

# THE FIRST STEP

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

**Kristine Kathryn Rusch took a halfway hiatus from short fiction these last two years as she finished up the large Retrieval Artist project. Her Anniversary Day Saga, planned at three books total, ended up being eight. As of June 2015, all eight books have hit print. (The most recent is *Masterminds* from WMG Publishing. But the saga starts with *Anniversary Day*.) Kris has returned to short fiction with a vengeance. Stories this year are appearing in *Clarkesworld*, *Fiction River*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and several anthologies. In her latest *Asimov's* tale, a time traveler discovers that reclaiming life's missed opportunities begins with . . .**

## THE FIRST STEP

Harvey DeLeo's arthritic fingers shook as he reached for the small device. The clear case showed the blue workings, moving like liquid crystal. Most people would see shifting fractals.

He saw eternities.

"Doctor DeLeo, don't touch it." Annabelle Sharep, the fifteenth scientist to work on the project, the one whose insight made it all possible, stood on the other side of the lab.

She was a thin woman with a sharp chin. Because of that chin, he got her name wrong for the first year they worked together: he would call her Anna Sharp, and she would have to correct him.

Once she started chuckling and calling him the ultimate absent-minded professor, he learned her name. Or maybe he learned it because she was one of the few he had hired who could actually keep up with him mentally, someone who didn't harangue him, or tell him his hours were too long, or fret that he would damage his health.

The time for fretting had passed years ago.

And now, on its little protected pad, the device thrummed with life. In it, Annabelle saw futures.

With the device, they had sent pennies forward in time. They had sent cameras forward that recorded every image, except the images he wanted. The ones that had recorded the actual journey. It looked as if nothing had changed as the cameras traveled through time, as if the cameras had just stayed on the platform, and the scientists had been the ones who moved.

Finally, DeLeo and Annabelle had used actual living creatures to see if they would survive the journey. After the earthworms had survived, after the cockroaches had survived, after the rats had survived, DeLeo and Annabelle had taken the experiment to the next level, sending creatures two days into the future instead of five minutes.

DeLeo had been the one who decided to send creatures to the past to see what happened.

Those were the experiments that showed time travel operated differently going backward in time than it did going forward. If an object already existed in the past, the object being sent back would become a ghostly reflection of itself.

Those had been the only experiments that freaked out the rats—DeLeo and Annabelle soon realized that cockroaches and earthworms weren't self aware enough to get freaked out. Or perhaps DeLeo and Annabelle didn't know what a freaked-out cockroach looked like.

Those experiments also led to the occasional death, particularly among the rats. DeLeo wasn't a biologist, so he didn't know if the freaked-out rats had ended up with scrambled thoughts, or if that ghostly separation had caused an actual physical reaction.

Annabelle had started a partnership with some colleagues in biology to see what was happening on a molecular level.

DeLeo didn't really care. One trip to the past would be worth an early death, at least for him.

DeLeo's fingers hovered over the device. He had to activate it, and simultaneously put his hand flat on the white disk Annabelle laughingly called "the launch pad." He wasn't sure the launch pad was big enough to handle him. He wasn't sure what would happen to his body when he did this. He wasn't sure if he would destroy the whole project with this attempt.

But none of that would stop him.

"Doctor DeLeo, don't touch. It's too soon," Annabelle said. "We've had this discussion." They had, too.

At every point along the way, they had had some version of this discussion.

*Inventors shouldn't be the first to use their inventions,* Annabelle had said one afternoon.

*Alexander Graham Bell did,* DeLeo had replied.

*He invented the telephone,* Annabelle had said. *It couldn't hurt him.*

*We know that now,* DeLeo had said. *They didn't know it then.*

*It's not the same,* Annabelle had said, *and you know it.*

Maybe DeLeo did know it. Maybe he didn't. He had theories about what happened to the creatures that went to the past and appeared with a ghostly sort of shape. He believed that shape was a manifestation of their consciousness—and yes, he believed all living things had a consciousness.

Annabelle didn't. She thought that matter somehow arrived in the past, then discovered it was already there—and that was where DeLeo tuned her out every single time.

As a young scientist, he would have listened. He would have argued, if need be. He would have *learned*.

But he wasn't doing this for the learning. Or the glory. Or even for a second success.

He was doing it for one moment.

He activated the sequence he had already programmed into the device and placed his palm on the launch pad. Annabelle was screaming at him. Other lab assistants were running through the open door.

They became insubstantial, and then they whisked away. The room became what it had been forty-five years before, a gigantic old classroom filled with wooden desks, initials and graffiti carved into the seatbacks. To his right, the old closet that he would later transform into his new office.

There was no device here, no launch pad, and probably no elderly Doctor DeLeo, although he seemed substantial enough to himself.

He was standing alone inside that classroom and he thought he smelled chalk. He probably didn't. It was most likely a sense memory, but he didn't care.

He knew he had to move quickly.

The classroom's door stood open, as all of the rooms did at this time of day—just after eleven P.M. as the janitor made his rounds. Amazing the trivia a man still remembered after forty-five years of living. A human brain slowly filled up with useless junk.

Who knew that an ancient, irrelevant detail would become so important now.

DeLeo walked through an aisle between desks, then out the door into the wide corridor. The floor was the gray and black 1950's tile that had first suggested the device to him—back when his office was three doors down. He walked past that office and couldn't resist a glance.

There he was, his thirty-year-old self, hovering over some components that the elderly DeLeo didn't even recognize.

A familiar sadness squeezed his heart. He paused, thought about all the time paradoxes—if he said something, if he gave a hint about the future, if he even gave his old self a heads-up about the present—what would change?

DeLeo didn't want to risk changing anything.

This day, the next hour, were the reasons he had built the device. Not so that graduate students in religion could travel back to Christ's crucifixion to see if it really happened as the Bible said. Not so that historians could add to their dissertations by actually speaking to Thomas Jefferson. Not so that techs could fruitlessly try to modify the device so that someone could finally shoot Hitler.

DeLeo had built the device for this, this short future—or this short past—or this short whatever someone wanted to call the next few minutes; *this* was the reason the device existed. He had a hunch no one would ever know what he had done, what his motivations were, why he had used the device before it got tested all the way up the biological food chain, hell, before all the computer modeling was even finished.

He had a hunch he would die before he could tell them.

He was seventy-five years old with a defective heart, and a possible death sentence, and if he waited for everything to be perfect, he would make the same mistake twice.

DeLeo went down the stairs like he used to as a young man, almost running as he bounced his way down. The old corridors, the old wooden doors, the old janitor (who was probably younger than DeLeo was now) pushing a bucket into the men's room—how many nights had DeLeo seen this very scenario and never really noticed it?

His one worry—the exterior door—stood open, sending in chill January air. It smelled of snow, although he wondered if that, too, was his imagination.

He crossed the quad to the graduate student housing, half expecting the students he passed to yell, "Hey, Prof, what're you doing outside the lab?" like they did these days or in the future or whenever now really was.

But the wind was strong, and everyone had their heads bowed against it, hoods pulled up over their faces. They weren't looking at him.

The campus had dimmer lighting, less of it too, before the anti-violence advocates finally convinced the administration that a well-lit campus was a safer campus. (It turned out to be true.)

Still, even in the semi-darkness, he could find his way to that little house, attached on each side to other little houses with their paper-thin walls and overactive heating systems. That pre-World-War-II housing got torn down twenty years ago or would get torn down twenty-five years from now, and (would be) replaced with a big athletic center. Whenever he saw the glistening thing, his heart squeezed sadly, painfully.

He preferred these drab little buildings with their yellow incandescent lights spilling out into the postage-stamp yards. Those little buildings had hope, and possibility.

The real kind, not the athletic kind.

He walked up his old front porch, knowing the doors wouldn't be open. Margery had always kept the doors closed and locked when DeLeo wasn't home, which meant the doors had always been closed and locked.

But the windows were open, because that little house was always fifteen degrees too warm.

He settled near the picture window, and waited.

Margery walked into the room, wearing a pair of sweatpants and one of his old T-shirts from Cal-Tech. She looked tired and, oh, so beautiful, still a bit of baby weight on her hips.

Then he heard it, that familiar little voice, one he had forgotten after it had gotten replaced decades ago with a deep baritone: "Maaaaa?"

She laughed and turned, looking in the direction of the coffee table.

DeLeo couldn't see anything. His eyes filled with hopeless old man tears. All of this, and he couldn't see anything.

He stood on his tiptoes, and finally, the baby came into view. Not a baby any more. That nanosecond between infant and full toddler, right on the brink. His son Richard, named for DeLeo's father, the warm man who had done his grandfather duties right, thank heavens, because Richard had needed a male role model, and DeLeo hadn't been it.

"Maaaaa," Richard said, chubby hands reaching, grasping, clutching.

DeLeo wiped at his eyes furiously. He had to see this without tears. He had to see. . . .

Richard's fingers caught the edge of the table, and pulled. DeLeo's breath caught. His son rose just an inch, then tumbled backward.

Margery started to go to him, but stopped as Richard—determined even then—sat back up. He adjusted his diaper-clad bottom, got on his dimpled knees, and placed his hands firmly on that table. Then he lifted himself up, one shaky limb at a time.

Margery put her fingers over her mouth. Richard gave her a toothless baby grin.

DeLeo frowned. He hadn't come for standing. He had watched Richard stand once before way back then, although to be honest, DeLeo hadn't paid much attention.

*Yeah, yeah*, he'd been thinking at the time. *A baby standing. So what?*

So what. He got to see his pretty wife again, that's what. And his pure perfect infant son.

DeLeo swallowed hard now, stared. Margery didn't move. For a moment, DeLeo thought she could see him, but she was still looking at their son. At *her* son. DeLeo had just contributed DNA, really. Never home, never there, never thinking about them. All charges—accurate charges—in the divorce. If only he had been home. If only he had cared—even a little—for the small things.

If only he'd understood that precious events happened only once.

Richard waved a hand, looking sideways. He clearly saw the old man at the window, probably thought that was his Grandpop, and gave DeLeo a big toothless grin. DeLeo smiled back, hoped his loitering there wouldn't change the moment.

Then Richard turned toward his mother, used the flat surface to keep himself upright and leaned-walked toward her. He reached the edge of the table and kept going, walking, stumbling really, moving with determined little steps, and falling into her arms.

Six seconds, maybe less, seconds she had brought (would bring?) up in an argument two days later. Until that fight, DeLeo hadn't even known his child—the boy that would be his *only* child—had taken his first steps.

First steps missed, like the first word, and the first day of school, as well as the last day of school and the first graduation ceremony. The first date, the first prom. DeLeo made it for the first (only) marriage, but not the birth of the first grandchild or the second or the third, and all of those first steps, first words, first loves. He was not the grandfather his own father had been, and DeLeo wouldn't have known how to try, even though, by then, he wanted to.

All those missed events—only seconds long, really—all that missed time.

He wasn't making up for it here. He had hoped (deep down) there might be alternate timelines, ways of influencing, maybe even becoming, someone else, but there weren't. Just the ghostly consciousness, and the observation.

And, as the experimentation had revealed that, DeLeo had realized he would only get one vision, one visit, one missed event, and he had thought and thought and thought about which one to choose.

He had finally decided on this one, the one that still made his heart squeeze when he heard the phrase “baby's first . . . ,” the first missed event he really and truly regretted.

Not that it changed anything. For anyone except him.

Voices sounded around him, and he saw a ghostly lab slowly superimposing itself over his old home. He would return to the lab in a heartbeat.

He made himself focus on that living room, instead of the encroaching lab, on his wife, her arms around their son, praising him for his toddling steps, and the boy, squirming to get away and do it again, so very Richard, even back then.

His wife reached for her phone to record this moment—the second attempt at walking. She would prove successful, and the time stamp that DeLeo had stared at over and over again had proven to be accurate.

DeLeo had worried that this moment, these six seconds, wouldn't live up to his expectations. He had worried that an old miracle, one so obvious, one completed by most human babies, completed by Richard's babies and to be completed by their babies, would seem anticlimactic.

But it wasn't.

DeLeo used to think he had lost eternities of precious time, but he hadn't.

He had worked an eternity to gain an eternity.

In six seconds.

And at the end of them, just before the lab became the only reality, DeLeo's baby boy—the baby his boy had been—the *happy* baby his boy had been—raised his tiny fists in triumph and joy.

Like DeLeo used to do whenever he succeeded.

No one had told him Richard had done that.

Maybe no one had noticed.

But DeLeo did.

At the last second of his eternity. Making each and every moment of his entire lifetime worthwhile.