

Honesty

Scott Nicholson

Peace of mind can be a very important commodity. Scott Nicholson describes one man's effort to take advantage of a new technology to get some for himself.

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“Have I ever made you jealous?”

Donald tensed under the blankets. Ten years of marriage, and Faye was still trying “to get to know him better.” He turned toward her. The diffused light of halogen street lamps and late jetcars spilled from the window and made her face pale against her dark hair.

“No,” he whispered. He knew where this would lead. He glanced over her shoulder at the clock. 11:30. Donald had an important appointment tomorrow, a meeting with a time travel agency. His head was full of marketing angles, and he didn’t want to be bothered with intimate conversation.

“*TimeCo: Bringing Home the Past.*” Not too bad, he thought. Still, time travel was expensive, something of an elitist pleasure. That pitch was a little too folksy.

“*If You Had It to Do Over...*” Hmm. A little better. Implied that what you did in the past actually made a difference in *this* life, even though in fact you could change nothing but that alternate life in whatever specific reality you visited.

How about “*Did You Ever Wonder?*” Yeah. Create a little element of the unknown, paint the travel client as a daring adventurer, maybe make—”

“Really?” Faye’s voice interrupted his brainstorming. “I’ve never made you jealous?”

Uh-oh. She sounded disappointed. Donald looked at her face. She was still beautiful, her skin untouched by age. Her eyes were bright and moist in the dim bedroom, and even though he couldn’t make out the startling shades of hazel-fading-to-gold in her irises, he sighed with the remembered pleasure of looking into them. Her eyebrows were raised slightly in inquisition.

“No, you’ve never made me jealous,” he said. He kept his voice quiet, even though they had half the entire seventh level to themselves. Donald made a good salary as an advertising rep. Not enough income to afford luxuries like time travel or a star-junker, but they were doing okay. At least they weren’t crammed six-to-a-cubicle down on the first level.

“Not ever?” Faye asked. She hadn’t blinked since beginning her interrogation.

“Why should I be jealous? I’ve always known you loved me.” He shrugged an arm free of the blankets and reached it around her neck.

She didn’t lift her head to allow his hug. Instead, she turned away and stared at the wall. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Donald glanced at the clock again. 11:32. He didn’t want to have baggy eyes tomorrow. And sometimes, as he dreamed, an ad campaign idea or slogan slipped fully formed from his subconscious. He was looking forward to sleep.

“I must not be attractive,” Faye said. “Otherwise, men would look at me and lust after me.”

“Do you *want* other men to lust after you?”

“No. It would just be nice to feel desirable once in a while.”

Desirable? Hadn’t Donald had sex with her once a week, whether he wanted to or not? Why, he’d interrupted some of his best thinking to cuddle with her and whisper little soft words in her ear. He nudged forward to do so now.

Her hair smelled nice. She always took pride in her appearance. So many of his friends’ wives had gone for collagen or plastic surgery or even rent-a-face. But Faye was perfect. Not in a fragile, bone-china way, but durable, as constant as the ocean or a light blue moon or a red Martian canyon.

“Of course other men want you,” he whispered in her ear. “Any man in his right mind would go for you. In fact, after a few moments in your presence, any man would go *out* of his right mind.”

She trembled in small glee. “So you get jealous sometimes?”

“Well, I guess I do once in a while.”

A little white lie. Sure, what was the harm? He was completely honest with her, secure in love and reciprocal fidelity. But once in a while, a little white lie kept the sailing smooth.

For instance, the time he’d wrecked the jetcar. He told her it was because a swarm of pigeons had obscured his windscreen. But actually he’d simply been flying too fast, seeing how close he could come to skimming the edges of the skyscrapers in the business district.

But he had insurance coverage. No harm done, right? He'd ejected and parachuted to safety. The wreckage had scattered on the empty streets below without harming anyone. Besides, who used the streets these days? Nobody but bums and creeps, and if they endured a little danger from falling junk, that was their fault.

And one other white lie, a lie of omission. Two years ago, a woman on the public lifts had tried to wriggle a hand down his pants while requesting a five-dollar bill. He had shoved her away, but not before her perfume had swarmed him and settled into his suit. Donald had told Faye that he'd made a sales call that morning on a client's shop, which happened to be an overly-aromatic beauty aids business.

So white lies were no problem. In his heart, he was still true.

Faye turned back to face him. She was smiling, the pleasant curve of her lips dark against her teeth. "I love you," she said.

"I love you."

"Bunches?"

"I married you, didn't I?" He had also married Advantage Advertising Agency, Inc., but he'd made room in his life for Faye, too.

She squirmed slightly against him and he felt her breath on his neck. He closed his eyes.

"Don't you want to know if you've ever made *me* jealous?" Faye asked.

No, he really didn't want to know. It was 11:40 now. He had to be in the TimeCo offices at 9 a.m. sharp. Preferably with an ad campaign to pitch. But he could tell from Faye's tone that the issue would not be dropped.

Donald sighed, one of those inner sighs that wouldn't give him away. He spent a moment mentally flipping through his TimeCo proposals, then reluctantly tucked them aside. "Okay," he said, trying to yawn a little as he spoke. "Have I ever made you jealous?"

"Not really. I've always known you loved me."

"Good," he said, cuddling her and closing his eyes. "Sweet dreams."

He took a deep breath, hoping his heart would slow, hoping she'd forgotten.

"Well, there was that *one* time...." she said.

Shannon, he thought. He had often tried to forget Shannon over the years, really he had. In fact, he hadn't thought of her in weeks. Not since ... well, not since the last time he had made love to Faye.

"Do you remember Shannon?" Faye asked. Her voice was neutral.

"Shannon?" he mumbled, trying to sound half-asleep. "Who's that?"

"You know. Shannon. The blonde you confessed to kissing that time, right when we'd first started dating."

"Oh, *that* Shannon." He snored unconvincingly.

* * * *

Shannon. That party, the drinks, some poet was celebrating having a book published and all the people there were wild, smoking tobacco and laughing and talking about things that dead people had once written. Not at all like Donald's crowd, who wore raytex suits and carried laptops and kept a close eye on their wristwatches.

Donald had been invited by an illustrator who worked at Advantage. Illustrators were an unreliable lot, not at all the sort that could further Donald's career, but back then he thought it was important to network as much as possible. Faye, whom he'd been dating for a few months and had judged to be quite acceptable, had pressing educational commitments and was unable to go to the party.

So he'd jetted out to the address alone, which was in a little-used area far from the city. He'd almost gotten lost because the street-arrows became sparser and sparser beneath him. He finally found the place, a one-level building next to a small patch of forest. A river wound past the house, quite pretty under the moonlight.

The party was boring. Nothing but jabbering and loud music. So he'd had a drink or two to pass the time. He was divided between getting ready to leave or having another drink when he saw her.

She stood by the back door, which was open to allow the fresh green-smelling air into the room. Her imitation leopard-skin jacket and faux leather pants clung to a model's figure. She smiled at him, gazing at him under her long eyelashes. Her eyes were green jewels.

He approached her without knowing why. She had her own special gravity, like a massive planet that drew its disturbed satellites towards a scorching atmospheric death.

Some man, the poet, probably, gave her a glass of burgundy. The poet waved his book around, trying to get her attention, but her eyes remained fixed on Donald's. She brought the wine to her lips and Donald's blood tingled. His feet carried him inexorably forward. By the time he reached her, the poet had sulked away, his book against his chest like a shield.

"Hi," she said. She stepped through the back door, confident that Donald would follow. He didn't disappoint her.

"Hi," he said. "I couldn't help noticing..."

"I'm sure." The patio was empty except for a couple of metal chairs. The hubbub of the party was muted, miles away. The wet green smell of the tree-lined river filled the air. Donald's head cleared instantly.

"My name's Donald," he said. The patio stones were cold beneath his feet, but the rest of his body was sweating.

"Shannon," she said. She stood near the scented shrubs that bordered the patio, looking at the sky. The stars and the scythe of moon and the distant sparks of jaunters glistened in her eyes.

"Do you ... do you mind if we get to know each other?" Donald felt foolish, out of his element. He'd lunched with a Senator, he'd worked with corporate heads so powerful they could crush his career with an e-mail message, but he'd never been this intimidated. Yet something drove him on, a force beyond his control.

"That's why we're here," Shannon said. Her voice was music, a melody that mixed with the breeze and the crickets and the soft rush of the river.

"I'm no good at small talk."

"It's all small talk." Shannon turned away from the sky. "We never just come out and say what we want."

Donald stepped nearer, into the pocket of heat radiating from her body. Her mouth floated a sweet aroma of burgundy, and her skin gave off an electric animal smell. Her eyes, her lips. Donald's head was thick with blood, it churned through all the places of his body.

Even as he reached for her, he realized how highly irregular his behavior was. Faye's face flashed through his mind, then was driven away by random carnal images.

His fingers touched, he leaned closer, the dark world shimmered and was forgotten. There was only Shannon's lips, parted in some kind of longing or

waiting.

This must be what it's like to be alive, really alive, he thought, as his stomach rode a jetcar loop and his mind spilled crazy slogans. This is what that silly poet wrote about, the wind, the river, heartbeats, her lips, her lips, her lips.

"Say what you want," she whispered.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered back.

* * * *

"I want to kiss you," Donald murmured.

"Stop pretending to be asleep," Faye said.

"I really *am* asleep."

"Your eyelids are twitching."

Donald reluctantly opened his eyes. 12:07. Tomorrow was already here.

"Tell me about kissing her." Faye sat up against the headboard.

"I didn't kiss her."

"Yes, you did. But I'm not upset about it anymore. I've learned to put it in the past."

"Good. It was nothing."

"Yes. I suppose I was jealous for no reason. I was more insecure back then."

"I still regret hurting you." He reached out and patted her hand. "I was a fool to think anything could be better than this."

"And I'm the one you ended up marrying. I'm the one that has you now."

"All's well that ends well." He yawned again. "Now, goodnight, dear. I'd better get to sleep. I have that big meeting tomorrow."

"Fine." She clacked some keys on the bedside keyboard and the curtains closed, blocking the outside streetlights. She wriggled down under the covers and Donald felt the warm fabric of her nightgown against his skin.

"I didn't kiss her," he said.

“You don’t have to lie, honey. I’ve forgiven you.”

“I would never lie to the woman I love.”

“I don’t believe you. Hush, now.”

He told himself over and over and over that he would not dream of Shannon. Finally, he fell asleep.

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Donald was five minutes late arriving at the TimeCo Building. He parked his jetcar on the third level and went through a large plasticrete foyer until he found the lifts. Soon he was on the seventh level, being ushered into the executive suite by a receptionist who didn’t remind him of Shannon.

A rather severe-looking Asian woman sat behind a large oak desk, her fingers propping her chin up. She checked her watch and frowned. A man with uncombed hair and thick glasses was on a couch at one end of the office, a cardboard box in his lap.

“Donald Sutler?” said the woman behind the desk. She leaned back in her chair.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Five minutes late. Here at TimeCo, we take our time very seriously.”

Donald wondered if that was a new slogan. Maybe they were working with a rival ad agency on the side. He tugged at his tie. “Sorry. Traffic was bad.”

She dismissed his excuse with a wave of her hand. “I’m Wanda Lin, CEO of TimeCo. This is Dr. Redmon. He discovered the chrono-refractor oscillation fields. Of course, pure science is worthless without a practical application, so we, um... ‘*persuaded*’ the doctor to come and work for us.”

Redmon’s glasses slid down his nose as he nodded at Donald.

“Well, shall we get right to work?” Donald said.

“Time is money,” said Wanda Lin. Donald forced a laugh as he brought papers out of his portfolio.

He pitched a few of his working slogans and laid out some conceptual sketches. Wanda Lin sat impassively through his presentation. Dr. Redmon seemed

to have fallen asleep on the couch. "I'm confident that these ideas will help take TimeCo to the next level," Donald concluded.

Wanda Lin stood and walked to the window. She watched the jetcars and municipal air wagons flit by for a moment, then turned. "I don't find any of those ideas particularly intriguing," she said. "You were close with 'Did you ever wonder?' but I'm afraid you don't really get what it is we're selling."

Donald said nothing. The client was always right.

"I'm thinking that maybe if you sampled the goods...." she continued.

"A sample?" Of course. Free samples. You had to get inside the product, live it, breathe it, *become* it. An ad man had to know the product better than anyone.

"Precisely. A trip through time. Just for research purposes, of course." She walked over to Dr. Redmon and kicked his shoe. He sat up with a start and blinked.

"Hook Mr. Sutler up," she commanded.

Donald waited to be led to some sterile laboratory, to be placed in some glass-and-titanium chamber and have wires and electrodes connected to his head. But as Wanda Lin waited, her arms folded, Dr. Redmon took the lid off the cardboard box and brought out two gadgets that looked like overgrown wristwatches.

Redmon gave a brief lecture, something about "multiple synchronicities" and "moment-universes" and "non-linear reciprocation," then said, "When do you want to go?"

"When?" Donald wondered if the doctor meant that they should wait until after lunch.

"Yes," the doctor said, excited now that he could spout technical jargon. "What time? Any favorites you'd like to revisit?"

Then it dawned on Donald what the doctor was asking. What point in the past did Donald want to choose for his first trip into the past?

Was there any but one?

"2089," he said. "April 16th. Sometime around 9:11 p.m."

The doctor fidgeted with a dial on one of the devices. "Not much interested in ancient history, eh? Building the Pyramids, signing the Declaration of Independence, assassinating Julius Caesar, lecturing to Albert Einstein about relativity? None of

those have as much fascination as an incident from your own past?”

“I’m just curious,” Donald said.

“Did you ever wonder?” Wanda Lin said, her voice thick with sarcasm.

Redmon showed Donald a small button on the device. “Press here when you’re ready to travel.”

Redmon placed the device in one of Donald’s jacket pockets, then set the controls on the other one. Donald watched carefully as the doctor aligned the numbers.

“This is your return ticket. It will bring you back at the same time that you leave, at least as far as observers in this reality can tell.” He placed the second device in Donald’s pocket as well.

“Wait a second,” Donald said. “What if I change something ... back *there*?”

“You only change the alternate reality that you visit. Don’t worry, that version of you will go on living happily ever after, completely unaware that you have altered its life. So will the other multiple versions, the same as before.”

Donald was getting confused. A hundred million Donalds out there with lives of their own? An infinite number of past and future Donalds?

Maybe he’d better trust the doctor. Surely the devices had been field-tested. All he could ask was something he’d heard in a sci-fi movie once. “What if I change history so that this moment here never happens?”

“Impossible,” the doctor said. “You only change the alternate reality that you visit, not this one. This is the real reality. Good-bye.”

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“I want to kiss you,” Donald whispered.

His mind spun like a broken Ferris wheel. He wasn’t sure if that was the result of his time travel, or the near sweet presence of Shannon’s breath. The stars swirled in the dark sky. He shivered in the aura of her heat as she put her hands on his shoulders.

Her irises were as green as seas, more alive than anything in the world, an aurora borealis around the large dark orbs of her pupils.

He touched her hair. It was as fine as mist, as soft as the thinnest of artificial

fibers, and shimmered under the night's random glow.

He cupped one hand around the back of her neck, the skin achingly hot under his fingers. His mouth drifted toward hers, a magnet to metal, a tide to shore, a long slow sun toward the mountainous pocket of the horizon.

Her lips, her lips, and everything, he thought. For the first time in his life, his brain spilled nonsense. *A jaunt! A heart jaunt! This must be what it's like to be in...*

To be in...

His lips hovered, quivering, anxious, addicted, inches from fulfillment. Her breath, heady and burgundy sweet, floated and filled him, drugged him, consumed him, drowned him.

An inch more, and the jaunt would be complete.

Shannon tilted her head back and held him away.

"Have you ever loved anyone else?" she whispered. The night insects swarmed their noise around the ensuing silence.

"Love?" he said. The broken Ferris wheel froze in mid-spin.

"Yes, my sweet. Love. Heart jaunt. True to the end, and that sort of thing."

Yes. He loved Faye. He loved her now, in this alternate reality, and he loved her back in the real reality, the world that he would have to return to eventually. But a little white lie never killed anyone. He could live with a lie.

Anything for the touch of those lips, that sweet surrender, that embrace and more, all the mysteries to follow. He would worry about the fallout later. Right now, he would say what she expected him to say.

"I've never loved anyone until this very moment." He craned his face toward hers. Still she held him back.

"You don't have to lie," Shannon said in that sweet mouth-music of hers.

"I would never lie to the woman I love." His throat was tight. His chest roared.

"I don't believe you."

"Oh, but it's true," he said, eager for the drowning, the spilling of her secrets,

the opening of this alternate universe and the strange future that awaited the two of them.

What was it that Redmon had said? You can only change the alternate reality, and not the real reality. But who was to say which was the real reality? Right now, nothing was more real than Shannon in his arms.

He didn't have to press the button that would trigger his return trip. Why, he could stay here and live out those longings, find out all the pleasures he had missed those many years ago. All because he had been...

He had been *what*? Too timid to seize the night? Too uptight and sensible to throw all caution to the stellar winds? Too foolish to follow the vagaries of his heart?

No, he thought. Too true. Too devoted to Faye. A heart could only be given away once. You can lie here, to Shannon, but you can't lie to the woman you love.

He hated to break the spell of the moment. But he had to be able to live with himself. Nothing flourished in an atmosphere of guilt.

"Wait here," he said, and he left her cold by the trees.

In the lights of the party that spilled gaily from the house, he brought the gadget from his pocket. It was a simple device, like a child's toy computer. He pressed the arrows to change the time of his return, as simply as changing the wake-up time on an alarm clock.

He went back to Shannon, her hair shining under the stars and stray night lights. "Now, where were we?"

"You were in the middle of lying to me," she said. "And next, you're going to tell me I'm the most beautiful woman in the world, and I make you crazy with desire, and then you're going to kiss me and do all silly, foolish things."

He smiled at her. "I'm already crazy."

She took his hand. "There's a meadow down near the river. Lots of flowers just waiting to be crushed."

Just before they entered the happy night, Donald pressed the button, leaving that version of himself to suffer endless delights.

* * * *

"I didn't kiss her," Donald said to Faye. The time travel left him mildly

disoriented, but other than that, everything was absolutely perfect. The bed was the same, his pajamas fit, and it was just after midnight.

“You don’t have to lie about it, honey. I’ve forgiven you.”

“I would never lie to the woman I love,” he said. This time he meant it. Oh, sure, that Donald in that real reality might have been a liar, but *this* Donald, he was completely honest with his wife. And the rogue Donald who was exploring forbidden pleasures with Shannon, well, that particular Donald had to live with his own black heart. *This* Donald was true. “I didn’t kiss her.”

“I don’t believe you,” Faye said. “Hush, now.”

“Believe me.”

Faye shrugged against him. “Okay, okay. I believe you.”

Donald hugged her. Somewhere, in another moment-universe, a version of himself was standing in the TimeCo offices, describing his experiences to Wanda Lin and Dr. Redmon, thinking up a dozen new slogans, nailing down the account and humming all the way to a performance bonus.

Somewhere, a version of himself was living out his wildest dreams, in love with the woman he had never dared to love, only to kiss once on a balmy spring night.

But here, in the new real world, he could be honest to Faye. And if honesty ever became too great a burden, if ever his thoughts again slipped back to Shannon, he had a jacket hanging in his closet. In the pockets were two very special devices.

At the touch of a button, he could again go be a sinner and come back a saint. But for tonight, honesty was enough. The weight of guilt was lifted from his heart.

“Was she prettier than me?” Faye asked.

“Shh, honey. I’ve got that big meeting tomorrow.”

“Was she prettier than me?”

“Of course not,” he murmured against the pillow.

Well, maybe that was a little white lie. But he could live with a little lie. His heart was still true. He drifted into a contented sleep.

For the first night in thousands, he didn’t dream of Shannon. –FO