

THE DAY BEFORE THE DAY BEFORE

by Steve Rasnic Tem

Steve Rasnic Tem's audio CD collection *Invisible* is a summer release from Speaking Volumes LLC. In November, Centipede Press is bringing out *In Concert*, the collected short collaborations between Steve and his wife Melanie Tem. The title story appeared here in *Asimov's* last December. The author's new tale for us takes a sharp and unsettling look at what could have happen...

When I was a child, a few dozen decades from now, our mother would have us say a prayer every morning before breakfast just to, as she put it, "get your heads in the right place before the day's clock starts ticking." She called it a prayer, even though we were agnostic or atheist or whatever. My mother saw herself as scientific and full of a great number of theories that sounded like so much fantasy to me.

In any case, she'd have the four of us—John with that breathing problem that so annoyed me (and that would kill him before his ninth birthday), beautiful red-haired Liz (gone missing after that terrorist attack on Denver that changed so many lives), Robbie (who left after high school and hasn't been seen since), and I, Kent (like Superman's more interesting alter ego)—bow our little heads and say in unison, "I may have made some terrible mistake the day before yesterday, and the day before that, but today I promise to do better, and fix what I can."

It was a lot for four small children to say without error, much less understand, and I always messed up, mumbling some inanity to cover my mistake, such as "the day before, yada yada yada." Liz always got it perfect, of course—I don't know if she understood it or not. Me, I was fixated on how our mother introduced our little morning mantra: "before the day's clock starts ticking." Did that mean that whatever happened before breakfast didn't count? Could I make every mistake possible, without consequence, if I just got up early enough? The very idea left me dizzy with freedom.

"Mister, your thingy is hanging out."

I look around in alarm, see the little boy pointing, and discover that I must have snagged my pocket watch chain on something and now it's hanging out, dangling with its two-faced fob. I put it away quickly, as if it were an unmistakable indicator of my occupation, not some silliness the team had contrived in service of a forced sense of solidarity. I try not to look too closely at the boy's face—I always have trouble with the children's faces. But I make myself smile at him, and give him a little wave, and he turns away abruptly as if suddenly alarmed at his own boldness.

The watches had been Carter's idea. The team doesn't wear uniforms, of course, and isn't really a team per se, since we all do our work solo. The door to our headquarters simply states "Office 87" in unusually thin, Arial Narrow typeface—if you were to look at an angle you probably wouldn't see any words at all. The office is in an old industrial park outside Washington, D.C., sharing a building with an import/export operation and a small electronics firm. Williams claims these businesses are also fronts for secret government agencies, but then Williams has been disturbed at least as long as I've worked there. He's ten years older than the rest of us, numbering six as of the last time I was in the office, which was actually a long time ago. Sometimes I wonder if they've replaced me. Sometimes I don't care.

The boy has pointed me out to his parents, who are now staring at me strangely. Of

course, I don't know what the boy told them; perhaps he was just fascinated by my eccentric timepiece, but parents are naturally suspicious of a child's random encounters with strangers. Not that I blame them. "Random," I think, is the most frightening word in the language.

With our solo assignments carried out in secrecy and with minimal interaction, there is very little feeling of camaraderie in Office 87. So Carter said we should all wear these old-fashioned pocket watches, to symbolize that we're part of a team—the "Time Team," he called it, laughing. Actually, we all laughed over that one. Then he made some reference to television shows in the old days, and how pocket watches had a relationship to fictional accounts of time travel historically, and though we smiled and laughed at his bit of erudition, it was strained, because we didn't really care. Most of the team, I think, care very little about the past, except in a resentful, uncomfortable way. We have this lonely job, you see, which we but vaguely understand. Except for Williams, we're all young guys in our mid-twenties.

Even Williams went along with the watch idea, maybe just so that he, too, would feel part of a team. The only point of disagreement among us was Carter's insistence that all the watches be broken—faces cracked into as many tiny pieces as possible, then glued back in place—preferably with some of those pieces affixed, deliberately, into the wrong places—so that they were like non-functioning timepieces converted into small works of art. It was Williams who backed up Carter's idea with his own words. "The broken watches have double significance. The timepieces have no meaning for us, because we are working *through* time and are unrestrained by it. But at the same time, we are there in the first place to make some change, to fix something which, at least from our supervising agencies' perspectives, is broken."

You could tell from the way Williams said "perspectives" just how much he trusted the bosses' judgment.

The boy's father looks over at me unpleasantly, but I smile and nod, and the idiot routine appears to assuage him at least temporarily. "He was just admiring my watch!" I call out foolishly, lifting it out of my pocket to display it again. All around me I'm aware of people staring, but I soldier on. "You don't see many like this anymore!" The two-faced silver fob spins, four small emeralds for eyes.

Each of us chose our own fob. Carter's was an antique ornament, a bit of memorabilia from one of those ancient shows: a telephone booth. Williams attached a warped and fire-scarred bolt onto his chain. We were all curious, but no one asked. Mine was the two faces—Comedy on one side, Tragedy on the other—the only thing I had left from my mother. I remember she liked the way the eyes appeared to glow in the faintest light. I was fascinated by the way it spun between the two faces, always reminding me how joy and sorrow arrive randomly into a person's life, with equal possibility.

I really didn't expect the powers that be would allow us to carry these watches on our assignments, but after an initial investigation they didn't seem to care. My guess is some official personage somewhere up the line decided it would be good for morale.

The grocery store in Fraser, Colorado, is unusually crowded today, but I've learned that a few seriously deep breaths and a practiced soft-focusing of one's vision prevent the worst of the anxiety attacks. Medicine to control such incidents was always standard issue, but I ran out of the pills a long time ago. I'm not supposed to *be* here, after all, but thinking that way gets me nowhere.

Most of the people in here today are tourists, including the young boy's family, on their way to some hiking or ski vacation. Most of the other children I see with guarded glances are likewise strangers, so I'm not likely to have to deal with them to any serious degree. Out of a population hovering around a thousand there are less than a hundred local children, and they're fairly spread out—on most of my trips in for supplies I'm normally unlikely to encounter more than a dozen of them. On my drive I avoid the local school.

I found this all out before I came here. It's why I came here—that, and the fact that this town is very much the same as it was, will be, in my time. This was home. This will be home, before I came to work for the agency. Oh, my mother's house hasn't been built yet, and the names on the buildings, the brand names in the stores, are all different, but the *feel* of the place is almost identical. I'm more aware of land and sky, mountain and stream, than I am of people here. My initial jump was into Denver—that's where the mission was—in my day that city is twice the size, having consumed the western foothills almost entirely. It was like traveling alone through a gigantic metropolis of the dead. I had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

I turn around and discover a little girl standing in front of me. Our eyes lock, or rather, hers lock on mine. She's a local; I've seen her before. A little blonde, curly-headed slip of a thing. I think dolls and hair-ribbons, afternoon daydreams and playing school. I have convinced myself that children this age possess some sort of radar that informs them I do not belong inside their particular circumstance, although none of the children I have ever encountered on assignment have said anything that would verify this perception. Maybe they simply don't know how to put it into words. Her face goes soft, a runny pink. I can't quite take my eyes away when the effect begins. It is then I am painfully aware that I cannot *feel* her true age. I watch as the life appears to burn out of her, leaving her a cinder, a stone without even a memory of flesh. In my time she is long dead—in this time her life has hardly begun. As I gaze at her she seems the oldest creature on the planet, her ageless face shimmering like a ghost of everything we hold dear.

She smiles at me—*love me!* her new face appears to say. I give up a sliver of an involuntary smile, then I turn and practically run to the checkout lane. I can feel people, all these dead people, turning to stare, noticing me, examining me, but it cannot be helped. Everything feels out of its proper order and, of course, it is. I am deranged and rearranged. Everything I left behind exists in a kind of frozen death, and yet what moves around me where I have come to is a walking death, a talking death of all that is gone. I pay the young woman at the checkout with the practiced, fleshless smile, place these stinking, moist bills into her bony hand, and flee.

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My ancient pickup whines as it struggles to take me farther up the mountain to my cabin, rented with the rotting (but historically accurate) cash every team member carries for emergencies. The bills aren't really rotting, of course, but I will never get used to paper money, the soft, greasy feel of it. It just *feels* worthless to me. The amount of money they supply you for these "rare" emergencies, in fact, is phenomenal. So I have been forced to conclude that such emergencies have not been so rare after all. Periodically team members have gone missing. More than a few times we have been told a member required "medical leave."

We have been instructed that the adjustments we are to make on these assignments are intended to be simply and briefly executed—we were never meant to be gone more than a half hour or so. The reasoning is apparent—the briefer our voyage the less the chance we

will disrupt continuity for everyone else. The adjustments we're sent to make are supposedly well-considered, planned out in the finest detail, the possibility of some disaster because of our meddling either eliminated completely or minimized to within acceptable parameters.

Our mandate is that only seemingly innocuous but absolutely essential adjustments are ever approved, tiny actions that will save the lives of important personages, for example, issues of national security and public safety. In other words, we don't go in with guns blazing to save some important diplomat or president's daughter.

Small changes, the kind you'd supposedly hardly notice. One of my assignments was to break into a parked car, hot-wire it, and move it forward three and one-half feet. On another assignment I went back forty years and stole a letter from a man's desk. Another time I picked up a candy wrapper and threw it away. Seriously—an entire, very expensive mission just to dispose of a bit of trash.

The cabin is as simple a living space as I can imagine. Two rooms plus rudimentary toilet and shower. Both the main room and the sleeping quarters have large enough windows you can almost feel as if you are living out of doors. In one corner of the main room are a sink, stove, and refrigerator. I have seen such things in movies, but I'm embarrassed to say that even after six months here I am not comfortable using these appliances.

I have tried as much as possible to furnish these quarters with simple, ageless furniture of no particular era or style. Something to sit on. Something to lie down on. A table. Planks and stiles and some upholstery. I want to find a kind of stillness here. I do not want the sensation of floating through time.

In the opposite corner is a stone fireplace—the true wonder of my living arrangement. Unaccustomed as I am to an open flame, I could sit here for hours gazing into the various patterns made, the subtle variations in color, and feel the oh-so-present, palpable heat. But I don't. Knowing the tree shortages to come, how could I? Still, I have to confess I've burnt more wood during my time here than I needed for warmth. At least, I believe, right or wrong, I have a relatively clear view of the choices I am making.

In Office 87 we never had any idea what our actions were supposed to be preventing, whom we were saving, whose day we were making the slightest bit better. That has been an essential part of the protocol under which we operate. Someone else—in fact a room of someone elses, one would hope—decides everything, including, most importantly, whether the mission meets that criterion of essentiality via minimal change. We've been told it's all done by committee, that there are checks and balances, and that everything we're going to do on the assignment has been researched thoroughly to minimize the consequences.

None of us completely buys that, of course—we're not fools. In every government there are pressures, there are favors owed, advantages to be gained. Not all my assignments, I am convinced, were in aid of the common good.

But we always hoped for the best. They chose people with minimal ties who wanted to make the world better through small actions. These were people who had little to hold them to today. These were people in need of a mission.

These were foolish people who had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

Before our brief jaunts into dead people's lives they would scan us thoroughly, looking for foreign substances, chemicals in the blood, anomalies and, I suspect,

contraband. They removed splinters, grit trapped under nails, even microscopic organisms in some cases. We were to fast for twelve hours before missions. I tried to stretch that to sixteen whenever possible. We were always told that these were purely precautionary measures, that there had never been a “negative incident.”

They continually emphasize that their understanding of what we do is incomplete. Carter says he heard that before any of us were recruited the technicians missed a tiny wood splinter in a fellow, and when they sent him back it virtually exploded into a tree, with obvious consequences for the traveler. Williams says that story has been making the rounds for years and it’s complete crap. Still, I thoroughly check myself over before they do their scan, just to reassure myself. People make mistakes.

For the trip itself they strap you into a device resembling a boat mounted vertically onto a metal scaffold. You are not merely strapped to this device, but transfixed by means of cords, ties, and cuffs which bite into the skin and restrict breathing and movement. A device resembling some sort of sports helmet, complete with face and mouth guards is squeezed over your skull, which still isn’t sufficient to shield you from the extraordinarily bright lights shining onto your face from eight different directions. In the background a technician reads off blood pressure, respiratory, and electromagnetic readings, which only serves to increase your panic until, on the verge of nervous collapse, you are launched into sometime else. Or at least that is how it always was for me. I don’t know how it was for the others—it was something we all seemed hesitant to discuss.

At the end of your quick assignment you are returned to that same launch chamber, dragged, or so it seems, from the end of your spine. The force is so great you imagine that if that segmented column weren’t fully attached to muscle and rib it would slip right out of you like a snake. The one major difference in your return is that the launch room is dark, quiet, seemingly abandoned. I’m sure they have their reasons for it—maybe it’s to conserve power, maybe it’s to minimize agitation during re-entry—but every mission for me it was as if I’d gone to the end of the world, beyond the years of humankind, with no way to get back to my own time.

Anomalies have occurred, despite their lame assurances. On one trip Williams came back with the front half of a small lizard growing out of his left arm, near the elbow. If he bent his arm too far it squealed in pain. I came back once with a small shiny protuberance on the inner side of my left foot. They decided it was an additional toe and severed it a few weeks before my next job.

Carter returned in a state of shock his last mission before I came here, his face covered in ridges and folds of skin a half-inch deep. Initial speculation was that this might be some sort of aging after-effect. Carter was terrified. “But I feel fine!” he kept saying. As it turned out it was just an accumulation of loose, dead skin. The body manufactures a great deal of it during the course of an average year. Somehow Carter had collected a deposit of numerous decades’ worth, and all on his face. They just shaved it off, basically. The bottom layer of skin, the one Carter had departed with, was a bit raw, but none the worse for wear. Simply one of the many random vagaries of time travel, they explained. I don’t think any of us found comfort in this statement.

One of the things I do here is walk the woods surrounding the cabin, picking up any trash I can find, down to the tiniest bits, and examining every plant, every tree, committing these things, and the land and rock that support them, and the line of sky that backgrounds them, to memory.

I have never been particularly ecologically minded. Certainly we are trained to cause minimal damage to the environments we travel into, but that is more a technical issue, I think, with little philosophical impact on most of us. When you experience such massive transformations, witness widespread ecological and social changes on every other trip or so, you tend to accept these waves as natural, inevitable, unchangeable.

But being here for a period of time, knowing how *long* such things last, I feel compelled to make these small corrections, these minute removals of what, aesthetically at least, does not appear to belong. Every trip I take into town I bring my trash and anything else I no longer need for the landfill. They say they are building another ridge. Maybe they are.

I am fixing mistakes. And recording, recording all the time. Because having lost my own time, this—this land, these woods, these stones—this is my last view of the planet.

The Denver assignment had been set for twenty minutes, with an additional three minutes available for error correction. I arrived in that city's main park, inside a small area of trees. I don't like landing near trees—the possibility of waking up inside one seems all too real. I am told it has never happened.

A few feet away were some small children playing. I recognized the pale, red-haired girl from the briefings. Her name was Alice, and she was five years old. She was shy and somewhat sickly, but she gamely tried to join the other children in their play. They purposely ignored her. Even good kids can be quite cruel at times.

Her mother was approximately ten yards away, sitting on a bench with other mothers. She was deep in conversation with one of them. Even diligent parents are sometimes distracted. Even good parents forget how random the world is, how quickly the unexpected can occur.

I quickly walked over to the little girl. A small needle protruding from the coin in my hand delivered the sedative into her arm. I pulled her limp body onto my shoulder and ran to one side of the park where it bordered the busy street. The little girl, Alice, started to wake up.

I stopped and looked back at the mothers on the bench. No one had noticed. But my instructions were that the mother had to notice, had to see, so I waited. I didn't shout, I didn't wave my arms, I just waited.

The little girl on my shoulder started to cry. I felt a pang, but I reassured myself that this was okay. They hadn't suggested I hurt her—of course I would have said no if they had. I didn't believe they actually would. Surely they wouldn't. We're not out there to hurt people.

Now the mother, and the other mothers, were screaming. The little girl Alice was screaming. All according to plan. I ran across the street.

The back door of the building was unlocked. I ran in, started up the stairs. The little girl was crying. "Alice," I said. "Alice, I'm sorry. Everything's going to be all right. I promise." Idiotic, of course. I really had no idea.

The room was empty except for an old stained mattress on the floor. I gently set her down on that. She wasn't crying so much now—it was more like a whimper, like a small hurt animal. It made me feel worse than before. I couldn't think of anything else to say—I've never

been good with children. So I said, "Alice." I repeated it, "Alice, Alice, Alice." Then I said, "I'm sorry" again.

She looked up at me. She was getting that pink blur. I was seeing her skull. I kept telling myself I wasn't hurting her—this wasn't that big a deal. I would make my return. Her mother would find her here. She'd be fine. I kept waiting for the air to shimmer, for the world to crack open, and then they'd drag me back where I belonged.

But she was only five years old. How could I leave her there? What if her mother didn't find her right away? What if that's the way they intended it—maybe she was supposed to be by herself in this room for hours? Five years old and by herself. Terrified.

In aid of what? Maybe she'd become a politician, this experience having shaped her. Maybe even a world leader. Maybe this event would inspire ambition, or develop certain strengths. The world would be a better place.

Or maybe this was all meant to just line someone's pockets. Maybe someone was about to get rich off her pain. Or maybe because this had happened to her, some way, somehow, the terrorist attack on Denver would not take place, and my sister Liz would be alive.

I waited and waited, well past the time, and listened to this child cry. Until I could not take it anymore.

I picked her up. "We'll find Mommy," I said. And started for the door. Behind me I heard the shimmering—I turned and saw Williams' face. Something had gone wrong. Now I was part of the past needing to be fixed. But this child. I ran for the door, ignoring his shout.

I raced out of the building with Alice in my arms. Everything so bright; around me the air was opening in several places. There was Carter. There were people I did not recognize.

Dashing across the street we were almost run down by one of those old yellow taxi cabs. He stopped just in time. I held Alice tightly. And then when we reached the park and I saw her mother talking to the police officer I set her down and let her go.

I turned and ran back to where the air had opened. I went into the building and up those stairs. I waited for the tug on my spine. And felt nothing.

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There was, I think, only a random chance I could have escaped the local authorities. And yet here I am. And I've never felt the tug again, and there have been no signs of a rescue attempt, and after this long I do not expect there will be. It is only time that separates us, after all. They could have come at any moment if they'd really wanted to retrieve me.

Perhaps it's my fault. I should have followed the instructions precisely. It wasn't my decision to make. What's one little girl's tears to the destiny of millions?

Still, she was so frightened. / was frightened. There are important people in this world, and there are unimportant people. Big people and small people. It has always been this way. It doesn't matter how much I rail against it. The decisions of a few will change the lives of the rest of us. There is nothing to be done. And if you are a small person, they don't always come back for you.

I cannot say how I feel about this—my feelings are lost somewhere in time. I have felt them leave my body, on their way to where I cannot follow.

At night without the light pollution of a large city I have a clear view of the stars, in a sky so expansive I can hardly take it all in. I do not enjoy feeling small. I cannot appreciate or accept the basic facts of individual demise. Perhaps I am just a child. Clearly, I am out of order. Out of place.

I have a theory. I think it would have pleased my mother to know that I, too, have theories. Just like a scientist who knows what he or she is about. Liz would have said, “Mom! Kent has a theory!” And the whole family would have gathered around to listen to it.

I believe that without a strong sense of causality, you cannot feel real emotion: love, hate, passion. How can you grieve someone not yet born? How can you love someone who lived before your lifetime?

The rest of the team would have laughed to hear me say such things. I’d always been so practical—I did my job, and didn’t understand all that much about it. No sense of the big picture.

Now I am living hundreds of years away from anything I thought I knew. If “living” is the right word, surrounded as I am by the dead, who had been dead ages before I was even born.

Now, memory is my time machine. It is a highly unreliable time machine, subject to frequent breakdown and delays due to constant, meaningless distraction. But it is all I have.

“Let’s get going before the day’s clock starts ticking,” my mother sings, going around to each of our bowls to ladle in the hot cereal she has made. Fraser is an ice cold town, “the ice box of the nation” they sometimes call it, but our mother’s hot cereal has the power to protect us from the ultimate cold.

We bow our little heads. John breathes noisily, scarily, and I’m annoyed because he kept me up all night with it, but I stretch my hand under the table and put it on his just the same, because we are brothers and buddies and I want him to know I am still here, sitting beside him in the warmest kitchen in the world.

On the other side of me, out of the corner of my eye, I can see my sister Liz with her beautiful red hair. She doesn’t know it, but sometimes I will gaze at her head for what seems like hours, trying to find all the patterns her hair makes, which are like flames of shifting color, and though I know they aren’t real flames, I want to ask her why I can still feel their heat.

Then there is Robbie, always so quiet, but always the first to begin, “I may have made some terrible mistake the day before yesterday, and the day before that, but today I promise...” already I’ve lost the words, I just never can remember. I can never get it right. So I just give it all I have, say the only words I own, the words sitting there at the tip of my tongue, “the day before, the day before, yadda yadda yadda, Amen.”