

## CLOSE TO HOME/IN A NEARBY UNIVERSE

What if String Theory is proven and an alternate universe is formed after each decision we make? How many minor decisions have to occur for two parallel histories to become widely different from each other?

Close to Home/In a Nearby Universe is a story that examines two such universes.

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‘Damn it, I’m going to be late again,’ April said, stuffing the water bottle into her backpack.

She and several volunteer parents were driving two-dozen kids from her Munger Jr. High science club on a fossil-hunting trip. They were traveling from Detroit to a wonderful gravel pit near Sylvania, Ohio.

Cambrian Period Brachiopods and Trilobites literally dripped from the small shovel she used at the pit on her solo exploration a few weeks ago.

April made a startling discovery at the site. She planned to show it to Joe, her former University of Michigan Geology instructor. She looked down at the finely webbed wings of the fossil carefully nestled in its protective box.

Was she wrong? Had she made a mistake in identification? But, if she were right — A shiver of excitement ran down her spine at the implications.

Joe agreed to meet her and the crew of middle-school scientists at the pit — in two hours. *Lord, why am I always running late?* She wanted to show him she could be on time, for once.

*I'm going to see Joe again,* she thought, mentally conjuring up an image of the tall, whip-lean Assistant Professor.

Not classically handsome, his tamped-down maleness simmered below the surface of his tanned skin. April struggled to take notes in his class, finding her eyes attracted to that wide mouth, while her ears heard little of his well-crafted lectures.

She finally thought to bring a small recording device to class and aced the next exam after listening to Joe's husky voice repeatedly in the safety of her apartment.

'I've got to get out of here,' April muttered, breaking out of her reverie. She put the strange fossil on the table, as she looked for her new hybrid car's door opener "thingie." It was not in its usual place on the entry table.

Finally finding it in the fanny pack she wore, she picked up her equipment and raced out of the condominium to her parking spot. The car still had that fresh-out-of-the-factory smell. As she adjusted the rear-view mirror, she checked her image. Brown eyes, brown hair in a ponytail, nothing special. She meant to add some highlights, but —

*Oh, just get going.*

She pulled into traffic and sped off to meet her students at the nearby middle school.

April went two blocks when she realized her mysterious discovery still sat on her kitchen table. Looking at the time display on the car's complex dashboard, she debated going back to her condo.

Her mother always said it was bad luck to return home without finishing a trip you started. Her mother's superstitions proved true more times than scientific-minded April liked to admit.

Sighing, she hung a wide U-turn and crashed into a badly placed garbage bin at the curb. She wasn't hurt, and the car was barely scratched, but she had to deal with the irate owner of the crumpled container. Of course, he called the police.

When she finally contacted the parents waiting at the school parking lot, it was so late they postponed the trip. The group was not happy, but they understood, saying that life happens, and that they could be there next week.

Her call to Joe did not go as well. Already half-way to Sylvania, he informed her that he couldn't make it next week.

April learned a month later that he accepted a position at UCLA.

She never saw him again.

## IN A NEARBY UNIVERSE

”Shoot, I’m going to be late again,” April Ann said, stuffing some energy bars into her backpack.

She and a few volunteer parents were driving a dozen kids from her Munger Jr. High science club on a fossil-hunting trip traveling from Detroit, to an unusual gravel pit near Sylvania, Ohio.

Last week, on her solo exploration to the site, Cambrian Period Brachiopods and Trilobites detached easily from the shale, as she scraped them up with her small hand trowel.

April Ann made a scary discovery there. She hoped to amaze Joe, her former University of Michigan Geology instructor, with it.

She looked down at the finely webbed wings of the three-inch-long, fossil insect that was carefully nestled in tissues in a large baggie. April Ann hoped Joe wouldn’t laugh at her far-out conclusions.

He agreed to meet her and the crew of middle-school scientists at the pit — in two hours.

*Lord, why am I always running late?*

After causing him to raise an eyebrow every time she rushed into her first-row seat in his lecture hall, she wanted to show him she could be on time, for once.

*I'm going to see Joe again*, she thought, mentally conjuring up an image of the tall, lean Assistant Professor.

She hadn't thought him handsome, at first. His nose was too big, his hair cut in a shaggy mess. But there was a tamped down maleness simmering below the surface of his tanned skin. April Ann found that her eyes were attracted to his wide, perfect mouth, while her ears did not hear much of his well-crafted lectures and she struggled to take notes in his class.

She finally thought of using her cell phone as a recording device, and got an "A," on the next exam, after listening to Joe's husky voice over and over in the safety of her apartment.

'I've got to get out of here, right now!' April Ann announced to the room. She put the strange fossil on the kitchen table as she looked for her car keys, which were not in their usual place, hanging on the wall plaque in the entry.

Finally finding them next to the coffee machine, she picked up all her fossil-hunting equipment and raced to her parking spot.

April Ann was two blocks away from the middle school when she realized that her mysterious discovery still sat on her kitchen table.

Looking at the digital clock on the dashboard of her 15-year-old PT Cruiser, she debated going back home. And then she had a better idea.

*I'll just ask Joe back to my place to see that crazy fossil.* She smiled to herself and continued to the school.

That evening in her living room, Joe was suspicious, then thoughtful, then excited when he examined April Ann's find.

It was an insect with web-lined wings, instead of the expected parallel venation. The branching net of lines shouldn't have existed until the Triassic Period, at least 500 million years *later* than the Cambrian-era gravel pit where April Ann found it imbedded in the Ohio shale.

A hoax? Evidence of time travel? In the next few weeks, Joe submitted the specimen to every test available. However, even today, radioactive dating of the era was unreliable. One thing proven — the matrix of shale surrounding the fossil was the same as the rest of the gravel pit.

The controversy that erupted in geologic academia didn't stop April Ann and Joe from falling deeply in love and marrying six months later.

April Ann was on time for the wedding.