

## About **Time Prime**

*This one came when I started thinking about time machines, one of the perennial props of science fiction. You'd think that, if it were possible to make a time machine, the past would be full of time travelers. Historic events like the crucifixion or the battle of Gettysburg ought to be full of time-traveling tourists. So where are they? But what if a time machine requires not just a transmitter, but also a receiver? After all, what good did it do for Marconi to invent the radio transmitter, until he also invented the radio receiver? From this, it occurred to me that the future could be just chock-full of people with time machines, just waiting for the first person to invent a time-receiver. From there it was pretty easy to extrapolate a bit on prime-time news.*

*I added a few details, like the fact that it's well known (among experimental physicists) that a theoretical physicist wouldn't even know which end of a soldering iron to hold, and used my imagination on some of the details. I'd already written a serious story about time travel ("Ripples in the Dirac Sea," which has been reprinted several times, for example in *Nebula Award Stories 25*), so I thought I'd do this one a bit lighter. So there you have it.*

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**Geoffrey A. Landis**

The transtemporizer consisted of a coil of palladium wire about the size of a nickel, surrounded by a colorful spaghetti-tangle of wires, breadboard electronics and gadgetry. "Doesn't look like much, does it?" said Gwendolyn Jones, as she finished adjusting the collimator and stepped back to survey her work. She was a bit more than just the usual beautiful lab assistant, with a Ph.D. in experimental high-energy physics from Princeton and a real knock-out figure. This quite literally: if you made an unwise comment about her figure, like as not she'd knock you flying. Did I mention her black-belt in Tae Kwon Do? She was just finishing her second year as a postdoc with Zalewski.

"Looks good enough to me," said Zalewski, a short, plump man with a frizzy brown hair and an equally frizzy beard, called "Doctor Z" by students and colleagues alike. Like most theoretical physicists, he wasn't much for lab work, but he was unusual in working closely with experimentalists and having considerable interest in the experiments, even to the point of occasionally helping out at a soldering iron himself when he thought that the project needed it. (Gwendolyn carefully neglected to tell him that she always had the undergraduate assistants re-do his solder joints as soon as he left.) The transtemporizer was based on a combination of his latest ideas on the universe with her ideas of how to make things work.

"When you energize it, do you really think we can send things back in time?" Gwen commented. She did her best to look dubious.

Dr. Z snorted. "Of course not. Didn't you read that paper I gave you?" His voice switched over to lecture mode. "Trans-temporal relocation requires both a sending and a receiving coil. Clearly, we could hardly send something back to before a receiver existed. When we energize, we're going to receive from positive t the object we send back next year, when we get the money to build the *sending*

transtemporizer."

"If we get the money, that is," said Gwen.

"Don't be silly, girl," said Dr. Z. (For the two hundred fifteenth time Gwen resisted the temptation to knock him head over lab bench. He was, after all, one of the few theoretical physicists who condescended to work with mere experimenters.) "After we have proof that the transtemporizer works, the NSF could hardly refuse our grant application again. Even the NSF review committee couldn't be that thickheaded. Could they?"

"Maybe not."

"Of course not. However, if they for some reason should do so, then no doubt our future selves will have the foresight to send us useful advice as to what to do next. I'm sure we'll think of something."

"Gotcha, Doc." She snapped a quick picture with the Polaroid as he pointed to the timeclock, and then snapped another of the apparatus. Actually, she had read the papers--she could hardly have built the machine if she hadn't--but she wanted his voice on tape for the record. This was, after all, an important experiment, and needed to be well documented.

"I really wanted to invent a space warp," Dr. Z. continued, his voice wistful. "Ever since I was a kid, reading Doc Smith and old "Worldwrecker" Hamilton. Damn, that would be something. But they said that a FTL drive was impossible, since if one existed it would mean time travel was possible, and I spend so long trying to prove they were wrong that I invented a transtemporizer instead." He chuckled. "Show them something, won't we?"

"Absolutely. So are you ready?" She checked that the videotape was running smoothly, then dropped the goggles down over her eyes. "Go."

With a wave of his hand, Zalewski hit the switch. Reaching below the lab bench, Gwendolyn casually flipped the circuit breaker on. Counterpropagating laser beams in brilliant lime green and pumpkin orange flashed on, meeting in the center of the coil. According to plan, a tightly coiled scroll of paper would emerge from the center of the ring.

With a peculiar noise that sounded something like a hamster burping, a matchbox-sized toy tractor tumbled through the coil. Stamped in tiny letters on the side was *Made in Taiwan, PRC*.

"What the heck?" Dr. Z reached over to pick it up. The toy righted itself and rolled out of the way, as the circle began to stutter out Tinkertoys. "This is not supposed to be a toy factory--"

Tiny manipulator arms unfolded from the toy tractor. As fast as the Tinkertoy segments hiccupped out of the circle, the tractor plugged them together, fashioning them into a rickety framework about the size of a dinner-plate. In a minute the frame energized, this time with a sound like a chimpanzee sneezing, and a robot roughly the size and shape of a mechanical armadillo rolled through. A TV camera on accordion struts extended upward and looked around. It quickly orienting itself, sprouted a pair of tiny mechanical pliers, and started to assemble a doorway-sized structure from the parts that immediately began to sneeze through the new gate just as fast as the armadillo-robot could assemble them. When this energized with a low musical burp (B flat, Gwendolyn decided), a bald black man stepped in. He was carrying a small electronic gadget with a lot of wires and a lens.

Gwendolyn raised her goggles and stepped forward to extend her hand. "Welcome to 1995. You must be--"

"Save it for Worthmore," the man said, cutting her off abruptly. He extended tripod legs from his gadget and aimed the lens at the large gate. "Testing, testing."

"Hey!" Dr. Z grabbed a fire-extinguisher, the closest thing he could think of to a weapon, cradled it under his arm, and aimed it like a Tommy-gun. "You're intruding on a delicate experiment. What the heck do you think you're trying to do there?"

In the meantime, two more men walked in through the gate. One set up floodlights, while the other dabbed make-up onto Dr. Z and Gwendolyn.

"At least you could tell us where, I mean when, you're from," said Gwendolyn, squirming impatiently while the make-up man highlighted the color in her cheeks.

"Keep still, deary, or the lipstick will be off center."

"Mmmph," said Gwendolyn. "But--"

"Rolling," said the cameraman.

A distinguished-looking man with a dark brown suit and impeccably styled hair stepped through the gate. He looked directly into the camera with a steadfast, yet warm, gaze. "This mike working? Good. Good evening. I'm Roger Worthmore, and this is history being made. I'm here in 1995, in the laboratory of Dr. Gwendolyn Jones and Dr. Nicholas Zalewski, co-winners of the prestigious Nobel prize in physics--" (Gwen looked at Dr. Z with raised eyebrows. He nodded, then shrugged modestly.) "--in 1997, the final year it was awarded. Here in 1995 they have just completed the world's first working temporal gate. Dr. Jones, perhaps you could tell the viewers--"

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When the interview was over and the hubub calmed down, Gwendolyn and Dr. Z started to relax. Worthmore waved to the camera and burped out through the gate. Nobody had offered any explanations, but Gwendolyn figured they would probably hear it all in endlessly boring detail on the evening news anyway. She was still struggling over the implications of what she'd learned from the lighting tech when she'd asked why no Nobel prizes had been awarded after 1997. After the invention of the transtemporizer, he'd said, the results to any scientific question were already known in the future. "Anybody interested in knowing something just looks it up in the *Encyclopedia of Science*. So nobody does scientific research any more, except maybe as a hobby, you know? Heck, that's the least thing different from the old days. Bet half of it will knock you silly. Say, can I have your autograph?"

"One thing still bothers me, Doc," said Gwendolyn, after she'd given her autograph and refused a date in 2001 ("really, a very popular year for first dates," he'd promised). "If the transtemporizer can transport things back and forth through time, why couldn't it also send things through space?"

"Well, it could, I expect," said Dr. Z. "Time and space are a continuous four-dimensional manifold, after all. But first you'd need a receiving coil on the other end, of course, which would present some--"

From behind them came a low musical burp. They looked around as the gate energized. The creature that appeared looked a bit like a turnip, a bit like a spider, and a lot like none-of-the-above. It--he?--began to speak, in clicks and whistles. A fraction of a second later a box on its--chest?--began to translate.

"Good evening, viewers. This is Zngiggarg, and with me on this historic occasion, the first meeting of our two peoples, is...."

The gate burped again. This creature looked more like a paisley earthworm, or perhaps a vacuum-cleaner redesigned by Picasso. "Good morning, viewers--". The next one looked slightly like a leather golf-ball on a pogo-stick. The one after that looked somewhat like a parrot wearing pink ear muffs.

Gwen and Dr. Z looked at each other. "The fun part, I see, has only just started," said Gwendolyn. "So come on and join the party."

Dr. Z. put down the fire-extinguisher and walked over to be interviewed by the first newsman.

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