

FOSSILS AND FOOLS

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If I had known I'd wreck the human race I'd have split a fifth of vodka with Weigel and gotten truly hammered. Instead, we played chess as usual at the Dragon City Chinese restaurant, sneaking white wine into water glasses.

"You did what?" Weigel asked in response to my mid-game attempt at conversation.

"Linked CTCs in the zero point flux," I repeated, then, leaned closer. "Closed Timelike Curves." He frowned. "Wormholes," I said. "You know, time travel."

Weigel shook his head. "Billy Boy, you need black holes for that. Got one up your sleeve?"

Tipsy, I pulled back a cuff and peeked in, nodding. "Quarks do ten-to-the-minus-forty-two seconds into the past all the time. Known fact."

Weigel shoved a sauced-up hunk of broccoli in his mouth and blocked my rook with a knight. "Three quarks for Muster Mark," he said, quoting Finnegan's Wake. "There are paradoxes you can't wish away." Then he made the traditional argument: "I off my mom before I was born and then where the hell am I?"

"Multiverses! That's the crazy part. The theory's there. Look in the journals." In my stewed state I hated to have to explain everything. I slid a bishop across the board.

"What theory?"

"Once time travel happens on a scale above quarks, it's easier after that."

"Easy, as in drop your quarter in the slot and shake hands with Genghis Khan?"

"Easy, as in super-cooled laser-faceted plutonium crystals."

Weigel swigged from his glass. "Jesus! What's your source? The terrorist shopping network?" He grabbed my bishop--I'd made a total blunder.

"Takes less than a microgram for what I'm doing. Friend of a friend up at Livermore." My funding and love life had dried up at the same time, so I'd sold my car, borrowed equipment, and set up in my apartment.

I refilled Weigel's glass from the bag. "Sounds like a moneymaker," he said. "But if it's so easy, why aren't time tourists here like fleas on a dog? Laser-flaked plutonium-whatever can't be that tough to score in the future."

"Since Becky left, I've been working on that twenty-four seven."

Weigel cracked a knowing smile. "Ah, it's all about the chick! Impress Becks and she'll come crawling back. You haven't answered my question. Who cares who invents it--big money in the future will grab it and sell it. So where are they?"

"Maybe I'll keep it to myself." I was too sotted to find a good move, so I pushed a pawn.

"Don't make me puke. You'd sell your mother for fame."

"My mother's dead."

"Sorry, forgot."

"Theory says when I make that anchor point, they can only come back to that moment. Hasn't been done, so no tourists."

"You said quarks do it all the time."

"Fluctuations. Gotta get a wormhole past a nanosecond. That's what Rosemary's gonna do."

"Rosemary?"

"Quark pump."

"Oh, right. Sounds like a moneymaker."

Weigel's two loves were James Joyce and dreaming up get-rich-quick schemes. Call me stupid, but I should have seen it coming. Love is blind whether it's physics or women.

His next move would be mate in two. A wok sizzled and the smell of hot oil came from the kitchen. By the light of a flickering dragon I tipped over my king. I hoped to God I was better at physics than chess.

"Let me know when she's ready to pop," Weigel said. "That's gonna be one helluva moment."

I called him late that night.

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Weigel sat on my ratty sofa, fiddling with his laptop while I tweaked equipment. "C'm'ere," I said finally, yelling over his iPod.

"So this is Billy's time machine." Weigel blew at the vapor trailing off the liquid helium unit.

"No," I said irritably. "This just makes an itty-bitty anchor point. A time machine is a whole nother thing. Leave it to the big dogs. All I want is the Nobel."

"All glory and no money makes Billy a dull boy."

Green digits on the frequency display counted down. If Becks'd stuck with me, I might've been fat and happy designing chips at Intel. C'est la vie. I rammed that molybdenum rod home. Rosemary's baby was born.

* * *

The lights went out. I heard noises and turned around. It was like New Year's Eve in my living room. Wall-to-wall people talked, laughed, rubbed elbows. They carried candles and kerosene lanterns. I lost track of Weigel right off. People bumped me with no apologies. Drinks spilled.

I turned to a pudgy woman, unable to avoid her in the crush. "Um," I said, "who are you people?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. What's going on here?"

"I came to check out The Nanosecond." She spoke as if it were capitalized. "Isn't that why you're here?"

Perhaps it is, I thought. "Amnesia," I said, tapping my head. "What is The Nanosecond?"

She eyed me like a chicken examining an odd insect. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, you know, this." She held up something that resembled the Star Trek transponders. "We're in the context when it started."

"What started?"

This time she stared as if I had three nostrils. "Time travel?"

"Oh." I tapped my head again. "So...you do it with that thing."

"Of course. How else would you do it?" Then she must have had a tiny leap of the imagination: "How did you get here?"

I hesitated too long. "Oh my gosh," she said, staring, "you're him. You're the Founder." She turned, drink sloshing, to a friend. "Betty, it's him."

Betty was totally ignorant of the technology she was using, but I pieced together a few things. My quarks had linked in the flux like kids in a tug-of-war! They had made an anchor

point. As theory predicted, time travel instantly became simpler from then on. Not trivial, but apparently without needing super-cooling.

I had to be sure. "So you can only come back to here? You can't talk to Lincoln or watch the pyramids get built or stop the Kennedy assassination?"

"Who's Kennedy?" Betty asked, uncaring.

"Pyramid," said the pudgy woman. "That's some kind of building."

The universe had been ripped right back to when I'd first cracked it.

I quickly guessed, and later confirmed, that Weigel had pirated my notes. I hadn't been totally clueless--he'd always been more interested in dollars than was decent for a Lit major. But I'd misjudged his ethics. Story of my life. Score with friends and lovers: zero.

Weigel had probably swiped my notebook that night and sold it. He'd always been more interested in dollars than was decent for a Lit major, but I'd misjudged his ethics. The highest bidder developed the hand-held "Personal Universal Devices" that everyone carried, and it didn't matter if that took ten years or a thousand--I'd pounded the first spike, and now they could come right back to that night. Once it was accomplished, my erstwhile buddy wasn't needed anymore--from my point of view, he was gone in an instant.

People began traveling everywhen. Paradoxes? Nah, Mom and Pops are fair game. Thorne and Klinkhammer had had it right, except for a curve ball or six.

I tried to connect with some of the time tourists. "Can you tell me," I asked a smart-looking red-headed woman, "why there aren't multiple copies of each of you? If you come from different multiverses?"

She put one hand around the back of my neck and probed in my mouth with the other. "Nice teeth," she said. "Who's your dentist?"

I went outside. They'd trashed the lawn. They stepped on my toes. 'Sorry' wasn't in their vocabulary. The novelty evaporated: my life's work was finished. Done, stolen, sold.

I walked down the dark block as a breeze rustled leaves and blew dust and papers along the empty street. Later I sat in the candlelight at Joe June's 24-Hr Cafe. Joe appeared at ease with the whole thing, but he was running the place by himself without electricity. Too busy to gab. His propane stove still worked and I stared into the black coffee I'd ordered. Then I looked up and saw sandy curls across the table, framing a familiar smile.

"Becky!"

"Uh, no. It's Shelley."

I shook my head impatiently. "Cut it out Becks. God, it's great to see you."

"So call me whatever." She reached across the table and put her hands on mine. "Were we in love?"

If time travel had worked, then maybe anything was possible. But to be staring at Becky who claimed to be not-Becky was too weird. The touch of her hands felt good though.

"Are all time travelers obnoxious?" I said, trying to move ahead.

She broke down laughing. Then she reached over and wagged my chin. "Rule number one, when traveling in time one must be obnoxious."

I'd invented the game but I didn't know the rules. I asked Becky-Shelley about the intrusion in my house. "Fools are peeping Toms," she told me. "No respect for privacy. They're like clumsy lovers poking in every cranny."

"Fools?"

"That's what we Fossils call the time travelers."

Shelley said that some people never did jump through time. I was one of them. We 'Fossils' were stuck in the base multiverse. Sort of a mother-verse from which other multiverses blossomed as the PUDs were used. And the Fools kept the devices to themselves--alternate futures were all Fool futures.

The first time travelers quickly became Fools, their identities scrambled by the unavoidable consequences of wormholes. If you jumped to a space-time where you already existed, the second 'you' was knocked like a billiard ball into a different 'verse. This chain effect eventually wrecked your mind. Or minds.

"I might be able to make one of those PUD things even if they won't give me one," I said to Shelley. "I invented them f'Chrissake."

Shelley dipped a piece of doughnut in my cup. "No, you never do. You're one of the legends."

I wondered how she knew all this--it was still just the first morning of the new 'verse. Shelley said, "I'm a Fossil by choice, but I used to be a Fool. When you change contexts, you lose track of who you were. You're permanently spaced out."

Shelley, it seems, had been burnt several times relationshipwise. After me, it had been with Fools. She'd trashed her history with a PUD and now she was Shelley--with a dim recollection of something lost.

Fools are shallow as a mud puddle, floating in a state of perpetual puppy love with each other. But Shelley had come to start over at the Nanosecond, the closest context she could get to sanity. And perhaps unconsciously, I thought, to me.

I shivered.

"You're cold," Shelley said.

"Forgot my jacket." Actually my nerves were wired. The future had RSVPd the unwitting invitation I'd sent, and coffee wasn't helping. "When do I get my apartment back?"

Shelley grinned. "Party's over. Your place was just a target last night." I could tell she liked this old Fossil again. Maybe that's why I never jumped.

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The nights were filled with campfires and candlelight; it was mythical, like Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean ride. Romantic if you didn't scratch the surface. Shelley and I often walked along a sidewalk leading to a park and then through uncut grass. Small fires sparkled across fields and we saw Fools surrounding each. Warm breezes carried the smells of smoke and eucalyptus.

Later the days were full of the sharp odors of growing corn. Fools were Appleseeds, planting fast-growing food that didn't need much tending. Machinery, like tractors and power plants, was beyond them. Most all technological items had been cut up and taken to other multiverses. Souvenirs from infinity.

Shelley and I walked through shoulder-high stalks in what used to be a playground. We sat with a group of Fools at a fire where they roasted ears in the husks. Shallow as they were, Fools were okay once you got to know them.

"So where are you folks from, originally?" I said. That Fossil concept confused them, their past and parents lost in a Rubik's pattern of changing contexts. I liked to pick on them for some reason.

Shelley patched it up. "He means, where were you last?"

"Oh, Geneva," said a tall girl with straight auburn hair, light eyebrows, and lovely blue eyes. She wore a burlap dress. "I helped stop the revolt."

"I was there as a kid," an older Fool with a beard said. Time travel doesn't stop aging--Fools die just like Fossils. A long time ago in his own personal memory, the bearded fellow had been at the Geneva revolt from which the pretty tall girl had just jumped.

"The Geneva revolt," Shelley explained, "will be an organized effort by Fossils to make a place where they can keep time travelers out." You could call a Fossil a Fossil, but you didn't call Fools Fools to their faces.

A young woman with raven hair stared. "You're a Fossil," she said. She looked at me like sex with a Fossil could be fun. I wasn't sure about their birth control methods, but Fools are promiscuous, perhaps because they often die young and life is immediate. Medicine is way beyond the Fools, so all the doctors in the Fossil era are booked solid. As are the dentists. Most Fools had lousy teeth. All domestic animals had quickly been eaten, and raising animals was no fun--Fools were de facto vegetarians. Raven-hair took a sensuous bite of her corn.

"What, no spare ribs? Lamb chops? Meatballs?" I said sarcastically. Shelley poked my side, stood, and pulled me up gently by the hair.

"He's sick," she said, and it was true enough.

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A good movie feels like life, but the whole thing is already in the can. Much like a movie, Einstein's theories require that our past and future actually exist. We strut and fret our hour upon the stage, simply following the script.

With multiverses, however, each PUD jump burns a new modified print of the movie, showing in a different theater. They're all playing at once. Free will is back: you choose what you want to see. But what the theorists missed was an audience that bounds around like puppies, through any and all of the theaters, in a ghostly mind-blowing pandemonium.

One day a ghost came home.

I was in the graveyard behind the Bethlehem church where my parents are buried, grateful they hadn't lived to see the mess I'd made. A young man walked along a sidewalk beyond a white fence. Weigel! I ran after him. "Hey Melvino," I called, using his nickname.

He stopped and turned. "Hello friend."

"Friend? You stole my secrets and sold them. Am I right?"

"If I have wronged you, I am deeply sorry."

This wasn't the Weigel I had known. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Paul."

"Do you remember me?"

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me with intense yet vacant eyes. "You're my friend."

The body was there; the spark was gone. Shelley had kept the best of Becky and then some, but Weigel got sucked in. He was a Fool, just passing through. He'd been a key player in the time-bending events but, unlike me, he now had an insanity plea. Weigel was dead and I had killed him.

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"What's wrong?" Shelley asked one day after a string of my expletives.

"Mind control."

"Still upset about yesterday?"

"All I did was try to make some notes."

"You know you can't do that," she said. "I've told you about that."

Write a play? Build a better mousetrap? Forget it. Anything with potential becomes a target for sightseeing Fools. I'd had an idea for an invention, and must have built it. Then one Fool told another and the vast empty-headed future invaded once again, to see where it started. I couldn't take it. Burned my notes to make them go away. They'd love-bombed it out of existence, at least in my context. Was that a paradox? Who thinks straight with groping Fools everywhen.

And so, disgusted with life for the moment, I said, "Let's go see Max."

"Okay."

Shelley took my hand and we went out.

Max is an original Fossil like me. I can actually beat him at chess, and he still has a major stash of coffee beans. And when we talk ideas, the Fools don't come.

We sat around Max's kitchen table with javas and lanterns and a little ersatz whiskey I'd distilled from corn mash. Drunk and enjoying myself, I was trying to be clever shooting my mouth off about how it was so amazing that one person, me, could affect the structure of space-time. I meant to disparage the Fools by implying that we Fossils were the real players. Max wasn't buying.

He was tall and weighed about 250 pounds. That and his friendly manner gave a certain automatic credibility to his words. "Y'know, Bill, it was you who ruined the universe," he said matter-of-factly. He wasn't angry--that wasn't in his nature.

"I didn't ruin it. I just changed it."

Max looked toward the ceiling shadows as if past the oak beams, and out at the unseen stars. He shook his graying head tolerantly. "You ruined it," he said. "Haven't you heard of The End?"

I looked at Shelley. The half-smile failed and she sighed instead. "I didn't want to tell you. I thought it would make you depressed."

"Tell me now."

She looked resigned. "Well, you know the PUDs don't reach far into space."

"Yeah." I downed some coffee. "You can't make a worm hole much beyond a gravity base. We're in our own loopy little pocket here. Go on."

"How far do you think they can go into the future?" she asked.

Surprisingly, I hadn't fully considered that question. It took just seconds now. I stared at Shelley with suspicion, then at Max. He nodded slightly. "Yep, four billion give or take," he said. "Textbooks were close. The sun goes red-giant. Earth is fried."

"But..."

Shelley shrugged. "The Fools don't talk about it. Not a fun topic." She lifted her cup and leaned back. "Some tried jumping there on purpose, others accidentally. Nobody's returned."

Max added more moonshine to his coffee. The aroma-filled silence dragged as Max and Shelley waited for me to flesh it out for myself. I'd almost begun to take the whole thing lightly, like a Boy Scout at a jamboree, complete with campfires. Now that the truth became clear, I almost wished Max was angry with me.

"The End," I said finally, "is the end of hope. The end of history. If it wasn't for the time loops, we would have learned more. Technology would have advanced. War might have sharpened us. In four billion years we probably could have reached the stars before the sun wipes us out. I killed that chance." I couldn't fault the Fools--they were caught in my screwy space-time.

I pushed my chair back, got up, and freshened my coffee. Shelley and Max sat watching me.

"It's like that in every 'verse?" I asked.

"Just the same."

I stared at a corner spider web. What could the spider know of our conversation? Of multiverses and the decay of dreams. The Earth and its closed web of space-time was now an inbred backwater in the great galactic sprawl. How many other dead-end civilizations among a half trillion stars had fallen victim to the future's siren call? And had I always been fated to destroy our hopes? The Nobel Prize--what a joke.

"I have an idea," I said.

They both looked at me in the lamplight, waiting for ol' hare-brain to speak.

"I've been doing some theory and it might be possible to send something small back past The Nanosecond. Just a little mass, just a little before."

We glanced around reflexively to see if any Fools showed up. Either nothing came of the discussion, or we would keep it secret.

"What would we need?" Max asked.

"A nuke would be great. But maybe a few barrels of home made gunpowder, cadmium shavings, a stolen PUD, plus some other junk."

"How would it help?" Shelley wondered. Then she saw. "Oh. You mean send a message so somebody could stop you. Keep you from doing The Nanosecond."

We looked at one another for a long time, each alone with their thoughts. Then Shelley said quietly, "We'd never meet."

"More likely nobody'd believe it," Max said. He heaved his bulk off the chair and made his way to the stove. "Although...maybe you would, yourself."

"I don't know if it would be that accurate," I said. Hell, I didn't know if it would work at all.

"You could write a letter to yourself. If somebody found it they'd probably drop it in the mail," Max said. "You wouldn't need to hit your own personal location. Wherever it showed up, if it had the right address it'd probably get to you."

I frowned. "What if I didn't believe it? That was my life's dream. Would I quit because of a letter?"

"You could tell yourself things only you know," Max said. He'd filled his coffee cup and sat down again.

Shelley was silent and I knew why. Could I destroy us, something better than I'd ever had? For a hypothetical second chance for those backstabbing rascals before the Nanosecond? Who might not survive anyway? Hell, the dinosaurs only lasted a couple hundred million years and they didn't even have guns or drugs or fluorocarbons.

She walked over to the dark window. Curtains fluttered in a dry wind. I followed and put my arms around her. "I won't do it," I said.

"No. Don't even think about it. You have to."

* * *

This part's for you Billy, you stupid jerk. I thought if I made it a story, you might actually read it. If you don't believe it, sell it to a fiction rag and pay the gas bill--and destroy the future. You thought you were in love and that Becky jilted you, but you never gave her a chance. You didn't love anybody except yourself and your damn project. You're an egocentric idiot and I hope you understand by now that no one is going to give you a Nobel Prize. Look, I love Shelley. You know how I know? Because I want what she wants--even if it means giving her up. Shelley was once Becky so I'm pretty sure you still have a chance with her if you get off your high horse.

I gave you the whole story so you'll know what's at stake--and maybe there's enough to satisfy your curiosity. Go be happy at Intel. But here's what you have to do first. BURN THAT BLACK AND WHITE NOTEBOOK you keep behind the refrigerator. And don't blame Weigel. But don't trust him or anybody else. BURN THE NOTEBOOK and forget those formulas. I'd say get a lobotomy but I'm guessing that's past your limit. Oh, and smash Rosemary's trigger.

Don't invite Weigel to your apartment. And by the way, if you bring out your king's knight instead of pushing the pawn, you've got a decent shot at beating him.

This is your last whack at doing the right thing, Billy Boy, and I hope you realize it's because you eventually learn how to love. If I did it, you can do it. Don't ignore this, old pal--your last chance to be more than a fool.

--END--