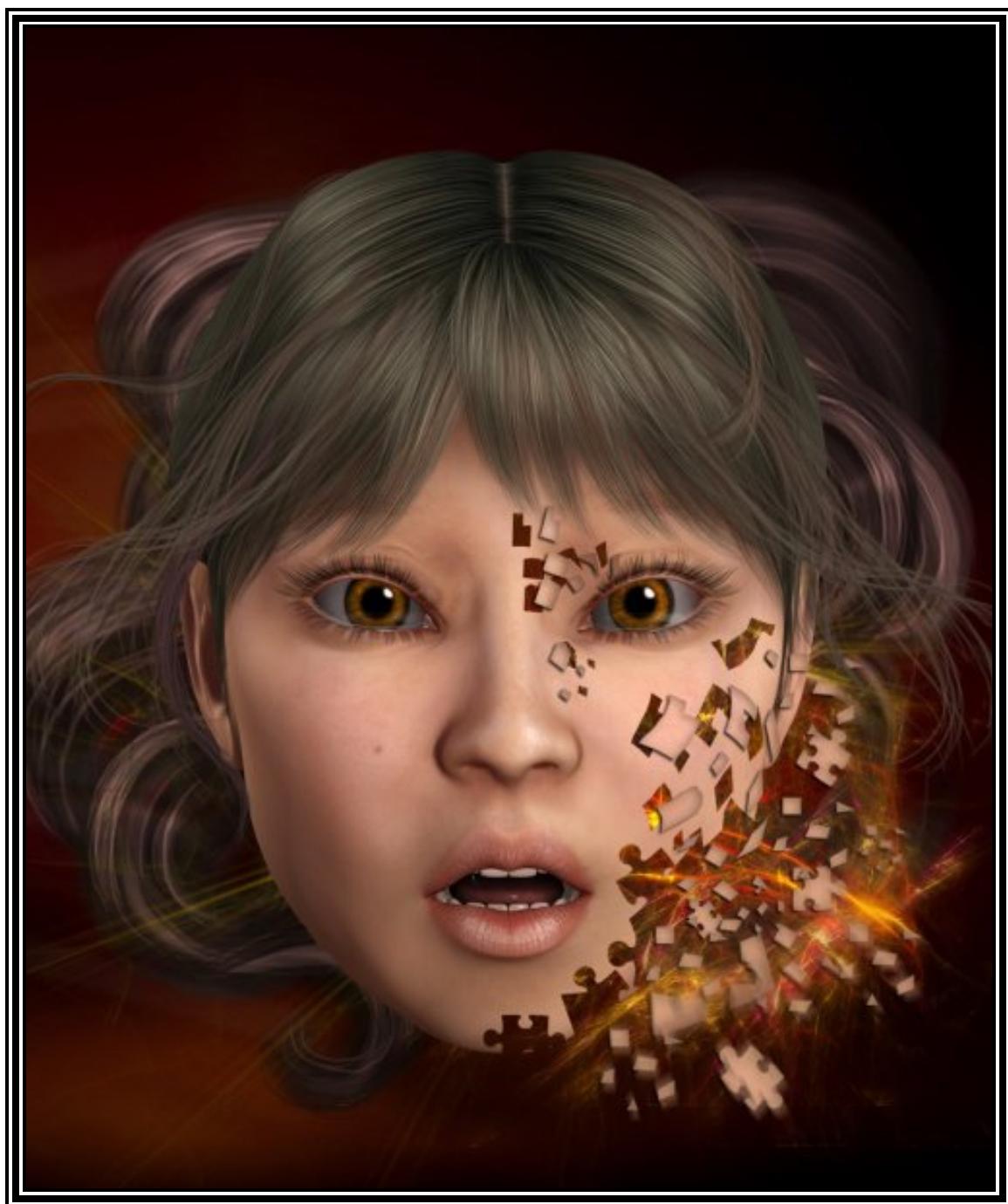


# Sliding Sideways

Bradley Stoke



“It’s like I’m sliding sideways through time and space,” Quentin explained.

Vivienne nodded encouragingly.

“You might have seen that movie *Sliding Doors* with Gwyneth Paltrow,” he continued. “Maybe, in this continuum, it stars Renee Zellweger.”

“I’m sure it was Uma Thurman.”

“Whoever.” Quentin took another sip from his beer. “Sliding sideways, she was. Only for me, it’s happening all the time.”

“All the time?” Vivienne asked, raising an eyebrow. “How can that be?”

“It’s like Stephen Hawking explains. You know, that we live in an infinity of parallel universes. Only that while most people stay in one spacetime continuum all their lives, I’m constantly sliding through all of them. I don’t go backwards and forwards in time. I just go forwards, but the universe I’m in changes around me. And I’ve got no control of it any more than most people have any choice about which parallel universe they spend the whole of their lives in.”

Quentin paused to assess Vivienne’s reaction. Was she humouring him? He often felt the urge to confess his predicament. He knew that the Quentin who would live with the confession was the Quentin whose body he was currently occupying and who would, no doubt, be thoroughly confused by the memory of this occasion.

Vivienne tapped her cigarette on the ashtray. “Go on,” she urged him.

“Are you sure?” Quentin asked.

Most women he spoke to on this matter would now ask “What you on?” Or they would pretend not to have heard anything. He was more anxious than he should be. Why should he care what Vivienne thought about the Quentin she had just met?

Not all Quentins were especially kind to him for the moment of his residency. He had several times suffered venereal disease, war wounds, and an uncomfortably generous waistline.

“Yes. It’s fascinating,” said Vivienne, puffing smoke from her cigarette and running a long fingernail along the rim of her wine glass.

“I’ve seen so many different worlds,” Quentin continued. “There are those where the Cold War persisted with the Soviet Union under President Andropov until the present day. There are those where President Kennedy was not assassinated at Houston. There are those where the Sex Pistols never existed. There’s even one where some Arab terrorists flew Boeing 747s into the World Trade Center.”

Vivienne raised her eyebrows. “I can’t believe that! It’s like imagining that Sir John Lennon never became the world’s best selling novelist.”

“I’ve seen that. He was assassinated, in fact,” Quentin admitted. “I’ve even been in a universe where the richest man in the world was that geek who runs Microsoft.”

“I can’t believe that either! How could IBM, Sun or Lotus allow that to happen?”

“It’s like everything since the time I was born in the early 1960s that could happen has happened. Everything before then is the same in all the universes I’ve inhabited, but after that it sort of diverges.”

“No nuclear wars?”

“Not ones I’ve survived, though there was a small one in the Middle East in the 1970s that led to universal disarmament. It’s amazing what difference a few radioactive

craters can make to a world!"

"I can imagine!" Vivienne said.

There was a curious sparkle in her eyes that suggested to Quentin that she was genuinely fascinated. She showed none of the amused scepticism that usually accompanied the most sympathetic ears to his predicament. Was she simply very good at hiding her real thoughts? Or was she playing him along?

"I once decided to write an account of my life," Quentin continued. "I had this 4GHz computer running this operating system called Winix. It was fantastic! And this was a few years back, whereas the best computers hereabouts aren't a quarter as fast. Anyway, I wrote all day and all night, while the wife I had, a pretty woman I've not seen since, kept moaning about me staying up. Then I thought I'd review what I'd written. And you know what?"

"What?" wondered Vivienne, raising her eyebrows in apparent interest.

"I didn't recognise what I read at the start of my account. It was like someone else had written it with totally different memories. It was then it occurred to me that there is a sort of continuum of Quentins, just like me, also sliding sideways through space and time. In fact, maybe everyone has a host of selves like me, perhaps an infinity of them in the infinity of parallel universes. And maybe people like me are everywhere."

"Fascinating!" remarked Vivienne, stubbing out her cigarette.

Quentin scrutinised Vivienne closely. Despite her apparent encouragement, Quentin was still half-expecting a sarcastic rejoinder. Did she really believe him? She was an attractive woman, who carried around with her a self-assurance that would

normally manifest itself in contempt towards a man like him, any man, who told a story that must seem ridiculously far-fetched.

“You think I’m mad, don’t you?” he asked her, as she brushed her black shoulder length hair off the sharp shoulders of her Giuseppe Marconi suit.

“Not at all,” Vivienne said with a smile. “In fact, I think I might be falling in love with you.”

“Now, you *are* taking the piss!” remarked Quentin.

How likely was that? He wasn’t a bad-looking bloke and the Quentin he was now had reasonable dress sense with well-groomed hair and an expensive Ben Jones leather jacket. But no one had ever said that to him before after such a short time. And certainly not after he had divulged his most intimate truths.

Vivienne shook her head. “I’m not taking the piss, Quentin. Although it’s a bit of an exaggeration to say I’m in love as such, you *are* just the man I’ve always wanted to meet. All my life, in fact.”

Quentin blushed. “I simply don’t believe that...”

“You’re right. You’re not the only one ‘sliding sideways’ through space and time, as you call it. It’s my life as well, you know, although I don’t have a term for it. It’s just I’ve never met anyone the same as me in that way.”

Quentin shook his head violently and squeezed his eyes tight. When he opened them, Vivienne was still there.

“You mean you’re like me? Every day you wake up and live in a slightly different world, subtly changing and mutating?”

Vivienne nodded. She opened her cigarette packet and put another Marlboro

Gold Tip in her mouth.

“It’s not always gradual. That’s why I asked about nuclear war. I spent a whole week in a kind of post-apocalyptic world. It was horrible! I had to eat rats and wear a lead-lined coat. That Ronald Reagan went just a little too far with his threats against the Soviets in the Pakistani missile crisis...”

“I remember that. It was touch and go, as far as I remember.”

“And then President Brezhnev, the senile git, called Reagan’s bluff and it was fireworks! I wasn’t there for the crisis, but I was there several years later. The thing is it happened suddenly. One moment I was living in this student squat in Hackney, the next minute in some nuclear wasteland. And when I came out of it, that was sudden as well. I was walking through some woodland trying to avoid some thuggish scavengers, and when I emerged at the end, it was by a motorway, only instead of it being empty and overgrown with mutant grass, there were cars driving along it, just like there’d never been a nuclear war. As I guess there never had been. I was fucking delighted, I can tell you!”

Quentin shook his head again. “And I thought the Cuban Crisis might have become the big one!” he exclaimed.

“I’ve never met anyone else who knows what it’s like, not so much living in a nuclear wasteland, but living each day in a different world. I thought I was the only one.”

“So did I!” admitted Quentin.

At last! After all these years, here was proof that there were others who knew what he knew and lived the life he lived.

“So, how did you first discover things were like that?” Quentin asked. “I was in my teens. There are so many changes as you grow up, you don’t realise that some are not the kind of changes that happen to everyone. You know, milk teeth falling out, your shape changing as you grow older, puberty, all that stuff.”

“I think it was in my teens, too.”

“When I tried telling people they thought I was mad. I was even taken to see a psychiatrist. But I discovered that pretty soon after I told people, they forgot about it. Other people, my parents, my friends, my teachers, didn’t have the same memories as me. Eventually, I realised that it was the Quentin I’d been before and made the confessions who’d have to live with the consequences of it, not me. It was like I could start afresh every day. I discovered I could do whatever I fucking liked and I’d never need worry about living with more than the memory of it.”

“Me too!” exclaimed Vivienne, drawing on her cigarette. “It’s so fucking liberating! In fact, I’ve several times done things, just because I knew I could. I stripped naked in a pub. Just because I could. I sucked a stranger’s cock in public because I knew I wouldn’t suffer for it. I’ve had sex with anyone I fancied.”

Quentin raised his eyebrows. “Well...” he remarked, “I’ve been a bit bolder than I might have been. Like I’ve been tonight, you know, approaching an attractive woman like you knowing that if you rejected me it’d be the Quentin I’m inside now who’d live with the rejection. I’ve been unfaithful to the several different wives and girlfriends I’ve had, who, after all, I didn’t really know very well and didn’t always like. I’ve often done things I can’t claim to be proud of. No *Groundhog Day* redemption for me, I’m afraid. But I’ve never been as bold as you.”

Vivienne shrugged. “I guess us spacetime travellers all have different ways of coping with the freedom we’ve been granted,” she mused. “The Vivientes whose bodies I’ve occupied have all been pretty different: all the different ways I could have been, and, of course, somewhere in space and time actually am. Some Vivientes I’ve been were pretty tight-arsed and that’s when I’ve probably been most wicked. The current Vivienne’s got a boyfriend who works in the City, but she seems pretty free and easy. Which suits me! None of that ‘Christ, Viv! What’s got into you?’ that I’ve heard so many times.”

Quentin finished his glass of beer and pulled out a twenty pound note, with its head of King Charles the Third on the back, and waved it at the barmaid. “What do you want?”

“I’ll have another glass of house dry white,” Vivienne said.

“And I’ll have another pint of Blackwell’s. I’ve never heard of that beer before this week, but it seems to be the most popular round here.”

“It’s the little things that are most confusing,” Vivienne commented. “I was amazed to see that there’s no Jubilee Line here. And no one’s ever heard of Madonna. She never made it big in this world. And who’d believe that Colin Powell would become President of the United States!”

The two of them threaded through the crowded bar to some seats by the jukebox on which was playing a selection of old pop songs, some familiar, some surreally different in detail and some totally unfamiliar. Quentin studied Vivienne with an approving eye as they sat down.

She was a little younger than him, probably in her mid to late thirties. She was

a woman who, being so slender and assertively pretty now, must have been quite a head-turner when she was younger. She crossed her long slender legs, almost all her stockinginged thigh on display under her fashionably short skirt, and her blouse coquettishly unbuttoned under her smart jacket.

Vivienne smiled. She flashed a healthy dental display behind her wide reddened lips. She pulled out another cigarette from her packet and lit it.

“I still can’t believe it’s true!” she said, unable to disguise the excitement in her voice.

“So, where do you live and what do you do?” wondered Quentin. A fairly obvious question really, but he knew the answer wouldn’t be so obvious.

“I can never be sure,” Vivienne confessed. “When I woke up this morning I was living in a semi on the other side of town, but whether I still live there I don’t know. The times I’ve gone to where I thought was home only to find that the keys don’t fit in the door! And when I wake up, I’m never sure where I’ll be, who I’ll have been sleeping with and where I’m supposed to be working. I think I work as a project manager for Pineapple Computers, but I didn’t bother going to work. What use would I be if I did? I don’t know anything about the job and I’d be useless at any meeting. So, I just went to see a film, Martin Scorsese’s *Lord of the Rings*, and mooched about at Sunbucks.”

“Same with me,” Quentin replied. He lit a cigarette he took from the half-empty packet of Benson & Hedges Gold Leaf he found in his pocket. Had he started the evening smoking that brand? “I think I’m recently separated from my wife, who I don’t recognise from the photographs on the mantelpiece. I’ve no idea whether I still

work at the brokers I was supposed to be working for yesterday. It's really stupid going to work. Once I was a Spanish teacher in Exeter and I don't know a word of Spanish. And the number of wives I've had!"

Vivienne smiled. "Sometimes the husband or lover I wake up with is a real catch," she admitted. "It's like I've really lucked out. Sometimes you can't believe the disgusting lump of lard I've been sleeping next to. They really hate it when they start groping me and I tell them to fuck off."

"The best I ever had," Quentin boasted, "was this model I was married to. She was fantastic. I couldn't take my hands off her, though I don't know how much she appreciated my attention. I was some kind of techno musician, though I didn't know what I was supposed to do with all the technical equipment. My hair was halfway down my back. I just wished I'd stayed like that for longer. One day I went to sleep in an enormous bed with this gorgeous blonde and woke up the following day a homeless drunkard in Brighton. That was horrible!"

"I've thought about trying to escape from it all," Vivienne said. She drew on her cigarette and sipped from her glass of wine. "You know like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*. I got on this plane to Hawaii, fell asleep over the Pacific, and woke up in my bed in Slough. Another time I was in a car crash and lost consciousness with blood all over me. The next thing I knew I woke up in a comfy bed with no bruises or anything. That really shook me. Had I just died or something?"

The two of them sighed.

Quentin looked around him at the other people in the bar. He wasn't sure that the barmaid wore the same green blouse when he entered the pub. And when had he

acquired that strange scar just above his thumb? There was so much he knew nothing about the lives of the Quentins whose bodies he drifted through. And Vivienne, didn't she have slightly different coloured lipstick when he started talking to her?

Life was so confusing. It might be wonderful, but it was sometimes such an effort to relax when each day brought new surprises and new revelations. He hoped he'd never again have a repetition of that month in gaol for manslaughter. Or the weeks shooting up heroin in that derelict house in Manchester. Or that day in hospital with his face ripped apart by shards of glass. Life could also be intolerably hard.

“Do you want to come back to my apartment? It's gorgeous. It faces onto the river and there's a lovely view from the window.”

“Beats Hounslow, that's for sure,” agreed Vivienne. “Yeah! Why not? Fuck it! Tomorrow I'll probably wake up in Timbuktu.”

Quentin laughed, but remembered only too well those weeks when he found himself working as an aid worker in the Sudan. It was difficult to be as irresponsible as he'd like to be with so many people relying on him, but impossible for him to perform the medical duties in which the Quentin whose body he inhabited was proficient.

When Quentin opened the door to his apartment, with Vivienne giggling behind him, he felt an anxiety he never normally experienced when he took a woman home with him. It wasn't just the anxiety that he'd find a wife or girlfriend he'd never known before waiting impatiently for him. Nor was it the fear that this encounter might not resolve itself in a physical way. Vivienne's passionate kiss under the shelter of the nearby Sainsbury Metro made clear that her intentions were precisely the same as his. He had, at last, after all these years, met someone who could be his real soulmate.

Someone, at last, who could truly understand his deepest anxieties and concerns.

Someone with whom, already, he would like to spend the rest of his days.

He stretched his palms out to press against Vivienne's bared breasts with tension that tingled like electricity through her body. The disrobing had been easy. The act of embracing her naked body was much more fraught. Would she suddenly vanish as his hands made contact on a bosom still firm and pert? Would she suddenly mutate, as had happened before, into someone wholly different from the one he'd accompanied through the Docklands streets: his arm around her waist and his nose nuzzling her long brown hair?

Contact was made. The docking was smooth. Their mouths grappled together with passionate urgency. When he placed his hand on her crotch, it was already dripping with a warm moistness of desire that hastened his impatience to couple with someone who might anchor his drifting through universes of subtle mutation.

Someone, perhaps, who could share the jokes he often wanted to share as he noticed details that hinted at the larger changes in the world around him. One who would remember, as he did, a world where Prime Minister Gordon Brown didn't defect to the Liberal Democrats rather than lose a term in office. One who remembered a world where the Euro was accepted with amazing enthusiasm by the British public. Or one who might also know a world where the UK refused to join the European Community.

Their two bodies fell onto the bed, Vivienne's gasps of passion and enthusiasm drowned out by his own. And when they conjoined,—his penis entering her vagina with energetic thrusts, each one savoured and relished as they had rarely been

before,—it was not just two bodies, but two souls, that met in each upward thrust of her crotch, as wild and unrestrained as any he could remember. It was truly two people becoming one. As little as nothing separated his hairy torso from her full bosom. Or his slightly bulging stomach on her flat muscular one. Or his stubbled chin grating against her smooth one.

The orgasms she voiced, which he reciprocated without losing the will and vigour to continue, were full, throaty and unfeigned. Fuck the neighbours. Quentin would never confront their complaints about the passion they could hear through the walls. This was it. This was the moment. This was the zenith of his life.

When they parted, two bodies reluctant to accept any pause in their lovemaking as anything other than brief respite, they exchanged memories and observations of the different worlds they had drifted through. The universe where the Americans won the Vietnam War. The universe where the Naturist Party won a seat in parliament (and the furore that caused). The universe where Michael Jackson became a militant black cleric and did remarkably well in the Presidential elections.

But no amount of passion could last forever, and neither Vivienne nor Quentin had the stamina of youth. They eventually accepted defeat. More lovemaking was beyond them. The two lay together on the huge double bed, sheets pushed to one side, while below the window of Quentin's apartment, a barge chugged along the River Thames, its lights shining against the darkness of the double-glazed glass.

It was to the sound of seagulls and tourist barges that Quentin awoke many hours later, gratified to find Vivienne still nestled beside him. He stared at the ceiling, his naked body cuddled up close to Vivienne who was dozing peacefully.

She was still here!

Now was the first day of the rest of his life, he mused, reflecting on the threadbare observation, but in his case one that promised to be rather more literally true. He smiled appreciatively at Vivienne as her eyes opened and she gazed at him through her long eyelashes.

“Still here?” he asked with a smile.

“Still here,” she replied, “but not for long. I’ve got to get to the office soon. It’s a working day.”

“Are you going to work then?” wondered Quentin.

“Well, of course. And you? Back to the City?”

Quentin wasn’t sure how he should answer. He wasn’t sure where he worked exactly. “We’ll see each other again, won’t we?” he asked hopefully.

“I guess so, although my husband won’t like it, I’m sure.”

“If, of course, it’s the same husband as yesterday...”

Vivienne frowned. “You what?”

“I mean, you don’t know who it might be today. It could be anyone.”

“Could it?” asked Vivienne, puzzled and leaning towards him on her arm.

“Indeed,” said Quentin, warming to the theme, “who knows what world we’ve woken up in? For all we know, Elvis Presley might be dead, Jack Straw might be Prime Minister and there might be no Fox TV.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m just saying we don’t know how the universe might have changed since yesterday.”

“What you on!” Vivienne exclaimed, with a nervous laugh. “I can’t imagine any of those things happening. Have you gone loopy?”

“No,” laughed Quentin. “I was just speculating. You know, the two of us sliding sideways through space and time...”

“‘Sliding sideways’? What kind of metaphysical rubbish is this? I’m not sure I *do* want to see you again if you spout stuff like that.”

Quentin panicked slightly, but he relished having his arm around her. “Don’t you remember our conversation yesterday?”

“I guess so. Mostly about your job in the City, the money you earn and how your wife doesn’t understand you. But, let’s be honest, will we, you’re not the first married man I’ve heard go on like that...”

“No?” Quentin wondered. Was this the same Vivienne?

Then he heard a door slam shut. It was the one to his apartment. Who could this be?

“Quentin, I’m home!” he heard a woman’s cheerful voice echo from the hallway. “They found an earlier flight from Washington after all. You’re not still in bed, are you?”

“What the fuck?” said Vivienne, echoing Quentin’s own thoughts. “You said your wife would no way be back.”

The door to the bedroom opened and in the slow motion prelude to the drama that followed, in which he was the victim of a torrent of verbal abuse from both Vivienne and a woman he didn’t recognise but was his wife of many years, he saw a neat figure silhouetted against the doorway. She wore a smart business suit, was slim

but much the same age as Quentin, and her face was frozen in an expression of unfeigned horror and disgust. And no wonder, at the sight of her husband, naked and lying next to an equally naked woman, who was slow, almost impertinently so, in covering her breasts under the bed linen.

The two women attacked him, almost ganging up with each other, though from opposite poles, in their condemnation of his infidelity and stupidity. As Quentin sat there on the bed, still naked, rocking with the depression that suddenly engulfed him, it was not guilt that made him so miserable. After all, this was not the first time that one wife or girlfriend or other found him in bed with another woman.

The moment had passed.

The Vivienne he was with was no longer the soulmate for whom he would have gladly abandoned his tall, elegant wife. She was a woman who was as much a stranger to him as the woman he had inadvertently cheated.