

## **Christmas Story 2022**

### **Four Heads are Better than One**

by Robert Ford

**March 21, 2042**  
**Metro Toronto Convention Centre**

"It turns out that time travel is more of a math problem than an engineering challenge."

Johnson Telgrave, PhD, MS, BEng  
Speaking at the 2042 IEEE International Physics Symposium

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**December 24, 1978**  
**(past his bedtime)**

John was a little kid when he first saw the 1951 film version of *A Christmas Carol*.

*Wouldn't it be cool, he thought, if you could travel backwards and forwards in time? What stops us from doing that? How could that work? What would it feel like?*

As all these thoughts flowed through his mind, his mother looked at him, worried. She assumed he was affected by the notion that Tiny Tim might not live.

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**September 2021**  
**Brampton, Ontario, Canada**

"Vilcabamba," that's where we'll go, said Cindy.

COVID-19 restrictions in Canada were at their height and some felt that it was the start of the end. Specifically, personal freedoms were going to be squeezed gradually to nothing. Vaccines were going to be used to track them even more closely than with what they already volunteered through cell phone data.

"Where is VilaLabamba?" asked Eric, her husband.

"Vilcabamba. Ecuador," said Cindy. "I've connected on Facebook with a group of people who have already moved there and another group who want to move there."

"Where in South America is Ecuador?" he asked.

"It's the west coast below Columbia and above Peru."

"Can we work there? I assume there's beer."

"Yes," Cindy sighed. "And yes."

*What the hell, Eric thought, Why not?*

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**December 24, 2029**

**Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**

John had a tradition of hanging out with friends on Christmas Eve and came home feeling relaxed and somewhat tipsy.

He was surprised to find, sitting in his apartment, someone who looked like his older brother along with his former girlfriend, Janine, a psychologist. Since John didn't have an older brother, this was a peculiar scene. *Jeez; how much rum was in that egg nog?*

"Hey John," said Janine. "This is John from the 2040s. We have some really important things to tell you."

"OK." John 2029 was beginning the thought process of connecting this to the time travel math he was working on when Janine interrupted.

"But, I have to hypnotize you first."

"Oh."

**December 24, 2010**

**Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**

After losing both his parents in the previous year, John was coming home slightly drunk from a gathering with friends – something he hoped would be a tradition, but maybe not quite as boozy.

Once he fumbled with the lock enough to enter his apartment, he found a fellow that reminded him of his Great Uncle Charles (deceased). And, somehow more surprisingly, Janine, an ex-girlfriend from University.

"Janine? What's this? Who's this guy?"

"Hi," said Janine, "Yeah. This guy is John from the 2040s."

"Like, *the future?*"

"Yeah. We have to tell you stuff."

"Um," John 2010 hiccupped. "Sure."

"We have to hypnotize you first."

"Whoa. Cool."

**December 24, 1992**

**Near Brockville, Ontario, Canada**

John and Janine were on the Via Rail morning train from Montreal to Toronto. They were returning home after visiting fellow grad students at McGill. They were due at their respective parents' homes for Christmas.

The Eastern Ontario countryside blurred by, looking rather white. Brockville station, where the train had a scheduled stop, was looking grey and bleak. The couple did not care.

They held hands and were happy and content. Until the moment an older guy whacked John in the shoulder with his bag. It stung John's shoulder – truly like a bee sting.

"So sorry; I'm such a klutz!" said the retiree.

"No problem," said John. He was massaging his shoulder and didn't look closely at the man. He noticed only a salt-and-pepper beard. The senior took a seat a couple of rows up. Soon John felt very drowsy and fell asleep.

Janine was frowning with a combination of confusion and annoyance when the retiree tapped her on her shoulder.

"Hi Janine. Sorry to intrude. My name is Johnson Telgrave from the 2040s. If memory serves, you've completed your hypnotherapy training, right?"

Janine looked at John, still asleep, and then back at future John. And then back to John 1992 and then back at future John. This repeated several times.

"What the fuck," she said.

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## **January 6, 2022** **(also known as Epiphany)**

### **Vilcabamba, Ecuador**

Cindy and Eric were both feeling relief and joy when their container of goods was finally unloaded at their shared house rental. Neighbours helped unload and, with the persistent spring-like weather of the region, they felt comfortable, with a sense of "at home." This feeling persisted despite a limited grasp of Spanish and not being truly sure how they were going to make it from their late 50s into retirement and, eventually, their dotage.

During the unpacking, an American named Lonny arrived. He said he lived a couple of streets down. He shook their hands rigorously and spoke of the wonders of living in Vilcabamba. From him Eric picked up the vibe of a real estate guy, and Cindy interpreted the vibe as a signal Lonny was interested in seeing if she were sexually available despite her married status.

Either way, they both went to bed with a slight fever, but felt reasonably normal the next day.

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## **May 18, 2022** **Vilcabamba, Sendero Ecológico (eco walk)**

After months of settling in, sorting out employment, and fixing up their part of the house, Cindy and Eric were feeling energized for a local hike.

They made all the usual mistakes people new to this sort of thing make. They didn't leave specific travel plans with anyone. They didn't pack enough spare clothes. They started late in the day. But they did have water.

The first problem they encountered was that the trails were not well marked for those new to the area. The second problem was that they underestimated how long the trail would take to cover and, subsequently, darkness started to fall – when they were off trail. During their stumbling efforts through the brush, they crossed paths with some Lesser Bulldog Bats. These normally insectivorous bats broke habit and took bites of the people who blundered in the middle of their flight path from vegetation to water.

Cindy and Eric spent a miserable night off the trail. When the sun came up, it was easy to navigate back. They were weary, bitten, and annoyed with each other.

Cindy's hand-written journal included this entry.

*Worst night of my life. I swear we are the dumbest two gringos in the whole town. Who knows what else apart from the damn bats that bit us. This is not a story I'm willing to share with the neighbours. I guess, technically, we should go to the doctor. We'll wait a day and see if we're feeling OK. So embarrassing.*

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**November 10, 2022**  
**Near Vishut, Ecuador**

There was a fiery crash on the Troncal de la Sierra (E35) highway. Alzono "Lonny" Estevez, an American citizen was identified through DNA and dental records as the only victim. The cause of the crash was never determined.

In Loja, Ecuador, two other American citizens perished in a house fire. The cause of the fire was never determined.

At the border with Peru, near the town of La Balza, two German nationals were shot to death while crossing from Ecuador to Peru. They were accused of being drug runners. The EU and the German national government had no comment.

That same week in Vilcabamba itself, there were three deaths in bathtubs that were deemed accidental. In addition, two other local expats – originally from the UK – went missing on a hike, never to be found.

A Swedish couple perished in a light aircraft accident on November 15.

It had not been a good week for foreigners in Ecuador.

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**June 21, 2042**  
**Vilcabamba, Ecuador**  
**Truchas Del Salado**

Johnson "John" Telgrave sat at the outside bar with his wife, Janine. He was 72; she was 70 and they would have appeared to their grandparents like classic aging hippies. They had many reasons to choose this place for the meeting. It was not in the centre of Vilcabamba, where they might be noticed. It had good food. And the restaurant's name translated to "Salted Trout," which was memorable and funny to John.

With their location being only 4 degrees south of the equator, the solstice had little effect and therefore meaning. They had both grown up in the northern hemisphere and there was so much emphasis placed on the solstice. *Geography matters*, John thought.

"Do you think they'll make it?" asked Janine.

"At least two of them better have. Or this is going to be a lot harder to pull off."

The first to arrive was John 2012. "You," he said. It sounded like an accusation. John 2012 looked nauseous, as one should after a time jump and a bumpy taxi ride.

"Us, I suppose," said John 2042.

"Janine?" John 2012 walked past his older version and hugged her.

"Yes, it's me."

"This is messed up. My head feels messed up."

"It will be OK; we have to wait for the others."

John 2031 was next. His tech was better than John 2012's; he'd landed closer to the destination and was in better shape, at least physically.

"I wasn't expecting two of you. Or, us," he said.

"Good to meet you," said John 2042. He shook his younger self's hand.

"You're from ... 2031?" asked John 2042

"Yes,"

"This one," the eldest John said, "is John ... what, 2012?" John 2012 nodded. He was still being aloof and suspicious.

"Is that you, Janine?" said John 2031.

She nodded.

"Pardon me for saying, but you look exactly what I thought you'd look like at, what, 70?"

"You're too kind," she said.

"Um," said John 2012, "just how many of us have you conjured up?"

"There's only one possible version remaining."

"Possible? From what year?" asked John 2012.

"Roughly, about 1995."

"Are you kidding? He's building this?" asked John 2012. He patted technology concealed under a light jacket, "with mid-90s parts? Good lord."

As if on cue, a young man carrying an obviously heavy pack, walked toward them. As he huffed and puffed, he said, "Oh wow. Doppelganger central."

"I am completely impressed you made it," said John 2042. "What year?"

"1994. Do you have a place I can plug in? I don't have much power remaining and I'm not sure what will happen if I run out of juice."

"I anticipated this problem. I have something better." John 2042 pulled a small box out of his own back pack. He looked over John 1994's equipment, found a way to have both plugged in at the same time.

"You're not going to switch him from his box to yours, are you?" asked John 2031.

Each time traveller's portable power system was required to conduct time travel jumps. In addition, it operated a special energy field to keep their atoms stable in the time period. There was also an added benefit of keeping foreign structures from entering or leaving their bodies.

Every atom and molecule in the universe can exhibit vibrational, translational and rotational motion. They also have a time-and-space state (i.e. where and when information). Manipulating this state allows for time travel, but it also doesn't allow molecules that never existed to be dropped off in the wrong time. For example, the SARS-CoV-2 virus didn't exist in 1960. Therefore a time traveller from 2020 would not be able to pass the virus on. It would be disassembled once it hit the special energy field and broken into its constituent components. If enough of these kinds of molecules hit the field, little sparks could be seen.

This allowed the time traveller to eat and go to the bathroom.

The consequences of the power system failing were unclear, however.

"He won't be of any use lugging around his tech and needing to be plugged in every couple of hours," said John 2042.

"Did any of us do the math to figure out what would happen if our power systems failed?" asked John 1994.

"Sometimes it's best not to know," said John 2012.

With some anxiety, John 2042 switched over John 1994's equipment.

They all stared at him for a couple of minutes.

John 2012 and John 2031 looked over the tech from 1994 with some amazement and awe.

"OK," said John 2042. "Phew. We have to order dinner; do some work; but, first, Janine has to undo some rather aggressive hypnosis."

Looking like three owls, the time travellers all turned simultaneously and stared at Janine.

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It took about 20 minutes each, but Janine was able to release their memories of being hypnotized and the information that was implanted. Primarily math formulas and techniques to help accelerate the discovery of time travel.

John 1994 felt angry. Violated in a way. The other two felt relieved. The compulsion to work on the time travel project and arrive at this time and place had been cripplingly intense and now they felt free.

Dinner was served and they started to work on the problem at hand. John 2042 explained that he had travelled about 10 years into the future to try to see how he could help in 2042. His thinking was climate change, but he discovered a world with a virus that drove people insane. The virus's preferred method of transmission was biting. People would have COVID-19 style symptoms and, if that didn't kill them, they would go into an uncontrolled rage and start biting people. Saliva to blood transmission was much more effective. For the virus.

"This is zombie apocalypse shit," said John 1994.

"Yes, but without all the eating."

"Gross."

"Regardless," said John 2042, "the source of the infection demonstrably comes back to here. There will be an exodus of expats who suddenly return home. And then all hell breaks loose."

"So, what does this have to do with us?" said John 2012.

"Wait a minute," said John 2031, "Didn't Cindy and Eric move here in 2022?"

"Bingo," said John 2042. He turned his tablet computer around and showed a picture of Cindy and Eric. "This was taken last week."

"No way," said John 2031. "They look **the same** as they did in 2022. This is 2042. They should be, well, old-ish – like you."

"Correct. But they aren't."

"How?" asked John 2031. "You aren't buying this crap that this is the "Valley of Longevity."

"No. Not *naturally* anyway," said John 2042.

"Who are Cindy and Eric?" asked Johns 2012 and 1994.

"I introduced them to you guys around 2015," said Janine.

"We were talking then?" asked John 2012.

"Can we stay on topic please?" said John 2042. "The facts are that these guys were infected with an experimental, artificial virus in 2022. They then were subsequently bitten by bats on a hike. The premise I wish to investigate is that the artificial and the bat viruses somehow mixed. I suspect these two will be patients 0 and 1."

"How the hell do you know they were bitten by bats and infected?" ask John 1994.

"I, ah, broke into their house and read Cindy's journals."

"She journals like crazy," said Janine.

"You broke into their house?" said Johns 2012 and 1994 simultaneously.

"It's OK. Janine was the lookout. It was nighttime. They were out. Apparently they've become rather, er, *nocturnal*," said John 2042.

"Yikes," said John 2031.

"But wait," said John 2012. "How do you know they were infected by an *artificial* virus?"

"There was a fellow named Lonny Estevez who was an American expat who was present in many people's lives until late 2022."

"What happened to him?" asked John 2031.

"Died in a fiery car crash. In fact, there was a rash of 'accidents' with expats between November 7 and 18 2022. Statistically, it was a huge anomaly."

"You invented time travel, travelled back in time to make us invent time travel faster," said John 2012, "only for us to come here and help you prove some wild conspiracy theory."

"That's intense," said John 1994.

"I mean, really," said John 2031. I read about this place. It's the home for people who fled countries to try to get away from conspiracies. This started when a *National Geographic* article talked about the longevity myth in 1973."

"If you compare conspiracy theories, which is easier to believe? 1. Bill Gates and the United Nations track every human on earth by an invisible injectable microchip (with an RFID tag and power supply) that could not fit in a syringe **or** ... 2. that someone wanted to experiment on

humans who self-selected by moving to a South American country with a fraction of the regulatory oversight of either North America or Europe?"

"This may sound strange," said John 2012, "but I know you well enough that you would not entertain this without proof."

"We'll get proof," said John 2042.

"How?" said three men named John.

"We need some of their blood."

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## June 22, 2042

### Vilcabamba, Ecuador

Not far from Cindy's house, John 2042 had rented an apartment. It was a tight fit, but all his time traveller selves took the time to sleep and rest.

At dusk, Cindy left her house and headed out.

John 1994 rode a bicycle in her direction, pretending to be intoxicated. As he approached Cindy he "lost control" of his bike and smashed into her. He held a Ninja claw rake, a kind of Japanese gardening tool. Its five points had been sharpened. He used it to lacerate her calf. He tossed it aside immediately. She was bleeding. And screaming.

"Oh my god I'm so sorry!" John 1994 yelled.

John 2012, wearing a ball cap to hide his face, ran up, saying, "*¿Estás herido?*"

*When the hell did I learn Spanish?* thought John 1994.

John 2012 had two cloths to help with the bleeding and bagged one and tossed it aside.

Cindy was screaming obscenities at John 1994.

John 2012 noticed that the rather nasty cut on Cindy's leg was healing as he watched.

*Who is she, goddamned Wolverine?*

She pushed John 2012, saying, "Get the hell off me!"

It felt like he'd been pushed over by a 150-kg defensive end.

Eric was coming down the street. He was walking fast, but his gait was somehow not normal. Clearly, he'd heard the commotion, but his eyes were like those of a person with the thousand-yard stare. Before John 2012 could sort out what he was observing, he saw Cindy lift John 1994 up by the shirt as if he were a toddler. Sparks were flying from his body; Cindy was discharging a boatload of molecular structures not found in 1994.

John 2012 was about to render aid when Eric shoved him over as easily as a linebacker pushes over a 5-year-old. *I hope I can stop feeling like a football soon. Where's our backup?*

"Hey!" It was John 2031. Eric turned around and started to run at him.

Off to one side, in a shadow, stood John 2042. He had a shotgun and fired on Eric. The blast caught Eric in the side. He grimaced and changed direction toward John 2042.

Cindy dropped John 1994 and screamed. She sounded like a lost soul.

*Where the hell did the gun come from?* wondered John 1994.

John 2042 unleashed 3 more shells from his Brazilian-made Taurus ST 12.

Eric finally stopped advancing but had not fallen. John 2031 finished him with a head shot using a Taurus PT911 semi automatic handgun.



John 2012 threw up.

Cindy charged toward John 2031, but John 2042 used his shotgun and John 2031 finished her with the handgun.

"We have to move fast," said John 2042. "Could you get brain and tissue samples and put them in these containers?" John 2031 took the sample kits and did the work. John 2042 stayed well back.

A van pulled up. It was driven by Janine. She got out of the car and pulled out jerry cans of gasoline and said to Johns 1994 and 2012, "Guys, can you help pour this gasoline on the bodies? They're a biohazard and we have to burn them right away."

"Obviously, we were left out of some of this plan," said John 2012.

"Yes," she said, "We can explain later. But you saw all the sparks. These two are the start of a massive plague if we don't do this."

Almost hypnotically, the two younger men poured the gasoline. They both noticed it did not smell like normal fuel. They assumed extra accelerants had been added.

Keeping her distance, Janine tossed a lighter to them both. "Light them up, please."

They all piled in the van and drove away fast – blessedly before the smoke reached their noses.

"To quote a Scottish friend of ours, *Jesus suffering fuck*, what was that?" said John 2012.

The van was heading out of Vilcabamba as fast and as circuitously as Janine could drive.

"If it makes you feel better, they were already dead," said John 2042.

"They looked pretty fucking alive up to the point where you shot them in the head," said John 1994.

"Only you three could be in close proximity with them. They were walking bags of virus. They were much further along than I thought."

John 2012 turned to John 2031 and said, "Since when did you, *old* John, conspire with *really* old John to become gun toting psychos?"

"You haven't experienced the COVID-19 pandemic yet. The idea of a designer virus combined with a bat-originating virus is absolutely horrifying."

"Plus, they've been effectively deceased for about two years," said John 2042. "Cindy stopped journaling. At first, she was really enjoying her extended middle age, but then started to feel ill. Then her writing stopped, but her body kept moving."

"Couldn't you have dragged somebody else into this?" asked John 1994.

"As I said, only a time traveller could get close enough to them to safely take a sample. John 2031 and I were backup in case something odd happened. In case they were like what I saw in the future. Which, it turns out, they basically were."

The van pulled up to a cabin at the end of a dirt road.

They all entered the cabin with Janine carrying the very well sealed sample kits.

Solar battery lights came on, attempting to reduce the gloom.

"I don't know about you bunch," said John 2012, "but I need a drink."

John 2042, slid a cooler out from under the table and said, "Help yourself."

The cooler was entirely filled with Pilsener.

"What variety," said John 1994, but it did not stop him from taking one.

The five of them sat and silently drank their beer.

"I'm assuming we go home," said John 2012, "and I further assume you get arrested. Is this your plan?"

"Janine has made arrangements to get the tissue samples to labs with the WHO and CDC. We can let them do their good work. However, we now have to undo our obvious paradoxes."

"Not liking the sound of this," said John 2031. "I was imagining what it will be like when we go back and it was giving me a headache."

"Yes," said John 2042. "About the going back part. At this stage I should confess I misled you. I allowed you all to think it was me that went into the past. It was me, but me two years from now me. Me in late stages of liver cancer. Modern treatment allowed me many years of extra life, but it all comes to an end. You see, John **2044** came back and explained what he'd done, and we hatched this plan."

Janine was starting to weep.

"You see," John 2042 continued, "With this last Pilsener, I downed an end-of-life pill."

"You fucking what?" said John 1994.

"I haven't had a drop to drink in years. It tasted really good."

"This means," said John 2031, "that your future self won't go back in time and mess with us to invent time travel early."

"Precisely. And I avoid what I expect would have been a rather nasty death."

"What's your theory on what happens to us?" asked John 2031.

Janine was holding John 2042's hand. Despite being in on the plan, her feelings of grief were nearly overwhelming. John 1994 moved to hold her other hand.

"Well," said John 2042, who was starting to sound drunk, "when the probability of me living drops to zero, your equipment will fail. Then your atoms will flip back to their regular space-time coordinates."

"You *did* do the math," said John 2012.

Moments later, Janine was left alone in a cabin with a dead man.

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## **December 24, 2029**

### **Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**

John had a tradition of hanging out with friends on Christmas Eve and came home feeling relaxed and somewhat tipsy.

For a moment, he was sure that there were people in his apartment. He shook his head and figured that he should cut down on the booze.

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## **December 24, 2010**

### **Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**

After losing both his parents in the previous year, John was coming home slightly drunk from a gathering with friends – something he hoped would be a tradition, but maybe not quite as boozy.

Once he fumbled with the lock enough to enter his apartment, he was sure there were two people there. But no, he was alone. *OK*, he thought, *less of the sauce for me.*

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**December 24, 1992**

**Near Brockville, Ontario, Canada**

John and Janine were on the Via Rail morning train from Montreal to Toronto. They were returning home after visiting fellow grad students at McGill. They were due at their respective parents' homes for Christmas.

A clumsy middle-aged man bumped John's shoulder with his bag. He apologized and carried on to his seat. John clutched Janine's hand tightly. He was suddenly overwhelmed by love for her. It was as if, for a second, his future life with her passed before his eyes and she would be with him until the end.