

EXTEMPORE

by

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Everybody knew; everybody wanted to help Rossi the time-traveller. They came running up the scarlet beach, naked and golden as children, laughing happily.

“Legend is true,” they shouted. “He is here, just like great-grandfathers say!”

“What year is this?” Rossi asked, standing incongruously shirt-sleeved and alone in the sunlight – no great machines bulking around him, no devices, nothing but his own spindling body.

“Thairty-five twainty-seex, Mista Rossi!” they chorused.

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye!”

Flick. Flick. Flick. Those were days. *Flicketaflicketaflick* – weeks, months, years. WHIRRR … Centuries, millennia streaming past like sleet in a gale!

Now the beach was cold, and the people were buttoned up to their throats in stiff black cloth. Moving stiffly, like jointed stick people, they unfurled a huge banner: ‘SORI WI DO NOT SPIC YOUR SPICH. THIS IS YIR 5199 OF YOUR CALENDAR. HELO MR. ROSI.”

They all bowed, like marionettes, and Mr. Rossi bowed back. *Flick. Flick. Flicketaflicketa* WHIRRR …

The beach was gone. He was inside an enormous building, a sky-high vault, like the Empire State turned into one room. Two floating eggs swooped at him and hovered alertly, staring with poached eyes. Behind them reared a tilted neon slab blazing with diagrams and symbols, none of which he could recognise before *flicketa* WHIRRRR …

This time it was a wet stony plain, with salt marshes beyond it. Rossi was not interested and spent the time looking at the figures he had scrawled in his notebook. 1956, 1958, 1965 and so on, the intervals getting longer and longer, the curve rising until it was going almost straight up. If only he’d paid more attention to mathematics in school … *flickRRR* …

Now a white desert at night, bitter cold, where the towers of Manhattan should have been. Something mournfully thin flapped by over *fkRRRR* …

Blackness and fog was all he could *fkRRRR* …

Now the light and dark blinks in the greyness melted and ran together, flickering faster and faster until Rossi was looking at a bare leaping landscape as if through soap-smearred glasses – continents expanding and contracting, ice-caps slithering down and back again, the planet charging towards its cold death while only Rossi stood there to watch, gaunt and stiff, with a disapproving, wistful glint in his eye.

His name was Albert Eustace Rossi. He was from Seattle, a wild bony young man with a poetic forelock and the stare-you-down eyes of an animal. He had learned nothing in twelve years of school except how to get passing marks, and he had a large wistfulness but no talents at all.

He had come to New York because he thought something wonderful might happen.

He averaged two months on a job. He worked as a short-order cook (his eggs were greasy and his hamburgers burned), a plate-maker's helper in an offset shop, a shill in an auction gallery. He spent three weeks as a literary agent's critic, writing letters over his employer's signature to tell hapless reading-fee clients that their stories stank. He wrote bad verse for a while and sent it hopefully to all the best magazines, but concluded he was being held down by a clique.

He made no friends. The people he met seemed to be interested in nothing but baseball, or their incredibly boring jobs, or in making money. He tried hanging around the Village, wearing dungarees and a flowered shirt, but discovered that nobody noticed him.

It was the wrong century. What he wanted was a villa in Athens; or an island where the natives were childlike and friendly, and no masts ever lifted above the blue horizon; or a vast hygienic apartment in some future underground Utopia.

He bought certain science-fiction magazines and read them defiantly with the covers showing in cafeterias. Afterward, he took them home and marked them up with large exclamatory blue and red and green pencil and filed them away under his bed.

The idea of building a time machine had been growing a long while in his mind. sometimes in the morning on his way to work, looking up at the blue cloud-dotted endlessness of the sky, or staring at the tracery of lines and whorls on his unique fingertips, or trying to see into the cavernous unexplored depths of a brick in a wall, or lying on his narrow bed at night, conscious of all the bewildering sights and sounds and odours that had swirled past him in twenty-odd years, he would say to himself, Why not?

Why not? He found a second-hand copy of J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* and lost sleep for a week. He copied off the charts from it. Scotch-taped them to his wall; he wrote down his startling dreams every morning as soon as he awoke. There was a time outside time, Dunne said, in which to measure time; and a time outside that, in which to measure the time that measured time, and a time outside that … Why not?

An article in a barbershop about Einstein excited him, and he went to the library and read the encyclopaedia articles on relativity and space-time, frowning fiercely, going back again and again over the paragraphs he never did understand, but filling up all the same with a threshold feeling, an expectancy.

What looked like time to him might look like space to somebody else, said Einstein. A clock ran slower the faster it went. Good, fine. Why not? But it wasn't Einstein, or Minkowski, or Wehl who gave him the clue; it was an astronomer named Milne.

There were two ways of looking at time, Milne said. If you measured it by things that moved, like clock hands and the earth turning and going around the sun, that was one kind; Milne called it dynamical time and his symbol for it was τ . But if you measured it by things happening in the atom, like radioactivity and light being emitted, that was another kind; Milne called it kinematic time, or t . And the formula that connected the two showed that it depended on which you used whether the universe had ever had a beginning or would ever have an end – yes in τ ; time, no in t .

Then it all added together: Dunne saying you didn't really have to travel along the timetrack like a train, you just thought you did, but when you were asleep you forgot, and that was why you could have prophetic dreams. And Eddington: that all the great laws of physics we had been able to discover were just a sort of spidery framework, and that there was room between the strands for an unimaginable complexity of things.

He believed it instantly; he had known it all his life but had never had any words to think it in — that this reality wasn't all there was. Pay cheques, grimy window sills, rancid grease, nails in the shoes — how could it be?

It was all in the way you looked at it. That was what the *scientists* were saying — Einstein, Eddington, Milne, Dunne, all in a chorus. So it was a thing anybody could do, if he wanted it badly enough and was lucky. Rossi had always felt obscurely resentful that the day was past when you could discover something by looking at a teakettle or dropping gunk on a hot stove; but here, incredibly, was one more easy road to fame that everybody had missed.

Between the tip of his finger and the edge of the soiled plastic cover that hideously draped the hideous table, the shortest distance was a straight line containing an infinite number of points. His own body, he knew, was mostly empty space. Down there in the shadowy regions of the atom, in t time, you could describe how fast an electron was moving or where it was, but never both; you could never decide whether it was a wave or a particle; you couldn't even prove it existed at all, except as the ghost of its reflection appeared to you.

Why not?

It was summer, and the whole city was gasping for breath. Rossi had two weeks off and nowhere to go; the streets were empty of the Colorado vacationers; the renters of cabins in the mountains, the tailored flyers to Ireland, the Canadian Rockies, Denmark, Nova Scotia. All day long the sweaty subways had inched their loads of suffering out to Coney Island and Far Rockaway and back again, well salted, flayed with heat, shocked into a fishy torpor.

Now the island was still; flat and steaming, like a flounder on a griddle; every window open for an unimagined breath of air; silent as if the city were under glass. In dark rooms the bodies lay sprawled like a cannibal feast, all wakeful, all moveless, waiting for Time's tick.

Rossi had fasted all day, having in mind the impressive results claimed by Yogis, early Christian saints and Amerinds; he had drunk nothing but a glass of water in the morning and another at blazing noon. Standing now in the close darkness of his room, he felt that ocean of Time, heavy and stagnant, stretching away for ever. The galaxies hung in it like seaweed, and down at the bottom it was silted unfathomably deep with dead men. (Seashell murmur: I am.)

There it all was, temporal and eternal, t and τ , everything that was and would be. The electron dancing in its imaginary orbit, the mayfly's moment, the long drowse of the sequoias, the stretching of continents, the lonely drifting of stars; it cancelled them all against each other, and the result was stillness.

The sequoia's truth did not make the mayfly false. If a man could only see some other aspect of that totality, feel it, believe it — another relation of τ time to t …

He had chalked a diagram on the floor — not a pentacle but the nearest thing he could find, the quadrisectioned circle of the Michelson apparatus. Around it he had scrawled, 'e=mc²', 'Z²/n²', 'M=M₀+3K+2V',. Pinned up shielding the single bulb was a scrap of paper with some doggerel on it:

$t, \tau, t, \tau, t, \tau, t$

c

R√ 3

Cartesian co-ordinators x, y, z

–c²t²=me

It was in his head, hypnotically repeating: *t tau, t, tau, t tau t* …

As he stood there, the outlines of the paper swelled and blurred, rhythmically. He felt as if the whole universe were breathing, slowly and gigantically, all one, the smallest atom and the farthest star.

c over R times the square root of three …

He had a curious drunken sense that he was standing *outside*, that he could reach in and give himself a push, or a twist – no, that wasn't the word, either … But something was happening; he felt it, half in terror and half in delight.

less c squared, t squared, equals …

An intolerable tension squeezed Rossi tight. Across the room the paper, too near the bulb, crisped and burned. And (as the tension twisted him somehow, finding a new direction for release) that was the last thing Rossi saw before *flick*, it was daylight, and the room was clotted with moist char, *flick*, someone was moving across it, too swift to *flick*. *Flick. Flick. Flick, flick, flicketa-flicketa* …

And here he was. Most incredibly, what had seemed so true *was* true: by that effort of tranced will, he had transferred himself to another time rate, another relationship of *t* to τ ; – a variable relationship, like a huge merry-go-round that whirled and paused, and whirled again.

He had got on; how was he going to get off?

And – most terrifying question – where was the merry-go-round going? Whirling headlong to extinction and cold death, where the universe ended – or around the wheel again, to give him a second chance?

The blur exploded into white light. Stunned but safe inside his portable anomaly, Rossi watched the flaming earth cool, saw the emerging continents furred over with green, saw a kaleidoscope whirl of rainstorm and volcanic fury, pelting ice, earthquake, tsunami, fire!

Then he was in a forest, watching the branches sway as some great shape passed.

He was in a clearing, watching as a man in leather breeches killed a copper-skinned man with an axe.

He was in a log-walled room, watching a man in a wide collar stand up, toppling table and crockery, his eyes like onions.

He was in a church, and an old man behind the pulpit flung a book at him.

The church again, at evening, and two lonely women saw him and screamed.

He was in a bare, narrow room reeking of pitch. Somewhere outside, a dog set up a frenzied barking. A door opened and a wild, whiskery face popped in; a hand flung a blazing stick and flame leaped up …

He was on a broad green lawn, alone with a small boy and a frantic white duck. "Good morrow, sir. Will you help me catch this pesky …"

He was in a little pavilion. A grey-bearded man at a desk turned, snatching up a silver cross, whispering fiercely to the young man at his side, "Didn't I tell you!" He pointed the cross, quivering. "Quick, then! Will New York continue to grow?"

Rossi was off guard. "Sure. This is going to be the biggest city …"

The pavilion was gone; he was in a little perfumed nook, facing a long room across a railing. A red-haired youth, dozing in front of the fire, sat up with a guilty start. He gulped. "Who … who's going to win the election?"

"What election?" said Rossi. "I don't –"

"Who's going to win?" The youth came forward, pale-faced. "Hoover or Roosevelt? Who?"

"Oh, that election. Roosevelt."

"Uh, will the country …"

The same room. A bell was ringing; white lights dazzled his eyes. The bell stopped. An amplified voice said, "When will Germany surrender?"

"Uh, 1945," said Rossi, squinting. "May, 1945. Look, whoever you are –"

"When will Japan surrender?"

"Same year. September. Look, whoever you are …"

A tousle-headed man emerged from the glare, blinking, wrapping a robe around his bulging middle. He stared at Rossi while the mechanical voice spoke behind him.

"Please name the largest new industry in the next ten years."

"Uh, television, I guess. Listen, you right there, can't you …"

The same room, the same bell ringing. This was all wrong, Rossi realised irritably. Nineteen thirty-two, 1944 (?) – the next ought to be at least close to where he had started. There was supposed to be a row of cheap rooming houses – his room *here*.

"… election, Stevenson or Eisenhower?"

"Stevenson. I mean, Eisenhower. Now look, doesn't *anybody* –"

"When will there be an armistice in Korea?"

"Last year. *Next* year. You're mixing me up. Will you turn off that –"

"When and where will atomic bombs next be used in –"

"Listen!" Rossi shouted. "I'm getting mad! If you want me to answer questions, let me ask some! Get me some help! Get me –"

"What place in the United States will be safest when –"

"*Einstein!*" shouted Rossi.

But the little grey man with the bloodhound eyes couldn't help him, nor the bald moustachioed one who was there the next time. The walls were inlaid now with intricate tracings of white metal. The voice began asking him questions he couldn't answer.

The second time it happened, there was a *puff* and a massive rotten stench rolled into his nostrils. Rossi choked. "Stop that!"

"Answer!" blared the voice. "What's the meaning of those signals from space?"

"I don't know!" *Puff*. Furiously: "But there isn't any New York past here! It's all gone — nothing left but …"

Puff!

Then he was standing on the lake of glassy obsidian, just like the first time.

And then the jungle, and he said automatically, "My name is Rossi. What year …" But it wasn't the jungle, really. It had been cleared back, and there were neat rows of concrete houses, like an enormous tank trap, instead of grass-topped verandas showing through the trees.

Then came the savannah, and that was all different, too — there was a looming piled ugliness of a city rising half a mile away. Where were the nomads, the horsemen?

And next …

The beach; but it was dirty grey, not scarlet. One lone dark figure was hunched against the sun glare, staring out to sea; the golden people were gone.

Rossi felt lost. Whatever had happened to New York, back there — to the whole world, probably — something he had said or done had made it come out differently. Somehow they had saved out some of the old grimy, rushing civilisation, and it had lasted just long enough to blight all the fresh new things that ought to have come after it.

The stick men were not waiting on their cold beach.

He caught his breath. He was in the enormous building again, the same tilted slab blazing with light, the same floating eggs bulging their eyes at him. That hadn't changed, and perhaps nothing he could do would ever change it; for he knew well enough that that wasn't a human building.

But then came the white desert, and after it the fog, and his glimpses of the night began to blur together, faster and faster …

That was all. There was nothing left now but the swift vertiginous spin to the end-and-beginning, and then the wheel slowing as he came around again.

Rossi began to seethe. This was worse than dishwashing — his nightmare, the worst job he knew. Standing here, like a second hand ticking around the face of Time, while men who flickered and vanished threaded him with questions; a thing, a tool, a gyrating information booth!

Stop, he thought, and pushed — a costive pressure inside his brain — but nothing happened. He was a small boy forgotten on a carousel, a bug trapped between window and screen, a moth circling a lamp …

It came to him what the trouble was. There had to be the yearning, that single candle-cone focus of the spirit: that was the moving force, and all the rest — the fasting, the quiet, the rhymes — was only to channel and guide.

He would have to get off at the one place in the whole endless sweep of time where he wanted to be. And that place, he knew now without surprise, was the scarlet beach.

Which no longer existed, anywhere in the universe.

While he hung suspended on that thought, the flickering stopped at the prehistoric jungle; and the clearing with its copper dead man; and the log room, empty; the church, empty, too.

And the fiery room, now so fiercely ablaze that the hair of his forearms puffed and curled.

And the cool lawn, where the small boy stood agape

And the pavilion: the greybeard and the young man leaning together like blasted trees, livid-lipped.

There was the trouble: they had believed him, the first time around, and acting on what he told them, they had changed the world.

Only one thing to be done — destroy that belief, fuddle them, talk nonsense, like a ghost called up at a séance!

“Then you tell me to put all I have in land,” says greybeard, clutching the crucifix, “and wait for the increase!”

“Of course!” replied Rossi with instant cunning. “New York’s to be the biggest city — in the whole state of Maine!”

The pavilion vanished. Rossi saw with pleasure that the room that took its place was high-ceilinged and shabby, the obvious forerunner of his own roach-haunted cubby-hole in 1955. The long, panelled room with its fireplace and the youth dozing before it were gone, snuffed out, a might-have-been.

When a motherly looking woman lurched up out of a rocker, staring, he knew what to do.

He put his finger to his lips. “The lost candlestick is under the cellar stairs!” he hissed, and vanished.

The room was a little older, a little shabbier. A new partition had been added, bringing its dimensions down to those of the room Rossi knew, and there was a bed, and an old tin washbasin in the corner. A young woman was sprawled open-mouthed, fleshy and snoring, in the bed; Rossi looked away with faint prim disgust and waited.

The same room; *his* room, almost; a beefy stubbled man smoking in the armchair with his feet in a pan of water. The pipe dropped from his sprung jaw.

“I’m the family banshee,” Rossi remarked. “Beware, for a short man with a long knife is dogging your footsteps.” He squinted and bared his fangs; the man, standing up hurriedly, tipped the basin and stumbled half across the room before he recovered and whirled to the door, bellowing, leaving fat wet tracks and silence.

Now; *now* … It was night, and the sweaty unstirred heat of the city poured in around him. He was standing in the midst of the chalk marks he had scrawled a hundred billion years ago. The bare bulb was

still lighted; around it flames were licking tentatively at the edges of the table, cooking the plastic cover up into lumpy hissing puffs.

Rossi the shipping clerk; Rossi the elevator man; Rossi the *dishwasher!*

He let it pass. The room kaleidoscope-flickered from brown to green; a young man at the washbasin was pouring something amber into a glass, gurgling and clinking.

“Boo!” said Rossi, flapping his arms.

The young man whirled in a spasm of limbs, a long arc of brown droplets hanging. The door banged him out, and Rossi was alone, watching the drinking glass roll, counting the seconds until …

The walls were brown again; a calendar across the room said 1965 MAY 1965. An old man, spidery on the edge of the bed, was fumbling spectacles over the rank crests of his ears. “You’re real,” he said.

“I’m not,” said Rossi indignantly. He added, “Radishes. Lemons. Grapes. Blahhh!”

“Don’t put me off,” said the old man. He was ragged and hollow-templed, like a bird-skull, coloured like earth and milkweed floss, and his mouth was a drum over porcelain, but his oystery eyes were burning bright. “I knew the minute I saw you – you’re Rossi, the one that disappeared. If you can do that –” his teeth clacked – “you must know, you’ve got to tell me. Those ships that have landed on the moon – what are they building there? What do they want?”

“I don’t know. Nothing.”

“Please,” said the old man humbly. “You can’t be so cruel. I tried to warn people, but they’ve forgotten who I am. If you know; if you could just tell me …”

Rossi had a qualm, thinking of heat flashing down in that one intolerable blow that would leave the city squashed, glistening, as flat as the thin film of a bug. But remembering that, after all, the old man was not real, he said, “There isn’t anything. You made it up. You’re dreaming.”

And then, while the pure tension gathered and strained inside him, came the lake of obsidian.

And the jungle, just as it ought to be – the brown people carolling, “Hello, Mister Rossi, hello again, hello!”

And the savannah, the tall black-haired people reining in, breeze-blown, flash of teeth: “Hillo, Misser Rossi!”

And the *beach*.

The scarlet beach with its golden, laughing people: “Mista Rossi, Mista Rossi!” Heraldic glory under the clear sky, and out past the breakers the clear heart-stirring glint of sun on the sea; and the tension of the longing breaking free (stop), no need for symbols now (stop), a lifetime’s distillation of *I wish* … spurting, channelled, done.

There he stands where he longed to be, wearing the same pleased expression, for ever caught at the beginning of a hello – Rossi, the first man to travel in Time, and Rossi, the first man to Stop.

He's not to be mocked or mourned. Rossi was born a stranger; there are thousands of him, unconsidered gritty particles in the gears of history: the ne'er-do-wells, the superfluous people, shaped for some world that has never yet been invented. The air-conditioned utopias have no place for them; they would have been bad slaves and worse masters in Athens. As for the tropic isles — the Marquesas of 1800, or the Manhattan of 3256 — could Rossi swim a mile, dive six fathoms, climb a fifty-foot palm? If he had stepped alive onto that scarlet shore, would the young men have had him in their canoes, or the maidens in their bowers? But see him now, stonily immortal, the symbol of a wonderful thing that happened. The childlike golden people visit him every day, except when they forget. They drape his rock-hard flesh with garlands and lay little offerings at his feet; and when he lets it rain, they thump him.

The End