

# Circularity (story fragment)

by Lorenzo Baehne

Ian Markham stood before the massive triangular window of Circularity's pyramidal office building. Its Technicolor hologram, a coup in advertising sloganeering, urgently flashed the company's ubiquitous tagline—

IT'S NOT JUST AN ADVENTURE. IT'S A SECOND CHANCE!

He looked down again at the brochure in his hand, creased from a hundred foldings. He had taken to carrying it everywhere over the last year, removing the document from time to time to read once again information he had long since memorized.

Ian had considered the procedure many times before. Reentering an earlier version of himself as a teenager was more than a little frightening, not to mention extreme. Yet the thought was also exhilarating. During his second shot at life he would perhaps venture to university. He could become a doctor, perhaps, or a lawyer or . . . oh, who was he kidding? Psychocasting does not a genius make.

These were the early fantasies. The unrealistic ones. He cared nothing for medicine or law. Sterile pursuits, really, which failed to inspire even a hint of enthusiasm. Perhaps he could become a writer instead. That line of work always spoke to him, voracious reader that he is. Becoming the new Lovecraft or Ligotti certainly held its appeal. But these dreams were likewise fantastic, he concluded. A man cannot build a life around the off chance of winning the lottery, after all. If he was going to see this through he had to pull his

expectations down to earth. Pragmatism was the way to go, he decided.

In time Ian began to wonder why a second chance was so important to him. What was wrong with his current life that he desired a new start? Sure, he did not earn a lot of money. He struggled to make ends meet, in fact. But as a man of simple tastes he did not require much. It was true, he was alone, but Ian had his books and a quiet apartment to himself. In recent weeks, however, another idea had begun to supplant the fantastic notions he previously entertained.

Reka.

He often thought of her. In truth, he was obsessed with Reka. A fact that came with its own twinge of regret and shame. One would think he would have gotten over her by this time—seven years later. Seven years, that is, since Ian had chosen another woman over Reka Rados. A terrible blunder, as it turned out, which even at the time had made itself abundantly apparent. Try as he might, however, Ian could not undo or mitigate the damage his decision had caused to either Ian's life or her own.

He refolded the brochure and jammed it into a coat pocket. Ian pulled open the door and was greeted by even more blinding displays. Flamboyant pink and emerald and violet assaulted his senses.

“Mr. Markham?” the attentive customer service woman inquired. She was instantly in motion from behind her ornate desk across the office.

“Yes, I'm Ian Markham.”

"We were expecting you. You're right on time," she smiled. "Mr. Twiss, our staff consultant, will be available in just a few moments. If you'll have a seat he'll be right with you." She indicated a row of ergonomic chairs to her left.

"Thank you," he said.

He dropped his rucksack on the floor, seated himself, and lifted from the pile a news magazine with a dizzying hologram on its cover. He absently flipped through its pages, stopping every few seconds to consult his timepiece, and resumed flipping. He turned the next page only to turn quickly back. The article's title that caught his attention inquired of the reader:

#### TIME'S SECRET ASSASSINS?

Ian began to browse the piece, occasionally cocking a skeptical brow when his eyes collided with a particularly breathless claim. It was the next paragraph, however, that enticed him to read its allegations a second time . . .

*A number of reports from anonymous industry insiders point to the seemingly impossible yet entirely consistent assertion that a popular tech firm whose focus is time manipulation is getting away—literally—with murder. The same sources point to clandestine operations conducted along numerous timelines. The shadowy operatives are tasked with, among other activities, exacting payment from their many clients, maintaining their parent company's methods, protecting its proprietary IP, and when necessary to keep those secrets under wraps, assassination. It now only remains to be seen whether—*

"Hello, Mr. Markham. I'm Harold Twiss. Are you ready?"

The consultant's office, fashionably spartan, held but an office chair, a desk, and before it, two over-stuffed chairs for clients. Its eastern wall boasted a large window overlooking a cavernous lab which housed a dozen stainless steel towers. Upon the deck and encircling each tower lay roughly a score of evenly-spaced pods.

"Is that it?" Ian said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder as he seated himself.

Twiss looked up from the bundle of paperwork on his desk, his eyes following the gesture, "Indeed it is," he said, "but let's not get ahead of ourselves." He glanced back at the paperwork. "I see you've indicated on our questionnaire that you wish to return a mere seven years before the present. I have to say that's unusual." He looked up at Ian, "Most of our clients opt for a childhood reinsertion or perhaps to their teenage years at the latest. They want to make the most of the experience, you understand. Also, given the expense, they want their money's worth." Twiss placed his elbows on the desk. "Tell me, what do you know about Circularity?"

Ian immediately felt a sudden dampness between his shoulders. "I'm familiar with the holo-ads, of course," he said. "And its tagline."

"'It's not just an adventure. It's a second chance!'" Twiss recited. "I've always thought that a bit derivative. Apart from our motto, though, have you sought any further information about the services our company offers?"

Ian fell silent for a moment as he plumbed his memory. "I read up on Velimir Rinski," he perked up. "The founder of Circularity and the inventor of psychocasting technology."

"By all means." The consultant gestured for Ian to continue.

"Well," Ian began, "Rinski was from Poland. A small town just outside of Warsaw. His twin brother Jacek was murdered during the Warsaw uprising in the second year of the pandemic. Jacek was something of an activist and agitator, which didn't go over well with the hardline authorities. In the end his corpse was strung up on a bridge by government thugs as a warning to everyone. 'Oppose the right wing government and *this* is what happens to you.'

"Message sent.

"The brothers were twenty-two years old at the time. In fact, it was Rinski's desire to save Jacek that led to his groundbreaking temporal research.

"Soon thereafter Rinski emigrated from Poland, and after several years in various European cities he eventually resettled in America. But the loss of his twin left a ragged hole in his life. A hole he couldn't shore up. While living in Prague, Rinski began developing his theory of temporal reconstitution or psychocasting. That is, reinserting one's consciousness into a previous version of oneself. The math is far too rigorous for the untutored like myself, but apparently it worked. It validated everything Rinski thought to be true of reconstitution theory. It was his Eureka! moment.

"Rinski believed that if he could locate himself earlier in the timeline there was nothing to prohibit—theoretically—the psychocasting of his consciousness into his younger self. But how to find his earlier incarnation and keep track of the new timeline from the current one proved problematic, to say the least. He soon found a solution, however, and invented what would come to be called the Rinski module."

"Two birds with one stone," Twiss concluded. "He discovered a method for reacquiring his preceding self and also a means of monitoring the new timeline from the present. He fabricated those

technologies in this very city." Twiss leaned back in his chair. "My goodness you have done your homework."

But Ian had fallen silent for a contemplative moment. When next he spoke, he said: "What happened to Velimir Rinski? I couldn't find an obituary anywhere on the Network, and it wasn't for a lack of trying. Did he psychocast?"

Twiss seemed suddenly uncomfortable at the question. He cleared his throat, and after a noticeable hesitation, he said, "He did. According to him, many times."

Ian was stunned by this answer. "But how is that possible? I thought reinsertion was a one-way trip. Are you suggesting—"

"I'm suggesting nothing," Twiss politely cut him off. "Rinski claimed he could bounce back and forth in time. But if true it scarcely matters, because he was the only one who could. Whatever secrets Rinski had he took with him on his final psychocast almost twenty years ago." Twiss's countenance then took on a pensive cast. "Yet, that still leaves your desire to regain only seven years," Twiss said, bringing the conversation full circle.

Ian looked embarrassed by the observation. After squirming in his chair for a few excruciating moments, Ian said, "It's not my school days that I wish to revisit. It's something altogether different I have in mind."

Twiss leaned back in his chair and scrutinized Ian for a moment, hands steeped before his chin. "Love, is it?"

Ian could feel his face flush crimson. "Is that a stupid reason?"

"Not at all," Twiss said. "On occasion a client will psychocast with similar aspirations. To repair a marriage, say, or to reunite with

estranged children. But even in such cases our clients cast much earlier than seven years.”

“Am I legally obligated to divulge my reasons?”

“No. We at Circularity understand our clients' need for privacy. We ourselves insist upon nothing less where our temporal reconstitution technology is concerned. Privacy is paramount, you understand.”

Twiss shuffled a fistful of paperwork then and donned his retro spectacles. “We're almost finished. You'll have to forgive me, Mr. Markham. I understand this next issue is a delicate subject. However, I need to ensure that you comprehend the financial arrangement you're making with us.”

“My understanding is Circularity will receive ten percent of all earnings in my new timeline,” Ian said.

“That's right. Our techs will contact you on your arrival. At which point you will set up a payment plan with your assigned technician and undergo something of an orientation.”

Ian nodded, but soon shifted awkwardly in his seat. “I'm embarrassed to ask this,” he said, “but what about time anomalies? Is that something I need to worry about? Will I cease to exist if, say, I kill a distant relative?”

Twiss smiled politely at what he clearly thought a quaint question. “You're referring to the grandfather paradox. And no. Reinsertion doesn't work that way. It is an earlier version of an already-existent you that you're returning to. You *could* kill your grandfather, I suppose. Provided he's still alive to be killed, and provided you're willing to do twenty-five to life for the offense.”

Twiss interlaced his fingers on the desktop, smiled the smile of a patient man, and so it went with the remainder of the consultation.

The 2 pm mag-rail afforded Ian time to review his lengthy meeting with Twiss. Ian had felt awkward for the duration of the consultation. It was not Twiss per se who conjured his feelings of disquiet but rather the unusual topic of discussion. Ian, a layman, felt ridiculous conversing on the science of temporal reconstitution and of starting his life over again. On parting, Ian was relieved to learn he could change his mind during the next thirty days. It was a grace period granted all of Circularity's clients and Ian was thankful for it. But given the gravity of the decision that lay before him and the prospect of reuniting with Reka, he found his thoughts returning to Velimir Rinski, the mysteriously-vanished founder of the company.

Why would a man abandon his life's work? Ian wondered. Rinski was the kind of genius who comes along only twice or thrice in a millennium. Ian could make no sense of his disappearance. Particularly if Rinski's claim that he could bend time to his will was fact-based rather than mere image maintenance. It rang true to Ian's ears, because this scrap of biography never appeared in Circularity's holo-ads or in the company's official history. Which meant it was far from idle street gossip, and he got the sense it was not a story Twiss dismissed out of hand.

Ian was roused from his thoughts by the intrusive political ad playing in the coach's holo-display frame. Ignoring the ever present advertisements became almost second nature. It had to, he thought, if you wished to retain your sanity in public spaces. This one, however, was screeching across the coach to assail the eardrums in his very skull. David Harbaugh, Amazon's founder and majority shareholder, was complaining at the unfairness of corporate powerhouses forced to pay federal income taxes. It was the same old song, Ian thought: rich men pleading poverty. It did not escape his

notice that when taxpayer-funded bailouts were in order the country's wealthiest were the first to extend a hand to take from the very pot they refused to pay into. Ian did not sympathize. He looked good for his age, though. Harbaugh had to be pushing a hundred.

Ian cast the racket from his thoughts, rummaged through his rucksack, and withdrew the novel he had started reading earlier in the week. It was a classic thriller that he had read once before—*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. He had read all of Freja Hultgren's Millennium novels, of course, but it was always fun to revisit an old favorite. When he left off, Lisbeth Salander had concluded that her new court-appointed overseer Nils Bjurman was going to be a problem. This, Ian knew, was the acme of understatement. He opened the antiquated paperback, removed the dog-eared bookmark, and settled in for the long ride home.

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