

Once is one too many

by Lorenzo Maccone

It had been ready for weeks now. I had spent years tuning everything to perfection, but I just couldn't get myself to go for it. The dangers were too great, and its apparent blandness only underlined the raw anomaly of its potential lethality. So there I was, one sunny afternoon, slumped on the couch looking critically over a steaming cup of strong tea at the strange contraption in a corner of my living room. A tall beige metal rack was filled with humming electronics, a heartbeat of blinking leds. Black cable dreadlocks snaked from it towards a cheap-looking desktop computer whose innards were spilled loosely on the table, its monitor glowing softly in a corner, rows of alphanumeric waving by. "How improbable", I thought.

How fantastically improbable that I, an obscure relativist that never even obtained a proper research post and made ends meet only through the odd job for the local university, would stumble over the key to time travel. Of course everybody knows it's impossible. "Crank" and "crackpot" were the most polite feedback that I had obtained from my, admittedly rather pathetic, attempts to communicate my discovery to the world. My teacup started shaking imperceptibly as I tightened my grip at the thought. I'll show them: a few weeks ago I had finally managed to open the portal to a different "when". But I still had to work up the nerve to walk through the shimmering black circle to the side of my apparatus that would teleport me there or, rather, "then". Like a diver poised on the edge of an abyss, I was scared of taking that step into the void. Everything had been carefully planned. I knew exactly where and when I would emerge: ancient Rome, February the 14th, 67BC at twelve past midnight, local time. There was not much choice: it was one of the handful of admissible solutions of the chrono equations and by far the most interesting one. I had no desire of emerging in the middle of the Pacific ocean in the early carboniferous era, or in full Sahara desert in 1221, the only other two possibilities that wouldn't land me in outer space or deep underground.

Out of an excess of caution, I had even run a check on the available Latin literature from year 67BC. My mind wandered back to the day when I had discretely climbed the broad white stairway to the Humanities Department of the university. I had timidly knocked on the door of the office of the Professor of Roman History and Literature. A gruff "Come in" had propelled me in the dark musty office. I stood in front of an austere white-haired man who eyed me

abrasively between towering stacks of ancient crumbling texts. My circuitous web of carefully constructed lies had fallen apart in my own mouth as I shriveled in the professor's blustery aura. He had just sent me a quizzical look over the rim of his thick black spectacles, and that had propelled me back out of his door, mumbling an apology. While I was standing out of the door trying to subdue my embarrassment and quell my blushing, Lucy had walked by. She had plain, diaphanous skin and fair hair, but her eyes were an intense green. A splash of paint across her face. "Is everything all right?", she asked concerned. "He's a tough nut" she whispered conspiratorially pointing to the professor's door. "Quite" I managed to stammer in reply. She turned to walk away, but caught a glimmer of desperation in my eyes that must have tapped in her maternal sympathy. "Hey, I'm Lucy, by the way. How about a cup of coffee? The coffee machine's just been repaired. It's not as poisonous as usual". Over a white plastic cup of vile black coffee, her contagious laugh managed to lift my spirits and I explained her the reason for my visit. She certainly must have thought I was trying to hit on her, but my pickup line "I'm a theoretical physicist researching for a time travel to ancient Rome" was so original that she kept on listening to me, although with no attempt to conceal the ironic smirk on her face. She must have concluded that I was innocuous, or at least, innocuous enough, and we became friends. I discovered she was a PostDoc student studying Catullus and the neoterio poets, so I figured she must not be as innocent as she looked herself. I managed to convince her to run an in-depth study of all available chronicles of the year 67BC. In the following months I repeatedly quizzed her to try to learn all I could about that year, while finishing my machine. Of course, it was a good excuse to spend time with her, and her intoxicating enthusiasm about life in ancient Rome was so contagious that I soon became a true expert of the period. She even helped me in my meticulous preparation of the clothes for the voyage. Of course, Lucy just looked at my arrangements with ironic skepticism, and laughed them off as the eccentricities of one of the many intellectualoids that buzzed around the Humanities department. On my part, I had been extremely rigorous about my preparations: it was imperative that my trip leave no trace. Not that I expected it to, I didn't expect to meet anyone at that late hour and my first trip was to last as little as possible.

I had already sent a camera, but it had come back with very uninformative pictures of a dark alley. Perhaps there was the tail of a stray dog in one of the pictures,

but I couldn't tell for sure. "I'll just have to go and see for myself", I sighed, blowing on my cup of tea, stealing an oblique look at the humming machine in the corner of the living room. The tall window shades were partly drawn, and the sun sneaked in with diagonal streams of dusty fingers of light that painted a geometric pattern of stark shadows on the wooden floor. I raised myself heavily from the couch, carefully balancing the cup and brusquely drew the shades to a stark steel-blue sky. My glance fell on the sunny park, where kids were playing an elaborate game of tag around the pond, their bright clothes and shrill cries seemingly fanning the crisp wind through the meadow and up through golden leaves of the trees. I thought of Lucy with a vague melancholy, setting the cup on the sill, and smiled warily at the scene. My modest apartment had that one perk, the tall window over that beautiful park. I turned to look at the shimmering black circle next to the machine, took a deep breath and jumped in.

I fell flat on my face in the dark alley that my camera had photographed. I almost didn't dare to breathe, taking in the unfamiliar sounds of the cool roman night, my cheek resting heavily on a smooth dark stone slab, my right hand laying on the scrawny grass in the gap between two slabs. I slowly picked myself up and saw that the commotion had attracted the attention of a gentleman dressed in a long toga and his escort. "An tibi necesse est auxilio?", the gentleman asked politely, looking at me curiously in the light of a flickering torch held by one of his slaves. I tried my best to act casually, but I realized that in the haste of my departure I had forgotten to take off my glasses, so much for the carefully rehearsed dress. "Tibi ago gratias, sed valeo", I managed to stammer in reply, bowing in deference. I waited for the gentleman and his escort to pass by, trying to hide the nervous tremor in my right hand. As soon as they turned the corner, I took a deep breath and jumped back in the time portal.

Again I fell flat on my face, back in the living room. The pungent smell of charred electronics greeted me. "Dang!", picking myself up, I realized that the unaccounted misalignment of the gravitational field at the time portal had subjected the delicate time machine to an unexpected energy surge. With a sinking feeling I opened its beige protective lid. The wires that I had so carefully strung there were completely vaporized, and some charred greenish-black droplets of molten pcb resin was all that was left. The wires! They were composed of a bismuth-scandium alloy I had dedicated a large part of the last twenty years to attain. I realized I wouldn't be making a second trip.

I frantically ran to the sagging bookshelf and fished out the dog-eared worn volume of Cicero's orations. I sat heavily on the couch, opening it to the page I had studied so many times since my calculations had told me where the portal would bring me to. There, in a little-known passage of the ninth oration, Cicero's description of his midnight chance encounter with an elegant and well dressed foreigner with pieces of glass on his face. Cicero's art evident, giving a very accurate description in few crisp words. I sighed and glanced at the window, greeted by the same steel blue afternoon sky I had left a few minutes (or centuries?) before. I slowly stood up and walked to the window, hoping against hope that something, after all, had changed. I was greeted by the familiar landscape of ashy dead trees framed by yellowish grass, surrounded by the sagging empty houses charred by the nuclear fallouts and littered by black plastic bags waving lazily in the dusty wind. I could see the black smoke coming from the charred hull of a burning bus down the road, the familiar gunshots and AK47 bursts echoing through the alleys. I sighed again, closed my eyes, and pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the window. The dreadful realization finally sinking in: my life's quest, to change the past, had failed...