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about 1,000 words

### The Departure of Armand Laroux

Armand Laroux tugged on his gloves with the reverence of a surgeon. He checked the levels on the display panel and fiddled with a few knobs until the needles within the dial casings all pointed at optimal numbers. Between archaic dials and red-knobbed levers, a Polaroid of Armand's wife and child was tucked into a seam in the control panel. For weeks, Armand had struggled with his wife's decision to take their son and move back to Belgium. He had even considered scrapping his project and trying to get her back, but the project was too important and he had worked on it for too many decades.

"When it works," he said to the picture, "everything will be different." He ran a gloved thumb over her face.

Armand's notes were scattered across the floor of his contraption. Sheet after sheet of nearly endless calculations and theories covered the pages in erratic, scrawling handwriting that only Armand could decipher. The important notes were stacked on the swiveling chair on which Armand was sitting. He had checked his notes enough times to know them by heart, but he checked them again. His calculations were correct, Armand was certain. There was nothing he had not accounted for. He had studied city maps and landscape plans from thirty years ago to confirm the location of buildings and environmental changes.

Armand's hands began to shake when he realized the time had come. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he wheezed through corroded lungs. He reached across the console and took a cigarette from the carton. Thirty-six years he had worked on his project and he had been smoking for thirty-five.

The hinges on the chair protested Armand's weight as he leaned back. He rested his head against the chair and puffed at his cigarette. Smoke billowed along the roof of his machine.

Not for the first time, Armand considered burning down his warehouse, collecting the insurance, and leaving for Belgium to win back his wife. The engine fuel could ignite

at the mere mention of fire. He looked at the glowing embers of his cigarette. He shook his head and sucked down a lung-full of smoke. The project was too important, and when it worked there would be no need to win back his wife.

"No use putting this off any longer," he said.

Armand flicked on a few switches and the contraption began to hum. Lights flickered on above and the console glowed with a series of green lights. He pulled the hatch shut and locked it with the large lever protruding from the wall. He placed an old motorcycle helmet on his head and pulled on his Mark 49 goggles. He checked that his pistol was tucked into the holster on his belt and the safety was activated. He did not want any accidents mid-travel.

The hum of the machine grew louder and a second, higher pitch was added to the sound. Armand turned a knob and checked the levels on a few of the dials. A third pitch buzzed into existence, deeper and undulating like an off-balance washing mashing. Armand pulled a lever labeled INITIATION SEQUENCE. All three tones blended together and the contraption began to shake. The round porthole above the console rattled and the aluminum walls vibrated in time with the undulating engine. Armand looked at the picture of his estranged family.

"I will fix everything," he said. "We will be together again. I can fix all of this. I will see you soon, mon amour." He pulled the Polaroid from the console and kissed his wife's likeness.

There was a faint orange glow emanating from the halogen lights above, and the engine vibrations had taken on a melodic reverberation. The sounds bounced from the walls like taps on a steel drum. Armand pulled the buckle strap over his shoulder and locked it into place. He took hold of the control sticks that rose from each armrest. The sticks did nothing, but Armand liked the comfort they supplied. At least he felt like he was in control.

An automated countdown echoed through scratchy speakers. It was Armand's voice.

"5," it said.

He braced himself against the chair.

"4."

Sweat dripped down his back.

"3."

"Time travel," he said.

"2."

"What was I thinking?"

"1."

The cockpit chamber bloomed a brilliant orange and Armand squeezed his eyes closed. The light was so bright he could still see the console dials. He held his hand up and counted his fingers through closed lids. The vibrations of the time-engine were causing his teeth to chatter and his eardrums felt as if they were going to burst. There was a sudden sharp pain in his left ear followed by intense ringing, and something warm and wet trickled down his cheek.

Then it was over.

The vibrations stopped, the color disappeared, even sound ceased. For a moment, Armand thought he had been rendered deaf. He feared--and hoped--his machine had worked, that he had gone back thirty years, and he could stop himself from creating the contraption.

He opened his eyes and he understood the silence.

Taking up most of the porthole was the sphere of the Earth. The planet hung like an ornament in front of a backdrop of shimmering stars and meaningful black. The blues and greens glistened in the sun's light, and Armand could make out the clouds of Hurricane Patricia traveling toward Mexico. His machine had worked and his timing was perfect.

But something had gone wrong.

As the atmosphere in his contraption was sucked into the void and Armand felt cold and pressure and doom, he realized his mistake. He had failed to calculate the Earth's trajectory around the Sun. He was in the same location in the universe, thirty years in the past, but the Earth was not.

*Well, Armand thought as his lungs searched for oxygen that did not exist, at least it worked.*