

... They First Make Mad

by Keith Stevenson

My stomach clenches, anticipating the next breach, but still I am unprepared. Picture a stone skipping across a glassy lake, but in reverse. The ripples move in towards the epicentre of every impact, each one bringing a jolt of ecstatic pain that unravels the senses, contorts muscles into cramping. And then the pain is gone and you're airborne, flying relentlessly towards the next touchdown, your body remaking itself in agonising surges. Telomeres lengthen, years fall away, all in a smothering silence. Even though you know you've been screaming since the journey began.

Timing isn't everything with this kind of travel. It's the only thing.

The lozenge deposits me in a newly vacated service elevator and skips on towards its inevitable rendezvous with Planck time. The pain has gone with the transition. That was another me. Another life. I look at myself in the smoky glass of the wall panel. Fingers feel smooth, taut skin where an hour ago (subjective) there had been dry wrinkles. I have an erection. I smile at myself in the mirrored surface and exit.

All around me is bustle and life. This is Paris, 2096. Before the Pogroms.

The Left Bank is still intact and I stroll along, breathing the summer air, looking at the pastels and charcoals. My hand closes on my wallet. The codes it contains, set up 80 years ago (subjective), a couple of days past (realtime), promise a very comfortable lifestyle, but there's no rush to access them. The old man I used to be was cautious to a fault and made sure the wallet contained banknotes appropriate to the era in case I was stranded by the dilation. I can think of better uses to put them to now. He chose Paris because of its conservatism, its relative political stability. But Paris has another side to appeal to a younger man's appetites. I turn towards the Boulevard St Germain and the 6eme arrondissement.

Not for the first time it occurs to me what a selfish life I lead. I console myself with the fact that publicising my discovery would have consigned it to destruction at best and some darkly motivated government meddling at worst. Given the alternatives, I decided to put it to the finest use I could possibly imagine — providing me with a long and comfortable life. Some would consider this a petty and pointlessly self-centred use of such an invention. They are the dreamers and visionaries, and I'm sure they truly believe they can make the world a better place. Embarking on my third lifetime, I feel my way is far more grounded in reality.

I smile at the girl sleeping beside me. I smell the soft ringlets of her hair, mingled with the scent of fresh sweat and sex. She's not beautiful. But the first bloom of youth gives her a certain attractiveness, a sought-after vitality which is ephemeral at best.

Standing on the cold parquet, I stride to the window. The Boulevard surges with traffic like a mighty river. Flyers hover above the main flow waiting to swoop into newly vacated gaps in a seemingly chaotic but radar-controlled ballet of near misses. The slidewalks are likewise crowded with business people, café-goers, tourists, students. All of them approaching the ephemeral, while I feel myself

becoming progressively more solid, more heavily engraved on the times with each passage. More real, even, than reality. Perhaps this is what it feels like to be a god.

‘Et une message pour vous, monsieur,’ the concierge says as I hand over a few crumpled bills. I look at the proffered mag strip as if it were a striking viper. There’s only one person who could know who I am and where I might be found this close to emergence. We aren’t meant to communicate.

Reluctantly, I snatch it from his nicotined fingers and push through the belle époque revolving doors to the street beyond.

My reader is the ‘latest’ model for 2096. The case, of course, is battered and scarred but it works well enough. I swipe the strip over the port and the screen lights up — Place George Pompidou. Juillet 16, 2096. 11.15am.

I check my chrono. I’d planned to cross the river to the central branch of the Banque de France anyway. This represents only a minor detour. But is it safe?

The trouble with an infinitely extended lifespan is that it multiplies natural caution at least tenfold. Your life somehow becomes much more precious simply because there’s more of it. I’d begun to grow irritated by a predilection I developed for doing nothing. It was the mark of an old man, and I’m certainly not that now. Besides, inaction could be equally deadly. A communication of this type would not be sent without some very good reason. I know myself that well at least.

I eschew the Metro, preferring to push along through the throngs of people. The meeting place isn’t far for my young legs. I feel so alive again!

The Seine flows darkly beneath me as I cross Pont St Michel. Ile de la Cité is far quieter and I pass the Conciergerie quickly. I’m just crossing Pont au Change when a man in front of me keels over suddenly and I fall on top of him.

“M’sieu’?” I begin, pushing myself to a half-crouch. Then I see his eyes. Completely milk white. I touch his face. The skin has lost its elasticity and feels hot. I crouch low over him, head craning to catch sight of the assailant as panic takes hold.

“Qu’ est ce que c’est?” a voice says from behind. And then I’m sent sprawling as another body falls across me. I get my knees under me, heave the weight off, and sprint for the far side of the bridge. There are shouts behind me and a gendarme’s shrill whistle, but I don’t dare stop running. Two people microwaved, one of them right on top of me. It has to be more than coincidence.

I’m well past Place du Chatelet before I force myself to a stroll, but my heart is pounding as much in fear as through my recent exertion. The Pompidou Centre isn’t far now, but will I be walking into a trap? The rational part of my mind tells me it’s probably safe. If whoever was shooting had sent the message, he would have waited at the meeting place, not knowing what route I may take. Perhaps I simply stumbled into some lunatic’s hour of carnage. No sane person would fire a weapon so close to the Prefecture of Police.

Cautious self-preservation wins out as I make my way to the wide open space that sides onto the Pompidou Centre. Crowds are out already, enjoying the warm summer sun. I keep to the west side of the square, in the lea of a group of older buildings that seem to glare accusingly at the retro-fitted oblong of glass and multi-coloured ducting opposite. I scan the rooftops looking for likely positions for sniper fire. But I’m fooling myself. I no more know where a professional killer might secrete

himself than I can play violin. Still, circumspection is the best tactic. I skirt the square looking at faces in the crowd. Most of the people there are staring up at the huge hologram that hovers above them, the solar system in miniature, moving in stately fashion as digits on the holo-sun's face count down the seconds to the next century.

I throw my last few coins at a street vendor and receive a cheese and ham crepe.

"Mostly empty calories, I'm afraid," a voice says behind me.

I spin around. A man, my height and colouring, but with a full beard and moustache is standing there. I look into my own eyes.

"We're not—" I begin.

"I know that. But this is a matter of life and death. Ours."

I look around. The street vendor is watching us, an odd expression on his face as his eyes jog between my 'friend' and myself.

"Walk with me," I say, and he falls in step as we begin to pace the outside of the square.

"You're not going to give me prior knowledge?" I ask. I have an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach. Some things were never meant to happen and this is one of them.

"Only what you need to survive. But I'm in more danger than you. I'm the second. It's you who has the advantage."

I stop and look at him. "I don't remember any of this."

He smiles in that annoying way I have. "It appears knowledge is limited by the speed of time, regardless of how often you go around." Then he becomes serious again. "I came in from Nassau on the orbital flyer this morning. Someone is going to kill our sixth in two day's time."

I stop again. So life is finite after all. "Wait a minute. How do *you* know?" I ask.

"Number 4 saw the aftermath. It was on a newsvid. A madman with a gun in central Melbourne. Number 6 was caught in the crossfire. Four sought out 1 and told him. Of course number 1 couldn't do anything until the lozenge carried him back past the event and 'he' became 'me'. But the fact he knew about 6's death was enough to kick him into a new timeline during the backward trip and, thanks to the lozenge, the rest of us came along for the ride. It's a whole new ball game now. I figured I could use some help."

"Too many madmen," I say.

"What?" My earlier self looks at me as if *I* have gone mad.

"Someone was taking pot shots at people with a microwave gun on my way here," I explain. "I very nearly didn't make it. Suppose this madman in Melbourne wasn't just firing indiscriminately."

He grabs my arm and steers me towards the Metro entrance. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"To the bank and then the orbiter 'port.'"

Travelling with oneself — 'seeing ourselves as others see us' — is an unnerving experience. I quickly become annoyed at the predictability of my partner's foibles. Insisting on a window seat, boarding at the last possible moment, eschewing the packaged meals in favour of some food supplement purchased in the 'port lobby.

Our/my decision to live out each life in separate parts of the globe takes on a new significance. It isn't just to avoid prior knowledge and the awful feeling of predestination. If we are to share the same space for any amount of time we'll probably end up killing each other/ourselves.

I try to distract myself from cataloguing faults by focusing on the reason for our flight. If the two shootings are linked, then I've been discovered. My active imagination lays out a whole galaxy of perpetrators but none seems more likely than any other. Has the government found my device in the future and dispatched assassins to wipe me from the time-stream? Or is it someone I offended in one of my incarnations, someone who has been able to discover my true nature and set about taking revenge in the most methodical, overkill way possible? There is still the possibility of coincidence. Live often enough and you're bound to run into life-threatening situations more than once.

One hour after lifting, we step off our flight in Melbourne. The cheery sun of Paris is all but forgotten in the overcast chill of midnight in mid-winter.

"I have no idea where he'd be staying," I say as we wait for the rapid-link into town.

"We know where he'll be in two days time. At the opening of the Pacific Games. I even have the seat block pinned down in the stadium."

The link speeds us into the heart of the city. Melbourne is a predictable clutter of thrusting towers in a collection of washed-out rainbow hues. It lacks the character of the European cities and is positively third-world compared to the beanpole spikes of the equatorial states. A glasteel canopy spreads across the CBD, sheltering us from the worst of the winter. We choose adjoining suites at one of the city's 'best' hotels — they're all the same really. There's no way I'm going to share a room, but we need to stay close, so this is a compromise.

I lock the communicating door on my side and run a hot bath, sinking into a mountain of bubbles. I should be relaxing in a suite at the George Cinq, ruminating over a bottle of Veuve Cliquot by now. I had the next 80 years all mapped out, and now I can't see past the next 48 hours. I rub at my temples, trying to massage away a tension headache. Damn this killer anyway. What right has he to endanger my lives? He's a mayfly by comparison. A nothing. I think of what I'll do to him when we finally track him down. I won't be using anything as quick as a microwave gun.

My dreams crowd with phantom assailants, and I wake next morning feeling no better. My partner — I called myself Abel Cartwright in that incarnation — wants to go out to the Games site and do some snooping, but I beg off, suggesting it's best we keep exposure to each other to a minimum.

I do some vague globalnet searching on the room port, but I soon give up. My entire being is refocusing around 11.23 am, Wednesday, 18 July 2096. If I save our sixth, my life can return to the track I've chosen for it. If I fail, I have to wait to become our fourth and try again. But between those two points will be 80 years of recriminations — 'if onlys' about what happened and 'what ifs' about my next chance. I don't want to live my life that way.

So I wait in my room, drink too much, and hate. Hate the killer, hate the maids who interrupt me and leave again hastily — beds unmade, towels unchanged — hate the city below me.

I shower and dress early the next morning. I'm ready for Abel before he knocks and we leave quietly together, walking the few hundred metres down to the bay and Victoria Stadium where the opening ceremony will be held.

Security is slack — after all, these are the 'friendly games' — and we pass quickly through to the main arena. Abel has fake IDs for us as technicians with the globalnet datastreaming division. Trackside, the air is thick with hoverbots, and the crowd is already making a hell of a noise. I hate sport. Christ alone knows what 'I' am doing at the stadium.

"The police reports pegged the shots coming from that gantry," Abel says, indicating an accessway above the second bank of seating across the field.

"Let's go," I say, anxious to get it over with.

A giant holo-orb is floating above the centre of the field. Some ageing chanteuse is belting out the Pacific Anthem, her bloated features magnified a hundredfold. I will be back in Paris in 6 hours, I promise myself. There is no way I am spending another night here.

Metal stairs run up through a gap in the stand. I take them two at a time. "Wait up," Abel calls behind me. "You'll scare him off."

He'll be scared, all right. But he won't be going anywhere. I reach the door to the accessway and throw it open. It slams against a support beam and the whole gantry rings with the impact. Someone's crouched overlooking the field, halfway along, a heavy duty assault rifle pressed to his cheek. He looks up, startled. For the second time in as many days, I stare myself in the face.

I recover first, covering the distance between us before he can swing the rifle my way. I kick him hard in the side of the head, and he goes down, the rifle skittering away across the checkplate. I'm consumed by rage. I want to hurt something. Badly. I reach down and grab a handful of shirt front. He has to be the fifth, or maybe higher.

"You idiot," I say, slapping him hard. "You're ruining everything, dammit—" slap. "What do you think you're playing at—" SLAP. A goblet of blood sprays from his ruined lips and I drop him to the decking. The crowd is screaming outside, it's hot as hell, and this piece of shit — my own self, for Christ's sake — is the reason I've been dragged here. He stares up at me, eyes all unfocused and laughs. Laughs!

The sound of the crowd fades, drowned out by a rushing noise that fills my ears. My cheeks are burning, and I grab him by the ears and smash his head into the decking. "Laugh that off!" I slam him again. And again. Arms wrap around my chest, dragging me away. I kick at the blood-spattered face until I'm pulled out of range.

"Stop it!" It's Abel. "Get a hold of yourself, for God's sake. We're meant to be saving a life."

"He deserves it," I snarl.

A massive explosion lifts us up together and flings us against the gantry wall. There's an eerie silence, and then the screaming below starts up again, this time laden with terror. The banner covering the front of the gantry has been blown away. Across the field, there's a smoking hole in the seating where our sixth had been. Floods of people are running now, fleeing the blast zone. Abel pulls a slimscreen from his pocket.

"— bomb, most likely a terrorist attack," the announcer's saying. "Wait. We have an image of the terrorist. Believed to be still at large in the stadium."

A grainy still, taken by hoverbot judging from the angle, appears. The image is being cleaned as we watch — a man bending down, touching a translucent sphere with one small grey rod protruding from its pearly white surface. The face is looking right at the lens.

“Number 6,” I say in a hoarse whisper. Abel sinks back on his haunches.

“What is happening to us?” he says, his face pale. “I’m not a violent man. I’m not a bomber or a sniper. I’ve never even been in a fist fight. But look what you did, all of you.”

I sit beside him, sparing a glance for my own handiwork slumped on the floor. The rage has left me as quickly as it came. Abel’s right. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t hurt a fly. And as for the rifle, I’ve never picked one up, let alone fired one.

“Something’s changing us,” I say. There’s a scrape behind me, and when I look around, our fifth is standing, swaying slightly, the rifle pointed at my eye socket. I should feel fear, but something hardens inside me. I grab the muzzle, push, twist, and ram the butt into his face, using the momentum to come to my feet. I know this shouldn’t be happening. But the fact that it is sends a thrill through my body. He goes down and I flip the gun, press it into his ribs, and fire. The recoil pitches me onto my back, and the body disintegrates. By the time I sit upright, Abel is headed for the exit.

“Wait,” I call, but he slams the door behind him, making good his escape.

It’s probably for the best. Abel’s obviously still more like the old me than what I’m becoming. I don’t know what’s causing it, but the effects are obvious. Perhaps humans aren’t meant to be remade again and again, aren’t meant to be gods.

The truth is, it can’t continue like this. Living quietly in the past is one thing. But this will change the future — my future, where my relatives and friends still live — irreparably.

I hunker over my own remains, pat pockets slick with blood until my fingers close on cool hardness and pull out a smooth, ceramic smart gun. Standing, I peel off my bloodied coveralls, wipe at spatters on my face and hands and push the gun into my belt, untucking my shirt front to conceal it.

Number 6 has to be stopped. And number 4 if he’s half as bad again as me. Once I’ve killed them, and any others out there, I may have to pay Abel a visit. And perhaps Number 1.

And when it’s all over, when there’s no one left, I’ll have to think about my own final disposition. If I live to travel back as number 4, there’s always the chance I’ll change my mind, try to put things back the way they were.

I don’t think I can let that happen.