

OUT OF TIME

By J.M. Stephens

“You know who I am, right, professor?”

“Yes. You’re that guy on the news: Tom Simms, the killer,” answered James T. Jordan of TimeCo Technologies.

“That’s right, the killer. Remember that and you won’t get hurt.”

Sirens howled in the distance. The two men faced off. Simms, a 37-year-old loner with long, brown, unkempt hair was dressed in jeans and white T-shirt; his 75 kg, 5’11” frame was dwarfed by the balding 6’ 2” scientist. The gun in Simms’s hand gave him the distinct advantage.

“The police are on the way,” said Jordan. “There’s no way out. They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be long gone, provided you do as you’re told,” said Simms, “and I won’t be back.”

“What is it you want, anyway?”

Simms pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket with his free hand, his other hand still holding the gun to Jordan’s head. He shook the paper to unfold it and held it out to the professor. Jordan hesitated, but then took the paper and read the words that Simms had scrawled.

“July 18th, 2012,” said Jordan. “What’s this?”

“That’s where I’m going, that’s what. I need to get there now—tonight.”

“But the machine hasn’t been tested properly. It’s still in the early stages of evaluation. We haven’t tried transporting living matter.”

“Well,” said Simms, “what’s the worst that can happen? I’ll be dead in 10 minutes anyway. I’m not giving myself up to the cops.”

“We don’t know the worst that could happen,” Jordan said. “We don’t know how the process would affect a living biological organism. We don’t know if it would be in the same form when it gets to the destination. We’ve only sent inanimate objects back to a maximum of a month, and the study of those objects is still in the early stages.”

“Well it’s a chance I’ll have to take. Now hurry up.”

“It’s not an exact science, you know,” said Jordan. “It’s not like in the movies where you just dial up the destination date and off you go. Going back to an exact date 18 years ago would entail intricate and complex calculations, and even then—”

“I don’t have time for that shit. How close can you get me?”

“Possibly a week, either side, but that’s only a guess.”

“Well, then send me back to the tenth of July. I can’t be late. I can’t fuck this up.”

“But I—”

“Get started! And hurry the fuck up!”

The sirens grew closer as Jordan’s nervous fingers tapped the keyboard. He stopped several times to operate another computer, check hand written notes, and to wipe the nervous sweat from his brow.

Simms heard car doors slam as the sirens wound down. Floodlights shone through the slits between the window blinds.

“We sent various materials back at increasing intervals.” said Jordan as he typed, “first, a day, then a week, then a month, and then returned them to the present, but we found they had changed slightly at the molecular level—corrupted, somehow. The further back we sent them, the greater the change. The extent of the corruption varied according to the type of material. Industrial diamonds and hard metals suffered the least. Sending a biological organ back 18 years is extremely unpredict—”

“Look, I don’t want a fucking lesson in quantum physics! Just hurry up!”

A voice came over a loudhailer. “The building is surrounded, Simms! We know you have a weapon, drop it now. Come out with your hands up. The building is surrounded.”

Simms pushed the muzzle of the gun into Jordan’s temple.

“Come on! Come on! I have to go, now!”

His hands shaking, a flustered Jordan hurriedly punched a few more keys. “Ok, it’s the best I can do under this pressure. There’s no guarantees.”

“Well, I aint got time to fill in no warranty card, anyway,” said Simms.

The voice continued over the loudhailer. Simms heard more sirens in the distance.

“Now!” said Simms. “It has to be now!”

Jordan rushed to the cube, which was completely and haphazardly wrapped in sheets of lead. The prototype measured 1 metre by 1 metre by 1 metre. Heavy cables ran from a 60cm diameter titanium coil on top of the cube to three other larger apparatuses standing side by side behind the cube. Jordan opened the small door and stood to the side.

“You’ll have to squeeze in. The machine wasn’t built for something of your size.”

Simms ran to the cube. He looked at Jordan for an extended moment, then offered his hand. “Thank you,” said Simms. “I pray this works, and I’m sorry, but this was the only way.”

Jordan hesitated at the sudden change in Simms’s demeanour, and then with a bewildered look, shook Simms’s hand.

Simms squeezed through the tight opening, and sat inside the cube, his knees to his chest and his head resting on his knees.

Jordan closed the door and turned the latch to secure it. With Simms secured inside the cube, Jordan contemplated running from the room to the waiting arms of the police, allowing Simms to be arrested, but there was something in Simms’s final words. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he felt he needed to let Simms go.

Glass shattered as a projectile flew through a window and landed on the floor, and then another through an adjacent window. Smoke began filling the room. Jordan pulled his shirt over his nose and mouth as he ran back to the computer and fed the final commands into the keyboard. The small light above the cube door illuminated green, and one of the apparatuses emitted a low whirring sound which gradually increased in pitch and volume like a jet engine. Jordan ran toward the door, coughing, his shirt still covering his nose and mouth. As he stumbled down the hallway toward the front entrance, he heard the agonising scream of Simms. It stopped abruptly, and Jordan knew Simms was either dead, or was somewhere else in time.

Simms’s entire body felt as though it had been hit with millions of high voltage electric shocks. He fell 3 metres, still with his knees to his chest, and landed in a sitting position on a pile of loose soil. After regaining his composure, he rose to his feet and looked at his surroundings.

He was on a large vacant lot in the old industrial part of the city. Stacks of steel mesh and pallets of concrete blocks littered the area. Silent digging machines and cranes lay in wait for their early morning masters to fire them up and continue where they left off the day before.

Simms shook his head violently, banging the palm of his right hand against his temple to try and clear his head. He looked down and retrieved his gun from the loose dirt, and slipped it into the waistband at the back of his jeans. He walked out to the sidewalk. A large sign on the front boundary advised that it was the site of the 'Future headquarters of TimeCo Technologies.' He looked left and right, then headed right, toward the city centre, about a half-mile away.

A lot had changed in 18 years, he noted. There was no sign of the 'Skyneedle' that had been so prominent in the city skyline. He had walked past it only 30 minutes prior; or 18 years in the future, he mused. He remembered the big fanfare at the Skyneedle's official opening. Every politician in the county tried to get their picture taken, claiming the project was directly attributed to their hard work and vision for the city. Big things were predicted for the city in the way of tourism, and theme parks were also in the planning stages.

Simms picked up the pace. He needed to find a newspaper stand. He needed to know the date, and he prayed he had gotten there in time.

The chiming of the town hall clock informed him that it was 8.00 PM. Empire Street, the main street of the city, full of cinemas, restaurants and cafes, bustled at 8:00 PM. Up ahead, he heard the chanting of a newspaper vendor over the beeping of car horns. His pace increased to a jog. He picked up a newspaper from the stack and checked the date. July 17th 2012. "Thank God," he said aloud. "You did good, Professor."

"Hey! You gonna buy that, or what?" asked the vendor.

Without a word, Simms replaced it on the stack and walked off, heading for the river, and the quiet and safety that it provides.

Simms found a vacant bench and sat facing the river, the muffled sounds of the city now distant. He gazed across the calm water at the lights of the office buildings on the far side, his face frozen in a blank stare. He looked through an imaginary tunnel into the past, except he had just travelled through some kind of tunnel and he was really looking into the future.

He cast his mind back to the very first time.

It was as clear in his mind as it was 18 years ago. Simms was 19 at the time. An assembly worker at a nearby car manufacturer, Simms lived alone in a one-room apartment in one of the lowest socio-economic areas of the city. Slim, blonde-haired Sally Morgan was 17 years old, with her life ahead of her. Simms saw her working at a milk bar and recognised her from his old school. She was 2 years behind him. He sat inconspicuously in a corner booth, and she came over to take his order. He easily struck up a conversation, and she agreed to take a stroll through Central Park at the end of her shift. It was a warm, summer night. The sky was clear, revealing the canopy of twinkling stars. As they walked, Simms pointed to the sky and told her the names of the constellations, making up the names of the ones that he didn't know. He pointed to the satellites as they wandered across the sky. Sally was impressed and starry eyed, not only from the view above but by the charms of the handsome young man who seemed to know all the right words to say.

They came to a darkened area where there was no one in sight. Simms pulled her in and kissed her lips. Sally tried to push him away but Simms was too strong. He slapped her, put his hand over her mouth, and dragged her into the bushes. He pulled his gun from his waistband and put it to her forehead.

“One fucking word and I'll kill you. Nod your head if you understand.”

Sally's wide, terrified eyes looked over the top of Simms's hand, and she nodded.

The next 2 hrs were just a blur of adrenaline, morbid curiosity, and depravity. The tools of his trade included cable ties, duct tape, and a box cutter. He never figured out what those symbols on her body and forehead represented. Finally, there was his finishing up tool, his Glock 17, the same gun he kept for all of these 18 years. Sally was the 1st of many. There were 21 victims in all, the last being a pregnant mother of 2, but it was Sally who caused him more pain and remorse than the rest of his victims put together.

Time...how it flies. He had controlled it. He decided how much time he would give them. Time...so much time he spent between kills, suffering in his own personal hell, haunted by the images of their pleading eyes in that instant when they realised their time had run out.

Time...those long intervals before the demon inside him emerged to again command his mind and his will. Time now presented him with an opportunity for redemption.

Simms stood and strolled along the path, the same path he had taken with Sally Morgan. He came to the spot, a small dark section adjacent to a thick hedge, and slipped through the same small gap where he had forced Sally to her ultimate demise. He looked down at the ground and her image flashed through his mind: the zip ties, the duct tape over her mouth, the crazy crimson drawings of pentagrams, inverted crosses, numbers and abstract shapes. Simms dropped to his knees and wept. He fell forward, lying on the same spot where Sally Morgan took her last laboured breath. He cried until fatigue overtook him.

Something prodded Simms's arm. He opened his eyes and looked up at the two policemen standing over him.

"Shit!" he said and looked at his watch. It was 9:20 AM. The sun was blazing down. He tried to jump to his feet, but a boot descended on his shoulder, pinning him.

"You got any ID?"

Simms panicked. "Yeah, sure, officer. Sorry, I must have had a few too many last night. Know what I mean?" He smiled, but the officers didn't respond.

"Name's Peter Doherty. My licence is in my back pocket."

Simms slowly reached behind his back, and then, with lightning-fast action, he snatched the gun from his waistband and turned it to the 2 cops, who stepped back and put their hands in the air..

"Take off your radios and throw them over there," said Simms, pointing to their left. The cops complied.

"This place will be swarming within sixty seconds," said one. "You'll go down for this."

"Not if I can help it," replied Simms. "Take out your handcuffs."

They took the cuffs from their belts.

"Now cuff your ankles together, and throw the keys over here."

“I’ll be visiting you in your cell soon,” said the second cop, glaring at Simms, “real soon.”

Simms grabbed the radios from the ground and turned to the cops.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I have to do this.”

He hurried along the path, throwing the radios into the river, and then ran. About a mile along the bank, he came to a bridge home to about 20 homeless men, most of them still asleep on their makeshift beds. Empty wine bottles and shopping trolleys littered the area. He looked for a man around his own size.

“Hey buddy,” said Simms, shaking the hobo’s arm.

The man grunted and squinted his eyes. “The fuck you want?” he mumbled.

“Here’s fifty bucks,” said Simms. “Give me your clothes; you can have mine.”

The man looked Simms up and down. “What? This some kind of joke?”

“No fucking joke. Do you want it or not?”

The man snatched the \$50 note from Simms’s hand.

“Damn right I do,” he said with a chuckle. “Deal!”

The old hobo showed off his new outfit to his companions, strutting back and forth like a catwalk model, and receiving laughs and applause from the three or four who cared.

The stale urine stench of Simms’s newly acquired attire made him want to vomit, and he scratched at something moving on his skin beneath the ragged, flannelette shirt, but he considered it a small price to pay for the lives of 21 young women. He was confident that he could move about the city unnoticed.

The distant sound of police sirens filled the air. He pulled his greasy black cap low over his eyes. Simms felt unusually tired, despite having just slept for most of the night. He sat against the cold, hard concrete wall, in the shadows, amongst the drunks and the homeless, and closed his eyes. He figured it would take a few hours before the police search died down. Somewhere in the gaggle of society’s rejects, he heard a drunk ranting incoherently. The sounds of snoring and the dull clanging and rumbling of the cars and trucks on the bridge structure lulled him to sleep.

In Simms's dream he strolled through Central Park with Sally Morgan by his side.

"You see that one?" he said, pointing to a spot in the night sky.

"Where?"

Simms moved behind her, and with his face next to hers, almost touching, extended his arm over her opposite shoulder. Sally looked along his arm, following the direction of his finger.

"That's Leo," he said.

"Why do they call it Leo?"

"Leo the lion, of course."

"Oh yeah, I see it now," she giggled. "It does look like a lion, doesn't it? How do you know these things?"

"Ahh," he said, with the tone of a wise man. "I know a great many things. I'd like to teach you. I'd like to show you things, Sally. There are so many things I want to show you."

"Show me then," she said, and turned to face him.

Simms looked into the depths of Sally's eyes. They were like the sunlit, crystal blue waters of a tropical island. She closed her eyes as her cool, soft lips met his, and he felt her quiver in his arms. His fingers moved through her soft, blonde hair and she pressed her body to his. The scent of her skin and hair, and the feel of her willing body brought out emotions never before felt by Simms. She gasped, and he felt her warm breath in his mouth. Their lips separated and, hand in hand, they strolled along the path to the river. They stood, looking out over the wide expanse of water. Sally rested her head on Simms's shoulder. A small boat chugged by, its navigation lights twinkling in the night. The moonlight danced on the rippling surface of the water. They heard the ferry's horn and watched it depart from the dock on the opposite bank.

"I wish it could be like this forever," said Simms. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"But it *can* be like this forever," she said, turning to him. "I don't *have* to go. I can stay. We can be together, Tom. Forever."

Simms looked at her, and his eyes filled with tears. "No," he cried, "Don't you see you have to go away?" He put his face in his hands. "He wants to hurt you, Sally. He wants to hurt you, and I can't stop him."

Sally put her hand behind Simms's head and drew him to her. He wept on her shoulder.

"Shhhh," she whispered, as she gently stroked his hair. "Let me stay, Tom. Please...let me stay."

Simms woke with a jolt, still weeping and unable to control it. An old, bearded man shuffled up beside him. "Here," said the man, and offered Simms a bottle. "This'll help."

Simms shook his head and pushed the bottle away. He stood and walked out from under the bridge, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sunlight.

Simms checked his watch. 4.30 PM. He felt weak, even after the sleep he just had. His muscles ached, and so did his stomach. He needed to eat. He pulled his cap low over his eyes and headed toward Empire Street. He had a thought and turned onto East 42nd Street. Up ahead, he saw the 1950's themed 'Hard Rock Café & Milk Bar'.

As he walked toward it, he noticed he had developed a slight limp, his left-side hamstring muscle ached and was weaker than the right. He shrugged it off. *Probably the position I slept in under the bridge*, he told himself.

He limped to the milk bar and looked through the window. The memories came flooding back. Some of the booths were cut-down cars, old Chevs and Fords with the roof and the front and rear sections cut off, the steering wheel removed, the front seat reversed to face the back seat, and a small table in between. On the other side of the room were round stools in front of a long bar. The colour scheme was pink, blue, and white. Posters of James Dean, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Munroe and other icons of the period decorated the walls. A juke box played the old Buddy Holly song "That'll be the day." The waitresses and counter attendants were all female, aged somewhere between 16 and 30 years old, dressed in short, pink, pleated skirts, white blouses, and white aprons.

Simms entered and sat in the same booth as he did 18 years before. His dishevelled appearance and bad odour drew the attention of adjacent customers, some of whom moved away to another booth. A waitress came over. She was about 19 years old, with black hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Would you like to order, Sir?"

Simms looked at her name tag.

“Yeah, I’ll have a cheeseburger and a black coffee—thanks, Cindy—triple shot.”

She hesitated and looked over her shoulder toward a man behind the counter who signalled her with a hand gesture.

“I’m sorry, but my manager said you’ll have to pay before we can give you your order.”

“Of course,” said Simms. “I understand.”

He pulled \$20 from his wallet and handed it to her. “Keep the tip,” he said.

“Thank you, Sir,” she replied with a nervous smile and turned to walk away.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She turned back.

“Is Sally Morgan here?”

“Sally? She starts her shift in about 15 minutes.”

Simms nodded. “Ok. Thanks.”

The cheeseburger was on his table within 2 minutes. He hadn’t eaten for almost 24 hours, and he wolfed it down. He smelled the aroma of fresh coffee even before it reached the table.

“Thanks Cindy,” he said as she placed it on the table. He took a sip and closed his eyes. He couldn’t remember a coffee ever tasting as good as that triple-shotter. Strong coffee was one of the few pleasures he still had in his life.

He noticed the manager constantly looking in his direction, and assumed that he wished Simms would leave and take the smell with him.

Then he saw her, walking through the door. Seeing Sally alive after all those years sent a shudder through Simms. He studied the beautiful, clear face of the teenager, her slender build, her platinum blonde hair tied in the regulation ponytail, and her straight-cut fringe resting on her eyebrows. She was dressed in her short, pink and white uniform complete with apron, her nametag pinned above her left breast. This was the way he always tried to remember her: the innocent, naïve, bubbly young woman that she was, not the unrecognisable bloodied mess that tormented him in his nightmares.

He watched her as she walked behind the counter, greeting her co-workers, and exchanging smiles. Cindy spoke to her, and they both looked in Simms's direction. Sally approached Simms.

"You were asking about me. Can I help you?"

"Sally, I came here to warn you. Please don't work tonight. It's dangerous. Can you take the night off?"

"I don't understand," she said. "Why is it dangerous? How do you even know me?"

"Please trust me, Sally. I'm trying to keep you safe, but if it turns to shit, I want you to be as far away from here tonight as possible."

The manager approached the booth. "What's going on? Is everything ok, Sally?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't understand any of what he's saying."

"Come on buddy," said the manager, motioning towards the door. "You've had your meal. It's time to leave."

"No. Please listen to me, Sally. Stay home tonight. Please."

"You better leave before I call the police," said the manager.

"Ok, ok," he said, raising his hands. He stood, and felt dizzy, but composed himself and walked to the door. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, his left leg gave way and he collapsed. Sally ran out the door and knelt next to him as pedestrians walked around them, keeping their distance. Ignoring the smell, she rested a comforting hand on his forehead. Three of her co-workers came to the door.

"Leave him, Sally," said one. "He's not your problem. Come back inside."

Sally ignored them. "Are you alright, Sir? Oh god, I'm so sorry." She pulled her phone from her apron pocket. "I'll call an ambulance."

"No! No ambulance!" he said, placing his hand over the phone.

She was stunned at his outburst.

"I'm ok," said Simms, and struggled to his feet. "I'm ok," he repeated as he limped down the street, turning back for a final look at Sally.

Simms limped toward the subway about 80 metres down the street. It was a 35 minute trip on the train to his old apartment. *I need to end this now*, Simms realised he was growing weaker. It seemed to him that every muscle in his body had a dull ache, and his skin appeared loose and flabby, as if he had lost muscle tone. *Looks like you were right, professor*.

He reached the subway and, having no Metro Card, followed a commuter through the turnstile, unnoticed in the dense crowd. He headed to platform three and boarded the train that would take him to Westwood Station. Exhausted, he sat near the door. He saw his reflection in the window opposite him. He looked older than his 37 years. His facial muscles had wasted away somewhat, and his cheeks and eyelids drooped, making him unrecognisable as his former self. Within five minutes, Simms was asleep. He opened his eyes when a conductor walked through the carriage calling for all passengers to exit the train.

“Where are we?” he asked the conductor.

“Wallsend. End of the line.”

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck!” Simms exclaimed. It was 50 minutes back to Westwood Station.

“Please,” he said, “I fell asleep. I need to get back to Westwood. It’s an emergency.”

“Well,” said the conductor, “you can stay on for the return trip, I guess. Don’t go to sleep this time.”

It was dark when Simms reached Westwood Station. He stumbled to the gate, slipped under the turnstile, and exited to the street. It was only a three-minute walk to his old apartment if he took the shortcut through an alleyway, which opened across the street from the apartment.

Two minutes into the journey, he struggled to stay on his feet, staggering and holding onto walls for support. Simms's internal organs felt like jelly, shifting and settling in the lower part of his abdomen, and it caused him to feel bloated. His heartbeat was erratic. One moment it pounded in his chest, and in the next, it raced and then fluttered, before pounding again with no sense of rhythm.

Simms stumbled through the alley. He saw his old apartment block across the street. His legs bowed, and they buckled under his weight. He fell to the ground, dropping his gun. Every part of his body ached with a burning pain as he struggled to crawl commando style along

the concrete. He stretched his hand out for his gun, and managed to rein it in with his fingertips. The sound of a closing door drew his attention to the young man across the street, walking down the front stairs onto the sidewalk.

“Tom!” Simms called but his voice was weak and he went unanswered. “Tom! Tom Simms!” he called again, fighting the pain in his chest and throat.

The young Simms stopped and turned his head, seeking the source. He didn’t see Simms lying in the dark alley, and after a few seconds of silence, continued on.

“Tom Simms!” he called again.

Young Simms turned again and squinted in the direction of the alley. “Who’s there? What do you want?”

“I have something for you” Simms croaked, his finger on the Glock’s trigger.

The young Simms stood silently for a moment. “Do I know you?” He crept halfway across the street, his eyes searching the darkness.

Simms tried to speak, but the pain was consuming him. The young Simms, having received no response, turned and resumed his journey.

“I know what you’re up to,” called Simms, the words gurgling in his throat.

Young Simms stopped in his tracks. His eyes narrowed. “You don’t know Jack Shit.” He edged his way across the street, straining his eyes to see who was in the alley.

Simms lay on his back, his vision blurred, his face a hideous distortion of loose skin.

The young Simms stood over him, his eyes adjusting to the low light. “What the fuck happened to your face, man?”

Simms’s lips twitched, but he couldn’t speak. He knew his time was running out. He thought about all the hours, the months, the years, and the lifetimes that he brutally stole from his victims. He wished that he somehow could have saved some of that time to use now, to undo the crimes of his past and prevent the crimes of his future.

He summoned all his remaining strength to raise the gun, but it was like lead, and his hand remained on the ground, his strengthless finger still on the trigger.

The young Simms spotted the gun. He bent down and wrenched it from Simms's grasp. He turned it over and studied it from different angles. "A Glock," he noted. He raised his eyebrows and nodded in approval then slipped it into the waistband in the back of his jeans.

The faces of his young female victims flashed through Simms's mind, Sally's being the most prominent.

"Please...please leave her alone," said Simms, but he alone heard the words as they echoed in his mind. His half-closed eyelids froze, and his dull, vacant eyes stared up at his younger self.

The young man searched through Simms's pockets. He took out the wallet and pocketed the small amount of money. With a brief, final look at Simms's lifeless body, he turned and headed toward the city.