

We Have a Dream
by Lesley L. Smith

We sat in an empty physics lab, waiting.

"I'm sick of this, Jamal. Aren't you?" my buddy Deron asked me, staring at the empty lab doorway.

"Yeah. If that tutor kid doesn't get here soon, I say we bolt," I said. It was a shame, too. I really liked physics, but without the tutor, I didn't know if I'd be able to pass.

Deron got up and started wandering around the lab. He touched some electrical equipment. "Do you think any of this stuff is valuable?"

"Shit, Deron, don't be such a stereotype." I attempted to distract him. "You got a date later?"

"Oh, yeah," he said with a big smile. "I'm meeting up with that fine Kanasha. Remember her? From two weeks ago?"

"New Year's Eve?" I said. "How could I forget? Yeah." I nodded. "She is fine."

"You know it." He waved his hands in an hourglass shape in front of him.

I looked at my watch and scowled. "I don't think the tutor is going to show this time. Our money's not good enough for him any more?" It was pissing me off. Here I was trying to better myself by going to college and The Man was screwing me over as usual.

"Not cool," Deron said, shaking his head.

"No," I agreed. "This shit wouldn't fly with Sarge." No matter what I did, it seemed like it was impossible to get ahead.

"You got that right!" Deron wandered over to a closet door. "Hey, check out this lock. Fancy. What do you think they got in here?"

I went over and glanced at the lock. It was top-of-the-line. I wondered what they had in there, too, but said, "Leave it be, Deron." The last thing we needed was trouble; we were already the oldest students in the class. That's what happened when you served your country first to earn money for school.

"I 'member *somebody* bragging on patrol about how he could open anything." Deron gestured with his shoulder at the keypad. "Give it a try. I dare ya."

I knew it was a stupid idea, but I was feeling frustrated. "A little look-see wouldn't hurt, right?" I cracked my knuckles, and knelt down to inspect the lock. It had a four-digit keypad entry--and easy access to its wiring. I'd seen this type before. "Huh. Not so fancy after all," I said. I took out my multi-use tool and pried the bottom section off. After that, it was a done deal as I cross-connected wires and the access light changed from red to green.

When we opened the door though, we didn't find a closet. It was another laboratory, about twenty feet by twenty feet. It had an odd tang inside, like ozone. I sneezed.

"Hey, what's that thing?" Deron pointed at a metal chair surrounded by two large metal spheres, one inside the other, made of metal bars.

"Hell if I know," I said.

We stepped further into the room to take a closer look.

There was a kind of control panel bolted to the front of the chair. One of the knobs was labeled with 'Destination Date'. What the hell? Could it be a time machine? That was crazy. And if it was, when would I go?

"Looks fake, don't it?" Deron said.

It did. "Yeah, it looks like a movie prop."

"Yeah." Deron held up his finger. "What was that one, with the dude? You know, there was that time machine."

I looked at him. "You mean, Time Machine?" Duh. I climbed through the bars and sat in the three-foot wide chair.

"So now it's okay to mess with?" Deron said. "Make up your mind, man."

"Messing ain't stealing." I waved my hand. "Anyway, it's gotta be fake. C'mon. Sit down."

He climbed through and sat next to me.

I was studying the control panel and pressed the button to 'Induce EM Field'. The metal spheres started spinning around us.

Looking around, Deron said, "Maybe you should shut it down even if it is fake. I don't want to get smacked by those circles."

I was thinking the same thing when Professor Baker's Assistant, Tad, finally showed up. He stormed into the room. "You're not allowed in here! Get away from that, you apes!"

"What did he call us?" Deron said calmly, looking at me and pushing up his shirt-sleeves. I'd seen that look in his eyes before, and it didn't bode well.

"Why, I believe he said 'ape'." Definitely August 27, 1963. I set the date on the machine.

Deron looked at the date and smiled broadly. "You go, bro. We'll save him. We'll save his ass."

"Stop it! You don't know what you're doing!" Tad said.

"I believe I do," I said. My momma didn't say I was good with machines for nothing.

Red-faced Tad stood next to the machine waving his hands around. "No! Don't press that button! Whatever you do, don't press that button!"

"Do you mean this large green button labeled 'Go'?" I smiled at him and pressed it.

The spheres spun faster and faster until we couldn't see past them. It got dark and there was a jarring feeling as we launched into something. It was a smooth ride for several minutes, then there was another jar, and it got lighter. The spheres slowed down and we could see through them. Slowly they came to a stop. We sat in the machine in a small field at sunset. Familiar buildings were scattered around us.

"I think we're still on the Georgetown campus," I said.

Deron started climbing out of the machine. "I think you're right. And the sun's just going down now, so we should have plenty of time to get to his hotel."

Two hours of hitchhiking later, Deron and I sat outside the Reverend King's hotel in the bushes, waiting for a scrawny racist assassin. At the appointed time, 10:05 p.m., he showed up, hands in pockets, head down.

Deron and I stood up.

"John Smith?" Deron asked calmly.

"Uh, yeah? Who are you?" John Smith answered. He was a skinny, freckly almost-kid. He looked scared shitless.

I started frisking him.

"Hey, you can't do that!" Smith said.

I picked the gun with the silencer out of his pocket.

"How did you know I'd be here?" Smith asked.

"We knew," Deron said.

"Are you FBI?" Smith asked. Was that a glimmer of hope in his eye?

Why would he say that?

"Yes." Deron grabbed the gun and pointed it at Smith.

"Deron! What're you doing?" I asked. "We just have to stop him."

"He's a terrorist, sure as shit," Deron said.

"Please don't kill me," Smith said, blubbering. He was barely twenty. "I was just trying to complete the mission."

What mission?

"Yeah, right." Deron shot him point blank.

"Shit, Deron! Why'd you do that?" I said.

"He assassinated the greatest man that ever lived," Deron said.

"But what the hell was he talking about? A mission? What mission?" I said.

"Shit, Jamal. He was just making that up."

I wasn't so sure.

The next day, we joined in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. From what I could remember from history class, it

was supposed to be a big demonstration, but they cancelled it because of Reverend King's assassination.

Deron was giddy with excitement. He kept saying, "We made this happen, bro!"

When we got to the Lincoln Memorial, we were surrounded by a sea of black folks; I'd never seen so many in one place before. It was thrilling, but I still felt uneasy about offing that kid last night. Sure, I'd killed plenty of enemy combatants, but that was war. I had no idea what the hell last night was.

When Reverend King stepped up to the microphone and started talking, my worries were blown away.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation," he said in a deep powerful voice.

I was entranced as he talked about the Emancipation Proclamation, manacles of segregation, chains of discrimination, a lonely island of poverty. "That's right," I said, nodding.

I yelled Amen with everyone else when he said, "Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

When he said, "I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations." it seemed like he was talking personally to me and Deron.

When he announced, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" my eyes filled despite my best efforts.

When he exclaimed, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," tears wet my cheeks.

When he proclaimed, "Let freedom ring. And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring - when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics - will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'" I was jumping and yelling in unison with hundreds of thousands of my brothers and sisters.

Hours later, drained and dazed, Deron and I found our way back to the machine.

"That was so fucking worth it," Deron. "Whatever happens next, that speech was worth it."

"Yeah," I said. "I'll remember Reverend King's words for the rest of my life."

I set the Destination Date to January 21, 2008 and away we went.

When we got back, however, the machine disappeared as soon as it landed in the lab, and Deron and I fell on the floor.

Tad was right there to greet us. But instead of laughing at us apes on the floor, he looked concerned. "Professor Wilson? Who's that guy? What are you doing here? What just happened? Are you all right?" He reached out his hands to help us up.

Deron scowled at him. "Professor? What happened to ape, kid?"

"I'm sorry sir, I don't know what you're talking about," Tad said. "What just happened?" He turned to me. "Professor Wilson, did you just appear out of thin air?"

I felt odd. I could recall Tad tutoring me in physics and me helping him with his dissertation research. I remembered both serving my country and earning my Ph.D. I looked at Deron. "I think things are different now. We did something."

Deron stared off into the distance, caught up in his own split memories.

"Uh, Professor, what's going on?" Tad asked. "You don't usually come in on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day."

"Say what?" I sprinted to the computer and did a search on Reverend King. "There's a national holiday called Martin Luther King Junior Day! And it's today. And look at this, Deron. We saved him from John Smith, but someone else got him in 1968."

"That ain't right!" Deron said. "We'll have to go back again and save him again."

I glanced around the empty room. "Go back in what?" I pointed. "The machine's gone."

"Please tell me what's going on," Tad said.

"We have a dream, kid," Deron said.

I smiled. "And it involves a time machine."