

Past Lives

A Fireball XL5 story

by

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Professor Matthew Mattic was very busy. He had locked himself into his lab at Space City several days ago, and hadn't been out since. His Fireball XL5 crewmates, Doctor Venus, and Colonel Steve Zodiac, had been leaving food for him outside the lab's door three times each day, and he had been occasionally picking it up and eating it, but only when hunger threatened to overwhelm his thoughts. Sleep had come only when he nodded off at his workbench. His telephone and video communicators were all switched off or disconnected. Even Robert, the amazing transparent robot he had built to co-pilot the XL5, was deactivated in his charging unit. Matt wanted no distractions. He was determined to see this project thru, no matter what.

The Time Machine. It haunted him. He had succeeded in breaking the time barrier some months before, but that dratted Lazoon had ruined everything by sending Steve, Venus, and Commander Zero into Earth's wild west past. The settings had been so bollixed by the animal that he had been forced to push the machine to destruction to recover them. He HAD to recreate the machine and prove that it wasn't an accident that it had actually worked. Another problem had come up as well...None of the time travellers could remember being in the past. It was if they had ceased to exist as themselves and become other people back then. They had recovered themselves upon arrival back in their proper time. A time machine that caused you to become someone else while in another era was useless. He'd been over and over the circuit diagrams for the machine for days, but couldn't find anything that would cause this effect. As he continued to pore over the diagrams, his eyes began to close. He'd been awake for over 24 hours, and sleep was beginning to claim him, no matter how much coffee he drank. His head nodded, and he fell sound asleep with his head resting on the drafting table. As he snored softly, he began to dream...

“W-W-Where am I?”, he stuttered. Looking around, he could see he wasn't in his lab anymore. He was lying on green grass under a clear blue sky. A large leafy tree extended above him, swaying gently in a soft, warm breeze. There were several brick buildings nearby, connected with sidewalks. Several young people passed by him, talking and laughing. Looking down at himself, he saw that he was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and dark blue necktie. Hmmm, he thought. “Looks like a suit from the 1960's.” A blonde young woman in a short skirt and blouse walked up to him and regarded him curiously. “Professor Mattic, aren't you going to class today?” “Oh, I, uh, of course!” he answered, standing and brushing his clothes off. He had no idea what class he was supposed to teach, or where, and panic began to grip him. “Well, then come on!” the young woman said. He followed her into one of the nearby buildings. As they entered the glass doors, he caught a look at his reflection. He was young, maybe in his early 30's, with curly red hair! He still wore glasses, but not the thick-lensed ones he was used to. Shiny, black leather shoes covered his feet, and he was tall, perhaps 6-foot or so. A memory came to him. His great-grandfather, Peter Mattic, had been a Professor of engineering at Cal-Tech in California in the 1960's. He remembered seeing the man in photos in his Mother's photo albums when he was a child. The woman startled him again. “Come on, Professor! class has already

started and you're admiring yourself in a reflection!". He large, friendly smile reassured him. They walked a short distance to a classroom and entered. Twenty or so other students became quiet when he entered and began taking out notebooks and writing utensils. The young woman took her seat at the front of the hall near a desk. He assumed he was to go to the desk, so he walked over to it and found a stack of neatly written notes there. Taking a quick look thru them, he found himself at home. The engineering principles in the notes were a bit primitive to him, but fit the era he appeared to be in. It seemed natural to take up the notes and begin a lecture. Of course, as himself, Matt had taught more than a few courses at various Earth universities before joining the space effort.

One of the notes was a seating chart with the names of the students. The young woman who had helped him to class was named Jenny Angel. "How appropriate!" he thought to himself. The class went well, and the students filed out when the bell rang. Jenny came to him as he was gathering the notes back into a neat pile. "Professor," she began, a bit shyly. "I know you teach engineering, but what do you know about past life regression?" This startled Matt. All at once, he saw a connection between the time traveler's experience and this dream.

Waking with a start, Matt nearly fell off his stool. He ran to his quarters aboard Fireball XL5 and retrieved an ancient photo album that he had carried with him since he had left home for university. Flipping quickly thru the yellowed pages, he suddenly felt his stomach drop to his feet. There was a photo of a tall, young man with curly red hair, obviously in a college setting. A young blond woman was standing beside him, holding flowers and wearing a wedding veil. The hand-written caption under the photo read, "Professor Peter Mattic and his new wife Jenny, on their wedding day - June 17, 1967".

"Oh, my goodness!" he exclaimed. Now he thought he knew what was wrong with the time machine. He returned to his lab and quickly consulted the computer for all information it could find on past life regression. There it was, plain as the nose on his face. Past life regression was theorized to connect a person, through hypnosis, to a previous life they had experienced in distant times past. Experimenters reported that different people seemed to connect to different eras, and to often very different people. Some saw themselves as the opposite sex, some as other races. All were able to relate, while under hypnosis, exacting details of their life in the past era, and of conditions then. Unless commanded explicitly to remember, however, most did not recall their experiences.

It was obvious to Matt that the time machine was tapping into that very same continuum of experiences that the past life regression experimenters were, but in a more controlled fashion. The machine could direct the person to a specific year and geographical location. It also materially transported the body of the traveller, but not their consciousness. They acquired a "local" consciousness upon materialising in the target time period, and re-acquired their own when they returned to their present. So, in effect, his machine could not really transport a person to another time. At least not in a useful fashion. The machine could, however, transport a machine, robot or some other machine that could record what it experienced to whatever time period they wanted.

Exhausted, Matt sighed. He showered and slept for the better part of a day. Emerging from his lab, he sought out his friends. He found Steve and Venus at her beach house, listening to the

latest music and trying to dance something Venus described as “the Watusi”, which involved a lot of jumping. Feeling himself once again, he began to explain what he had found and experienced. Both Steve and Venus listened attentively, and when he was finished, Venus sat next to him and took his hand. “Dear Matthew, we're so sorry your time machine won't work the way you want it to, but don't you see now that you have proved that no one ever truly dies? A person's thoughts and experiences aren't lost at death, but are recorded somehow in the very fabric of space and time, and your machine can help us connect to them when we need to.” Steve joined in, “Yeah, Matt! It's not a failure, it's an opportunity to explore a new horizon. And speaking of which, we'd all better turn in soon. We go back on patrol in Sector 25 in the morning. Come on, Matt, I'll drop you off at Fireball.”

As Steve and Matt sped thru the darkness toward the great spaceship, Matt turned his gaze up to the stars, and muttered, “Thanks, Great Grandma Jenny...you helped me see the truth. Maybe someday we can talk some more...”.