaggerating. I think riding to the moon would be almost dull in comparison to what you may just possibly have a chance to do. It is the greatest possible adventure. I would give anything I own or will ever have just to be in your shoes; I'd give years of my life just for a chance at this. And that's it, friend Morley. I can go on talking, and will, but that's really all I have to say. Except this: through no virtue or merit of your own, just plain dumb luck, you are invited to join the project. To commit yourself to it. Absolutely blind. That's some pig in a poke, all right, but oh, my God, what a pig. There's a pretty good delicatessen on Fifty-seventh Street; what kind of sandwiches you want?"

"Roast pork, what else?"

We bought our sandwiches and a couple of apples, then walked on toward Central Park a couple of blocks ahead. Prien was waiting for some sort of reply, and we walked in silence for half a block; then I shrugged irritably, wanting to be polite but not knowing how else to answer. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Whatever you want."

"All right; why me?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked, as the politicians say. There is a particular kind of man we need. He has to have a certain set of qualities. A rather special list of qualities, actually, and a long list. Furthermore, he has to have them in a pretty exact kind of balance. We didn't know that at first. We thought most any intelligent eager young fellow would do. Me, for example. Now we know, or think we do, that he has to be physically right, psychologically right, temperamentally right. He has to have a certain special way of looking at things. He's got to have the ability, and it seems to be fairly rare, to see things as they are and at the same time as they might have been. If that makes any sense to you. It probably does, because it may be that what we mean is the eye of an artist. Those are just some of what he must have or be; there are others I won't tell you about now. Trouble is that on one count or another that seems to eliminate most of the population. The only practical way we've found to turn up likely candidates is to plow through the tests the army gave its inductees; you remember them."

"Vaguely."

"I don't know how many sets of those tests have been analyzed; that's not my department. Probably millions. They use computers for the early check-throughs, eliminating all those that are comfortably wide of the mark. Which is most of them. After that, real live people take over; we don't want to miss even one candidate. Because we're finding damn few. We've checked I don't know how many millions of service records, including the women's branches. For some reason women seem to produce more candidates than men; we wish we had more we could check. Anyway, one Simon L. Morley with the fine euphonious serial number looks like a candidate. How come you only made PFC?"

"A lack of talent for idiocies such as close-order drill."

"I believe the technical term is two left feet. Out of fewer than a hundred possibilities we've found so far, about fifty have already heard what you're hearing now, and turned us down. About fifty more have volunteered, and over forty of them flunked some further tests. Anyway, after one hell of a lot of work, we have five men and two women who just might be qualified. Most or all of them will fail in the actual attempt; we don't have even one we feel very sure of. We'd like to get about twenty-five candidates, if we possibly can. We'd like a hundred, but we don't believe there are that many around; at least we don't know how to find them. But you may be one."

"Gee whiz."

At Fifty-ninth Street as we stood waiting for the light, I glanced at Rube's profile and said, "Rube Prien; yeah. You played football. When was it? About ten years ago."

He turned to grin up at me. "You remembered! You're a good boy; I wish I'd bought you some thick gooey dessert, the kind I can't eat anymore. Only it was fifteen years ago; I'm not really the young handsome youth I know I must seem."

"Where'd you play again? I can't remember."

The light clicked green, and we stepped down off the curb. "West Point."

"I knew it! You're in the army!"

"Yep."

I was shaking my head. "Well, I'm sorry, but it'll take more than you. It'll take five husky fighting MPs to drag me back in, kicking and screaming all the way. Whatever you're selling and however fascinating, I don't want any. The lure of sleepless nights in the army just isn't enough, Prien; I've already had all I want."

On the other side of the street we stepped up onto the sidewalk, crossed it, then turned onto the curve of a dirt-and-gravel path of Central Park and walked along it looking for an empty bench. "What's wrong with the army?" Rube said with fake injured innocence.

"You said this would take an hour; I'd need a week just for the chapter headings."

"All right, don't join the army. Join the navy; we'll make you anything you like from bosun's mate to lieutenant senior grade. Or join the Department of the Interior; you can be a forester with your very own Smokey-the-Bear hat." Prien was enjoying himself. "Sign up with the post office if you want; we'll make you an assistant inspector and give you a badge and the power to arrest for postal fraud. I mean it; pick almost any branch of the government you like except State or the diplomatic corps. And pick any title you fancy at no more than around a twelve-thousand-a-year salary, and so long as it isn't an elective office. Because, Si -- all right to call you Si?" he said with sudden impatience.

"Sure."

"And call me Rube, if you care to. Si, it doesn't matter what payroll you're technically on. When I say this is secret, I mean it; our budget is scattered through the books of every sort of department and bureau, our people listed on every roster but our own. We don't officially exist, and yes, I'm still a member of the U.S. Army. The time counts toward my retirement, and besides I like the army, eccentric as I know that sounds.

But my uniforms are in storage, I salute nobody these days, and the man I take a lot of my orders from is an historian on leave from Columbia University. Be a little chilly on the benches in the shade; let's find a place in the sun."

We picked a place a dozen yards off the path beside a big outcropping of black rock. We sat down on the sunny side, leaning back against the warm rock, and began opening our sandwiches. To the south, east, and west the New York buildings rose high, hanging over the park's edges like a gang ready to rush in and cover the greenery with concrete.

"You must have been in grade school when you read about Flying Rube Prien, deer-footed quarterback."

"I guess so; I'm twenty-eight." I bit into my sandwich. It was very good, the meat sliced thin and packed thick, the fat trimmed.

Rube said, "Twenty-eight on March eleventh."

"So you know that, do you? Well, goody goody gumshoes."

"It's in your army record, of course. But we know some things that aren't; we know you were divorced two years ago, and why."

"Would you mind telling me? I never did figure out why."

"You wouldn't understand. We also know that in about the last five months you've gone out with nine women but only four of them more than once. That in the last six weeks or so it seems to have narrowed down more and more to one. Just the same, we don't think you're ready to get married again. You may think you are, but we think you're still afraid to. You have two men friends you occasionally have lunch or dinner with; your parents are dead; you have no brothers or sist --"

My face had been flushing; I felt it, and took care to keep my voice quiet. I said, "Rube, I think I like you personally. But I feel I have to say: Who gave you or anyone else the right to poke into my private affairs?"

"Don't get mad, Si. It isn't worth it; we haven't snooped that much. And nothing embarrassing, nothing illegal. We're not like one or two government agencies I could name; we don't think we're divinely appointed. There's no wiretapping or illegal searches; we think the Constitution applies even to us. But before I leave I'll want your permission to search your apartment before you go back tonight."

I felt my lips compressing, and I shook my head.

Rube smiled and reached out to touch my arm. "I'm teasing you a little. But I hope you don't mean that. I'm offering you a crack at the damndest experience a human being has ever had."

"And you can't tell me anything about it? I'm surprised you got seven people. Or even one."

Rube stared down at the grass; thinking about what he could say; then he looked up at me again. "We'd want to know more," he said slowly. "We'd want to test you in several other ways. But we think we already know an awful lot about the way you are, the way you think. We own two original Simon Morley paintings, for example, from the Art Directors' Show last spring, plus a watercolor and some sketches, all bought and paid for. We know something about the kind of man you are, and I've learned some more today. So I think I can

tell you this: I can lust about guarantee you, I believe I can guarantee you, that if you'll take this on faith and commit yourself for two years, assuming you get through some further testing, you will thank me. You'll say I was right. You'll tell me that the very thought that you might have missed out on this gives you the chills. How many human beings have ever lived, Si? Five or six billions, maybe? Well, if you should test out, you'll become one of maybe a dozen out of all those billions, maybe the only one, who just might have the greatest adventure any human being has ever had."

It impressed me. I sat eating an apple, staring ahead, thinking. Suddenly I turned to him. "You haven't said a damn thing more than you did in the first place!"

"You noticed, did you? Some don't. Si, that's all I can say!"

"Well, you're too modest; you've got your sales pitch worked out beautifully. Will you accept a down payment on the Brooklyn Bridge? My God, Rube, what am I supposed to tell you? 'Sure, I'll join; where do I sign?'"

He nodded. "I know. It's tough. There's just no other way it can be done, that's all." He sat looking at me. Then he said softly, "But it's easier for you than most. You're unmarried, no kids. And you're bored silly with your work; we know that. As why shouldn't you be? It doesn't amount to anything, it's not worth doing. You're bored and dissatisfied with yourself, and time is passing; in two years you'll be thirty. And you still don't know what to do with your life." Rube sat back against the warm rock, staring off at the path and the people strolling along it through the sunny fall noon-hour, giving me a chance to think. What he'd just said was true.

When I turned to look at him again, Rube was waiting. He said, "So this is what you have to do: take a chance. Take a deep breath, close your eyes, grab your nose, and jump in. Or would you rather keep on selling soap, chewing gum, and brassieres, or whatever the hell it is you peddle down the street? You're a young man, for crysake!" Rube sliced his hands together, dusting off crumbs, and shoved several balls of waxed paper into his lunch sack. Then he stood up quickly and easily, the ex-footballer. "You know what I'm talking about, Si; the only possible way you can do this is to just go ahead and do it."

I stood up too, and we walked to a wire trash-basket chained to a tree, and dropped our wastepaper into it. Turning back toward the path with Rube, I knew that if I took my wrist between thumb and forefinger my pulse rate would be up; I was scared. With an irritation that surprised me, I said, "I'd be taking a hell of a lot on the say-so of an absolute stranger! What if I joined this big mystery and didn't think it was all that fascinating?"

"Impossible."

"But if I did!"

"Once we're satisfied you're a candidate and tell you what we're doing we have to know that you'll go through with it. We need your promise in advance; we can't help that."

"Would I have to go away?"

"In time. With some story for your friends. We couldn't have anyone wondering where or why Si Morley disappeared."

"Is this dangerous?"

"We don't think so. But I can't truthfully say we really know."

Walking toward the corner of the park at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, I thought about the life I'd made for myself since I'd arrived in New York City two years ago looking for a job as an artist, a stranger from Buffalo with a portfolio of samples under my arm. Every now and then I had dinner with Lennie Hindesmith, an artist I'd worked with in my first New York job. We'd generally see a movie after dinner or go bowling or something like that. I played tennis fairly often, public courts in the summer, the armory in the winter, with Matt Flax, a young accountant in my present agency; he'd also brought me into a weekly Monday-night bridge game, and we were probably on the way to becoming good friends. Pearl Moschetti was an assistant account executive on a perfume account at the first place I worked; ever since, I'd seen her now and then, once in a while for an entire weekend, though I hadn't seen her for quite a while now. I thought about Grace Ann Wunderlich, formerly of Seattle, whom I'd picked up almost accidentally in the Longchamps bar at Forty-ninth and Madison when I saw her start crying out of overwhelming loneliness brought on from sitting at a table by herself having a drink she didn't want or like when everyone else in the place seemed to have friends. Every time I'd seen her after that we drank too much, apparently following the pattern of the first time, usually at a place in the Village, a bar. Sometimes I stopped in there alone because I knew the bartenders now and some of the regulars, and it reminded me of a wonderful bar I'd been to a few times on a vacation, in Sausalito, California, called the No-Name Bar. Mostly I thought about Katherine Mancuso, a girl I'd been seeing more and more often, and the girl I'd begun to suspect I'd eventually be asking to marry me.

At first a lot of my life in New York had been lonely; I'd have left it willingly then. But now, while I still spent two or three and sometimes more nights a week by myself -- reading, seeing a movie I wanted to see that Katie didn't, watching television at home, or just wandering around the city once in a while-I didn't mind. I had friends now, I had Katherine, and I liked a little time to myself.

I thought about my work. They liked it at the agency, they liked me, and I made a decent enough salary. The work wasn't precisely what I'd had in mind when I went to art school in Buffalo, but I didn't know either just what I did have in mind then, if anything.

So all in all there wasn't anything really wrong with my life. Except that, like most everyone else's I knew about, it had a big gaping hole in it, an enormous emptiness, and I didn't know how to fill it or even know what belonged there. I said to Rube, "Quit my job. Give up my friends. Disappear. How do I know you're not a white slaver?"

"Look in the mirror."

We turned out of the park and stopped at the corner. I said, "Well, Rube, this is Friday: Can you let me think about it? Over the weekend, anyway? I don't think I'm interested, but I'll let you know. I don't know what else I can tell you right now."

"What about that permission? I'd like to make my phone call now. From the nearest booth, in fact, at the Plaza"-he nodded at the old hotel just across Fifty-ninth Street-"and send a man over to search your apartment this afternoon."

Once more I felt a flush rise up in my face. "Everything in it?"

He nodded. "If there are letters, he'll read them. If anything's hidden, he'll find it."

"All right, goddammit! Go ahead! He sure as hell won't find anything interesting!"

"I know." Rube was laughing at me. "Because he won't even look. There's no man I'm going to phone. Nobody's going to search your ~ crummy apartment. Or ever was."

"Then what the hell is this all about!"

"Don't you know?" He stood looking at me for a moment; then he grinned. "You don't know it and you won't believe it; but it means you've already decided."

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Most helpful customer reviews

395 of 405 people found the following review helpful.

A classic of time travel, romance, and history

By Claude Avary

Author Jack Finney (1911-1995), among his other writing accomplishments, penned two great, influential science-fiction novels: the 1955 alien invasion story "The Body Snatchers," the source for three great movies (with "Invasion of..." usually tacked onto the front), and this 1970 subtle romance about time travel. It's a novel that many people hold close to their hearts, and like the movie "Somewhere in Time," has the magic to allure you with the wonder of traveling back to a simpler time -- 1880s New York in this case -- and exploring in depth a world so unlike your own. Finney, with meticulous detail and the support of numerous old photographs and drawings from the period (this is referred to as an "illustrated novel") recreates New York in 1882, letting us and the main character, Si Morley, marvel as we walk over the old streets, see places where one day great skyscrapers will stand, gaze on a traffic jam of hansom cabs, discover the arm of the Statue of Liberty sitting in Madison Square awaiting the rest of its body, play old parlor games in a boarding house, and look at Fifth Avenue when it was a thin street of trees and apartments. People who have lived in New York will especially adore these descriptions of the vanished city and the comparison Finney makes between the "modern" city (1970; vanished now to us as well) and the 1880s city. However, even if you've never been to New York in your life, you'll feel like you have after reading this. That's an incredible compliment to pay to a writer.

"Time and Again" won't please readers looking for quick action and thrills. It is a leisurely book that takes its time to build up the central situation: the U.S. government has found a possible method to travel back in time through purely mental means, and believes that young artist Si Morely fits the profile of the person who can achieve it. Once the book moves to the actual time traveling, the focus is mostly on the experience of being in another time and Si's discovery of how it affects him...especially when he feels he may be falling in love with a girl from the time. There is, however, a mystery simmering inside the story, and Si sets himself out to unravel it. What will the consequences be for history itself if he interferes? And what does the government really want to achieve with this project?

The last third of the book is tense and suspenseful, and contains an incredible and lengthy description of a disastrous event that ranks with the most vivid visual writing I've ever read. And the resolution is nothing short of perfect; Finney delivers the most satisfying conclusion. However, the book takes patience. Let Finney's prose, his wonderful main character Si, and his ability to pull you back in time with him sweep you away -- you won't regret it when the journey is over. Even if you never read science fiction or claim to dislike it, this is one book you'll find it difficult not to fall for.

154 of 162 people found the following review helpful.

Easily my favorite book of all time - a great read

By Dom Miliano

I am shocked by the range of reviews for what I consider one of my favorite books. It is (using a much over used word here) a masterpiece. Strong characters, intricate plot, exquisite detail all grounded in the most exciting place in the world, New York City. What's not to love? I have re-read this book several times. I also have it on tape and play it to get through long car trips - it's an old, reliable, much loved friend. I am fascinated by time travel and I love New York so that probably explains the appeal of this book. I also grew up as a reader (as opposed to a real TV junkie) and I love getting lost in very detailed prose and intricate word pictures - the kind Finney employs here to hook the reader. I can visualize one scene in my mind now - Sy Morley in his rooms in the Dakota, snow falling, the city silent, bathed in white. Is he in the 19th or 20th century? Was the experiment a success or a dismal failure? You have to read on (and will want to read on) to see.

98 of 104 people found the following review helpful.

Author's best--great novel of time travel

By Gary M. Greenbaum

Simon Morley, an illustrator, is enlisted by a secret government project to hypnotize himself into 1880s New York. He is successful, and goes back to investigate a mystery. As we are overwhelmed with details of 1880s New York, we can almost believe that this time travel is possible. Morely finds himself in love with his landlady's daughter in the past, and must deal with threats both in the past and in the present.

This is Finney's finest, a gentle novel which nevertheless prompts us to give serious thought to the morality of the decisions we make. Morley's decision to treat the people in the past as more than images long dead in the present leads inevitably to his decision to question the rightness of the project he is engaged in, and to act on that decision.

....

A fine, fine book that I wish Finney hadn't spoiled with a sequel. When will they make that movie out of it that they keep talking about?

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TIME AND AGAIN BY JACK FINNEY PDF

Your impression of this publication **TIME AND AGAIN By Jack Finney** will certainly lead you to obtain exactly what you specifically require. As one of the inspiring publications, this book will certainly supply the visibility of this led TIME AND AGAIN By Jack Finney to gather. Also it is just soft file; it can be your cumulative documents in gizmo and various other gadget. The vital is that use this soft data publication TIME AND AGAIN By Jack Finney to check out as well as take the perks. It is just what we indicate as publication TIME AND AGAIN By Jack Finney will certainly enhance your ideas as well as mind. Then, reading publication will certainly additionally boost your life quality much better by taking good action in well balanced.

Review

"New York Times" Go back to a wonderful world and have a wonderful time doing it.

About the Author

Born in 1911 the American author Jack Finney wrote numerous SF novels, thrillers and mysteries, several of which were adapted to film. He is best known as the author of **THE BODY SNATCHERS**, which became the hugely popular and influential film, **THE INVASION OF THE BODYSNATCHERS**. He was awarded the **WORLD FANTASY AWARD** for Lifetime Achievement in 1987. A long time resident of California he died in 1995.

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Chapter 1

Is shirt-sleeves, the way I generally worked, I sat sketching a bar of soap taped to an upper corner of my drawing board. The gold-foil wrapper was carefully peeled back so that you could still read most of the brand name printed on it; I'd spoiled the wrappers of half a dozen bars before getting that effect. This was a new idea, the product to be shown ready for what the accompanying copy called "fragrant, lathery, lovelier you" use, and I had the job of sketching it into half a dozen layouts, the bar of soap at a slightly different angle in each.

It was just exactly as boring as it sounds, and I stopped to look out the window beside me, down twelve stories at Fifty-fourth Street and the little heads moving along the sidewalk. It was a sunny, sharply clear day in mid-November, and I'd have liked to be out in it, the whole afternoon ahead and nothing to do; nothing I had to do, that is.

Over at the paste-up table Vince Mandel, our lettering man, thin and dark and probably feeling as caged-up today as I was, stood working with the airbrush, a cotton surgical mask over his mouth. He was spraying a flesh-colored film onto a Life magazine photo of a girl in a bathing suit. The effect, when he finished, would be to remove the suit, leaving the girl apparently naked except for the ribbon she wore slanted from shoulder to waist on which was lettered **MISS BUSINESS MACHINES**. This kind of stunt was Vince's favorite at-work occupation ever since he'd thought of it, and the retouched picture would be added to a collection of others like it on the art-department bulletin board, at which Maureen, our nineteen-year-old paste-up girl and messenger, refused ever to look or even glance, though often urged.

Frank Dapp, our art director, a round little package of energy, came trotting toward his partitioned-off office

in the northeast corner of the artists' bullpen. As he passed the big metal supply cabinet just inside the room he hammered violently on its open door, yodeling at full bellow. It was an habitual release of unused energy like a locomotive jetting steam, a starting eruption of sound. But neither Vince nor I nor Karl Jonas at the board ahead of mine glanced up. Neither did anyone in the typists' pool outside, I knew, although strangers waiting in the art-department reception room just down the hall had been known to leap to their feet at the sound.

It was an ordinary day, a Friday, twenty minutes till lunchtime, five hours till quitting time and the weekend, ten months till vacation, thirty-seven years till retirement. Then the phone rang.

"Man here to see you, Si." It was Vera, at the switchboard. "He has no appointment."

"That's okay. He's my connection; I need a fix."

"What you need can't be fixed." She clicked off. I got up, wondering who it was; an artist in an advertising agency doesn't usually have too many visitors. The main reception room was on the floor below, and I took the long route through Accounting and Media, but no new girls had been hired.

Frank Dapp called the main reception room Off Broadway. It was decorated with a genuine Oriental rug, several display cases of antique silver from the collection of the wife of one of the three partners, and with a society matron whose hair was also antique silver and who relayed visitors' requests to Vera. As I walked toward it my visitor stood looking at one of the framed ads hung on the walls. Something I don't like admitting and which I've learned to disguise is a shyness about meeting people, and now I felt the familiar slight apprehension and momentary confusion as he turned at the sound of my approaching footsteps. He was bald and short, the top of his head reaching only to my eye level, and I'm an inch short of six feet. He looked about thirty-five, I thought, walking toward him, and he was remarkably thick-chested; he'd outweigh me without being fat. He wore an olive-green gabardine suit that didn't go with his pink redhead's complexion. I hope he's not a salesman, I thought; then he smiled as I stepped into the lobby, a real smile, and I liked him instantly and relaxed. No, I told myself, he's not selling anything, and I couldn't have been more wrong about that.

"Mr. Morley?" I nodded, smiling back at him. "Mr. Simon Morley?" he said, as though there might be several of us Morleys here at the agency and he wanted to be certain.

"Yes."

He still wasn't satisfied. "Just for fun, do you remember your army serial number?" He took my elbow and began walking me out into the elevator corridor away from the receptionist.

I rattled it off; it didn't even occur to me to wonder why I was doing this for a stranger, no questions asked.

"Right!" he said approvingly, and I felt pleased. We were out in the corridor now, no one else around.

"Are you from the army? If so, I don't want any today."

He smiled, but didn't answer the question, I noticed. He said, "I'm Ruben Prien," and hesitated momentarily as though I might recognize the name, then continued. "I should have phoned and made an appointment; but I'm in a hurry so I took a chance on dropping in."

"That's all right, I wasn't doing anything but working. What can I do for you?"

He grimaced humorously at the difficulty of what he had to say. "I've got to have about an hour of your time. Right now, if you can manage it." He looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but...if you could just take me on faith for a little while, I'd appreciate it."

I was hooked; he had my interest. "All right. It's ten to twelve; would you like to have lunch? I can leave a little early."

"Fine, but let's not talk indoors. We could pick up some sandwiches and eat in the park. Okay? It's not too cool."

Nodding, I said, "I'll get my coat and meet you here. You interest me strangely." I stood hesitating, looking closely at this pleasant, tough-looking, bald little man, then said it. "As I think you know. Matter of fact, you've been through this whole routine before, haven't you? Complete with embarrassed look."

He grinned and made a little finger-snapping motion. "And I thought I really had it down. Well, it's back to the mirror, and more practice. Get your coat; we're losing time."

We walked north on Fifth Avenue past the incredible buildings of glass and steel, glass and enameled metal, glass and marble, and the older ones of more stone than glass. It's a stunning street and unbelievable; I never get used to it, and I wonder if anyone really does. Is there any other place where an entire cloud bank can be completely reflected in the windows of one wall of only one building, and with room to spare? Today I especial??? enjoyed being out on Fifth, the temperature in the high 50's, a nice late-fall coolness in the air. It was nearly noon, and beautiful girls came dancing out of every office building we passed, and I thought of how regrettable it was that I'd never know or even speak to most of them. The little bald man beside me said, "I'll tell you what I've come to say to you; then I'll listen to questions. Maybe I'll even answer some. But everything I can really tell you I will have said before we reach Fifty-sixth Street. I've done this thirty-odd times now, and never figured out a good way to say it or even sound very sane while trying, so here goes.

"There's a project. A U.S. government project I guess you'd have to call it. Secret, naturally; as what isn't in government these days? In my opinion, and that of a handful of others, it's more important than all the nuclear, space-exploration, satellite, and rocket programs put together, though a hell of a lot smaller. I tell you right off that I can't even hint what the project is about. And believe me, you'd never guess. I can and do say that nothing human beings have ever before attempted in the entire nutty history of the race even approaches this in absolute fascination. When I first understood what this project is about I didn't sleep for two nights, and I don't mean that in the usual way; I mean I literally did not sleep. And before I could sleep on the third night I had to have a shot in the arm, and I'm supposed to be the plodding unimaginative type. Do I have your attention?"

"Yes; if I understand you, you've finally discovered something more interesting than sex."

"You may find out that you're not exaggerating. I think riding to the moon would be almost dull in comparison to what you may just possibly have a chance to do. It is the greatest possible adventure. I would give anything I own or will ever have just to be in your shoes; I'd give years of my life just for a chance at this. And that's it, friend Morley. I can go on talking, and will, but that's really all I have to say. Except this: through no virtue or merit of your own, just plain dumb luck, you are invited to join the project. To commit yourself to it. Absolutely blind. That's some pig in a poke, all right, but oh, my God, what a pig. There's a pretty good delicatessen on Fifty-seventh Street; what kind of sandwiches you want?"

"Roast pork, what else?"

We bought our sandwiches and a couple of apples, then walked on toward Central Park a couple of blocks ahead. Prien was waiting for some sort of reply, and we walked in silence for half a block; then I shrugged irritably, wanting to be polite but not knowing how else to answer. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Whatever you want."

"All right; why me?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked, as the politicians say. There is a particular kind of man we need. He has to have a certain set of qualities. A rather special list of qualities, actually, and a long list. Furthermore, he has to have them in a pretty exact kind of balance. We didn't know that at first. We thought most any intelligent eager young fellow would do. Me, for example. Now we know, or think we do, that he has to be physically right, psychologically right, temperamentally right. He has to have a certain special way of looking at things. He's got to have the ability, and it seems to be fairly rare, to see things as they are and at the same time as they might have been. If that makes any sense to you. It probably does, because it may be that what we mean is the eye of an artist. Those are just some of what he must have or be; there are others I won't tell you about now. Trouble is that on one count or another that seems to eliminate most of the population. The only practical way we've found to turn up likely candidates is to plow through the tests the army gave its inductees; you remember them."

"Vaguely."

"I don't know how many sets of those tests have been analyzed; that's not my department. Probably millions. They use computers for the early check-throughs, eliminating all those that are comfortably wide of the mark. Which is most of them. After that, real live people take over; we don't want to miss even one candidate. Because we're finding damn few. We've checked I don't know how many millions of service records, including the women's branches. For some reason women seem to produce more candidates than men; we wish we had more we could check. Anyway, one Simon L. Morley with the fine euphonious serial number looks like a candidate. How come you only made PFC?"

"A lack of talent for idiocies such as close-order drill."

"I believe the technical term is two left feet. Out of fewer than a hundred possibilities we've found so far, about fifty have already heard what you're hearing now, and turned us down. About fifty more have volunteered, and over forty of them flunked some further tests. Anyway, after one hell of a lot of work, we have five men and two women who just might be qualified. Most or all of them will fail in the actual attempt; we don't have even one we feel very sure of. We'd like to get about twenty-five candidates, if we possibly can. We'd like a hundred, but we don't believe there are that many around; at least we don't know how to find them. But you may be one."

"Gee whiz."

At Fifty-ninth Street as we stood waiting for the light, I glanced at Rube's profile and said, "Rube Prien; yeah. You played football. When was it? About ten years ago."

He turned to grin up at me. "You remembered! You're a good boy; I wish I'd bought you some thick goeey dessert, the kind I can't eat anymore. Only it was fifteen years ago; I'm not really the young handsome youth

I know I must seem."

"Where'd you play again? I can't remember."

The light clicked green, and we stepped down off the curb. "West Point."

"I knew it! You're in the army!"

"Yep."

I was shaking my head. "Well, I'm sorry, but it'll take more than you. It'll take five husky fighting MPs to drag me back in, kicking and screaming all the way. Whatever you're selling and however fascinating, I don't want any. The lure of sleepless nights in the army just isn't enough, Prien; I've already had all I want."

On the other side of the street we stepped up onto the sidewalk, crossed it, then turned onto the curve of a dirt-and-gravel path of Central Park and walked along it looking for an empty bench. "What's wrong with the army?" Rube said with fake injured innocence.

"You said this would take an hour; I'd need a week just for the chapter headings."

"All right, don't join the army. Join the navy; we'll make you anything you like from bosun's mate to lieutenant senior grade. Or join the Department of the Interior; you can be a forester with your very own Smokey-the-Bear hat." Prien was enjoying himself. "Sign up with the post office if you want; we'll make you an assistant inspector and give you a badge and the power to arrest for postal fraud. I mean it; pick almost any branch of the government you like except State or the diplomatic corps. And pick any title you fancy at no more than around a twelve-thousand-a-year salary, and so long as it isn't an elective office. Because, Si -- all right to call you Si?" he said with sudden impatience.

"Sure."

"And call me Rube, if you care to. Si, it doesn't matter what payroll you're technically on. When I say this is secret, I mean it; our budget is scattered through the books of every sort of department and bureau, our people listed on every roster but our own. We don't officially exist, and yes, I'm still a member of the U.S. Army. The time counts toward my retirement, and besides I like the army, eccentric as I know that sounds. But my uniforms are in storage, I salute nobody these days, and the man I take a lot of my orders from is an historian on leave from Columbia University. Be a little chilly on the benches in the shade; let's find a place in the sun."

We picked a place a dozen yards off the path beside a big outcropping of black rock. We sat down on the sunny side, leaning back against the warm rock, and began opening our sandwiches. To the south, east, and west the New York buildings rose high, hanging over the park's edges like a gang ready to rush in and cover the greenery with concrete.

"You must have been in grade school when you read about Flying Rube Prien, deer-footed quarterback."

"I guess so; I'm twenty-eight." I bit into my sandwich. It was very good, the meat sliced thin and packed thick, the fat trimmed.

Rube said, "Twenty-eight on March eleventh."

"So you know that, do you? Well, goody goody gumshoes."

"It's in your army record, of course. But we know some things that aren't; we know you were divorced two years ago, and why."

"Would you mind telling me? I never did figure out why."

"You wouldn't understand. We also know that in about the last five months you've gone out with nine women but only four of them more than once. That in the last six weeks or so it seems to have narrowed down more and more to one. Just the same, we don't think you're ready to get married again. You may think you are, but we think you're still afraid to. You have two men friends you occasionally have lunch or dinner with; your parents are dead; you have no brothers or sist --"

My face had been flushing; I felt it, and took care to keep my voice quiet. I said, "Rube, I think I like you personally. But I feel I have to say: Who gave you or anyone else the right to poke into my private affairs?"

"Don't get mad, Si. It isn't worth it; we haven't snooped that much. And nothing embarrassing, nothing illegal. We're not like one or two government agencies I could name; we don't think we're divinely appointed. There's no wiretapping or illegal searches; we think the Constitution applies even to us. But before I leave I'll want your permission to search your apartment before you go back tonight."

I felt my lips compressing, and I shook my head.

Rube smiled and reached out to touch my arm. "I'm teasing you a little. But I hope you don't mean that. I'm offering you a crack at the damnedest experience a human being has ever had."

"And you can't tell me anything about it? I'm surprised you got seven people. Or even one."

Rube stared down at the grass; thinking about what he could say; then he looked up at me again. "We'd want to know more," he said slowly. "We'd want to test you in several other ways. But we think we already know an awful lot about the way you are, the way you think. We own two original Simon Morley paintings, for example, from the Art Directors' Show last spring, plus a watercolor and some sketches, all bought and paid for. We know something about the kind of man you are, and I've learned some more today. So I think I can tell you this: I can lust about guarantee you, I believe I can guarantee you, that if you'll take this on faith and commit yourself for two years, assuming you get through some further testing, you will thank me. You'll say I was right. You'll tell me that the very thought that you might have missed out on this gives you the chills. How many human beings have ever lived, Si? Five or six billions, maybe? Well, if you should test out, you'll become one of maybe a dozen out of all those billions, maybe the only one, who just might have the greatest adventure any human being has ever had."

It impressed me. I sat eating an apple, staring ahead, thinking. Suddenly I turned to him. "You haven't said a damn thing more than you did in the first place!"

"You noticed, did you? Some don't. Si, that's all I can say!"

"Well, you're too modest; you've got your sales pitch worked out beautifully. Will you accept a down payment on the Brooklyn Bridge? My God, Rube, what am I supposed to tell you? 'Sure, I'll join; where do I sign?'"

He nodded. "I know. It's tough. There's just no other way it can be done, that's all." He sat looking at me. Then he said softly, "But it's easier for you than most. You're unmarried, no kids. And you're bored silly with your work; we know that. As why shouldn't you be? It doesn't amount to anything, it's not worth doing. You're bored and dissatisfied with yourself, and time is passing; in two years you'll be thirty. And you still don't know what to do with your life." Rube sat back against the warm rock, staring off at the path and the people strolling along it through the sunny fall noon-hour, giving me a chance to think. What he'd just said was true.

When I turned to look at him again, Rube was waiting. He said, "So this is what you have to do: take a chance. Take a deep breath, close your eyes, grab your nose, and jump in. Or would you rather keep on selling soap, chewing gum, and brassieres, or whatever the hell it is you peddle down the street? You're a young man, for crysake!" Rube sliced his hands together, dusting off crumbs, and shoved several balls of waxed paper into his lunch sack. Then he stood up quickly and easily, the ex-footballer. "You know what I'm talking about, Si; the only possible way you can do this is to just go ahead and do it."

I stood up too, and we walked to a wire trash-basket chained to a tree, and dropped our wastepaper into it. Turning back toward the path with Rube, I knew that if I took my wrist between thumb and forefinger my pulse rate would be up; I was scared. With an irritation that surprised me, I said, "I'd be taking a hell of a lot on the say-so of an absolute stranger! What if I joined this big mystery and didn't think it was all that fascinating?"

"Impossible."

"But if I did!"

"Once we're satisfied you're a candidate and tell you what we're doing we have to know that you'll go through with it. We need your promise in advance; we can't help that."

"Would I have to go away?"

"In time. With some story for your friends. We couldn't have anyone wondering where or why Si Morley disappeared."

"Is this dangerous?"

"We don't think so. But I can't truthfully say we really know."

Walking toward the corner of the park at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, I thought about the life I'd made for myself since I'd arrived in New York City two years ago looking for a job as an artist, a stranger from Buffalo with a portfolio of samples under my arm. Every now and then I had dinner with Lennie Hindesmith, an artist I'd worked with in my first New York job. We'd generally see a movie after dinner or go bowling or something like that. I played tennis fairly often, public courts in the summer, the armory in the winter, with Matt Flax, a young accountant in my present agency; he'd also brought me into a weekly Monday-night bridge game, and we were probably on the way to becoming good friends. Pearl Moschetti was an assistant account executive on a perfume account at the first place I worked; ever since, I'd seen her now and then, once in a while for an entire weekend, though I hadn't seen her for quite a while now. I thought about Grace Ann Wunderlich, formerly of Seattle, whom I'd picked up almost accidentally in the Longchamps bar at Forty-ninth and Madison when I saw her start crying out of overwhelming loneliness brought on from sitting at a table by herself having a drink she didn't want or like when everyone else in the

place seemed to have friends. Every time I'd seen her after that we drank too much, apparently following the pattern of the first time, usually at a place in the Village, a bar. Sometimes I stopped in there alone because I knew the bartenders now and some of the regulars, and it reminded me of a wonderful bar I'd been to a few times on a vacation, in Sausalito, California, called the No-Name Bar. Mostly I thought about Katherine Mancuso, a girl I'd been seeing more and more often, and the girl I'd begun to suspect I'd eventually be asking to marry me.

At first a lot of my life in New York had been lonely; I'd have left it willingly then. But now, while I still spent two or three and sometimes more nights a week by myself -- reading, seeing a movie I wanted to see that Katie didn't, watching television at home, or just wandering around the city once in a while-I didn't mind. I had friends now, I had Katherine, and I liked a little time to myself.

I thought about my work. They liked it at the agency, they liked me, and I made a decent enough salary. The work wasn't precisely what I'd had in mind when I went to art school in Buffalo, but I didn't know either just what I did have in mind then, if anything.

So all in all there wasn't anything really wrong with my life. Except that, like most everyone else's I knew about, it had a big gaping hole in it, an enormous emptiness, and I didn't know how to fill it or even know what belonged there. I said to Rube, "Quit my job. Give up my friends. Disappear. How do I know you're not a white slaver?"

"Look in the mirror."

We turned out of the park and stopped at the corner. I said, "Well, Rube, this is Friday: Can you let me think about it? Over the weekend, anyway? I don't think I'm interested, but I'll let you know. I don't know what else I can tell you right now."

"What about that permission? I'd like to make my phone call now. From the nearest booth, in fact, at the Plaza"-he nodded at the old hotel just across Fifty-ninth Street-"and send a man over to search your apartment this afternoon."

Once more I felt a flush rise up in my face. "Everything in it?"

He nodded. "If there are letters, he'll read them. If anything's hidden, he'll find it."

"All right, goddammit! Go ahead! He sure as hell won't find anything interesting!"

"I know." Rube was laughing at me. "Because he won't even look. There's no man I'm going to phone. Nobody's going to search your ~ crummy apartment. Or ever was."

"Then what the hell is this all about!"

"Don't you know?" He stood looking at me for a moment; then he grinned. "You don't know it and you won't believe it; but it means you've already decided."

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