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finders keepers

by . . . Milton Lesser

Amhurst wanted to get married.
But then an invisible ingenue
moved in on his wedding day . . .

EDDIE AMHURST WATCHED the scissors get up from the dresser and march across the room. If they had marched on the floor it would have been bad enough—but not this bad. They marched across the air of the bedroom, one thin metal leg after the other, to where Eddie was sitting on the edge of the bed in his underwear.

They went *snip, snip*—once, twice, rapidly. Then they marched again across the air of the room and plunked down on the dresser.

In his right hand Eddie held a silky piece of black cloth. In his left hand he held a similar item. On the floor at his feet were two other pieces of black cloth. If you glued the sections together you'd have a pair of black silk socks, size twelve. They were so new that you could still see where the paper telling the brand-name and the size clung to one of them.

But they weren't much good as socks anymore. In his hands Eddie held what could have been a pair of black-silk spats except that no one wore black-silk spats. On the floor at his feet were two black silk fingerless gloves.

"Hey, George!" Eddie called. "George, come here quick."

George ran in from the bathroom, shaving-soap still on one side

A TIME-TRAVEL TALE THAT TAKES TIME-OUT FOR LAUGHTER.

of his face. He looked at Eddie and the two pieces of black silk in Eddie's hands. He said, "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Me? I didn't do anything."

"Anyone can see that you went to the dresser, got the scissors, cut your socks in half, then put the scissors back on the dresser. What I want to know is why. *Why?*"

"I didn't," Eddie said lamely. Then he told George how the scissors had got up, marched across the room, and cut his socks.

"Yeah," said George. "Right away. Take it easy, kid. I know you're about to be married. I know you're nervous. But relax. Just take it easy—calm down."

"Hah!" said Eddie. "*Hah!*"

"What's so funny?"

"I can prove to you that I didn't get up, take the scissors and cut my socks. I can prove it, that's what."

George told him to go ahead.

"I just took a shower, right?"

"Right."

"I always powder my feet after a shower, right?"

"Howinhell should I know?"

Eddie sat back on the bed and stuck his feet out. "Look."

There was white powder all over the bottoms of his feet, a lot more of it in between his toes.

"Okay," George said. "I see it. What does that prove?"

"You go ahead and find the powder on the rug. If I walked from here to the dresser and back

there'd be powder all over the rug where I walked. Find it."

George looked but the rug was solid blue without any white marks on it. "So you crawled on your hands and knees, so you walked on your hands. Just don't tell me the scissors did that themselves. They couldn't."

"I didn't say they did it by themselves. *Something made them do it.* Something doesn't want me to get married, George. Take last night. Someone put pineapple in my fruit cup. You know I'm allergic to pineapple. It makes me itch all over for two days but luckily I found it. When I came back from the florist the bridge was out. I could have been killed if I hadn't noticed it."

George shook his head. "The bridge was *not* out. I went back and looked for myself later. You went the long way for nothing because the bridge is standing as it always stood. Did you hear anything over the radio about the bridge being out?"

"No-o-o . . ."

"There wasn't even any rain. Eddie-boy, you're just nervous. You're imagining things. Judy will have a nervous wreck on her hands if you keep this up. Look—you just sit here and wait for me while I run downtown and get you another pair of black socks."

"Uh-unh. It's Sunday and the stores are closed."

"Okay, I'll let you wear mine. I'm only the best man and I'll wear navy blue and no one will know the

difference." George sat on the edge of the bed next to Eddie and took off his shoes and socks. He gave the socks—just a half-size too big—to Eddie, then padded across the room to the chest of drawers to find a pair of navy socks for himself.

The scissors got up off the dresser again while George's back was turned and Eddie wanted to yell, only no sound came out. He just sat there watching while the scissors cut this new pair of black socks neatly in half. Then George began to turn around and the scissors dropped quickly at Eddie's feet.

George held up a pair of navy socks. "I got 'em . . ." he began. "Eddie, what the hell did you do *that* again for?"

"Honest . . ."

"Never mind. We'll both wear navy." Plainly he thought his cousin Judy was marrying a lunatic.

The thing that surprised Eddie most was the fact nothing happened during the first part of the ceremony. It was an outdoor wedding and he stood with George at the makeshift altar in the garden while Judy came down the aisle with her entourage.

Judy was lovely in her getup, all right, only Eddie could have done without all the pomp and ceremony. And lately there had been something about Judy—little meanesses, some annoying petulances—which had left Eddie on the irritable side.

It was her mother as much as anything, a fat overbearing dominating windbag . . . Eddie boy, stop talking to yourself that way about your future mother-in-law . . .

Why should you? Go ahead, keep thinking like that if it's what you feel. Assert yourself.

"Who said that?"

"Said what?" George wanted to know. "I didn't hear anyone. And be quiet, Eddie—people are looking at you."

You don't have to be quiet unless you really want to. Don't let them rope you into anything, Eddie—it still isn't too late.

Eddie looked in vain for the source of the voice but everyone around him seemed so utterly unperturbed that he could only conclude that he was hearing things. Could this have been the voice of his conscience, telling him to get out while the getting was good?

Conscience, smonscience. No such thing, Eddie. It's me.

"Well, who are you?"

George said, "Will you shut up, Eddie? Everyone's staring."

After that it wasn't easy. Judy joined him at the altar but he listened to the ceremony with only one ear. With the other he tried to pay attention to the voice which he alone heard. Since it continued and since he was the only one who heard it, he concluded quite logically that he was going off his rocker. Then maybe he *was* being roped into something—because if the prospect of marriage to Judy made him feel

this way, then maybe he'd better call the whole thing off before it was too late.

Or had the strange voice put that idea into his head? Come to think of it, here was a nice pleasant female voice. It didn't rasp like Mrs. Wilkins' voice and it didn't hold the slight suggestion of a whine dormant in her daughter Judy's.

"Do you, Edward, take this girl Judy, to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Silence, except for a few sobs and whimpers in the sea of faces around them.

"Do you, Edward . . ."

Don't do it, Eddie. Do it and that'll be the end for you. You'd regret it something awful.

"You think so, Miss, ah—"

I'll tell you my name after you refuse. You'll find out a lot of things after.

George wailed in Eddie's ear, "For gosh sakes, boy—you're holding up the works! And quit that mumbling to yourself. Just say yes."

"Hmmm," said Eddie, cogitating.

". . . And do you, Judy, take this man Edward—"

Apparently his *hmmm* had been taken as an affirmative if nervous response.

You're right, Eddie—that's just what happened. Only don't let them go on. In a moment it will be too late, and you'll be stuck.

"You think so, eh?"

"Shut up!" George hissed in his ear.

". . . To have and to hold through sickness and in health, till—"

The wind came up so suddenly, and with it the clouds, that one moment they stood in a bright sunshiny garden, the next it was dark and somber and overhead lightning flashed and thunder rolled sullenly.

The rain came down in thick sheets from what had been a moment before a wonderfully clear blue sky. Even George's composure received a serious dent. "It just can't happen that fast!" he cried.

Judy sobbed, "My gown. Oh, my precious gown!"

"I said, do you, Judy . . ."

Don't let him go on, Eddie. The rain will add to the confusion. Tell him you never said yes—you never did, you know.

"That's true. I didn't."

"Didn't what?" George demanded as several men ran out to them with umbrellas.

"I never said yes," Eddie told him, but the thunder all but drowned him out. "I never said yes!" he fairly screamed.

Since everyone had heard him that time, the ceremony had to begin anew. "Do you, Edward . . ."

Better, better that you don't, Eddie.

"Will you please be quiet and let me make up my own mind?"

"Eddie!" This was George.

". . . to have and to hold, through . . ."

Judy was trying vainly to pull the entire length of her gown under the umbrella and the fact that she couldn't made her pout. Her makeup was running in the rain too—and quite suddenly she looked rather unpretty. Definitely positively irrevocably unpretty—a younger thinner somewhat more attractive image of her mother. A thoroughly revolting thought.

"Uh-unh," said Eddie.

You tell 'em, Eddie-boy.

"Ub-unh."

George whispered, "What does that mean? Say yes so everyone can hear you, especially with this thunder."

"That doesn't mean yes," Eddie explained patiently. But then, because the thunder roared still louder, he shouted, "In fact, it means the opposite of yes."

You tell 'em, Eddie.

"It means that this is all a mistake. I will not marry Judy. The answer to the question is no, no, NO!"

No one did anything. They all just stood there, looking at him, and Judy even forgot to see how the rain was ruining her gown. Eddie became embarrassed—they all just stared. Presently he kissed Judy's cheek politely, said he was sorry, turned on his heel and strode down the muddy aisle.

Everyone looked but no one tried to stop him.

The voice said, *You told 'em, Eddie. You sure told 'em!*

He took a hot shower and it

made him feel much better. When he finished and got into a pair of dungarees and a tee-shirt and lit a cigarette, the bell rang. It was George.

"I ought to punch your nose, Eddie Armhurst."

Don't let him talk that way, Eddie. Until now the voice had been silent since the ruined ceremony.

"Don't talk to me that way. Just because she was your cousin and just because you introduced us on a blind date—"

Splat! Something hit Eddie's nose, just as had been predicted and he sat down on the floor.

He hit you! Get up and knock the stuffing out of him, Eddie.

Eddie's nose bled easily. It was bleeding now. He stood up and George hit him again and then his nose was bleeding more than ever.

This time Eddie sat there and did not try to get up. He knew there were about nine quarts of blood in his body and he must have lost at least a quart by now.

George readjusted his high hat. He took a step towards the door but never reached it. A big redwood bookend took off from an end-table and thudded against the side of his head. His high hat fell off and he sat down next to Eddie, muttering something about hitting him from behind.

The voice said, *I couldn't bear to let you take a beating. If you can't defend yourself, then I've got to do it for you.*

For the first time a concrete thought on all this came to Eddie—perhaps it was a girl, just an ordinary girl, only she was invisible. He had seen a movie once and while the invisible man in it had remained invisible, if you put some clothing on him you could see his shape.

Eddie ran around the room with George's high hat, trying to find an invisible head. But after a time he felt silly. The hat kept falling to the floor every time he tried to put it on something.

The voice giggled. *You're wasting your time, Eddie. I'm not invisible, not in the way you mean. Now that you didn't marry that Judy-thing, you have no ties. Right?*

"Umm."

No parents?

"Nope."

No close relatives of any type?

"A bunch of third cousins in Chicago I think."

They don't matter. Any close friends?

Eddie looked down at the floor, where George was trying to get up. "I used to have one," he said.

But not now—not any longer. Good! Then you can come with me, Eddie. I had to make sure of that first. You ready?

"Where are we going?"

Just have some patience and you'll see for yourself.

"Maybe I won't like it."

"He's talking to himself again," George said. "Am I glad my cousin didn't marry him! Lucky Judy."

Ready, Eddie? Hab! A poet and don't know it!

"Umm."

Eddie began to feel dizzy but he reasoned that was because George had punched him in the nose not once but twice. Soon the floor came up to meet him because he no longer could keep his balance and then, as he sat there, everything began to grow hazy, foggy, unreal. Soon the room was only a shadow of a room and he could not even tell that the rug was blue. Less than a shadow, it seemed to dissolve in water—in very hot water, because it dissolved quickly.

This Eddie did not know—but he dissolved with it . . .

* * * * *

"Edam Hurst! Wake up!"

Eddie sat up groggily. He was on a big comfortable couch and the voice came out of a loudspeaker on the wall. There were the couch and the loudspeaker, a closed door and Eddie—and outside of that the room, a small one, was empty.

"You got it wrong," Eddie said. "Just a matter of pronouncing. Not Edam Hurst. Ed Amhurst. Get the difference?"

"Subtle," the voice said. "It doesn't matter. There isn't another Edam Hurst or Ed Amhurst here. No confusion."

"Well, where's the other voice? The woman."

"Early cultural trait," the voice mused. "High sex-identification. Eeb. did nothing to assert her feminity, yet he knew the voice

for a woman's. Interesting, extremely interesting."

"Of course she's a woman."

"The timbre isn't that much different for you to know it as a certainty ever. High sex-identification in your time, young man. If I simply heard Eeb's voice I'd never know her sex—not just from her voice."

"Well, she *is* a woman."

"Certainly, certainly—and a mighty troublesome one. First time something like this has happened in nearly a thousand years. What do you think we ought to do?"

"How the heck should I know? I don't even know what happened."

"True, true. I'd forgotten you're no telepath. I wonder if telepathy came in when high sex-identification began to wane. Umm, no—hardly possible. Eeb is obviously a throwback and she has both. Intriguing."

The door opened and a woman entered the room. She was dressed in shorts and some sort of negligible halter. She walked across the room to the loudspeaker and Eddie, who had, armed with tapemeasure, once judged a local beauty contest, was sure she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She said, "I'd better shut that thing off before Rajuz lulls you to sleep with all his scientific talk." She flicked a switch on the loudspeaker. "Of course he can still speak through telepathy but your mind won't get the impulses without that loudspeaker, Eddie. See? I

can hear him now but you can't."

Eddie had to take her word for it because he couldn't hear a thing. He hardly cared. Of paramount importance was this fact—here was *the* voice. Not any voice but the one that had brought him here, wherever *hers* was.

Eddie tried to be patient. "You're Eeb," he said. "That much I know. But where the hell are we?"

"You mean, in space?"

"Uh-huh."

"We're exactly where your room was. We haven't moved an inch."

"So where's my room? Where is it then?"

"It isn't. It *was*. Fifty thousand years ago it was, Eddie. Not now. Now it's gone, with the building, with the city, with your whole civilization. We've left your time and entered mine."

"Yeah," said Eddie. His voice sounded lame.

"You don't believe me."

"Nope, sorry—I don't." In truth Eddie was glad he hadn't married Judy but as for the rest of this, well—he was from Missouri.

"It's simple. I'm a professor of history and my period of study was yours, the second millenium of the Christian Era."

"Do you—ah—teach history in that outfit?" He pointed to the enticing lines of her halter and shorts.

"Certainly. It's comfortable. Anyway we use no guesswork in history. We use a time-scanner. That, of course, makes history the most accurate of all the sciences.

It's mental travel through time—not physical unless you will it.

"Elementary stuff, Eddie. Just as they learned teleportation through space ten thousand years ago, so they learned you can do the same thing through time. Mental effort, applied properly, can move physical objects. It was always latent in human beings through some unknown ancestor—they just had to learn how to control the power."

Eddie was still skeptical. "So you studied history by actually going back there?"

"Something like that. Then I found you, Edam Hurst."

"Ed Amhurst."

"What's the difference? I found you and once I did, purely by chance, of course—that was the end of history. No more studying. They tell me I'm a throwback—less psi-quotient, more sex identification than anyone here. Maybe that explains it.

"Anyway I had to bring you back. People constantly teleport trophies through time—but not in a thousand years has anyone brought back a human being. I saw that you had no ties and I brought you. Unfortunately there's a law against it, I think."

Eddie asked her why.

"It can cause a lot of trouble. You can change history by bringing someone where he doesn't belong. But I had to. I'm a throwback. I couldn't be satisfied . . ."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she had been walking closer and closer

to Eddie, ever since she had turned off the loudspeaker. Now, abruptly, she was standing next to him—and then she was sitting on his lap. She snuggled in close and then she began to kiss him and Eddie knew at once that kissing had come a long way in fifty thousand years, even if the psi quotient was greater and sex identification had diminished.

Three minutes later Eeb got up and Eddie knew quite suddenly that while he had always known love at first sight to be ridiculous and impossible, love at first kiss was a very different matter.

"Damn that Rajuz! He's the Dean, and he wants us in his office. So it goes, Eddie—if it's not one thing it's another. We have no choice, of course. We'll have to go."

They left the room and stood on a moving sidewalk with a lot of other people and this first five-minute glimpse of the place was enough to convince him that he had indeed been teleported through time. A lot of what he saw could not even register in his brain simply because he had no standards for comparison. But he did notice almost at the outset that everything seemed simplified—possibly because telepathy and teleportation were the reigning king and queen.

"You've seen enough of the city for now," Eeb told him. "All these people are out walking for the exercise. Let's take the shorter way to Rajuz's office."

One moment they stood there on

the moving sidewalk, the next they were in the presence of Rajuz.

Rajuz sat at what must have been a desk, a spherical desk, but he did not look much like a dean. He could have been a technician or even a truck-driver.

Eeb explained, "The trend has been away from differentiation since the sex-identification patterns were decreased. But I'm fed up with it. They all look the same, like that. You know something, Eddie? I like you better."

Rajuz tuned in another of the loudspeakers on his desk, and Eeb explained that it was necessary because the psi-quotient varied in everyone.

"Eeb Lym, Edam Hurst, you have committed a misdemeanor."

"Not him," Eeb said. "It was all my fault."

"Motivation is above suspicion here, you know that. It is the law—if someone does something it is because he wants to. Edam Hurst is as guilty as you are."

He scowled at them for a time and then continued. "Frankly, I don't know what to do. This is the first crime of this nature in a thousand years and while it's merely a misdemeanor it will have to go punished."

"Yes," Eeb agreed. "I guess so. You name it and we'll oblige."

"You won't like it."

"Name it anyway."

"The punishment simply is this—you are to take Edam Hurst back where he belongs."

"Oh, no! Not after I found him—"

"That is the punishment. Throw-back or no you must learn that sex identification is decidedly secondary to psi quotient. When can you take him?"

"Well, I—"

"Don't I have anything to say about this?" Eddie demanded.

"A feeble bit at best. Just sit still and listen, young man."

"—I suppose I can take him this afternoon if the scanner room is vacant."

"It will be vacant, we'll see to that. I'm glad you're being sensible about this whole unhappy affair, Eeb Lym."

"What are you so cheerful about?" Eddie said.

They stood in the scanner room and the girl was humming a little tune. "Don't worry, Edam Hurst. Relax, Eddie. I'm cheerful because I know what I'm doing, that's why. Just bear with me."

He had no choice. But now that suddenly, devastatingly, he felt about Eeb the way she felt about him, he did not want to lose her. It was as simple as that.

"Time is huge," Eeb told him. "You didn't think that once I found you I'd let you go? Oh no, I found you and you're mine—that's all there is to it. Even Jeeva, Lord of the City, couldn't do a thing about it. Nossir. Time is big and while I said . . ."

She flicked a switch and kicked

nonchalantly at a pedal with her foot. "That ought to do it. Just don't be frightened, Eddie. The important thing—"

"The important thing," he finished for her, "is that we want to be together, right?"

"Right," she said, kissed him soundly and turned a little knob on the wall. "Now we're ready."

As before Eddie became dizzy and soon he was sitting on the floor watching the room spin and fade. Spin and fade.

By the time it dissolved, Eddie was whirling away into a giddy limbo . . .

He stood up and heard the wild nature sounds all around them. The bulk of the time-machine was big at his side in a green wooded glen. Eeb came dancing up to him with an armful of fruit. "Here, it's delicious. Taste it—"

She held out her hand and he

took a bite, then looked up sharply. With a whirring sound, the machine faded, disappeared.

"I sent it back," the girl said. "I wanted to make it permanent, just you and I. Time is big and they'll never find us. Besides, they'll think this is punishment enough. We're exiled back here."

"Well, where is *here*?"

"Oh, I'm not exactly sure. Right around the time the human species emerged. Should be a wonderful life, Eddie—"

Eddie began to sing a popular song. Popular? It had been popular—when? This all was very confusing.

"Edam Hurst, you have positively the worst singing voice I've ever heard."

He smiled and told her to be quiet, kissing her to put more force behind the command. Then, hand in hand, Edam and Eeb walked through their glen.

The names of those congenital skeptics who insist that time-travel is impossible, even in theory, are Legion. Nor is their stand difficult to comprehend. They say that no man or woman has yet traveled backward to meet a younger him or herself face to face. They say this is immutable paradox. And by way of clincher they add a query as to why, if time-travel is to come, has it never happened? Why haven't we recorded instances of visitations from the future.

However, those in favor of time-travel have answers ready and waiting. These optimists (?) use the parallel universe theory to meet the first question. Such return, they claim, would immediately cause a forking of the Earthways, leaving our version of the world untrodden by time-traveling feet. As to the clincher, they counter-question with a How do we know we haven't had such visitors? Time-travel, when it comes, will come in a far-distant future. At such a distance the mere six thousand years of recorded human history is a mere fly-speck on the annals of Earth. So why should this tiny dot in the continuum have been favored?