

Christmas Story 2020 Time Travel Tours

**December 24, 2055
Underground Bunker
Boston, Massachusetts**

Isaac Czerniak, PhD Quantum Physics, greeted his next clients at the elevator. "That's a heck of a long elevator ride," said Mr. Jenkins, who, with his young female companion, stepped from the lift.

"Our deep bunker," said Isaac, "helps with security and shields our equipment from unwanted electromagnetism. Come this way and we'll start preparations." They proceeded down a bland corridor.

Karl Jenkins and Susan Court were headed to see The Who on May 31, 1976, where the band would play The Valley in London. Isaac was unsure of the appeal of this band's 120 decibels coupled with really awful weather, but people's tastes were often inexplicable.

As they walked toward the preparation chamber, Isaac reviewed the procedures.

"Much of what I'm going to say is review, but for safety, I am obliged to cover the written material again. In a few minutes, Dr. Jefferson will do a quick physical to make sure you aren't taking any pathogens with you to 1976. An outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 or the Ebola virus in 1976 would be ... problematic.

"We also will provide you with period specific clothing. We make sure we don't use fabrics that have not been invented by that date. It's important you blend in, don't talk to anyone – although with this concert that would be challenging due to how loud it was – and don't try to pick up any souvenirs. Your custom contact lenses will enhance your vision and record the experience for later review. They will provide as close to a VIP or box seat experience as possible. Incognito time travellers can't risk trying to sneak into those sections.

"The travel belt that will be around your waist will activate at the end of the concert. There's an emergency return button, which I will show you how to use once you are suited up. Any questions?"

"Yes," said Susan, "The information packet said that on arrival there would be brief disorientation. What's that really like?"

"The landing is like being very drunk for about a minute. It's best to crouch down upon arrival until your head clears."

"I know that we're going to 1976, but I was really hoping for a 1965 Scandinavian tour date. Why does that not work?" asked Susan.

"She has a very strong interest in Daltrey as a young man," interrupted Karl.

Susan slapped him playfully on the shoulder. "Don't ruin my Christmas present." Isaac wondered if Susan knew how expensive this gift was.

"I won't bore you to death with the mathematics," said Isaac, "but the concert venues need to include a large enough audience in which to hide, and enough chaos so that crashing the concert with fake tickets will have a high probability of success. Without these conditions, the equipment simply won't work."

Isaac was lying. The math excuse was a euphemism for the risk to corrupting the timeline. His equipment could drop anyone anywhere up to about 100 years in the past, but messing up the timeline had literally unimaginable and incalculable consequences. Therefore, he had built in risk tolerances.

They entered the lab area and Cleo Jefferson greeted them. Despite the progress of the last decades, white people were often startled by Dr. Jefferson. She was six-foot-one, presented as equatorial African, had a Virginian accent, and was a genius. Everyone sensed it before she even spoke.

Isaac had a crush on her the moment he met her, but he was 65; she was 32. Plus, he needed her talent more than anything else. Her equal expertise in medicine and physics were a rare combination.

Cleo led the couple to the examining room.

Isaac moved into the launch room and checked the board. There were 12 couples and some singles in the timeline now, enjoying various concerts. He moved two more tubes – they looked like upright *2001 A Space Odyssey* hibernation pods – into position and started a pre-travel checklist.

Karl and Susan returned with Cleo. She gave Isaac a smile and thumbs-up. One thing his clients wouldn't always notice was that Cleo's medical check also included checking for traces of contraband drugs or other items that would mess up the timeline.

Under their mid-1970s hippy themed clothes were their travel belts. They were flexible straps with a large buckle that held the key travel equipment. These buckles sent signals to the equipment in 2055 each and held an emergency return button. There was a metal protective cover, which had to be slid out of the way for the return button to be accessed.

Karl and Susan soon realized that the buckle had attached itself to each wearer's bare skin. If they tried to remove the belt by force, it would be very painful.

Beside each travel pod was a smaller version. It only looked large enough for a baby. As they stepped nervously into their pods, Susan asked, "What's the small one for?"

"It's there to maintain the law of conservation of mass and energy. All the atoms currently in your body are all somewhere in the past. You can't have two of your carbon atoms in the same place at the same time. Therefore, we suck all your 1976 molecules into this container while you are moving into the past."

"I can only assume," asked Susan, "that if we went to somewhere where we were already alive, that would be bad?"

"Yes and no. Every ten years or so your body regenerates everything. It's not as if we were going to 2020 and Karl's baby leg would end up in this chamber. If it was too close in time, the person in the past might feel ill from the sudden departure of atoms from his or her body."

Cleo helped by hooking large power cables into the two pods, with an umbilical cable to the smaller pods.

Susan had a quizzical look on her face. "How do you find the 1976 particles?" she asked.

"Excellent question," said Isaac. "Quantum entanglement works across time. Particles have spin, polarization, etc. They also have a marker in time."

"How did you think of this?" she asked.

"I had a lot of time on my hands during the 2020 global pandemic," replied Isaac.

"How long does the trip take?" asked Karl, who was showing signs of fraying nerves.

"Not long," replied Isaac. Unceremoniously, and to avoid having to give a refund if Karl chickened out, Isaac hit the switch to seal the pods. Two seconds later he hit the Go button and they were gone.

Isaac inspected the smaller pods and saw an appropriate amount of gas and liquid swirling around. He checked the board and saw that their signals had appeared with the correct space-time frequencies.

"Well, Cleo," said Isaac, "that trip brings us to slightly over break-even. Can you believe it?"

"That's wonderful," she said. "Are there many more concerts that people want to see that are safe enough?"

"A few," Isaac said.

"Do you plan to shut down the system and retire?"

"Huh. Do you think I'm that old? I was hoping to do historical research."

"Well," Cleo said with a smile and a wink, "you are 65 even if you do have a hot bod."

"Dr. Jefferson; do we know each other that well?" asked Isaac, in a silly tone with a facial expression of feigned shock.

"Maybe in another life."

Isaac had no time to ponder the remark. An alarm from the monitoring board sounded. He had not heard that noise since prelaunch system testing years ago. It meant that the signal to a traveller had dropped.

Isaac rushed to the board. Karl and Susan's signals were gone.

"What could cause this?" asked Cleo.

"Equipment failure at their end or ... death."

Isaac stared at the board in the hope of change.

"OK. Cleo, could you set up a pod for me?"

As Cleo moved another pod into place, Isaac unlocked a locker and pulled out a belt with a larger buckle – one suitable for multiple trips. He took his clothes off, strapped the belt on, and changed into another set of garments that had been hanging in the locker. The clothes were nondescript: a T-shirt, jeans, and a pullover.

He also pulled what looked like a firearm from the locker and strapped it under the t-shirt.

Cleo watched closely. "Have you been holding out on me?"

"Uh, yes, but this is my emergency kit," said Isaac. "For an emergency I wasn't thinking would ever occur."

"Really though," she said, "Is that a *gun*?"

"It's a non lethal conducted energy weapon."

"Wow, an NLQ" she said. It was a strange non-acronym. NL for non lethal and Q for the CEW. Apparently NLCEW was too much of a mouthful. He also pulled out and switched on a device that looked like a cell phone, but had some exotic components. He then put in image enhancing contact lenses.

Isaac was about to step into his pod, when another alarm sounded. "Fuck." He ran to the board and saw that the two grandkids of Elon Musk had disappeared from the original Woodstock.

"Cleo, could you please start the emergency recall for everyone else? Start with the ones who, from their point of view, have been gone the longest. If more of them disappear, shunt coordinates of when and where to my phone and I'll intercept them."

Isaac stepped into the pod, Cleo operated the controls and pushed the Go button. He was gone.

A third alarm went. As Cleo expected, it was for Altamont Speedway Free Festival in 1969. The last alarm she was expecting was for Elvis in 1976. Once that one sounded, she plugged the coordinates into the communications board to send to Isaac.

Cleo had no intention of recalling the others. She knew there was nothing wrong. The auto return circuits would work fine.

She walked into a different, hidden room. In it were two additional pods with their accompanying smaller pods. She checked one of them and it still had the right amount of matter. Her lover was still travelling.

She opened a locked box and pulled out a backpack and placed in it a modern high-end tablet as well as vintage solid state external USB drives. She included a photo of her mother, a medical kit and a few items of jewellery. She changed into 1969 appropriate clothes. With the backpack, she stepped into her own pod and used a remote control to enter her coordinates and clicked Go. Cleo was gone.

May 31, 1976

The Valley, Charlton Athletic Football Ground London, England

Isaac appeared outside the venue. He crouched and let the travel effects wear off.

"Hey man, are you OK?" asked a passer-by.

"Yeah, I'm good, thanks!"

The rain was letting up. Isaac looked around. If he had entered the settings correctly, he should have arrived a few minutes before Karl and Susan. Since he did not know when exactly things went wrong, he was not willing to take chances, despite his strong desire to determine the cause of their lost connection.

It was almost a pity that they would have to miss hearing The Who at an ear-splitting 120 decibels. In one of the test runs of the system, Isaac had seen The Beatles. *Seeing* was the extent of it; the screaming fans had drowned out the music.

Not far away, he saw them appear. Karl's stomach was evidently not handling the trip very well. Susan seemed fine. He approached them and they were perplexed to see him. Before he could explain, a shot from a gun with a silencer ripped a hole in the grass right next to Isaac's foot. He dove to push the couple over in the hopes to make them less of a target. The next shot tore through Susan's shoulder. As Isaac hit the ground himself, he drew his NLQ. He could see a man, wearing a hooded Baja jacket. He approached holding with what reminded Isaac of James Bond's Walther PPK with a silencer. He fired two bursts from the NLQ. The assailant ran off.

Isaac lifted up Susan's bloody shirt and hit the emergency return button. She immediately vanished.

"Karl! Hit your button now!"

Karl fumbled under his shirt and in a couple of seconds was gone.

Isaac looked for the shooter, but saw nothing. The implications were disturbing. People were coming over to look into the disturbance. Isaac turned his back and looked at his phone. He entered the most recent coordinates that Cleo had sent.

"Did you see that?" said a concert goer.

"What?"

"That guy – he just disappeared."

"What are you on, man?"

December 31, 1975

Pontiac Silverdome Pontiac, Michigan

Isaac was in the midst of a 60,000-person crowd somewhere in the middle of Elvis's show. He could hear *Trying To Get To You* coming from the stage.

"Hey mister, are you OK?"

"I'm good thanks. Just a little dizzy."

Isaac wrestled with the concept of someone else knowing Karl and Susan were attempting to see The Who. It was not going to be a good conversation when he returned. He had brought the NLQ in case his clients were in a fight with a local. Was this problem far worse?

There were three distinct possibilities: one being that Karl and Susan had looked like someone else, and the assassin was targeting the wrong people; or the assassin had been hired by someone from the future; or the assassin was from the future.

His next job was to find his two clients – a rich grand nephew and niece of Jeff Bezos – from somewhere in this sea of excited people, mostly women, in sequined pantsuits. Elvis started into *Don't be Cruel* and the crowd stopped moving a little.

He worked through the crowd looking for his two clients. It took ten minutes, but he saw them and headed their way. He was also looking for more people carrying Walter PPKs. But, at the moment the niece and nephew recognized him, one pointed in a way that alerted Isaac to danger from behind. He spun around to find a large cowboy with a Bowie knife. Isaac quickly disarmed him with a cross arm knife block and then knocked him to the ground.

"Why are you trying to hurt these kids?"

"Kids?" the cowboy said, "I was paid to put *you* down."

Elvis finished *Heartbreak Hotel* with

*They'll be so lonely
They'll be so lonely, they could die*

Isaac turned to his clients and said, "Hit the emergency returns NOW!"

They were gone and soon Isaac was gone, taking a profound feeling of confusion with him.

**August 16, 1969
Woodstock Rock Festival
Bethel, New York**

Isaac was crouched in mud. He could hear the Grateful Dead in the mid distance. *Woodstock*, he thought. He let the nausea from the trip clear. While still crouched, he checked his phone. It looked like there was only one more time jump after this one.

The challenge of course was to reconcile the idea that the clients whose signals vanished off the board were meant to attract him to these settings. To be assassinated? Why? And, by whom?

Woodstock was such a large chaotic festival that he'd felt OK letting a couple of clients visit. In this instance, he was looking for a couple in their 30s. They were some of Elon Musk's progeny with a deep interest in popular music. Sonny and June.

Despite his special contact lenses, Isaac knew finding them would not be fast. It was after 10:30 p.m. and the lighting at Woodstock was notoriously bad. The Dead started up *Turn On Your Lovelight*.

*Without a warning you broke my heart, takin' it baby, tore it apart
And you left me standin' in the dark, said your love for me was dyin'*

Not many people knew that The Dead were going to drag this out for 38 minutes. Isaac hoped in that time he'd find his clients. About 20 minutes later, he spotted them sitting on a blanket watching the stage. They had a good view enhanced by their special contact lenses.

During his search, he'd been very careful to look for possible assassins and was startled, shortly after calling the couple's name, to find Sonny pulling a familiar-looking Walther PPK with its silencer. Isaac grabbed Sonny's wrist, pushed the gun away and punched him in the face. Isaac then fired the NLQ, rendering Sonny unconscious with a blue flash. People nearby thought it was a very bright camera flashbulb. Isaac turned to June and said, "What the fuck is going on?"

"Don't kill me. Don't kill me."

"You're my client, why would I?"

"The other guy. He had a belt like ours said you'd come to kill us."

"Name?"

"He didn't say."

"What'd he look like?"

"Kind of like you but a lot younger."

They were interrupted by a festival-goer who asked them to shut up please.

"Time to go home," said Isaac. He activated the belt on the unconscious Sonny and told June to press her return button.

They were gone. Isaac hid the Walther under his shirt.

He sat on the muddy blanket, listening to The Dead draw out their song. He checked his phone and there was one trip left before he could return home. Cleo had not added any others. He chose to assume that all but two clients were now safely home in 2055.

He then pushed the button for the final trip.

**December 6, 1969
Altamont Speedway Free Festival
Tracy, California**

This jump was harder on Isaac than the others; each trip had been wearing him down. As he crouched, surrounded by a sea of people, he heard The Rolling Stones start playing *Jumpin' Jack Flash*. He realized he was at Altamont. If his memory was correct, they were not many minutes away from the killing of Meredith Hunter. He also knew where his clients would want to be. One of the two women was a fabulously wealthy great grandchild of Mick Jagger himself. They had begged him to allow this concert to be opened up on the time travel tour.

He carefully drew the NLQ and moved closer toward the stage. History was not clear on exactly who thought the Hells Angels would be good to guard anything, let alone the stage. But whoever that was, he was clearly an idiot.

By the time The Stones' cover of Chuck Berry's *Carol* began, Isaac was near enough to the stage to start looking for his clients.

Anyone paying attention to him were truly wondering why a grandpa was at this concert. It was the time in history where living past 40 seemed unimaginable. But his age helped him move toward the stage more easily.

He spotted his clients; the enhanced contact lenses helped. He began moving through the crowd to reach them.

The Stones started *Sympathy for the Devil*.

A couple of Hells Angels blocked his way.

After a moment, they parted and he saw him. Or perhaps himself.

"Hello, Isaac," said his younger self. He might have been 35. *How?*

Before he could speak or react further, younger Isaac lifted up his older self's pullover and exposed the Walther. "See," said the younger Isaac to the Hells Angels, "he's got a gun."

The Hells Angels lunged toward the older Isaac, but he fought back, punching the closest one in the gut. The crowd started to notice the fight and react. The audience lurched about, provoking smaller fights. Everyone started heaving themselves closer to the stage.

The second Hells Angel stabbed older Isaac in the chest twice with a Gerber Mark II knife – one that had seen action in Vietnam. He and younger Isaac moved to block the view. "Watch out. I have to get this old guy out of here," said the Hells Angel.

By this point Mick Jagger had stopped *Sympathy for the Devil* and implored the audience to cool it.

While crouched over the now deceased older Isaac, his younger self removed all the technology and shoved it in a rucksack. He handed the Hells Angel a wad of cash and then moved back into the crowd, away from the stage. He was joined by a tall Black woman, who put her arm around his shoulder.

The Hells Angel took the dead body away, pretending to be helping an old man who'd fainted.

The crowd settled, for the moment, and Mick Jagger said, "We're always having something very funny happen when we start that number."

December 24, 2020
Isaac Czerniak's Apartment
W 95th Street
New York, New York

Isaac had finished his last test run of calculations and had the feeling of success. The isolation caused by the pandemic had focused his mind. After nine months of effort, a limited form of time travel was in his grasp. The mechanics of the idea were daunting. It would take years to make it practical, but he had many money-making ideas in mind.

Suddenly he felt ill – as if his legs wanted to give way. He leaned on his desk.

A man emerged from the kitchen; he was a spitting image of himself.

"Hello Isaac. Best to sit down. You are suffering from having some of your body matter be time-displaced."

"Who are you?"

"I'm you, plus five years."

"But ... there's no way I could create anything that fast."

"You didn't."

Dr. Cleotha Jefferson came out of the kitchen.

"Who the hell are you?" The 30-year-old Isaac was starting to cough.

"I'm Cleo. From 2055."

"You see," said the older Isaac, Cleo saw you use your invention to send rich people to rock concerts in the past. She even helped! However, she recruited me." He reached out to hold her hand. "Made me offers too good to resist. And made me realize we had different obligations – that catering to the ultra rich was pointless ... and worse."

The 30-year-old Isaac was physically struggling. Were he taken to hospital right away, he might have survived. However, Cleo handed her lover a needleless hypodermic from 2055. He quickly injected the younger Isaac and he quietly and painlessly died. They carried his lifeless body to the bathtub. A second injection started a desiccation process. In an hour the body was mostly dust. A further hour of work left no trace of the body.

In the living room, Isaac poured two glasses of wine and gave one to Cleo.

"Well, it's Christmas Eve. I'm a Jew, you're a time displaced Black New Baptist, medical doctor-physicist from 2055 and we're trapped in New York in 2020 during a pandemic. May I propose a toast to the recently departed who made all this possible?" They clinked their glasses. Cleo looked out the window. The first snowflakes of Christmas fluttered down.

"Where to start?" asked Isaac. "Helping Black Lives Matter? Fixing voting districts? Climate Change? (I'm sure you want to have better outcomes than what you saw in 2055.) Stock market speculation to fund it all? Health care? Set up your fake ID?"

"I love it when you talk dirty," she said.

And they kissed. They had the rest of the pandemic to figure it out.

By Robert Ford
December 1, 2020