

Death Ray Butterfly
by Tom Lichtenberg

One

If there's one thing I hate it's private detectives. And lab guys. Lab guys think they can figure out who done it just by measuring how hard it was to mop up the blood. And private detectives think all it takes is some kind of unique slant on things and there you go. One time there was this crippled albino midget gypsy detective from Albania who thought that all that individuality he had was enough to go solving crimes, but he just got in the way, like they all do eventually. The main thing that kept all those cases cold was people sticking their noses in and mucking up the waters.

Pet peeves. I could go on and on with those. Don't think I ever found the limits to that! Maybe it's what they want, I don't know. They told me go ahead and start talking into this little black box here and just keep talking, long as it takes. Said don't worry about it. Whenever you start talking, whenever you stop, the little black box will know. Don't have to turn it on or turn it off. It doesn't make any noise either so I don't know. Just keep talking, they said, so that's what I'm doing. Wanted it all for "posterity", their word. Me and my famous cases, all of that. Another cranky old man going on about the good old days. Tell you one thing, it ain't gonna be like that. Never were no good old days I knew about. Or maybe there were and just nobody told me "here they are! Enjoy 'em! Ain't gonna last!"

So here I am, seventy-two years old, been retired from the force a few years now. Worked that beat a long time. Fifty goddamn years. That is a long time, tell you that much. Started out, there was one telephone in the whole department. By the time I retired, they got one planted in everybody's skull. So a lot can happen in fifty years, even if you don't stick to the one same

universe the whole time, or even get back to the one you started out on. That's the thing. I can't tell for sure if I ever did. Back when I chased old Cricket Jones throughout the time-space continuum, I'm pretty sure I started out on the one old Earth I was born on, but did I ever see it again? Can't say for sure. Similar, definitely, very much so, and maybe that's enough. You'll see what I mean when I get to it.

They want me to talk about Cricket. Want me to talk about Reyn Tundra, Melvin Eldon and Eldon Melvin too. Make sure you get Racine in there while you're at it, they said. Everybody loves to hear about her. They can't get enough of Racine, the cold-blooded mini-skirted killing machine she was. Talk about who stole the lady's leg bone. Don't forget about Shrimpie. All right, all right, I'll get there. In my own way, damn it. In my own time. See I'm just talking here, me and this little piece of black plastic I am holding in my hand. They said I didn't need to hold it, just be somewhere nearby but hey, if I'm talking to a thing, at least if I touch it I don't feel like I'm just talking to myself, which is what it looks like. They said I could go out and walk around if I like. Why would I do that? Seventy-two years spent mostly on my feet chasing bad guys. Time to sit down now. Look out the window. Raining out there anyway!

Two

So then my assistant Kelley says, why don't you start with the time they dragged you back in time to stop the toddler assassin? That was some weirdness there. See I'm sitting on my ass in the headquarters' office canteen enjoying my meltdown caffeine when the General - he's got bangles and shit on his coat - comes charging in, barking orders like straight out of an old time crappy movie.

"Mister Mole? Come with me. Big trouble. I need you to plug it like a leak."

I don't budge too easy so the guy started shouting louder like it would help me get the picture. Never did understand why people wave their hands around while they're talking. If I want to play charades I'll let you know. Generals don't impress me neither. I did some military time myself. Boy was I young then! Must have been some kind of war going on, it's hard to say. We did a lot of marching around. Some kind of yelling they did too. I don't get with all the talking so loud. I can hear you pretty good so just pipe down will you?

He's jabbing his finger this way and that, saying he's got some kind of machine and no time to waste, or rather a time machine that was going to waste, or he only had a few rides left before the thing expired, like it was going to pop like Cinderella's pumpkin. I finally dragged my butt over to the window where he was trying to show me it was outside. Thing looked like an ordinary car to me.

"Let me get this straight", I said to him. "You want me to go for a ride in that old buggy of yours, is that it?"

"No bugs," he shouted. "Nobody will hear a thing!"

“The car”, I shouted back. I can shout too when I want to. “Go for a ride in the car?”

“Yes, of course”, he jumped up and down all agitated. That was what he wanted after all, so I said okay and I followed him down the stairs and out to the street. He opened the passenger door for me and so I got in. He got in the driver's seat. It was pretty much your regular everyday car, only when he turned the key, it wasn't any engine turning on. We just vaporized. Poof. Like Cinderella's pumpkin after all. Next thing you know we're in some place I had never been before. He showed me a newspaper and jabbed a finger at the headline.

I was carsick. I climbed out of that thing and puked all over the sidewalk. The General he's there offering me a glass of water but if I remembered one thing they always told me about strange places it was don't ever drink the water so I didn't. General shrugged and led me into this really nice hotel room where they were planning to put me up. Slowly I got the story out of him, once I made him understand he didn't need to shout and to talk more slowly please.

Somehow they'd found out - I guess it was from their time machine - that some nameless three-year old girl was going to assassinate a presidential candidate. Sounded kind of fishy to me. Three-year old girls usually have names! Okay, a sorry excuse for a joke, I know. Sue me.

I didn't know what they wanted me to do about it, but it turned out they wanted me to stop it from happening. Since I was a detective from the future, they figured I'd know how. I wanted to ask him how they'd come up with such an incredibly stupid idea but he beat me to it.

“Look”, he told me, “It's a disposable time machine, okay? It's got pre-sets.”

When and where it could go was already fixed and it could only go two places and one time each place. They found out about the murder the first place and time. They ended up outside my office the second place and time. The general only had an hour so he asked the first person he saw who the best detective was and that was my assistant, Kelley, who said it was me, and that he could probably find me sitting on my fat ass in the kitchen drinking yesterday's coffee.

So now what, I wanted to know. How much time did I have to solve the case, and how was I supposed to get back to my own time after I did that? Then the general told me, speaking quietly for a change, that he didn't have a freaking clue. He'd done his bit. The rest was up to me, or God, or whatever.

Three

So where the hell was I? Somebody's going to have to go through this someday and do something about it, put it all in order, or not. What do I care? I'm just doing what they tell me. Seems like it's always been that way. Regulations and rules. Follow the procedures, fill out the paperwork. I spent half my career just staring at a piece of paper with a pencil in my hand. Summarize, they tell you, as if you can take the constellations of events, the coincidence of all those lives colliding at that very point, all of the accidents, alignments and misfortunes that it takes for every little thing that ever happened to happen at all. It astounds you if you have any sense whatsoever.

If that old lady had gone only one mile an hour slower or faster and if that city bus had stalled out only one or two seconds before and if that grocery cart wheel wasn't crooked and bent and if that umbrella, lying in the street, and if that young man had trimmed his sideburns just a hair, and if the sun had come up in the south and the cosmic dust had settled on a different rock ... you can drive yourself crazy thinking about stuff like that.

The boys on the beat never let me forget a word of it. Maybe I'd been in a coma or something for a moment, but once it got around, there I was, reputation and all. Stanley K. Mole, finder of lost souls, of Alma Perdida, the only police inspector in the force to witness the quantum mystery. That's when they started piling all those cases on my desk, beginning and ending with the coldest of the cold, Reyn Tundra.

I never let it bother me. At least I wasn't stuck on traffic duty, like Sergeant Oliver Jamm was after his close encounter with the alien grape. I wasn't pensioned off like Captain Zanzig Neese was after she was caught coddling cadavers in the cooler. I may have

gone off my rocker but I got back on pretty quick and I stayed back on that rocker ever since. I take it all with abiding grace if I do say so myself and I do. Say so myself.

They called the cases cold but I called them hard, and I was a hard case myself. Back since I was a kid, is what my dad always said. That boy's a hard case, got a hard head. All because I rode my bike down Ganges Hill without any brakes, just flew off into the hedges at the bottom, put my faith in God. Caught me all right, but scratched the hell out of me too. I still have the lacerations on my chest, been sixty years by now. Me and Smidge McCullers used to do that trick, him on roller skates even, the rickety four wheel kind. One summer we swore to conquer that mountain, limbs be damned, and damned if we didn't. Old Smidge could have used that kind of perseverance later on in life. Never did amount to much, did Smidge. Last time I saw him he was spending time alone, a lot of time, in solitary.

Don't we all? Shoot, here I am walking around the backyard with this dumb old black box in the palm of my hand, getting my sweat all over it and chatting up a storm. Feeling kind of stupid. Like Smidge McCullers. Now that boy was dumb. I remember one time I had to stop him from jumping off the roof of a six story building. Said he could make it, was sure he could, and wanted that twenty five cents I bet him but I took it back. Gave him the damn quarter just to save his life. That's what I call being a friend.

Four

My assistant, Kelley, is pestering me to talk about the girl Racine. People love to talk about her nowadays, since she got all mixed up in things and became so famous, and who was it who knew her way back when, when she was nothing, just getting started out? I guess I had my chances to nip that sucker in the bud, but what are you going to do when the kid is only twelve and facing life for a butchery so appalling that no one could believe it?

She was some kind of orphan I'm told, raised by the criminal mastermind sometimes known as Dennis Hobbs. Hobbs always claimed he worked for Jimmy Kruzel but I always suspected it was the other way around. Kruzel was kind of wimpy for an organized crime boss, always sniveling his way through interviews, whining about the room being cold, or the chair being hard on his butt. Kruzel owned all the riverboat gambling, it's true, but I think it was in name only. Hobbs had something on him and was using him like a front man.

Hobbs himself, though, what a piece of work. Man was wide as he was high and spoke in such a low voice and so softly you could never make out what the hell he was saying. Sounded more like the distant rumbling of a freight train than an actual human being talking. I remember some nights getting so pissed off I had to leave the room and turn on the TV just to hear the sound of an intelligible human voice.

Hauled that bastard in so many times, it wasn't funny. Then he had this little girl he was always towing around. Said he had to take her to school, pick her up from school, help her with her homework, always some excuse he thought would get him out of coming down to the station. Crazy. There'd be some killings on the docks and everybody knew that Hobbs was in it up to his

elbows. We'd come around, me and some rookie partner they were always saddling me with, and I'd be like, come on Hobbs, time to take a ride, and he'd go, "heck, officer" - son of a gun was always calling me 'officer' like he didn't know my name and rank - "I got to take my little girl to her dance recital tonight. She won't stand for it if I don't take her. Come on, officer, give a dad a break."

Like I gave a damn about giving breaks! I'm a cop, for Christ's sake. But he'd get those big old sad eyes going and my partner, always some wet-behind-the-ears little flake, he or she would get all sobby into it too and I'd just have to leave it, come back later. And damn if that little girl of his wasn't up to her knees in blood as well. Heard the strangest things about that kid, like she was literally born of the devil and some devilette, whatever you call those female demons, I forget the term. Long straight black hair, black eyes, thin as a rail, pale as a ghost, Racine came out of nowhere and was always tagging along her adopted papa Dennis.

She never said much, neither. Times I brought her in, always for murder or attempted murder - she never did anything less, never anything petty or small about that kid - she would never say a word. Knew her rights. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I ever even heard her voice back then outside of pleading "not guilty, your honor". They never sent her up for anything, never had the evidence, never had the witnesses. Clean as a whistle, every time, but the word was she had killed at least a dozen times, and rarely only a single person when she'd done it, usually a spree. They said she used a variety of weapons on her criminal occasions; guns, knives, swords, machetes, whips, chains, poison, acid. Girl had a repertoire.

Of course she vanished, that's how she got famous. Vanished but kept popping up from time to time, like the spirit she resembled. Rumors every day, years later, people claimed they'd seen her, same as she always used to be; somewhere between fifteen and

twenty, you could never be sure, though she had to be more than fifty by then. Last I saw that Racine she was smiling at me from the back of a getaway car. Like always, she was getting away!

Five

The crimes that go on nowadays, you can hardly believe it. We have people stealing skin - literally swiping the skin off your forearm, just to scrape the data and passwords that are embedded there. Not to mention the leg bones worth a fortune on the international market, shipped here from Ethiopia and Madagascar and God only knows where else. Then they got people cracking pacemakers for the serial codes and doing what they call 'spot-checking', which is a fancy term for mimicking gestures to control a personal auto-bot.

I don't even know what half these crazy crimes are but at the bottom of it it's always money, so that's one thing I do understand. Money and the screwed-up human being. It's always one thing or the other. Now with all the people in the world it's no wonder they're always talking about the remote personality control. A big city needs it. You can't have a hundred and fifty seven million people in a small space going about their business on their own!

Once they instituted that it was just a matter of time before the hoodlums and the lowlifes started working the angles around it. They can tap your wavelength, mess you up real good. You see these people staggering around now because somebody jacked their life and put them in a mood. You got them lying around on benches wondering where the hell they are, and then their families come and find them and take them back to Starters so they can get their tune up back to normal.

Mental technicians, there's a job. Down to a science, this business of what they call 'life ordering' and 'predisposition'. I'm lucky I got out of it because I retired in time and they were saving the cops for last in any case. Someone's got to be alert when

everyone else is sleeping, or might as well be. They tell me that the innovators have a special plug-in to keep them going. Got to have new stuff, you know, always got to have new stuff.

One time I was in a room somewhere, I'm forgetting where it was exactly, and I look outside the window, and I'm way above the street, and down there I see people walking and just like that, somebody just popped in, just popped right in. Weren't there but a second before and kept on walking like they'd been there all the time. I was rubbing my eyes because I couldn't believe it and I didn't tell nobody about it for a while, not even my assistant, Kelley. I know what I saw, though. It was real as you and me. Well, real as me in any case. I don't actually know about you.

There are strange things like that so I would never be surprised by anything anymore. You could tell me there are people who believe in billion year old souls living deep down in volcanoes that came here from another universe and I would nod and say, could be. Who knows? I've seen lost souls, and even found one, once upon a time.

She was just a corpse when I met her, a body laying up there in the woods around Pink City. She'd been in that state for quite awhile, nothing but bones were left. I don't know why they called me to the scene, because I wasn't in Lost Persons at the time, but Captain Cameroon - Rendira Cameroon - she thought of me, and asked for me specifically. I came up on to the scene - just a gully in the woods, nothing special, pile of bones there in a ditch.

Cameroon comes out and shakes my hand, she says,

“Mole, I got a feeling about this one. There's something missing here.”

“Looks like a whole lot missing”, I told her, “like a case, for one thing.”

“Oh, she was killed all right”, says Cameroon. “Shot right through the back of the head, execution-style, like they always say. Small

caliber, close range. She was kneeling, hands tied behind her back.”

“So who done it”, I asked facetiously. I was being rude because Cameroon seemed to have all the answers. Turned out she did.

“It was Curly and Rags”, she told me. “Curly already confessed. Been on his conscience now for seven years. Couldn't live with himself anymore. Even turned his own brother in as the shooter.”

“Hobbs' boys”, I nodded, and Cameroon agreed.

“He cut them loose”, she continued. “Hobbs didn't do nothing for them. Let them go.”

“So what's missing?” I asked her, and that's when she shook her head.

“Who she was”, she says.

“Now wait a minute”, I tell her. “Didn't Curly tell you who she was?”

“Claims he doesn't know”, she replies, “and Rags, he won't talk. Doing the time but in silence. Boys convicted of killing no one! No one with a name, that is. So that's why I wanted you, she said. I can't find out who she was. There's nothing on her, dental records nothing, missing persons nothing, federal agents nothing. You might say she's a real lost soul.”

“I bet her family'd like to know”, said Cameroon.

“I bet they would”, I told her.

Turned out to be a real puzzler. I won't bore you with the details now. Damn near drove me crazy, I can tell you that much.

Six

Maybe the case that dogged me the most over the years was Arab "Cricket" Jones. I can't even remember the first time I had to deal with that guy. It seemed like deja vu all over again every time he came to my attention. One time it was Jimmy Kruzel complaining about Jones - I can see him clearly now, sitting on the swivel chair in my office, swinging back and forth and scratching his nose, whining about how this nasty little man kept showing up on his riverboat casinos and swindling him out of all his money. Jones' modus operandi was legit, which only annoyed Kruzel even more. The guy would come in, gamble, and win every time. There had to be something wrong.

Jones won at everything and literally every time. No one could remember a single losing hand at cards, a single losing roll at craps, a single losing spin at roulette. Kruzel insisted that I do something about it. I did. I laughed in his face and enjoyed it. I told him to get out and stop disturbing my peace. But that wasn't the end of it. I figured Hobbs would put an end to Jones once and for all if he had a mind to, but I wasn't in the business of protecting gamblers from the trouble they brought on themselves. Funny thing was, Hobbs never seemed concerned about Cricket. He always let him in, always let him play, always paid him his winnings. That got my attention, eventually. There had to be an angle in it.

Okay, it didn't get my attention directly. I was never going out looking for cases - they had a way of finding me on their own. This time it was a squirrely private detective who bothered me about it. I hate private detectives, especially these corner cases, like this one, Shrimpie McDaniel. He was a short, fat, club-footed gay Eskimo with a Fu Manchu mustache and a mouth on him like

you wouldn't believe. Usually came in on a case after the crime lab assholes had totally screwed up the evidence so the real police, meaning me, couldn't locate a single uncontaminated shred of it. I don't know whoever told those lab guys they were supposed to be solving crimes! As far as I know, their job's to measure things and mop up blood. Sure enough there's some in every case who can't help but step all over the scene. Then they call in some loser like Shrimpie to cover their ass, pretend it was all his fault in retrospect. I'm on to that game. Seen it for years.

So Shrimpie comes in and tells me there were two Cricket Joneses at Kruzel's at the same time the other night. Absolutely two identical Joneses. Not brothers, not twins, not cousins - the same. And one of them was sticking out of the other one's trousers. I told Shrimpie to stuff it. Obviously he'd seen the bottom of too many bottles that night, but he swore on his mothers' graves, after letting me know he had three moms; a birth mother, a foster mother, and later an adoptive mother, all of them oddly passing away within a week of each other though hundreds of miles apart. Strange.

Arab Jones was at the blackjack table, standing behind the players, when the second Arab Jones popped out of the first one's pants, and strolled over to the bar. Every one who saw it dropped their jaws. Whatever that means. Like 'chiseled features'. Whenever I hear that I always have to say, are you kidding me? Who the heck drops their jaw? Shrimpie brought in the dealer, and he brought in some other witnesses, and they all swore on Shrimpie's mothers' graves that they were telling the truth.

“So what?” I wanted to know. “So the guy's some kind of magician, is that a crime? Is that worthy of my attention? And why are you telling me instead of rounding him up and selling him into the circus like a freak?”

Shrimpie says it's because I'm the one who gets the weird ones. It's my reputation, I'm telling you. So what am I supposed to do, pay a visit to this Cricket Jones and ask him how many of him there are at any given time?

“Get out of here” I roared, and Shrimpie beat it. But it wasn't the last I was to hear about Arab “Cricket” Jones. Some time later I get a package in the mail and inside was a note from Jones himself, along with what looked like a plastic cigarette lighter. In the note he tells me to be very, very careful, that it's disposable, and there's only a limited number of turns you can take, and that each of the parallel universes you can click to is very much like the one right next to it - just a teensy bit different - and the further you get the more the differences add up, but you never know, he underlined, you never know which direction you'll click into - backwards or forwards, it made no difference - or even how many layers at a time.

I stared at that note and I stared at that lighter. I came close to burning the first and melting the other. Wish I had. Would have saved me a lot of grief later on.

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