

The Warm Equations

By Bill Wolfe

It's my passion, it's my curse. I can't help it, I have to undo what happened to Mary. It consumes me.

Ten years-old, walking her home from school, she was only six, after all. We called the firstgraders yard apes, don't ask me why. I remember I was embarrassed that I was 'stuck' with her. I hung back with some of my fourthgrader friends, while she skipped ahead. She knew enough to stop at the crosswalk. She wasn't stupid.

I was probably twenty feet back when the light went to yellow. Even then, I could see the red El Camino speed-up instead of slowing. The driver was trying to make the light, he wasn't going to make it. Mary was poised on the curb like a sprinter, waiting for the gun.

I started to run. I could tell that her focus was on the little green 'walk' sign, and not on the traffic. She was only six!

The smell of burning tires and the coppery, cloying odor of so much blood still haunt me, forty years later. Every time I hear the screech of a too-hard brake, I cringe. But I'm going to change all of that.

She was my responsibility, damn-it-all!

The driver wasn't at fault. It was me. I was supposed to see her home, safely, and I failed. I was ten feet back and at a full, ten-year-old gallop when this old lady—must have been at least eighty—reached out and grabbed me, stopped me cold.

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I was seventeen when I first saw the early temporal calculations and it all became clear to me. Even then, the equations were developed enough to tell me that travel to the past was not only possible, it was doable! I wasn't really good at higher math, Mary was the smart one. But I was good enough to know that the Project would happen, someday. And I would be on it.

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Rasmirov was almost foaming at the mouth as he and Schrieber went at it, again. His sweaty, bald pate bobbed up and down in time with each vehement statement.

"History cannot be changed, you blithering moron! The calculations are one-hundred-percent accurate on that."

“But dummkopf, you continue to forget the little ‘equal’ sign in the middle. If the changes on the right are balanced by the changes on the left, then all is well, but the equation is different!” His round glasses had slipped down his long, narrow, beak of a nose until they teetered precariously close to destruction. He wouldn’t push them up until they actually slipped.

“If the equation is different, then Time. . .History Itself has been changed.”

“Nonsense!”

“Idiot!”

It was an old argument, and as usual, I was backing Schreiber on this one. But nobody in the room cared what I thought. I was just the guy who kept the computers running and turned their obscure equations into code that made their Device, work magic. To them, I was no more important than the guy who swept the floors.

For the most part, they were right. But I did have one advantage over LeCletus, our janitor. I could turn the thing on, and set the date. One thing that all the equations agreed upon, travel to the past was a one-way trip. I would balance the equation! I had 1970 cash, clothes and glasses. I was as ready as I could be.

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“Excuse me, ma’am,” I had spotted her an hour before, and followed her as she walked around town, gawking like a tourist. The shock of it took a half-hour to subside. I had time, school wouldn’t be out for at least fifteen minutes. I had to talk to her.

“Dad?” she said when she turned to my voice. She sounded at least as startled as I felt. She reminded me of. . . Grandma, only taller.

She was much younger than I remembered, maybe fifty-five and aging well. But I recognized her the second I saw her. She was the old lady who stopped me, all those years ago. . .she was. . . Mary!

“So these two time travelers walk into a bar.” It’s all I could think of.

“Billy?. . . Billy!” As she hugged me, I noticed her hippie clothes smelled like they came from the same retro shop where I’d bought mine. Mothballs and incense.

We held each other for a long time, her shoulders quivering as our silent tears mixed. If passersby paid any heed, neither of us were aware of it.

“You—this you—stopped me from saving you, in my timeline.” I finally choked-out my only explanation.

“I ran-out in front of the car and you followed me, in mine,” her voice was hoarse, she wiped her nose on a tie-dyed sleeve. “Witnesses say you grabbed me and threw me up and over the car. I remember landing in the bed of that awful El Camino. And the screaming tires.”

“The equations have to balance,” I glanced at my watch, only minutes, now.

“You sound like Schreiber.” She looked at her watch, too.

“I won’t let you stop me, Mary.”

“I will not let you trade your life, for mine. You don’t know what it’s been like. . .the guilt.”

“I was responsible for you.”

We both startled at a growling rumble down the street. There was something about the sound of it that immediately cut through even the intensity of the moment. Half a block away, stranded at the light and revving like a racecar, was the El Camino.

“Balance.” It was all she had to say.

“Two for two,” I answered.

The light changed, the El Camino’s tires squealed as the driver raced for the next intersection.

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Billy caught up with Mary, standing at the crosswalk. The light had changed, but nobody moved to cross. There had been a terrible accident just down the street, two mangled bodies lay in the road, hands still firmly clasped.

The End