

A fast and far-out extrapolation concerning circular time, from Rudy Rucker, who has authored three sf novels, WHITE LIGHT, SPACETIME DONUTS and SOFTWARE, and a non-fiction book, INFINITY AND THE MIND. He lives with his wife and children in Virginia, where he is an associate professor of mathematics at Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

The Man Who Ate Himself

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Harry enjoyed driving, even though he'd never managed to get a license. He had a whole theory of it, a system of simultaneous differential equations which told he how fast to turn the wheel for a four-wheel skid on a tight turn taken too fast. "Controlled drift" he called it.

I drew my safety belt a bit tighter. "I'm driving on the way back to the airport, Harry. I only said you could drive on the way *to* Marston's. Remember that." It wasn't always easy to have a genius for a partner.

We were going at least fifteen miles per hour too fast. Harry was slouched back in his seat, stiff arms outstretched. He wore a forgotten smile and kept giving the wheel abrupt, precise little twitches. I had to think of Mr. Toad's wild ride. At least we were in open country.

We hadn't encountered another car for about five miles now. Harry was taking the curves wider and wider ... brushing across them and fishtailing out. Humming unhappily, I studied the map Marston had sent us. Crater Acres. We should be almost....

There was a wild squealing. I cried out something of a religious nature and threw my hands up to protect my face. The car bounced like a skipped stone, slowed and shuddered to a stop. The engine died. The sun was bright and hot.

"Pretty flashy, boys. And ah'd always thought you scientist fellas were a bunch of-ribbon clerks. Welcome to Crater Acres!"

A limited-function android with a TV screen face pulled open the cyclone-fence gate Harry had stopped for. The android was dressed like a gun-slinger. Van Marston's familiar features grinned at us from the screen.

Immediately beyond the gate, the vegetation grew lush. A mist clung to the heavily irrigated grounds. I couldn't quite make out the mansion I knew lay at the center.

As soon as the gate was fully open, Harry revved the engine up to a chattering scream and peeled out, kicking cubic meters of gravel up into a roost-ertail.

"YEEEEHAW!" Marston's amplified voice whooped. The android drew a six-shooter and fired two shots after us. Presumably it had aimed to miss.

Marston had made his bundle in oil and uranium. He wasn't what you'd think of as a Friend Of The Earth. But now that he'd retired, he'd tried to fix up his Crater Acres estate like one of those wild animal parks. Some giraffes were stalking through the tall grass to our right, and just ahead of us a tremendous snake lay sunning himself.

Still accelerating, Harry detoured around the snake, knocking a cloud of winged insects out of the elephant grass. The unexpected lurch made me smack my head on the edge of the window. Suddenly I'd had enough.

I reached my left foot over and stepped on the brake. Hard. At the same time I took the key out of the ignition and pocketed it. Far behind us, the android fired another shot. You could hardly hear it over the steady chirping of the insects.

"Harry, the car's rented in my name. You could have broken an axle just then, And we've got some delicate machinery in the trunk. What are you trying to prove?"

We'd skidded to a stop half off the road, some hundred feet past that huge snake. It was watching us with glassy eyes, and seemed to be nibbling its tail. Marston's house was still out of sight.

Finally Harry answered. "You know how I feel, Fletch. I don't like Marston. He's stupid. He's a bully." Harry's hands clenched and unclenched on the wheel. "I knew a kid just like him in eighth grade. Donny Lyons. Every day Donny Lyons would knock me down and steal my dessert. Until one day I hid one of my father's false teeth inside a Twinkie." Harry let out one of his weird giggles.

"Look, Harry. Marston wants to give us a lot of money to help float his corpse in outer space forever. We're going to take the money. We need it because for some crazy reason you wouldn't let me market that waste disposal device of your..."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I *know*, Harry. Just let me finish. The point is that we can take Marston for a lot of bucks. You told me you don't see how his capsule can avoid crashing ... sooner or later. So just remember that we're screwing him. But, please, for God's sake, don't tell him. Then everyone'll be happy."

"Everyone except his wife."

"Look, how's *she* going to know if Marston's capsule falls into a star somewhere? As if she'd care anyway.

She's not even thirty! Now, will you trade places with me and let me drive?"

Harry opened his door and got out heavily. It was hot, and the plastic seat was sweaty where he'd sat. I waited a minute before sliding over. Harry stood next to the car and stared back at that snake.

"Isn't there some myth?" he said when he got back in. "About a snake who swallows his own tail?"

"Yeah. I don't know." I rolled up my window. There was something moving towards us through the tall grass on our left. It would be typical of Marston to have lions loose to handle intruders. I started up the engine and drove on.

There was a second fence around Marston's house and lawn. They were set in a crater-like depression a hundred meters across. The old man was out in front, leaning on a hoe and waiting for us. I couldn't believe how skinny he'd gotten. Lung cancer. He pushed one of the buttons set into the hoe handle. The inner gate opened for us.

"Welcome, boys! Welcome to my little Garden of Eden. Let me show you mah plot!" His diseased voice had a grainy, raucous quality.

I got out and went over to glad-hand our pigeon, but Harry just sat in the car, ostentatiously picking his teeth.

"Y'all wouldn't have to do that if you'd stop eatin' flesh!" Marston called out to him. "*Live and let live.* It's Mother Nature's law!" Marston had been one of America's most vocal vegetarians for several years now.

Harry examined the end of his toothpick. "That's not what you said when you closed down the solar energy companies, Mr. Marston." He spoke without looking up. "Back then it was *eat or be eaten.*"

Marston looked back at me with a genial smile. "Guess ah've always wanted to see me a real genius. Now ah know." He hooked his thumb towards Harry and stage-whispered, "Looks lahk a cross between a cowpie and an albino toad, don't he?"

"Really, Van." A melodious voice came from the shady porch. "That's no way to talk about the author of *The Geometrodynamics of the Degenerate Tensor?*" In true Southern-belle style, each sentence ended as a question.

"Well, point mah head and call me doctor," Marston chortled. "Ah had no ideah!"

Evangeline Marston walked down the steps, a graceful arm outstretched. She wore a jiggling T-shirt and skintight red lame jeans. I had to bite my tongue to keep from moaning.

"Don't listen to Van, Dr. Gerber. We're really so happy to meet you." Harry pocketed his toothpick and got out of the car with alacrity. He was as much of a homy bastard as the next man.

"I didn't realize you were abreast of current cosmological theory, Mrs. Marston." Harry's big livery lips stretched in a wet smile. "I'd be happy to send you some preprints."

"Oh, you would? I have the nicest little professor at Austin who'd be so delighted. And do call me Evangeline."

"Pleased to meet you, Evangeline" I sang out, and basked for an instant in her warm gaze. Harry grunted something similar.

"Y'all just have to come see mah crops now," Marston said, waving us around the house. "Ol' Eva and me have been livin' off the land, ain't we, sugar?" He gave the gorgeous red apple of her rear a lingering pat.

In back of the house Marston had his famous garden. He always had his TV spots filmed with him standing in it ... usually leaning on that goddamn hoe. All his companies had ever done was to rip the Earth off, but now the fact that he had a garden was supposed to make us forget all that.

For all Marston's talk about Mother Earth, you could tell that he had a crazy fear that the old girl was going to get back at him. He was so scared of ending up underground that he'd hired us to help him launch his corpse into outer space. According to his letter, he only had a few weeks left.

Evangeline walked in among the plants and tossed Marston a ripe tomato. He caught it and bit in thirstily, the juice runing down his knobby old chin.

"Why don't you just let Eva bury you in the garden?" Harry suggested with deliberate cruelty. "I'm sure you'd make good fertilizer."

A pulsing snake of a vein sprang into relief on Marston forehead. "That is *just*, " he wheezed angrily, "what ah do *not* want to happen. As you verah well know, Mr. Genius author of Tense Jamaican Degenerates.' As you *verah* well know!" His dull old eyes brightened with hiry.

I stepped in. We'd come here to close a deal, not to trade insults. "I'm sorry, Mr. Marston. Dr. Gerber has only been involved with the technical aspects. I'm sure he was not aware that...."

Gasping for breath, Van went on as if I hadn't spoken. Harry had struck a nerve. "Ah am not going to *rot* in the ground. And ah am not going to *burn* in no fire. I am going to stay just as ah am for evvah and a *day!*" He glared at Harry with pure hatred.

"Yes, sir!" I said with an ingratiating smile. "And Fletcher & Co. is going to make it happen for you. Your guidance system is in our car. All systems go! I've got the plans right here." I patted my briefcase. "If you'd care to...."

"I'm sure that you distinguished gentlemen must be absolutely famished?" Eva said, drifting out of the garden. The contrast between her swivel-ing hips and her refined, magnolia-blossom voice was exquisite. Those pants could have been painted on. Briefly I let myself imagine licking the paint off.

At lunch I was polite and shared Marston's stewed corn and zucchini. Harry and Evangeline had TV-dinners of Mexican food.

"Eva don't like vegetables" Mars-ton confided in me. "Ah have to eat just about ewathing that garden grows." A TV-screen-faced android cleared the dishes away.

The screen was playing an Old South movie starring Shirley Temple and Mr. Bojangles. "Oh my goo'ness" the android murmured, and set a bottle of bourbon on the table. Happily I poured myself a drink.

There really had been something special about the vegetables. Eating them had filled me with an unusual sense of ... completeness. "The soil is special" Marston was saying. I listened with a patient smile. "Mah plot is right on the spot where a meteor struck." He leaned across the table with an expression of senile cunning. "We found part of it, too. The remains of an alien spaceship. Ah made it into mah sarcophagus."

Harry had been busy watching Ev-angeline chew, but this last remark drew him into the conversation. "Chariots of the Gods, Mr. Marston? Fact is stranger than ficton, eh?"

That little vein on the old man's forehead popped out again. He stood up angrily. "You just come on out to the barn with me, toad-head. Ah have nevah...." A wet, heavy cough cut him off.

In an instant Evangeline was at his side. In between the brutal coughs Marston was gasping air with pathetic little whoops. His face was red, and his eyes bulged out. Suddenly a thick gusher of blood vomited out of his mouth. The eyes went out like lights. He was dead when he hit the floor.

Evangeline looked wild-eyed from him to me to Harry., "You..." she got in a thin strained voice. Then she began throwing things. A metal trivet caught Harry in the temple, but I managed to grab her wrists before she got the carving knives. I had been wrong when I'd said she wouldn't care if Marston died. I didn't know why, but she loved that scrawny old earthraper.

I was ready to forget the contract and leave, but the gate-control buttons were keyed to Marston's and Evangel-ine's fingerprints only. And Evangeline wanted to do things just as Marston had planned.

So I helped her put him in his cylindrical coffin. It was made of strips of wood fit together like a Chinese puzzle. Marston had made it himself out of a cottonwood tree he'd cut down to dig his garden. We slid

Marston in there naked and took him downstairs to the walk-in freezer.

The physical labor of hauling the coffin to the basement helped calm Evangeline down. I strained my back and ended up wishing I'd gotten the android to help. When the old man was stowed like he'd wanted, I helped myself to some more of his bourbon and sat down on the porch with Evangeline. The shrilling of the grasshoppers washed over us.

"Where is that awful toad-man?" Evangeline asked suddenly. It was not dear to me what she wanted him for.

"Harry didn't kill your husband, Mrs. Marston. It was cancer. And, if you'll forgive my saying so, your husband's companies have probably led to more...."

"You don't have to tell me that, Mr. Fletcher. My husband knew what he did to the Earth. And he was scared the Earth wouldn't forgive him for it.

That's one of the reasons ___" Her voice caught.

"One of the reasons he wanted us to launch him into space," I filled in. "Well it shouldn't be hard. He's already got the rocket?"

"Yes, we have it in an underground silo right over there." She waved towards the barn. "And Van and I built his own little capsule for him." She pushed her voice on. "All you and ... and Dr. Gerber have to do is to plan a course and install something to keep him from falling into any stars."

"He wants to float in outer space forever," I said. "That's fine with me. Let me show you how the system works." I got out some papers. I'd done most of the work on this one and was eager to impress this beautiful woman.

The heart of the system was a set of piezoelectric crystals. Whenever Marston's capsule approached a gravitating object, the tidal forces would squeeze a trickle of current out of one of the crystals. Each crystal was hooked in to a little ion jet. The result was that Marston's capsule would automatically adjust its path to avoid any star or planet which came its way. In the absolute cold of outer space, the crystal would be sensitive enough to react to a star that was still a light-year off. Since the guidance jets would react so early, they didn't have to be very strong.

"Yes," Evangeline said when I'd finished explaining. "But what happens when the jets run out of juice?"

I hadn't expected her to think of that. "The charge should be more than adequate for a thousand years," I extemporized. "That certainly...."

"It's not forever," she protested. "Van wants to last forever ... not just end up in some star a thousand years from now."

Harry ambled around the corner of the house. He looked like he wanted to laugh. Holding a tight, straight mouth, he took a seat next to me. There was a silence.

"I looked at it," Harry said finally. "I guess I owe Mr. Marston some sort of apology." Then, with terrible inap-propiateness, he giggled.

"Looked at what?" I asked sharply.

"It's a little bit late for an apology, Dr. Gerber?" Evangeline spoke across me. Her voice was cold, but there was a hint of satisfaction in it.

"Do you think I could photograph it before...." Harry began.

"I'm not at all sure we're going to send it off," Evangeline replied. "Mr. Fletcher has just told me he can only guarantee a thousand years."

Harry made a negative, frog-like face. "Fletch doesn't know what he's talking about. Once it goes into orbit around the galaxy, the energy requirement goes down to oh-point-zilch. I can promise you ten billion years. A whole cosmic cycle."

"What the lame-brained hell is a cosmic cycle supposed to be?" I burst out. Harry had hurt my feelings.

Evangeline seemed to know. "That's how long the universe lasts," she explained. "That nice little professor at Austin told me about it. Time is only supposed to be ten billion years long?"

"That's right," Harry said, with another giggle. "And wouldn't it be something if your husband's capsule lasts all the way? The first man to travel around time!"

I thought for a minute. "When you say *around*, do you mean...?"

Harry interrupted me. "I don't see why we shouldn't be able to get him launched tonight."

I took a long drink of my bourbon. Sitting in the middle of the crater containing Marston's house, I felt like I was at the center of a bull's-eye. The house, the lawn, the inner fence, the fake African savannah, the outer fence ... it was all Marston's, and I wanted to get out. I held my glass up to the setting sun. "So let's get to work."

We got the guidance system out of the car's trunk. We had six little ion jets coupled to crystal sensors, and a power pack to drive the jets. Microprocessors were built in. The pack was no bigger than a knapsack, but we had wedged enough unconfined quarks in there to run New York City for ten years. Two of Marston's nuclear-power plants had piped us the energy. If he was lucky enough not to have too many near misses, maybe he *would* make it into galactic orbit.

Evangeline brought the android over to help. The TV-screen face was playing a tape of Marston, in blackface, singing spirituals. Weird. Evangeline stepped forward and flicked a switch on the machine's back. Its face shrank to a point of light and winked out. The locusts shrilled on.

Nothing Harry or Evangeline had said had prepared me for Marston's capsule. It was like a giant razor clam. The two shell-halves were made of some shiny, lava-like substance. In back they were joined by metal hinges. In front they were propped open with a two-by-four. Inside was a cylindrical hollow, just the size of Marston's coffin.

"We found those ... windows in the garden", Evangeline said. "And there were some metal scraps we melted and cast into hinges. Van had the whole idea after he found the windows." The shock of her husband's death seemed to have worn off a little. Her halo of sexuality was building back up.

"They could just be silica that was fused when the meteor hit," Harry mused. "But those markings...."

I looked closely at one of the shell-halves. It was darkly transparent and was covered with scratches. The scratches were arranged in bands, and certain of them appeared over and over. It was easy to see how Marston might have convinced himself they meant something. I shuddered a little, remembering his thick, bloody coughing. I busied myself with the jets.

A few hours later we had the guidance system hooked up. It was basically just glued onto the capsule ... any touch of an atmosphere would have pulled it loose ... but we weren't planning for the capsule to ever go near an atmosphere once the rocket was launched.

Although there was no way to honestly predict what the capsule might encounter once it was a few dozen light-years from Earth, we had programmed in an overall course plan. The rocket Marston had hidden in the underground silo was to take the capsule out of the Solar System. Once in interstellar space, the rocket would eject the capsule. At that point our guidance system would kick on. Our basic principle would just be to avoid massive objects as they came up. According to our calculations, this would eventually get the capsule out into intergalactic space. So as not to have to deal with any more galaxies crowded with stars, we planned for the capsule to go into orbit around our galaxy once it got out there. Sooner or later it would have to fall back in ... but this wasn't exactly a short-term problem.

"The most important thing is that he doesn't come back to Earth," Evangeline reminded us. "Can you promise me that?"

I had known Harry long enough to read his expressions. Right now he was wiggly with suppressed laughter. I wondered how badly he'd sabotaged the guidance system.

"I promise you," I told Evangeline, giving her arm a kindly pat. Her flesh felt like warm marble. "I think we're ready to go."

Evangeline and the android went down to the freezer to get Marston. While they were gone I tried to pump Harry for some information, but he just grinned and took a few pictures of the scratches in that black glass. When Evangeline came back, the android's face-screen was back on. It was singing "Massa's in de Cold Cold Ground."

I helped them heave Marston's coffin into the capsule. I'd had those two bourbons. So of course I had to gash my finger on the rough edge. Some of my blood went with Marston.

The capsule was resting on a little dolly on tracks. While I nursed my cut, Evangeline pushed a button on the wall, and the capsule began rolling smoothly forward. Outside, a five-meter disk of sod lifted up to reveal Marston's personal hearse. A hydraulic lift eased the rocket up so that its hatch was level with the ground. Mechanical arms reached out and gently drew the capsule in. The hatch thudded shut, and we were ready for launch. The sky was clear. It was almost midnight. The locusts had finally knocked off. In the distance I heard a lion's coughing roar.

"When should it go off?" Evangeline asked me in a silky whisper. She looked a little chilled in just that T-shirt.

I took my calculator out. I'd stored the master program last week. All I had to do was enter tomorrow's date, and the machine gave me the optimum launch time. "One thirteen" I replied, "a.m. Where's your console?"

"Inside." We followed Evangeline into the dark house. I felt better being there now that Marston was out of the freezer. Evangeline opened a rolltop desk in the living room to reveal the console. She punched 0113 and switched on the automatic sequencing. That was all there was to it. We had a little over an hour to kill. I got myself another bourbon. Harry and Evangeline stuck to soda.

Looking out the window at the rocket-tip protruding from the ground fifty meters away, something occurred to me. "That's kind of close, you know. The exhaust is liable to set the house on fire."

"Don't worry," Evangeline sang back. "The house is mostly titanium. Van had a lot of enemies."

That was a good lead-in for one of Harry's remarks, but he passed the opportunity up. He just leaned back in one of Marston's leather chairs, sipping soda and staring at Evangeline. She didn't look back, but you could tell she felt him staring. She kept finding reasons to stand up and lean over, with her prettiest

feature aimed right at him.

When it got down to the last few minutes, we all stood by the window and counted down together. I had to hand it to Marston. It seemed like a great way to go. Just before blast-off, the android came out with a magnum of cold champagne. Knowing that Marston must have programmed that into the console sequencer, we drank long and deep with a clear conscience. And at one thirteen the big bird lifted off. Marston's lawn and garden were burned to a crisp, but inside his titaniplast house we didn't feel a thing. We stared upward until the tiny flame was lost in the stars.

I must have had most of the champagne, because I don't remember going to bed. All night I had whirlybed dreams. There was some trivial sequence of actions which I kept having to do — each completion was only a new beginning. The task had something to do with the scratches on Marston's capsule. They were sort of there, yet not there ... and it was up to me to make them real. But I couldn't read them until I'd written them, and I couldn't write them till I'd read them.

Finally I managed to wake up. Dawn. The house was quiet. I seemed to be in a guest room. On the other side of the room was an unmade bed.

Where was Harry? Just as I stood up, he came padding down the hall. He had a funny expression.

"Let's go" he said shortly.

"OK. But where...."

"Never mind. Let's get out of here. Are you sober enough to drive?"

"Sure."

We went down and got in the car. Harry said I should just drive up the slope to the gate and honk. I did, and it swung open. Harry leaned out the car window, staring back at the house. Perhaps something moved at one of the windows. "I love her," he said, finally pulling himself back in.

"What happened last night? Don't tell me that she let you...."

Harry was close to tears. "She had a *mind*, Fletch. A body like that, and she'd even heard of my papers! I had her. I *had* her. But then I had to go and tell her. She'll never forgive me."

"You told her how you sabotaged the guidance system?"

"I *didn't* sabotage it. I didn't have to. Time is a circle, Fletch. If she had really understood my papers, she would have known that. Time is a circle ten billion years around. And Mar-ston's body is going to make the round trip."

I thought a minute. "So? That just means that there's *two* Marstons out there. There's the Marston we just launched, and there's the Marston who's traveled ten billion years around. One Marston is seventy and the other is ten billion and seventy."

"That won't wash, Fletch. What if we'd decided not to launch him? How would the ten-billion-and-seventy-year-old know whether or not to exist? A particle's world-line can't be like a thread winding around and around time. It has to close off, to come back on itself."

"I still don't get the point, Harry."

"The points is that circular time means the universe *repeats*. Every ten billion years everything comes back to the same place. It's like a pool table. If you plug all the pockets and hit a hard enough

break-shot, the balls will eventually reform into the triangular pattern you started with. Every atom in Marston's capsule has to come back to where it started from."

Suddenly it clicked. "You mean the crater back there...."

"Has to be, Fletch. *Has* to be! Marston's ship is going to go around time and crash there ... say, in 1100 A.D. There's probably even a Zuni Indian legend about it. And then Marston's capsule is going to lie buried until he digs it up five years ago. Sealed in the capsule is going to be some rotten compost which he is going to plow into his vegetable garden."

The joy of science had driven off Harry's sorrow at losing Evangeline. He gave a wild giggle. "And Marston thought he was a vegetarian! He thought he could avoid rotting on Earth!"

The same snake we'd seen yesterday was lying in the same place in the driveway. It had its tail tucked into its mouth. I down-shifted and skirted it. The android guard was already holding the gate open for us. The TV-camera over the gate scanned back and forth. For an instant the camera pointed at the android's face, and it became a TV screen with a picture of a TV screen with a picture of a TV screen with a picture of....

I pulled onto the paved road and started driving toward the airport. I had a hell of a hangover.