

Real Time

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Someone was tampering with time again; I could feel it, in my head and in my gut, that sick, queasy sensation of unreality.

I put my head down and gulped air, waiting for the discomfort to pass, but it only got worse.

This was a bad one. Someone was tampering with something serious. This wasn't just someone reading tomorrow's papers and playing the stock market, this was *serious*. Someone was trying to change history.

I couldn't allow that. Not only might his tampering interfere with my own past, change my whole life, possibly even wipe me out of existence, but I'd be shirking my job. I couldn't do that.

Not that anyone would know. They must think I'm dead. I haven't been contacted in years now, not since I was stranded in this century. They must think I was lost when my machine and my partner vanished in the flux.

But I'm not dead, and I had a job to do. With help from headquarters or without, with a partner or without, even with my machine or without, I had a job to do, a reality to preserve, a whole world to safeguard. I knew my duty. I *know* my duty. The past can't take tampering.

They might send someone else, but they might not. The tampering might have already changed things too much. They might not spot it in time. Or they might simply not have the manpower. Time travel lets you use your manpower efficiently, with one hundred percent efficiency, putting it anywhere you need it instantly, but that's not enough when you

have all of the past to guard, everything from the dawn of time to the present—not *this* present, the *real* present—you'd need a million men to guard it all, and they've always had trouble recruiting. The temptations are too great. The dangers are too great. Look at me, stuck here in the past, for the dangers—and as for the temptations, look at what I have to do. People trying to *change* everything, trying to benefit themselves at the cost of reality itself—they need men they can *trust*, men like me, and there can never be enough of us.

I sat up straight again and I looked at the mirror behind the bar and I knew what I had to do. I had to stop the tampering. Just as I had stopped it before, three—no, four—four times now.

They might send someone else, but they might not, and I couldn't take that chance.

I had to find the tamperer myself, and deal with him. If I couldn't find him directly, if he wasn't in this time period but later, then I might need to tamper with time myself, to change *his* past without hurting *mine*.

That's tricky, but I've done it.

I slid off the stool and stood up, gulped the rest of my drink, and laid a bill on the bar—five dollars in the currency of the day. I shrugged, straightening my coat, and I stepped out into the cool of a summer night.

Insects sang somewhere, strange insects extinct before I was born, and the streetlights pooled pale gray across the black sidewalks. I turned my head slowly, feeling the flux, feeling the shape of the time-stream, of my reality.

Downtown was firm, solid, still rooted in the past and the present and secure in the future. Facing in the opposite direction I felt my gut twist. I crossed the empty street to my car.

I drove out the avenues, ignoring the highways; I can't feel as well on the highways, they're too far out of the city's life-flow.

I went north, then east, and the nausea gripped me tighter with every block. It became a gnawing pain in my belly as the world shimmered and shifted around me, an unstable reality. I stopped the car by the side of the street and forced the pain down, forced my perception of the world to

steady itself.

When I was ready to go on I leaned over and checked in the glove compartment. No gloves—the name was already an anachronism even in this time period. But my gun was there. Not my service weapon; that's an anachronism, too advanced. I don't dare use it. The knowledge of its existence could be dangerous. No, I had bought a gun here, in this era.

I pulled it out and put it in my coat pocket. The weight of it, that hard metal tugging at my side, felt oddly comforting.

I had a knife, too. I was dealing with primitives, with savages, not with civilized people. These final decades of the twentieth century, with their brushfire wars and nuclear arms races, were a jungle, even in the great cities of North America. I had a knife, a good one, with a six-inch blade I had sharpened myself.

Armed, I drove on, and two blocks later I had to leave the avenue, turn onto the quiet side-streets, tree-lined and peaceful.

Somewhere, in that peace, someone was working to destroy my home, my life, my *self*.

I turned again, and felt the queasiness and pain leap within me, and I knew I was very close.

I stopped the car and got out, the gun in my pocket and my hand on the gun, my other hand holding the knife.

One house had a light in the window; the homes on either side were dark. I scanned, and I knew that that light was it, the center of the unreality—maybe not the tamperer himself, but something, a focus for the disturbance of the flow of history.

Perhaps it was an ancestor of the tamperer; I had encountered that before.

I walked up the front path and rang the bell.

I braced myself, the knife in one hand, the gun in the other.

The porch light came on, and the door started to open. I threw myself

against it.

It burst in, and I went through it, and I was standing in a hallway. A man in his forties was staring at me, holding his wrist where the door had slammed into it as it pulled out of his grip. There had been no chainbolt; my violence had, perhaps, been more than was necessary.

I couldn't take risks, though. I pointed the gun at his face and squeezed the trigger.

The thing made a report like the end of the world, and the man fell, blood and tissue sprayed across the wall behind him.

A woman screamed from a nearby doorway, and I pointed the gun at her, unsure.

The pain was still there. It came from the woman. I pulled the trigger again.

She fell, blood red on her blouse, and I looked down at her as the pain faded, as stability returned.

I was *real* again.

If the man were her husband, perhaps she was destined to remarry, or to be unfaithful—*she* would have been the tamperer's ancestor, but *he* might not have been. The twisting of time had stopped only when the woman fell.

I regretted shooting him, then, but I had had no choice. Any delay might have been fatal. The life of an individual is precious, but not as precious as history itself.

A twinge ran through my stomach; perhaps only an after-effect, but I had to be certain. I knelt, and went quickly to work with my knife.

When I was done, there could be no doubt that the two were dead, and that neither could ever have children.

Finished, I turned and fled, before the fumbling police of this era could interfere.

I knew the papers would report it the next day as the work of a lunatic,

of a deranged thief who panicked before he could take anything, or of someone killing for perverted pleasure. I didn't worry about that.

I had saved history again.

I wish there were another way, though.

Sometimes I have nightmares about what I do, sometimes I dream that I've made a mistake, killed the wrong person, that I stranded myself here. What if it wasn't a mechanical failure that sent the machine into flux, what if I changed my own past and did that to myself?

I have those nightmares sometimes.

Worse, though, the very worst nightmares, are the ones where I dream that I never changed the past at all, that I never lived in any time but this one, that I grew up here, alone, through an unhappy childhood and a miserable adolescence and a sorry adulthood—that I never traveled in time, that it's all in my mind, that I killed those people for nothing.

That's the worst of all, and I wake up from that one sweating, ready to scream.

Thank God it's not true.