

MILLION EYES:
EXTRA TIME

ACCOLADES FOR THE MILLION EYES: EXTRA TIME SHORT STORIES

Operation Loch Ness

Named one of *Idle Ink*'s "Best Stories of 2018"

Rachel Can Still See

Winner, Rushmoor Writers Hyde Cup 2016

Highly Commended by *Writers' Forum*

Who is Rudolph Fentz?

3rd Prize Winner, *Scribble* 2015 Winter Issue

Paul

Shortlisted, Aeon Award Contest 2015

Rachel Can See

Longlisted, *InkTears* Short Story Contest 2014

Honourable Mention, *Metamorphose* Issue 2

Eryl Mai's Dream

Shortlisted, *Dark Tales* June 2017 competition

The Home Secretary is Safe

Longlisted, *InkTears* Short Story Contest 2017

Longlisted, *To Hull and Back* Humorous Short Story

Competition 2017

*"The Bisley Boy" (Extracts from Margery Ingleby's journals
– Modern English translation)*

Shortlisted, *Artificium* Summer 2017 Short Story

Competition

MILLION EYES: EXTRA TIME

C.A. BERRY



Elsewhen Press

Million Eyes: Extra Time

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Million Eyes: Extra Time is a compilation of short stories set in the universe of my time travel conspiracy thriller trilogy, *Million Eyes*, the first book of which will be released in early 2020.

The stories act as an introduction to the *Million Eyes* world, exploring themes that are central to the trilogy and offering a unique insight into its time-travelling villains. They focus on side characters who (mostly) do not appear in the trilogy while revealing clues to key storylines in all three books.

Many of these stories are inspired by conspiracy theories and urban legends you may recognise.

Think of these tales as a bit like the mini-episodes you get with TV series – *Star Trek: Short Treks*, *Lost: Missing Pieces*, and *Doctor Who's* many prequels, mini-adventures and ‘Tardisodes’.

While the stories here can stand alone, you’ll notice that a number of them are strongly linked and follow a loose chronology. My advice is that you read them in the order as they are presented in this collection.

Nine of the stories have been previously published. Some have also won or been placed in competitions. Three of the stories are brand new.

At the end of this collection, you can also read an exclusive extract of the first book in the *Million Eyes* trilogy, coming soon...

PRAISE FOR THE MILLION EYES: EXTRA TIME SHORT STORIES

For *Paul*

“‘Paul’ is a true tour de force feat of storytelling as C.R. Berry combines the speculative and uncanny with a thought-provoking concept that will definitely linger at the back of your mind long after reading. And if you’re a fan of The Beatles this story will definitely be up your Abbey road.”

ANTHONY SELF, *Director, Storgy Magazine*

For *The Home Secretary Is Safe*

“My favourite SF yarn [in *Phantaxis* Issue 6] came from fellow Brit C.R. Berry with ‘The Home Secretary is Safe’. Hapless Cody Evans gets caught in a time loop on a train. This was beautifully handled and worked all the better because it had no complete explanation at the end.”

EAMONN MURPHY, *Reviewer, SFcrowsnest*

For *Rachel Can Still See*

“I really liked the originality of this story. The characters are well-drawn and credible – no mean feat given the nature of the story.”

LORRAINE MACE,
Author of best-selling D.I. Sterling series

For *Who Is Rudolph Fentz?*

“Good build-up to a chilling conclusion.”

MARY CURD, *Scribble Reader*

“A good plot with a descriptive setting and pacey dialogue.”

NEIL BRAMALL, *Scribble Reader*

For *The Charlie Chaplin Time Traveller*

“I really enjoyed it! Perhaps I’ll turn it into a movie sometime!”

GEORGE CLARKE, *Film Director*

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RACHEL CAN SEE

My 'Best Friend'

8.30am. First day of my final week in Year Six at St John's. Mum dropped me off and this girl came running over to me telling me about some boy she'd kissed.

My initial thoughts were: *Wow, she's forward. Not sure I'd go up to someone I didn't know and tell them about my lip antics.*

But then she used my name, as if she knew me.

"Sorry – how do you know my name?" I asked as politely as I could.

She laughed. *Rude.*

"Come on, you idiot," she said. "I need to show you these texts Taj was sending me." She started pulling me by my arm toward the school's pupil entrance.

"What are you doing?" I said, yanking back. "I don't know you. Why are you acting like we're friends?"

The girl let go of my arm and looked at me, her wide, slightly obnoxious grin starting to falter. "Rachel, are you joking?"

I wasn't sure what she was playing at. "I've never seen you before."

"We're best friends, you birdbrain. Have been since Year Two."

"My best friend is Jenna Weir. I don't even know your name."

She didn't know who Jenna Weir was and started to cry. Mrs Fowler came rushing over. She hadn't heard of Jenna Weir either, which made me angry. Were this girl and Mrs Fowler in league to confuse and frighten me?

The girl became hysterical. I became hysterical. Her mother was called. My mother was called. All before the end of registration.

Mum took me home, and only then did this girl start to come back to me. Lucy. Her name was Lucy. It was a bizarre feeling, like I'd woken up from a dream. No, Jenna Weir wasn't in my Year Six class. Lucy was. Lucy was my best friend, the one I had sleepovers with every Friday night. Round hers one week, mine the next. Jenna Weir... she was slipping away. It was getting harder to recall her at all.

I'm not sure if Lucy ever truly forgave me. I don't think she

trusted me after that. We stayed friends, but drifted apart during secondary school. By Year Nine we never spoke again.

I remember Mum, at the time, was convinced Lucy had done something to upset me and my reaction that day was to punish her. Truth is, that's not the truth at all. For a few hours that morning, I genuinely had no idea who Lucy was.

Parent's Evening

"Let's start with the good," said Mr Spencer, Rachel's history teacher. "The quality of Rachel's written work is excellent. For a Year Eight student, her grasp of grammar, spelling and her use of adjectives is better than some of my GCSE students. She is clearly an extremely intelligent girl."

Rachel's mother, Maureen Evans, looked at her smiling daughter with uncertainty. A 'but' was coming, and the more glowing the praise before it, the bigger it was likely to be. The smile Maureen returned her was slight, restrained until she knew exactly how much praise to apportion.

"And the bad?" Maureen asked. *Let's get this over with.*

"Well..." Mr Spencer said, his desperately-in-need-of-plucking unibrow crinkling as he frowned, "... I'm afraid Rachel refuses to engage with the subject."

Maureen glanced at Rachel, whose smile had twisted into an irascible frown. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, she seems to think that I'm running a creative writing class, rather than a history class."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'll give you a few examples." Mr Spencer folded his arms on the desk. "Earlier this year we learned about Christopher Columbus's discovery of America. But Rachel insisted that Columbus never got to America, that his ship and crew were lost at sea, that the person who actually discovered the Americas was a Frenchman, though she couldn't say who. Then, more recently" – he pulled out some notes to refer to – "we started learning about William Shakespeare – his upbringing, his marriage, his career. But Rachel insists that Shakespeare only wrote a handful of plays before he was stabbed to death in a brawl. She believes that some of his most famous plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream were planned but never written. It's all very imaginative, but history is about facts, not fantasy."

"It's not fantasy," mumbled Rachel, staring at her feet. "He was stabbed outside a tavern when he was twenty-eight."

"No, he wasn't," said Mr Spencer, turning a hard gaze on Rachel and sounding like he'd had this argument several times before. "I told you, he died aged fifty-two in 1616. No one knows how or why but one non-contemporary source says he died of a fever."

"But I remember learning about it."

"When? When did you learn about it? Because it certainly wasn't in my class."

"I – I don't remember."

"Mmm." His lips compressed and he shook his head. "I'm afraid the fact is, young lady, unless you start to realise that history is not about writing stories, you're going to fail your exams in the summer."

Rachel, still staring at her feet, shrugged her shoulders belligerently.

"Rachel, are you listening to Mr Spencer?" Maureen said, a hint of irritation in her tone. "He's only trying to look out for you."

Sighing, Rachel lifted her head, looked fleetingly at Maureen, then returned her gaze to the floor, like she was too embarrassed – or too embittered – to face anyone. She murmured, "I know."

Uncle Roger

"Rachel, eat some breakfast before you go," said Mum. My body's high metabolism kept me thin – which Mum knew – but she was permanently worried I was going to turn anorexic.

"No, Mum, I'm already late." I downed the coffee she'd made me, lurched into the hallway, and dug my feet into my shoes.

"Oh, I do hate it when you skip breakfast," said Mum from the kitchen.

"Stop worrying. I'm going to Pizza Hut with Angela after

our lecture, so I'm hardly going to waste away."

I heard her sigh. I was about to hurtle out the front door when I remembered I needed to tell her my dinner plans. "I'm going to pop into Uncle Roger's after uni, so I'll probably have dinner with him tonight."

"Pardon?"

Presuming she hadn't heard me, I dashed from the hallway to the kitchen to repeat myself, huffing as I did so. Not that an extra few seconds were going to make much difference to the embarrassment of walking into my sociology lecture half an hour late.

"I said – I'm going to pop into Uncle Roger's after –"

"Yes, I heard what you said." Mum stared at me, her eyebrows quivering and face ashen.

"What?" I snapped.

"Darling, you know Uncle Roger is dead."

A breath caught in my throat. For a second I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "Sorry – what?" I choked out.

"Uncle Roger is dead. You know he is. He died on September 11th. Remember?"

She's been keeping this from me! How could she?

"Are you serious?" My fingers gripped the edge of the breakfast bar. "September 11th? That's almost a month ago!"

Mum's brow deepened. "A month ago? No... *The* September 11th!"

"What do you mean, *the* September 11th?"

"September 11th 2001. When the World Trade Center was attacked. Uncle Roger was working in the North Tower when the first plane hit." She stepped toward me.

I stepped back. "What attack? What plane?"

Mum shook her head. "Rachel, I don't understand how you could forget this. Two hijacked planes flew into the Twin Towers in New York, caused both buildings to collapse. Your Uncle Roger" – she swallowed and I saw the lump in her throat – "he was on one of the impact floors." Her voice was breaking up.

"Mother, I have no idea what you're talking about. The Twin Towers are still standing. I saw them on the news the other day." I waved a vague hand toward the living room. "And I spoke to Uncle Roger on the phone last week."

"Oh, darling. No, you didn't." A tear rolled down her

cheek. "You really didn't."

My heartbeat quickened. My uni bag dropped off my shoulder. Feeling faint, I groped for a stool around the breakfast bar. Mum made me more coffee. I texted Angela to tell her I wasn't going to make the lecture.

I went to the doctors instead.

Dr Flynn

Maureen hoped that hypnotherapist Dr Flynn would have some answers, because Rachel's GP certainly didn't.

Maureen's regular dose of diazepam wasn't helping that day. Not that she was expecting it to. Rachel had been having sessions with Dr Flynn for the last two weeks and today Dr Flynn was going to give her and Rachel a report on her progress, and an assessment on what she thought was wrong.

"I'm afraid I don't have anything enlightening to tell you both."

Great, thought Maureen. Exactly what she was dreading.

"What *can* you tell us?" She tried to suppress her frustration.

"Well, as you know, I've had Rachel under deep hypnosis in each of our sessions." Her thin fingers curled around the file in her lap. "And I've talked with her about various events in her life. She's recalled a lot of things very differently to the account you gave me, Mrs Evans."

Maureen took Rachel's hand, entwining their fingers. "What things?"

"She described being with her father. Day trips. Holidays. She described going to her father's place of work. It was a 'Take Your Daughter to Work Day' and she remembered helping him on an advertising campaign for a new chocolate bar."

Maureen's heart dropped. Rachel's father – her beloved Kevin – died before Rachel was born.

"She also remembered having a brother."

"A brother?" Maureen's brows shot upward.

It was all too much. Maureen found herself panicking, struggling to breathe, hot – cold – hot – cold. Dr Flynn calmed her down, told her that everything would be okay,

that apart from Rachel's mystery memories, she was as healthy as a horse. Normally Maureen needed a paper bag, but Dr Flynn's soothing words and velvet voice were enough.

Rachel hugged her.

Dr Flynn carried on. "I'm going to suggest that Rachel spends some time at Pinewood. Just so we can do some further tests."

"Pinewood?" Rachel had accepted everything in silence up to this point, but this she couldn't stand. "Isn't that a loony bin?"

"It's a mental health facility."

She frowned. "I'm not crazy."

"I'm not saying you are," Dr Flynn said. "But there *is* a problem with your memory and there are people at Pinewood who may be able to find out what it is."

Pinewood

I'd been at Pinewood for two weeks. The doctors were no closer to understanding what was going on in my head. My resentment for Mum was gone. At first, yes, I was beyond mad at her for shipping me off to the nuthouse. But it was the fear talking. I knew I was in the right place.

How could I forget 9/11? How could I forget Uncle Roger dying? Because part of me genuinely believed it never happened. I had been living with 'alternate' memories all my life. Some clearer than others. Some I'd resolved were dreams which I'd confused with reality.

No. Dreams were nothing to do with it. I had a theory of my own. A theory I didn't share with the doctors. Not really their specialty. The best people to call would've been Mulder and Scully, if they weren't just TV inventions.

My theory was this: I'd fallen through a hole in the fabric of space from a parallel universe, and my alternate memories were memories of my original life in the other world.

Very sci-fi, granted. But no one else had an alternative explanation to offer.

Until November 13th. That's when everything changed. Friday the 13th.

How apt.

Dr Flynn was talking to someone in the corridor outside my room. I'd been given a private room away from the communal ward I was in during my first week. I wasn't sure why.

Dr Flynn's arrival was a surprise. She hadn't been to see me once. I presumed she'd palmed me off on the specialists at Pinewood. Now she was here at three o'clock in the morning.

She entered the room and barely looked at me. Not even a hint of a smile. Two others were standing in the doorway – a man and a woman in dark suits with dark hair. My lamp was on its dimmest setting, and the glow only limped as far as the end of my bed, making their faces dark as well. I could tell from the tilt of their heads that they were staring at me.

Dr Flynn was fumbling with the instrument tray in the corner of the room. Before my brain managed to connect with my lips to ask questions, she stabbed my arm with a syringe.

The room spun. Dr Flynn and the two people in suits were swallowed inside a frantic blur, then a thick quilt of darkness fell over me.

Missing

Every time the phone rang, Maureen hoped it was Pinewood with news of her darling Rachel. A diagnosis, a prognosis and a discharge date. She hated the thought of Rachel being there, getting poked, prodded and interrogated by doctors who had no clue what they were dealing with. Rachel was a new phenomenon to them.

Then the phone did ring. Just before midday on Friday, November 13th. It was Pinewood with news of Rachel, but it wasn't the news she expected, nor imagined, possible.

"Mrs Evans, is your daughter with you?" said Dr Farage, Rachel's doctor at Pinewood.

Maureen's heart stopped. "What? No. No, she's not with me. Because she's there. At the hospital."

"Have you had any contact with Rachel? Did she try to call you at all last night?"

"No, she didn't. Tell me what's going on." Maureen pressed the phone to her ear and lowered herself into a chair.

“It appears Rachel discharged herself in the middle of the night. We can’t find her. She’s nowhere at the facility.”

Them

“W-what are you... you d-doing to me...?” I murmured, the words falling limply from my lips.

I opened my eyes a crack to a blur of people. More men and women in dark suits. Doctors in white coats. They surrounded me, talking amongst themselves, talking about me. I was in a bed, but not the same bed or the same room I was in before.

“You... you’ve kidnapped me,” I challenged them with the little vigour I could muster. “You’ll pay for this.”

One of the doctors approached. A man. As he leaned over me, he shifted into focus, like a lens change during an eye test. I could make out his green eyes, the thick tortoiseshell frames of his glasses, the small scar on his bald head, and the tiny grey hairs that were curling out of his nose.

“My sincerest apologies, but your removal was necessary,” he said, and I felt his warm, stale breath on my cheeks.

“W-why?”

“You have an ability we do not yet fully understand, which very few people possess. You have a different perception of time. A larger perception. You can see beyond. You can see the changes. The work we do sometimes necessitates changes.”

“Changes to what?”

“The timeline.”

I tried to swallow. My throat wouldn’t let me. When it finally did, it was like someone had socked me in the neck.

“W-what are you going to do to me?”

“We’ve been assessing you, trying to determine the extent of your ability. For some people, it’s just like déjà vu, but yours is the most powerful we’ve seen. That leaves us two options.”

“Which are?” Honestly, I was afraid to find out.

“The first is we kill you. Quick and painless for you, clean and tidy for us. The work we do has to remain a secret, and we cannot continue to operate in the dark with you shining a light on us.”

It was like he'd slammed a bunched fist into the pit of my stomach with his full weight behind it, driving the breath from my lungs. Wordless, I just stared in horror. No one even believed me! What sort of threat could I have been?

"I take it you'd like to hear Option Two?" He said it with a facetious smirk – as if this was the time. "The second option is that we *use* you."

Finally, I found my voice. "Use me?"

"As I've said, your ability is powerful. You can see things we can't. We may be able to use that to our advantage."

"W-what would I have to do?"

"Join us. Work with us. Help us to better understand your ability, so that we can nurture you into an asset. I'm afraid it would mean you giving up your former life in a rather finite way, to avoid drawing unwanted attention."

"What do you mean finite?"

"We'd need to fake your death."

My throat closed once more. All I could think of was Mum utterly falling to pieces.

Impatience now crisping his words, the doctor continued, "I realise none of this is what you want to hear, but we're busy people. I'll give you five minutes to assimilate what I've said and come to a decision."

Yeah, right. Five minutes.

The Call

Maureen had not slept for three days. Not since Pinewood told her Rachel was missing. There was no way she could, no way *any* parent could. She lived on coffee and frozen ready meals – when she felt like eating. The TV was always on, a sort-of companion, but nothing on the screen really registered or mattered. All she wanted was for her iPhone to ring and for Rachel's tender voice to caress her ear.

On the third day, it did ring. But it wasn't Rachel's voice. It was Detective Inspector Tabor's voice. Softer, gentler, and more sullen than when Maureen first met her. No longer edged with positivity and hope.

"We think we've found her," she said dismally.

Maureen knew what she meant, but denial took over. "Is

she okay?" She didn't even believe her own words.

"We're going to need you to come down to the hospital."

"To do what?" She didn't know why she asked. She already knew the answer.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs Evans. We need you to come and identify Rachel's body."

History tests

Sometimes death is better.

Two years they'd been assessing me, examining me, delving into every corner of my existence. I couldn't remember the last time I saw daylight.

"Er – sorry, Rachel, can we backtrack?" said Dr Masood.

Here I was again. Another hypnotherapy session with Dr Masood. Another history test. Today she'd been asking me about the Vietnam War.

"You said that President *Kennedy* ended the Vietnam War? When was this?"

Going inside my head with a few choice words was better than going inside it with a scalpel. I was just so tired. Tired of being a lab rat for these people. And what hurt the most, more than any blade or needle, was that I'd almost forgotten what Mum looked like.

"Mid-60s, I think," I replied wearily, remembering JFK's world-famous speech about the Vietnam peace agreement.

Dr Masood was silent for a minute or so. Then she said, "So you don't recall anything happening to President Kennedy in 1963?"

"Er – no."

"I see. So you know nothing about Kennedy's trip to Dallas, Texas, on November 22nd?"

"No... why? Should I?"

I'd obviously said something important.

WHO IS RUDOLPH FENTZ?

June 1950

Tired and fed-up, Forrest Thomson was finally on his way home after a late night at the office. That's when he encountered Rudolph Fentz.

At 11.15pm, Forrest was passing through Times Square, New York City, heading for his apartment on West 51st Street during Times Square's busiest time, theatre letting out time. Carving through the crowds, wishing he'd gone a different way, Forrest noticed a man in his thirties standing in the middle of the road.

The man looked confused, disoriented, and was staring at the cars like he'd never seen one before. And what in the world was he wearing? A cutaway coat, waistcoat underneath; a turned-up collar and black, oversized bow tie; and a tall silk hat. He also had proper mutton chop whiskers like nobody had anymore. It was all very 19th-century. Most odd.

The traffic lights went green. The man panicked and, instead of waiting, made a run for the sidewalk.

Forrest screamed, "Stop!" but was far too far away to be heard.

The man ran straight into the path of a taxi and went tumbling over the hood. Forrest flinched. He'd never seen anyone run over before.

He sprinted to where the man lay but a crowd of people and some police officers had already surrounded him. Wondering how bad he was hurt, Forrest's gaze shifted between different members of the crowd, trying to discern what they were saying. His question was answered by a woman who was much closer, "He's stone-dead! Why on earth did he run out like that?"

Shit. Forrest's chest tightened. He'd never seen anyone dead before either.

It was at that moment that Forrest noticed another woman standing amid the crowd, saying nothing, just looking. He noticed her because she was the only person who didn't seem shocked by the dead man lying in front of her. He saw her look at her watch. Then she turned and walked away.

Curious.

Instead of staying with the crowd, Forrest felt compelled to

follow her. She flagged down a taxi, forcing him to make a quick decision.

It was nearly half eleven. *I should go home.*

Damn it, there was something strange about all this. That man, his clothes, the fact that he looked like he'd never seen a car before.

This woman knew something.

So he waved for his own taxi and instructed the driver to follow her. Less than fifteen minutes later, the woman's taxi dropped her on West 86th Street, just inside Central Park, near the Central Park Reservoir.

"Stop here," said Forrest to the taxi driver. He paid the fare and got out. He saw the woman head for the reservoir and pursued her. Since it was night time, it was easier to stay out of sight. Regularly she looked around to check she wasn't being followed. *Even more suspicious.* Hidden behind trees, away from the pools of lamplight that flanked the reservoir, Forrest watched her sneak inside the southern pump house, a grey structure made from schist and granite that Forrest had always thought looked like a miniature castle thanks to the arched windows and turrets.

Why would she go in there?

He stepped out of the trees and – wary and uneasy now – climbed the steps to the pump house. The clock on top of the building ticked past midnight. Forrest couldn't see anything but darkness through the windows. He stepped up to the main door and listened for movement inside. Nothing. He presumed the woman had locked the door behind her, but he wasn't going to try it. He didn't want to draw attention.

He looked around for a little longer. He walked from the pump house a little way along the joggers' path, which edged the reservoir, looking out across the moon-stroked water.

That's weird.

He could see a strange rippling on the surface of the reservoir, about a quarter of a mile out from the pump house. Couldn't have been the wind. It was coming from just one spot. Something beneath the water was causing it.

The rippling continued for a few minutes. Then the water was still again. Forrest waited a further ten minutes, but the woman didn't re-emerge from the pump house. So he left Central Park and took a taxi home.

September 1951

On a Friday afternoon, Forrest picked up a copy of the latest issue of *Collier's* magazine in his lunch break. With a coffee and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, he sat to read it in a café on West 45th Street.

He liked the short stories, particularly the ones by up-and-coming science fiction author Jack Finney. This issue had a story by Finney called *I'm Scared*, about an unnamed retired man, the story's narrator, who had been interviewing people in the New York City vicinity. The people he spoke to had all had bizarre experiences that seemed to involve time travel. There was a woman who had an encounter with an adult dog two years before she was given the same dog as a puppy. A man who snapped a photograph of himself with his future wife a few years before they'd even met. And a man who was shot using a gun that had been found and locked in a police safe the day before – and was still there. The narrator posited that the fabric of time was breaking down.

What really caught Forrest's attention was the narrator's meeting with Captain Hubert V. Rihm of the New York City Police Department. Rihm talked about a case of his, concerning a thirty-something-year-old man who showed up in Times Square late one evening in June 1950. No one saw how he got there, but he was dressed in late-19th-century clothes, looked disoriented and was standing in the middle of the road, only to be hit by a taxi and killed before anyone could help.

"Huh?" said Forrest aloud, looking up and realising he'd invited stares from some of the other people in the café. He smiled awkwardly and returned his eyes to the magazine.

Even the date was the same. June 1950. He had presumed the story was fictional – but it couldn't be.

Forrest read on. Captain Rihm told the narrator that when the man's body was searched, the items in his pockets seemed to fit with the 19th-century nature of his attire. Seventy dollars in obsolete banknotes. A bill from a livery stable for washing a carriage and feeding a horse. A letter to 'Rudolph Fentz' at an address on Fifth Avenue, New York City, postmarked June 1876 – an address that was now a business premises, not a residence. And several business

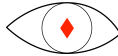
cards repeating the name and address.

Rihm investigated and traced Rudolph Fentz's daughter-in-law, who said that Fentz had disappeared in 1876 when he was twenty-nine years old. When Rihm checked missing persons records, he found an entry for Fentz from 1876. The description given was an exact match for the unidentified man who'd been run over in Times Square.

Rihm's only explanation was that Rudolph Fentz had somehow travelled forwards in time from 1876 to 1950.

This is mad.

Coffee cold and only a third drunk – Forrest had been so engrossed in the story – he hurried out of the café and decided to take the rest of the afternoon off.



“Good afternoon, please could I speak with Captain Hubert V. Rihm?” said Forrest, making the call from his apartment at three-thirty that afternoon.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the receptionist. “Please could you repeat that name?”

“Captain Hubert V. Rihm.”

Forrest could hear the flutter of paper. “Please could you hold the line, sir,” she then said.

The line went quiet. Two minutes later, she returned. “I’m afraid there are no police officers with that name at this precinct.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.”

“Have a pleasant day, sir.”

Forrest hung up. It wasn’t hugely surprising. Even though one of the stories in *I’m Scared* was almost identical to what Forrest had witnessed in Times Square a year ago, the characters and names might still have been fictional.

Perhaps Jack Finney heard about what happened to the man in Times Square from someone else – or witnessed it himself – and incorporated it into the story.

There was only one way to find out.

“Hello, please could I speak to Jack Finney?” said Forrest, having found the author’s telephone number in the phone book.

“Yes, speaking,” a man replied.

“Oh, hello, sir. Can I just say, I really enjoy your stories in *Collier’s* magazine.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

“I wanted to ask you about one of them if I may.”

“Go ahead.”

“Your latest story, *I’m Scared*, has details of an event that is very similar to something I actually witnessed myself a year ago. Rudolph Fentz. The man who, in your story, is dressed in 19th-century clothes, turns up in Times Square, confused and like he’s never seen a car before, and gets run over by a taxi. I saw something just like this – and in June last year – same time as in your story. I wanted to know where the inspiration came from...”

Mr Finney went quiet.

Forrest was urged to fill the silence. “I – er – just thought it was a bit of an extraordinary coincidence. Thought you might’ve been there yourself, or maybe someone told you about it?”

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Forrest Thomson.”

“Be careful, Mr Thomson.”

“Be careful? Why?”

“Because they made me put my name to that story. Even paid me for it. But I never actually wrote it. That story was nothing to do with me.”

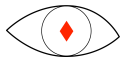
Curiouser and curiouser.

“Who are ‘they’?”

“People you don’t want to be on the wrong side of.”

Forrest felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle against his shirt collar. “Sir, if I may enquire, do you know who did write *I’m Scared*?”

Mr Finney had already hung up.



His leads had gone dry but Forrest decided that he finally had a good story. Even though he was convinced of something highly suspect going on after the Times Square incident last year, he didn’t think what he had was enough. He wasn’t a

journalist either. Numbers were his strength, which was why he was an executive in the accounts department of *The New York Times* rather than one of its reporters. Still, he had a yearning to do a bit of journalism for the newspaper and was just waiting for the right story.

This was it.

On a dusty typewriter, he began writing. He included everything – the man in 19th-century clothes getting run over, the mysterious woman he followed to Central Park, the strange rippling on the surface of the reservoir, and the details of his little investigation into *I'm Scared*.

He also included his own theory about it all: *I'm Scared* and all of the stories contained within it were true, but were deliberately being disguised as fiction. Rudolph Fentz was real – he was the man Forrest had seen get run over. Captain Hubert V. Rihm was probably real, too, but his existence had been erased as part of the same cover-up. And the woman who disappeared into the Central Park pump house was at the heart of it. Perhaps her people were conducting time travel experiments, and Rudolph Fentz and all the other interviewees in *I'm Scared* were inadvertent victims of those experiments.

Just as he was finishing the manuscript, Forrest received a knock at the door of his apartment.

He went and looked through the peephole. It was Arthur, the landlord for the building. Forrest opened the door, immediately noticing the forlorn expression on Arthur's face.

"Arthur, are you o – ?"

Another man was there with him in the corridor, Forrest realised. Standing on Arthur's right, the man – dressed in a long black coat and trilby – had a pistol in his gloved hand and was pointing it at Arthur's waist.

"I'm so sorry, Forrest," Arthur murmured. "He made me bring him up here."

Forrest felt his chest bulge as he fought for breath. His heartbeat quickened. He addressed his question to the man holding the gun, dread tightening his throat, "W-what's going on?"

"We need to have a little chat, Forrest," said the man menacingly. He looked at Arthur. "You may go, but remember what I said. If you call the police, I will shoot Mr

Thomson here and then I will come downstairs and shoot you.”

Arthur made a run for the stairwell at the end of the corridor, stumbling as he did so.

“Shall we?” said the man, shifting his aim to Forrest.

Forrest let him in to his apartment. The man instructed him to pour them both a drink and then go and sit on the couch in the living room. The man sat in Forrest’s armchair opposite him.

“I want this to be as painless for you as possible,” said the man softly. “What’ll help make that happen is if you tell me exactly who you’ve told about Rudolph Fentz.”

How could these people have traced him so quickly?

Shit. The calls. The calls he made. Still, they were fast. Damn fast.

Forrest wasn’t going to hide anything. What was the point? Clearly these were powerful people. “No one,” he said. “I’ve written a story for *The New York Times* all about it. My first piece of journalism for them. Didn’t want to share it with anyone till the chief editor had seen my article.”

“And where is this article?”

“On my typewriter in my study. Ink’s not even dry.”

“Where is your study?”

“Just down there.” Forrest indicated past the kitchen to the room at the end of the hall.

“Fetch it for me, please.”

The man followed Forrest to his study. Forrest handed the manuscript to him, including the last page that was still in the platen of the typewriter, and they returned to the living room.

The man read it, commenting afterwards, “Quite a theory you have here. You’ve had a busy afternoon. It’s a shame that your theory is just a bit too close to the truth.”

“So you admit that Rudolph Fentz is a real person? Not just a fictional character invented by Jack Finney?”

The man leaned forwards. He placed his gun on the coffee table in front of him. He would’ve been able to reach it first – there was no point Forrest trying to grab it. Forrest took it as a gesture of politeness more than anything else.

“You seem like a good, reasonable man. And since we both know how this is going to end, I see no reason to bullshit you. As you have determined, *I’m Scared* is not a work of

fiction. The real writer of *I'm Scared* wrote it not as a short story, but as a statement for the press. He spoke to people, discovered things that were going on in the New York City vicinity which the organisation I represent would rather not be generally known. We thought we had tracked down all those who'd experienced certain strange events. *I'm Scared* proved that we hadn't, and both the writer and all the people in the statement became a serious problem for us. Unfortunately, he had already released his statement to the press before we were able to track him down, and versions of his story had already been published in several newspapers."

The man leaned forwards again, picking up the glass of whiskey Forrest had poured for him, and sipped it.

"We dealt with him – the writer – and all the people in the statement. But we couldn't delete what was already in the public domain. What we could do was try and rebut it somehow. So we got hold of the original statement and published the whole thing as a short story by Jack Finney. He'd already written short stories about time travel for *Collier's*, so he seemed like an apt choice. That way people would believe the stories about Rudolph Fentz and the others came from him."

"Apart from the people who were actually there," Forrest pointed out, "like me."

"Indeed, but you were the only one we didn't know about. Everyone else gave statements at the time, so we were able to track them down. You didn't."

That's because Forrest was saving it for the *New York Times* story he'd just written – which now wouldn't see the light of day.

At least he'd bought himself a year.

"So are you going to tell me the truth of what's been going on in this city?" Forrest asked. It was worth a try.

The man paused. He looked again at Forrest's manuscript for *The New York Times*. "You've pretty much hit the nail on the head in this, but I see no harm, at this point, in giving you the full picture. It's the least I can do."

Forrest shivered. "I'm listening."

"My organisation has a facility at the bottom of the Central Park Reservoir. It's one of several throughout the world. As we speak, our scientists are conducting experiments there.

They are trying to make time travel possible. The experiments are in their infancy and we're a long way from success. Long story short, there have been some... problems. Accidents. We believe that some of the experiments created instabilities in time throughout the city and beyond it, causing certain people and things to become displaced. But what's important is that everything is under control again. Our hope is that there will be no further incidents."

Forrest downed the rest of his whiskey and poured another. Having his theory verified felt good, even if nothing else did.

"Would you permit me to make myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?" he asked, swallowing hard, knowing that he didn't have long left.

The man smiled. "Of course."

As Forrest ate and drank, polishing off a whole bottle of whiskey, he chatted with the man about unrelated things: his job at *The New York Times*, his travels to London, his ex-girlfriend Jeannie. And the man shared a few tales, too: his own travels, his son starting college, his wife being pregnant with a new baby.

And after Forrest had finished his sandwich and the dregs of his whiskey, the man said quietly, "It's time," and Forrest nodded.

Then the man picked up his gun, stood up, and shot Forrest in the head.

THE HOME SECRETARY IS SAFE

Cody Evans' favourite song by Funky Pimple, a band described by his sister as "straight-up weird", came on Giant Cow Parsnip FM. Thirty seconds into the song, just before the awesome knife and fork solo, the signal cut out again.

Cody silently blasted the world of technology. These days, computers could run baths, do laundry and cook a roast, but listening to the radio on the train through the English countryside was just too much. Patchy reception ever since he left Paddington meant that Giant Cow Parsnip FM, the radio station for 'alternative' listeners, had cut out four times already.

Having a break from studying for his GCSEs, Cody was bound for the village of Chipping Vernon and his aunt, Maureen Evans. He wasn't particularly excited about it. Seeing Aunt Maureen was always a sad affair. Her daughter, Rachel – Cody's cousin – was killed in a hit-and-run a couple of years ago and for obvious reasons Aunt Maureen hadn't been the same since. Although Cody and Rachel weren't particularly close due to the age gap, he missed her too. She had been like another older sister to him, a slightly less annoying one.

"Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush," said the posh old lady on the other side of the train carriage, a mobile phone to her ear. "It's unsightly and not fair on the neighbours to have to look at it. Perhaps we ought to bring it up at the village meeting."

Cody chuckled to himself. Her round spectacles, smart jacket, long, plain skirt and sensible shoes made him doubt she was referring to this Mrs Battersby's pubic area. And her rigid, perfectly shaped grey perm made her aversion to unkempt shrubbery unsurprising.

An attendant with a trolley of snacks and drinks entered the carriage. "Anything to eat or drink, madam?" she said to the old lady.

"A drop of gin, please, dear. No tonic," the old lady replied, before resuming her phone call, "Yes, I quite agree... Oh, don't get me started on Mr Barnaby. Ghastly little man."

After giving the lady a glass and small bottle of gin, the attendant turned to Cody, "Anything to eat or drink, sir?"

"No, thank you."

As the attendant continued through the carriage, Cody

looked out of the window. A minute or so later, the train went straight through the station of Marplemead, which meant he was about half an hour from Chipping Vernon.

A faint murmur eased through the crackly static currently being emitted by the single headphone tucked into his left ear. The radio was coming back on, though it sounded like he'd missed his song.

Then a muffled woman's voice said, "*Please repeat. Is the Home Secretary safe?*" And a moment later, "*Good.*"

Eh?

He listened. The static was back, the voice gone.

Perhaps that was a bit of an advert, a trailer for something, leaking through a sliver of reception. Whatever it was, was gone.

"Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush. It's unsightly and not fair on the neighbours to have to look at it. Perhaps we ought to bring it up at the village meeting."

Cody looked at the old lady on the phone. Did she literally just say the same thing again?

Silly old bat. Obviously didn't remember that she'd just made a point about poor Mrs Battersby's bush a few minutes ago.

The radio signal started coming back. Cody heard the same voice from before say, "*What's happened?*"

A pause, then, "*Alright, hold on.*"

This wasn't the radio. Cody was hearing one side of a conversation.

The train attendant with the trolley of snacks came into the carriage again, through the same door she'd emerged from minutes ago – but Cody hadn't seen her go back that way.

Did he black out or something?

"Anything to eat or drink, madam?" she said to the old lady – again.

"A drop of gin, please, dear. No tonic." The old lady resumed her phone call, saying, "Yes, I quite agree... Oh, don't get me started on Mr Barnaby. Ghastly little man."

What was going on here?

After serving the old lady, the attendant addressed Cody as before, "Anything to eat or drink, sir?"

"Er – didn't you just come through here and ask me that?"

"Pardon, sir?"

"You already asked me, and you already served that woman over there."

A soft frown of confusion crossed the attendant's face. She glanced at the old lady, then back at Cody. "N-no, sir. I haven't been through here yet. I just came from the other carriage." She gestured towards the door she'd come through, connecting this carriage to the one in front.

He didn't understand. "Is this a joke?"

The attendant's frown narrowed from confused to irritated. She said tersely, "No, sir. Anything to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you."

The attendant continued up the carriage. Cody looked out of the window. The train whipped through Marplemead station again.

This didn't make sense.

Moments later, "Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush. It's unsightly and not fair on the neighbours to have to look at it. Perhaps we ought to bring it up at the village meeting."

Cody stood up. "What are you doing?" he snapped at the old lady. "You've just said the same thing three times!"

"Excuse me, young man, I'm on the telephone," she replied.

Cody moved into the aisle between the seats, turned and looked towards the back of the carriage. He should've seen the attendant – she went past in that direction just moments ago. He didn't.

The sound of the connecting door opening, followed by the rattle and clink of a refreshment trolley, made Cody spin round. Expectedly but impossibly, the attendant came through a third time.

He had an idea and returned to his seat.

After the attendant served the old lady her gin, she asked him if he wanted anything and he replied, "Yes, please, a can of Coke."

The attendant placed a can of Coca-Cola on the table in front of him. He paid for it, then she proceeded up the carriage.

He looked out of the window, waiting for Marplemead station.

He still had a headphone in his left ear, emitting static,

almost like a low wind. As he watched through the window, the same woman's voice from earlier started breaking through the static. *"You're right. Something's gone wrong. A loop is in progress. We're trying to stabilise."*

A loop...

Marplemead flickered past the window. Cody jumped up, flung himself into the aisle, and looked down the centre of the train. The attendant with the refreshment trolley was there, pouring a cup of tea.

And then she wasn't. Cody blinked, and the attendant vanished – gone. No sound. No flash of light. No puff of smoke. She was there, plain as day, pouring tea. And then wasn't. The aisle was clear.

Cody spun back to his table. The can of Coke he'd just ordered was gone too.

And then came the old lady's unwitting innuendo, now as funny as a punch in the nuts, "Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush."

He expected her to mention the neighbours and bringing it up at the village meeting. She didn't. Instead she said, "Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush."

Cody looked over at her.

"Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush. Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush. Mrs Battersby really needs to trim her bush."

She twitched in between each repeated sentence – same moment every time.

Cody arched towards his window. A solitary weeping willow tree rolled past, its yellow sprawling arms tussling with the wind. Then another weeping willow went past, identical to the last, making the same windblown shapes. And another. Identical. Same movements.

Not *another* at all. The same one. Appearing at the same intervals as the old lady's looping sentence.

He straightened and looked around the carriage again. Other passengers were stuck in the loop, making exactly the same movements every few seconds.

It was as if the train was a record on a turntable, skipping.

Cody sat down in his seat. He wasn't sure what to do. He listened for the voices in the radio static, pressing his other headphone into his right ear, if only to drown out the nerve-

pinching rasp of the old lady.

A minute later, the woman's voice crackled through again.

"Stabilising. The loop is closing."

That explained the skipping. The loop was getting smaller.

Then, *"Wait. We're getting a separate reading. Stand by."*

The voice was clearer now, louder, but Cody still had no idea where it was coming from.

A thirty-second pause was followed by, *"Confirmed. There's a glitch. A glitch in the loop. Could be a person. Stand by."* A further pause and, *"Confirmed. There's someone aboard the train who isn't resetting."*

Shit. They were talking about him.

Now what?

"Whoever it is, find them and bring them in," said the woman.

Cody shot up, spun into the aisle and launched down the carriage towards the doors. It was time to get off this *Twilight Zone* train.

How would he get out? The exit doors were locked on moving trains.

He didn't get that far anyway. Through the narrow windows of the connecting doors ahead, Cody saw glimpses of someone in the next carriage who wasn't skipping – and was heading towards him.

Cody wouldn't reach the exit doors before this person reached him.

He stopped, looked around.

"I heard that the Home Secretary was on this train. I heard that the Home Secretary was on this train. I heard that the Home Secretary was on this train."

Cody looked to his left. A forty-something male passenger was talking to the woman opposite him. Possibly his wife, since the two were holding hands over the table, both stuck in the loop.

Cody glanced back at the connecting doors. A man in a black suit and trilby – typical Men in Black stuff – thundered through them.

"You! Don't move!" he blared.

From the looks of it, he was unarmed.

Cody eyed the walking stick that was leant against the seat next to the forty-something man. The wooden shaft was

capped with a hefty marble grip.

“I heard that the – hey!” The man’s reaction as Cody grabbed the walking stick. Then the loop reset. “I heard that the Home Secretary was on this train,” he said to his wife.

Even more bizarre was the fact that his walking stick was next to him again, yet there was a walking stick in Cody’s hand, too.

The universe had just grown an extra walking stick.

The Man in Black charged at him.

Cody swung the walking stick, its solid marble handle connecting with the side of the man’s head. The awful *crack* made Cody wince.

The Man in Black went down like a sack of spuds, thumping onto the floor of the carriage.

Cody dropped the walking stick. His stomach lurched.

The Man in Black was out cold, perhaps dead.

Cody hadn’t planned to kill anyone.

He was about to run, then noticed the folded newspaper sticking out of the Man in Black’s jacket pocket. He saw a portion of the back, the sports section, showing the results of the Newcastle v Juventus football match: two-nil to Juventus.

A match that hadn’t happened yet – it was scheduled for tonight. Cody was hoping to watch it at Aunt Maureen’s.

He bent down, carefully tugged the newspaper from the Man in Black’s pocket and unfolded it.

It was a copy of *The Overlook*, dated April 11th.

Tomorrow’s paper. Today was the 10th.

Shit, the headline.

HOME SECRETARY KILLED

He started reading the article, but stopped. The train had gone quiet. He’d only just realised.

He looked around.

The man with the walking stick was staring, motionless, at his wife. His wife and all the other passengers sat stock-still, eyes fixed. One lady was drinking from a bottle of water, the neck of the bottle stuck at her lips. And there was no movement through the windows either – the train had stopped.

Frozen. Frozen in time.

The mysterious woman's voice filtered through the radio static, "*The loop is closed. Have you apprehended the glitch?*"

No, they fucking hadn't.

It wouldn't be long before they realised that Cody, the glitch, was still glitching. He had to get off this train – now.

He shoved the newspaper into the back pocket of his jeans, then stepped over the Man in Black and sprang for the exit doors. Yes! He'd been wondering how he would get off a locked train, but of course, all trains had door releases for emergencies. He thought being stuck in a time loop with time travellers chasing him qualified.

The door release was a red lever in a sealed glass compartment in the wall next to the exit doors. Cody punched the glass, smashing it, and pulled the lever.

The doors unlocked. He then had to manually pull them open.

He jumped out. The train had frozen in the middle of nowhere, it seemed. He saw the weeping willow, which stood at the foot of a gentle slope covered in long grass and scattered with a few more trees further up.

Cody hurtled up the incline, away from the train track.

After three or four strides, the cry of metal on metal jolted him, made him lose his footing and slip down the incline. His hands shot out and grabbed a protruding rock to steady himself.

He looked over his shoulder. The train was speeding away like nothing had happened.

He continued up the incline, stopping at the top and looking back. In the distance, he could see Marplemead train station, a few miles ahead of where he'd got off. He saw the train tear past it.

Standing on higher ground meant he could see a large section of the railway track, winding through the Warwickshire countryside.

What was... *that?*

He squinted, peered into the distance. There was something on the track, a mile or so ahead of where the train was currently.

He dug his smartphone from his pocket, accessed his

camera app, positioned it over whatever it was, and zoomed in.

His camera had an excellent zoom. A super-zoom, they called it. Which meant Cody was able to see pretty clearly the large stack of metal drums that had been loaded onto the track.

“Oh my God...”

The driver must’ve seen them. The scream of brakes reverberated.

Too late.

The train rammed the metal drums, which exploded on impact. A torrent of fire, smoke and debris blasted the air. The crack of the explosion shook the ground, even as far as Cody, and the first two carriages spun off the rails.

Heart thumping, Cody called 999 immediately, told them what he’d seen. After hanging up, he just stood there, helpless, watching as survivors floundered from the wreckage, and a huge, billowing bank of smoke sullied the sun-washed landscape. He was too far away to go and help, plus, there could’ve been more time travellers waiting for him if he went back.

Shit. He’d just remembered.

The newspaper.

He pulled it from his back pocket, unfolded it, and read the first few paragraphs of the front-page story.

The Home Secretary has been killed in a railway crash that also claimed the lives of 39 passengers and injured 83 others.

Shortly after 11.00am on April 10th, the eight-coach Wessex Rail train crashed near the village of Marplemead in Warwickshire, the first two coaches derailling. Early reports indicate that police are treating it as a deliberate terrorist attack.

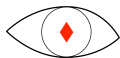
The Home Secretary, Teresa Denlon, was killed instantly along with all 17 passengers in the first coach. She was on her way to her country home in Warwick for the weekend, ahead of an important meeting with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner on Monday.

THE HOME SECRETARY IS SAFE

What was it the woman in the radio static had said to her colleague, the first time Cody heard her?

He remembered: "*Is the Home Secretary safe? Good.*"

Cody ran.



The following morning, Cody was back in London. His journey home yesterday had been long and expensive, involving two taxis, three buses and a deliberate avoidance of trains. He obviously hadn't told his parents that his train was the one that crashed – he wasn't sure how he'd explain that. He'd simply said that his train was cancelled because of the crash, so he'd had to postpone his trip to Aunt Maureen's.

The moment he was awake, Cody got dressed and headed out.

He popped into the nearest shop and scanned the newspaper stand for a copy of *The Overlook*.

He'd speculated on it last night – now his suspicions were confirmed.

It was the April 11th paper, just like the one he'd nicked from the Man in Black yesterday, but the front page headline had changed, the story with it.

He went somewhere private to read it.

**WARWICKSHIRE TRAIN CRASH:
44 DEAD, HOME SECRETARY UNHARMED**

A railway crash near the village of Marplemead, Warwickshire has claimed the lives of 44 passengers and injured 97 others. The Home Secretary, Teresa Denlon, was aboard the train and among the 36 passengers who were unharmed.

The eight-coach Wessex Rail train crashed shortly after 11.00am on April 10th, the first two coaches derailing. All 26 passengers in the first coach are reported to have died. Early reports indicate that police are treating it as a deliberate terrorist attack.

Home Secretary Teresa Denlon, who was on her way to her country home in Warwick for the weekend, said this morning, "My heart goes out to everyone who lost their lives on that train, and the families they've left behind. The only reason I didn't die with them was because of an erroneous announcement over the intercom. An automated voice told passengers – by mistake I've since learned – that the train was due to divide at Banbury. So I moved from the first carriage to the fifth. I am heartbroken that fate could be so kind to me, and so cruel to the 44 people who died."

THE CHARLIE CHAPLIN TIME TRAVELLER

What the – ?

George's next bite of pizza never came. Open-mouthed, he replaced the slice in the box, grabbed the remote, rewound the clip and replayed it.

The clip was on disc two of the DVD set of *The Circus*, a silent film starring Charlie Chaplin. Disc two comprised the extras and George always watched the extras – the making-ofs, commentaries, storyboards, deleted scenes. It was the filmmaker in him, not content to just enjoy a movie, but to need to know exactly how it was done.

But this particular clip was just some footage of the film's premiere at the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood in 1928, not a feature he was expecting to offer much insight into the film's creation. And it didn't. What George found was nothing to do with the film.

Twenty seconds into the clip, following a wide shot of the crowd outside the Chinese Theatre, the camera closed in on a fake zebra, one of several temporary statues erected to represent the circus animals in the film. George's eagle eyes noticed a woman in the background, walking behind the zebra, horribly dressed in a black top hat, huge dress, heavy, hooded coat and pointed shoes.

What caught his eye was that she was holding something to her ear. Something small and flat, her fingers closed around it. And she was talking to it. She stopped and turned slightly towards the camera, then the scene faded into another.

Pizza long-forgotten, George replayed the short scene over and over. He slowed it down, zoomed in, paused.

Yup, this woman was talking on a mobile phone – in 1928 – decades before they were invented.

This is nuts!

"Yeah, that is weird," said his friend, Bran, when George showed him the clip that evening. "There's probably a pretty mundane explanation, though."

"Yeah. She's a time traveller. She's on the phone to her colleagues in the future," said George flatly.

Bran nearly spat out his beer. "Ha! You serious?"

George smirked. "No, you idiot. But sounds pretty cool, doesn't it? I've got an opportunity here."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, no one's spotted this before, as far as I can tell. So if

I make a YouTube video or something, show people this clip and put the theory out that she's a time traveller, could be a great way of whipping up publicity for my films."

"Nice."

It was worth a shot. It was four years since George started his independent film production company, Yellow Fever Productions. Four years since he decided – on his 30th birthday – to throw in the towel on full-time employment in tedious jobs and brave the financial wilderness of the self-employed newbie filmmaker, armed with just determination and a dream. It's that which had always kept him going, but the small scale of his films compelled him to think outside the box when it came to promotion.

And while he agreed with Bran – there was probably a perfectly mundane explanation for the woman in the clip – he thought he'd attract the most attention by posing an outlandish one.

He filmed a YouTube video and used it to plug Yellow Fever Productions and his recent films *Battle of the Bone* and *The Knackery*, before inviting the world's input on *The Circus*'s premiere footage. His main hope, obviously, was that the video would lead to more YouTube subscribers, more hits on his website, more DVD sales. At the same time, he *was* interested in whether anyone had an explanation for the woman on the mobile phone – because he didn't have one.

In less than two weeks, the video had received 1.5 million hits, his website was getting tons more traffic and sales of his films had gone up.

Mission accomplished.

And the 'Charlie Chaplin time traveller' became a 21st-century urban legend. There was a flood of theories about the woman with the phone. George found himself tracking comments on his video, reading articles about it that were popping up on people's blogs and even some major news sites. Lots of people said it was just digital trickery. A DVD Easter egg or something.

But that didn't sit right with George. Why hoax something that nobody but him had noticed in the seven years the DVD had been out?

There were other theories. Was she listening to the resonance inside a seashell? Was she suffering from a

toothache and holding an ice pack to her face?

Ha. Nonsense. Since when do people walk the streets listening to seashells? And talking to them? And who talks to ice packs?

A new theory emerged. This ‘time traveller’ was just an old woman using an early portable hearing aid. Internet sleuths dug up details about these hearing aids, invented in the 20s by companies like Siemens and the Western Electric Company. George reviewed the photos and, yes, these devices – generally flat and rectangular – did loosely resemble smartphones.

Why was she talking to it? The sceptics argued that she was actually talking to herself, seeing if she could hear herself better, testing the device out.

Mmmm.

It was the most plausible explanation, George conceded. He wasn’t entirely happy that he’d got to the bottom of the mystery, but it wasn’t something he was going to lose sleep over.

Then came a new development. George had been holed up in his Belfast apartment for three days, squirreling away at the script for his new film. The evening had advanced on him like an unseen, time-eating monster – always did when he was writing – and he realised at half ten that he’d forgotten to eat.

He blitzed a ready-made lasagne in the microwave and garnished it with some slightly stale tortilla chips. He parked on the sofa in front of the newest episode of *Breaking Bad* and blew a sigh of irritation when his iPhone’s bouncy ringtone encroached on an intense scene. It was nearly 11pm – who on Earth was calling at this hour? He paused the scene and dived to the other end of the sofa to grab his phone, which was charging on the arm.

Withheld number. He was tempted to cancel the call, but curiosity tugged his finger to the answer button. “Hello?”

“Is that George Clarke?” replied a small, muffled female voice.

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“I used to work for Western Electric. I’d prefer not to reveal my name – not at this stage. I saw your YouTube video.”

“How did you get this number?”

“That would take too long to explain, and we don’t have much time. It won’t be long before they trace my call.”

“*They?* Who’s *they?*”

“Whoever’s rewriting the history of my company – and others.”

“What on Earth are you talking about?”

“Most people now believe that the old woman in the footage you found was using a portable hearing aid. Portable hearing aids were not invented until the 30s, *after* that clip was filmed. Not by Western Electric. Not by Siemens. Not by anybody.”

George felt a dubious eyebrow poke his forehead. “Er – there’s proof all over the internet, on these companies’ websites, on the ‘Hearing Aid Museum’ site, on Wikipedia... They all say that portable hearing aids, resembling what the woman is holding, were invented in the mid-20s.”

“They’re lying. The information was altered, fabricated, by those trying to protect the woman’s identity, and the truth of her presence there.”

“How do you know this?”

“I was high-up at Western Electric. I had access to all its records, its history. Even now it’s defunct, I still have the original, unaltered versions of those records. I know what devices my company developed and when – and I have demonstrable proof right here. Let’s meet and I can show you. Then we can decide together what to do with it.”

“I’m not sure w – ” George hadn’t decided what to make of this woman. She sounded convincing, but many liars were.

“Meet me at midnight tonight at the south-west corner of Victoria Park, just after you come over the Sam Thompson Bridge,” she said. “I will bring paper and electronic copies of what I have, and you will see that I’m telling the truth. If I don’t turn up, it’ll be because they got to me.”

She hung up before George had a chance to refuse. He returned to his warm imprint on the sofa but didn’t resume *Breaking Bad*. He scooped up the last few tortilla chips and munched away, replaying the phone call in his mind and deciding whether to yield to his curiosity’s seductive pull.

Victoria Park’s only a ten-minute walk.

Why not?



George arrived at Victoria Park at five to midnight. It was a thick, inky dark night, just a sliver of moon in the sky, barely touching anything. A single lamppost flanked the footpath on the park's south-west corner, malfunctioning and flickering rapidly like an orange strobe light. Still the best source of light in the area, George took the risk of a headache and stood beneath it, hoping the mysterious former employee of Western Electric would show up soon.

12pm came and went. A couple of people with dogs walked by – both men. *Dog-walkers at this time of night?* His watch ticked past half twelve and the beginnings of a headache gnawed at his temples, his tolerance of the private disco caused by the lamppost fading. He resolved to wait another ten minutes, remembering the woman's last words to him on the phone: "If I don't turn up, it'll be because they got to me."

After five minutes and a further watch-check, a broad-framed man walked briskly towards him from the direction of the Sam Thompson bridge, dressed in a smart, camel, double-breasted overcoat.

"George Clarke?" The lamppost light strobed over the man's face, revealing his dark, thinning hair and thick beard, which – George suspected – made him look older than he was.

"Yes," George replied cagily.

"Detective Inspector Martin Hammond of Belfast Police." He opened his wallet and flashed his 'Police Service of Northern Ireland' badge – it looked genuine. Slipping the wallet into an inner pocket, he held out his right hand to shake George's. "Pleasure to meet you."

George shook his hand. His skin was cold, dry and rough, his handshake overly hard, like he was trying to assert his position – or was just a macho arsehole.

"Er – likewise," George lied.

"Don't worry, mate. You're not in any trouble. But the woman you're here to meet *is*."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid you've been conned. The woman who called

you – Nora Tatlock is her name. She has previous for fraud and deception offences and identity theft. She secretly heads up an organisation we've been investigating. We finally tracked her down tonight, after her phone call with you, and arrested her. We'd like you to give a statement if you're willing."

"Wait – what organisation?"

"It's an organisation that fuels conspiracy theories and urban legends with falsified evidence. It's a bit like what the Mirage Men used to do. Mirage Men were agents of the US government who leaked false stories to UFO circles about aliens, secret bases, a spaceship crash at Roswell... But they did it in order to cover up what the government was really doing: developing advanced technologies to use against the Russians in the Cold War. I'm afraid there are no political or national security motives behind what Nora Tatlock's organisation is doing. Just criminal ones."

"Criminal?"

"Their M.O. is to instil paranoia in the subject, to encourage them to 'find out the truth', and eventually get them to pay money to various companies and individuals to get access to certain documents, people, places. But those who receive the monies are secretly affiliated with Tatlock's organisation. It's her organisation that gets paid. Think of it as a very long and drawn out fraud."

At the start of Hammond's explanation, George felt a pang of embarrassment inciting blood to his cheeks. But that eased quickly as he realised that Tatlock ran a sophisticated operation that lots of others had fallen victim to, and much deeper into than he had. He now felt less stupid and replied confidently, "Inspector, I was intrigued enough to come here to meet this woman. But I would never in a million years have parted with any cash to get to the bottom of the 'Charlie Chaplin time traveller' – as the internet's calling it. If I'm honest, I really only made that YouTube video to get attention for my movies."

"You're lucky, then. Not all of their targets fall for it, but many do. As we both know, some conspiracy theorists see deception everywhere, and can be fanatical and obsessive about getting to truths that aren't there. Those are the people that Tatlock's organisation thrives on."

While a bit unnecessarily alpha male in his manner, Hammond seemed legitimate. His story made sense, but George decided to play devil's advocate anyway and said jokingly, well, half-jokingly, "Of course, this Nora did warn me that if she didn't turn up tonight, it means you got to her."

"They say that every time. It fuels the uncertainty, the mistrust. These are very clever people. Trust me, Nora duped you tonight."



After his impromptu midnight meeting with Inspector Hammond, George gave a statement and subsequently kept tabs on the case. Ninety-five percent of him believed that Nora Tatlock was a crook, just as Hammond had described. The other five percent was giggling at him. What if they really had got to her, like she warned, and those indicting her were the real frauds? A far-fetched possibility, but a possibility all the same.

Months later, he read in the Belfast Telegraph that Nora had pleaded guilty in court. Three weeks after her guilty plea, George went along to her sentencing hearing at Belfast Crown Court, eager to see what she had to say.

Nora was in the dock, eyes red and full of tears. Her lawyer read out a letter she'd written to the judge, a poignant expression of remorse, fully admitting to leading the organisation Hammond had talked about and defrauding dozens of conspiracy theorists by dishonestly fuelling their paranoia with faked evidence. She even had a heart-rending motive: to pay for her Alzheimer's-stricken mother's care home bills.

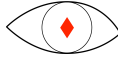
Nora had noticed George in the public gallery. Her letter went into detail about how she'd viewed the 'Charlie Chaplin time traveller' YouTube video and seen an opportunity, which was why she used her organisation's high-tech hacking software to obtain his mobile number. As this part of the letter was read out, she looked at George, tear-wet cheeks glimmering under the artificial yellow light in the stuffy courtroom, and mouthed, "Sorry."

Her letter begged for a suspended sentence. Unfortunately

for Nora, the judge was not in a sympathetic mood and gave her six years behind bars.

That's that then, George thought as he drove home after the hearing.

Guess it really was a hearing aid.



Gillian Flint stepped into Miss Morgan's office. She was tapping away at her laptop, her thin fingers like spiders scurrying out from a lifted rock. She didn't look up. Flint waited, hands clasped together, trying to construe something – anything – from Miss Morgan's expression.

No such luck. Her expression was blank, lips straight as a pencil. It was an expression capable of converting into restrained delight or unrestrained fury in less than a second with no prior warning.

Nearly a minute later – the longest minute ever – Miss Morgan looked up, eyes flaring like struck matches, and blared, "You bloody idiot!"

Flint recoiled. *Ah. We're in unrestrained fury mode.* She'd been told Miss Morgan wanted to see her, but no one had told her why. She'd only just arrived back from 1928, but the mission had gone without a hitch – as far as she knew.

"Ma'am, I – I apologise for... for being an idiot," spluttered Flint. "But the mission was a success. I got what we needed..."

"Lucky for you. If you hadn't completed the mission, I'd have tossed your useless arse into the Room the moment you got back. You get the luxury of a chance to explain yourself."

Dread pressed down on every organ in Flint's torso. *Shit – what have I done?* "W-what's happened?"

"We've just spent the last seven months trying to clear up your mess. Somebody damn well caught you on the phone to me in 1928. Caught you *on film!*"

"I – I didn't – I didn't re – !"

The phone rang, giving Flint time to think and go over her movements. Miss Morgan put Martin Hammond on loudspeaker. He was a detective inspector with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but secretly he worked for them.

THE CHARLIE CHAPLIN TIME TRAVELLER

“Yes, Martin?”

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” he replied. “I have good news. Nora Tatlock has been jailed for fraud. I don’t think George Clarke is going to pursue this any further. My advice is that we no longer need to monitor him.”

ERYL MAI'S DREAM

1

"Mummy, if I die, will I go to Heaven?" said Eryl Mai Jones, stirring soggy cornflakes into a yellowy slop. She wasn't hungry, which wasn't like her, but she had a funny feeling in her stomach that wasn't going away.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mother, standing by the sink.

"Will Peter and June be there? In Heaven?" Peter and June were her classmates at school, her best friends since she was five. "I hope they are. I don't want to be on my own."

Mother walked over to her, face crinkled in that concerned frown she always made. She took off her apron and sat down at the kitchen table next to her. She leaned towards her, her look softening, and said, "Darling, what is all this nonsense about dying?"

Eryl Mai knew she'd feel better if she told her. "I had a dream."

"What about?"

"Well, I went to school and when I got there, it was gone. Something black had come down all over it."

Her mother's frown returned. "Something black?"

"Yes. Like a big black blanket covering the whole school. And everyone was... stuck underneath it."

Mother's frown lifted again and her lips curved in a warm smile. She cupped Eryl Mai's chin in her hand, leaned in closer. "Darling, it was just a bad dream. That's all. No more talk about dying, all right?"

"Yes, Mummy."

Mother kissed Eryl Mai's cheek. Standing, she glanced down at the cornflake mush Eryl Mai was still whipping with her spoon, raised an eyebrow of disapproval and said, "You're finished with those, I take it?"

"Yes, Mummy. I'm not very hungry. Sorry." She handed the bowl to her.

"Just make sure you eat your lunch. I don't want you wasting away." Mother returned to the sink to finish the washing up.

Eryl Mai did feel better though. Because Mother was right. It was just a dream, nothing more. She was alive. Peter and June were alive. Everything was fine.

The funny feeling in her stomach went away. She finished her orange juice, then Mother took her to school.

2

It was Thursday October 20th 1966 and my third day playing 'Miss Rebecca Lewis: substitute teacher'. Thank God it was nearly over.

At break time, as the kids scurried out of the classroom to the playground, I stopped Eryl Mai and asked if I could speak with her for a few minutes.

"I'd just like to ask you some questions," I said.

"Er – yes, miss," said Eryl Mai warily.

"Meet you outside," said Eryl Mai's friend, June.

I waited till all the kids were gone, then went and shut the classroom door. Eryl Mai returned to sit at her desk.

Here goes.

"When's Miss Rossiter coming back, miss?" Eryl Mai asked. Rossiter was Eryl Mai's teacher, the one I was 'standing in for'.

"When she's better," I said. "Soon."

I wasn't the best with kids – never had much experience with them – so pretending to be a teacher wasn't exactly the most appropriate assignment for me. I got straight to the point so as not to drag it out, "I understand that you had a dream last night, Eryl Mai."

She frowned. "Miss, how do you know –?"

"Your mother told me," I lied.

"Oh."

"She's worried about you, asked me to speak with you," I lied again.

She continued to frown – perhaps it was unlikely that her mother would do that. I decided to go with it. She was only ten. Surely she wouldn't think her teacher was lying.

"Tell me about this dream," I said.

"It was like I said to Mummy. I went to school and it wasn't there."

"Where was it?"

"Well, it was there, but there was a big black thing covering it, and everyone was stuck under it."

"Dead?"

"Don't know. I hope not, but maybe." She shrugged. "It was just a dream, though. That's what Mummy said."

I sat down at the desk beside her. "Eryl Mai, have you had

dreams like this before?"

"I've had lots of dreams."

"Bad ones?"

"Yes."

"That you remember?"

"Some, yes. But not like this one. The others had monsters in them, like those Dalek things in *Doctor Who*. And there was this old lady that wanted to put me in a pie and eat me. This one wasn't like those. It felt like it was real. And I remember it more. It's really clear – in my head I mean. I remember walking up to the school, and it was foggy, and I couldn't feel the ground. It was like I was floating. And then I saw all the black stuff. Like a big blanket covering the school."

I opened my bag and dug out my folder of photos. "Eryl Mai, I'm going to show you some photographs." I unclipped the folder, lifted out the photos and handed them to Eryl Mai. "I want you to tell me if you've had dreams about any of the things or people in these photographs, okay?"

I watched Eryl Mai's reaction to each photo. The predominant emotions she displayed were surprise, confusion, fear and revulsion, I guess the kind you'd expect from a ten-year-old girl seeing these things for the first time. There was no hint that anything in the photos was familiar to her, that she was recollecting anything.

She handed the photos back to me and said, close to tears, "Why did you make me look at those?"

I felt bad. She was a sweet kid and I'd upset her. Still, I needed to know. I replied, gently as I could, "I'm sorry, Eryl Mai. I just need to know if you've had dreams about anything in them."

"Well I haven't."

"Okay."

"But I probably will now."

3

Why would Miss Lewis show her those things? Eryl Mai couldn't get the photographs out of her head for the rest of the day.

Horrible. They were just horrible. Broken houses. Upside-down cars. Dead bodies lying in the street. Even babies. Dead, dead, dead. A giant tidal wave crashing into buildings. People getting crushed behind a fence next to a football pitch. Two enormous skyscrapers on fire with big, bulging clouds of black smoke billowing from the top of them. More wreckage, more bodies. So much disaster and death.

Not all the photos were horrible, though. Some were just of people. Living people. There was a photo of... no, it *couldn't* have been John Lennon! It looked like him – Eryl Mai's favourite Beatle – but he was much older and not very nice-looking, not like the John she knew. He was signing an autograph for someone, it looked like.

She also remembered a couple of some blonde woman. Really pretty, and Prince Charles was in one of the photos with her. She looked important but Eryl Mai didn't recognise her. And Prince Charles looked older too! How could that be? Eryl Mai remembered that the next photo was of a crashed black car inside a tunnel, the front of the car completely smashed in.

Then there was a photo of some schoolchildren with their teacher, a class photo just like the ones Eryl Mai had at her school. This photo had some text at the bottom: *Class of 1995 – 1996, Dunblane Primary School.*

1995 – 1996? That was thirty years away!

It must've been a trick. Must've been. Perhaps whoever gave Miss Lewis those photos was trying to fool her, frighten her. Or maybe Miss Lewis was the one doing the fooling and frightening and had made the photos herself somehow. Miss Lewis was creepy, that was certain. Creepy and strange. Eryl Mai hoped to God that Miss Rossiter would hurry up and get better.

That night, Eryl Mai didn't tell Mother about Miss Lewis and the photographs. She just wanted to forget about them, forget about her. Sleep. Sleep and not dream.

Please no dreams.

As she woke the next morning, she smiled. Smiled all through breakfast, and this time ate all her cornflakes. She hadn't dreamed. Or, if she had, she couldn't remember anything.

She went to school still smiling. It was the last day before

half term – another reason to be in a wonderful mood. Even knowing she'd be seeing Miss Lewis again couldn't dampen her spirits.

And then – as luck would have it – Miss Lewis wasn't in! The children gathered in the hall for morning assembly and sang *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, which fitted her mood nicely.

After assembly, the deputy head, Mr Beynon, said he'd be taking Eryl Mai's class that day in place of Miss Lewis.

"I wonder where Miss Lewis has got to," Peter whispered to Eryl Mai as they walked to their classroom.

"Don't care," said Eryl Mai brightly. "It's going to be a good day."

They filed into the classroom for a morning of arithmetic – not Eryl Mai's favourite, but she was looking forward to Mr Beynon teaching it.

As they took their seats and Mr Beynon started speaking, a low, deep sound interrupted him.

Everyone looked around. "What is...?" Peter murmured to Eryl Mai, but as the sound rose, his words disappeared into it.

In a moment, it was a deafening, dreadful rumble.

Everyone froze.

The room went dim, like a thick cloud had cloaked the sun. Eryl Mai turned her head towards the window.

No, not a cloud. Something huge and black and fast was rolling towards the classroom.

Something black.

Oh God.

Eryl Mai shut her eyes. Then a sharp noise stabbed her ears. Her eyes sprang open but saw only black. All around – crashing, grinding, shattering noises. And screams. Blood-curdling screams. She felt a violent thump from behind and fell. Hit the floor hard, unbearable pain shooting through every inch of her. She still couldn't see anything, just black. A great weight pressed down on her, pushing her, pushing her against the floor, harder, harder. She couldn't breathe. She pushed back. Whatever it was, was too strong.

Then it stopped. The noise – gone. The pain – gone. The weight pressing down on her – gone. The floor beneath her – gone.

Just like in her dream, Eryl Mai was floating.

4

I'd parked on a hill on the other side of the River Taff, looking down at the village of Aberfan, Eryl Mai's school still engulfed by morning fog. Mynydd Merthyr, the mountain above Aberfan, was doused in sunshine. The sun was too late. Heavy rain for several days had already saturated the immense accumulation of mining waste and debris that Merthyr Vale Colliery had been dumping on the mountain side for the last fifty years. Waste and debris that sat precariously above Aberfan.

I didn't want to wait and watch, but I couldn't turn away. It was a stab of guilt, I think. Just yesterday, I was down there with them. Three days I spent getting to know living corpses. I was the only one who could escape – because I knew what was going to happen. It was my job, but a part of me felt cowardly, like I'd run away. Abandoned them to their fate.

The least I could do was watch, acknowledge... and remember.

At 9.15am, the coal tip gave way. It appeared to occur in slow motion from where I was standing. More than a hundred and fifty thousand cubic metres of black sludge avalanched towards the village. An awful rumbling sound echoed for miles. Stung my ears, prickled my skin, rattled my bones.

From here it was like a thick, black quilt, or a blanket just as Eryl Mai had described, draping itself harmlessly over the village. Except that that blanket was flattening houses, ripping up trees and swallowing people.

And now it was smashing into the side of Eryl Mai's school.

My phone rang. Something, at last, to tear me away from the horror. I turned away, got back into my car – which thankfully muffled some of the rumbling – and answered the phone.

"Merrick, did you find the girl?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

"And?"

"It was definitely a premonition. But I think it's the only one she's had. I showed her the photos. None of them triggered anything."

"Good. My hope is that most people with the ability are

like her – only able to foresee one event – and that people with a higher degree of precognition are few and far between. Makes them easier to deal with.”

“Yes, ma’am. Have our scientists been able to work out if precognition is to do with us? To do with our time travelling?”

“Not yet.”

“What are your orders?”

“I need you to jump to the beginning of September, 2001. There’s a World Trade Centre employee I need you to interview. Lawrence Boisseau. A few days before he was killed on 9/11, he had a dream about the Twin Towers crashing around him. I’d also like you to speak to his wife. Apparently she had a dream, too. About the streets of Manhattan being filled with debris. Basically I need to know if somehow this ability is, for want of a better word, *contagious*.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

I hung up the phone. The rumbling had stopped. The position of the car on the slope meant I could no longer see the valley. I could no longer see Aberfan or the huge bank of slurry that had enveloped it. The sky was a perfect, vivid blue, not a cloud in sight. The sun’s rays speared through my driver’s window, warming my arm and shoulder. I could hear birds. It didn’t feel like a hundred and forty-four people – including a hundred and sixteen children – had just been crushed to death a few hundred metres below me.

I jumped forwards to 2001, but I didn’t fly straight to New York. I went back to Aberfan. I went to visit the cemetery where the victims of the disaster had been interred together in a mass grave.

I wanted to pay my respects to Eryl Mai Jones.

"THE BISLEY BOY"

**(EXTRACTS FROM MARGERY
INGLEBY'S JOURNALS
– MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

1544

April 8th

What news Father brings us today! Neville and I can hardly contain ourselves! I knew something was afoot. I noticed at breakfast this morning that Mother and Father kept smiling at one another. Neville did not notice anything, but he never does, even though he is two years older than me.

Finally Father told us. A very special visitor is coming to stay in Bisley for a while. VERY special, he said. He would not tell us who at first. He wanted to tease us. Then he blurted it out and Neville and I screamed and ran around the house.

It is the Princess Elizabeth! She is coming to Bisley! I am so excited I cannot breathe! I have never met or even seen her before and now she is coming to our village!

Neville asked why. The plague is wreaking havoc in London again, Father says. King Henry VIII wants his daughter somewhere safe, so he has decided to send her to stay at Over Court House. It will be so strange to have her living so close to us.

But my excitement is starting to fade as I write this. I am starting to feel nervous now.

What if she is scary and mean like the King is? I have not met the King either, but from what Father tells me, he is not very nice.

What if she does not like me?

May 13th

How wrong could I be! The Princess Elizabeth is lovely. Not like the King at all. I really must stop saying these things about the King, and thinking them. He will chop my head off next. He likes doing that, Father says. Just ask the Princess. He did it to her mother.

The Princess, despite not having a mother (which I simply cannot imagine – I would surely die without mine), seems a happy, gentle sort. She speaks softly and kindly. She is small, thin and pale like me and has golden hair just like Neville's, but much longer and lovelier. She looks much like my brother, actually.

When the Princess arrived in Bisley, her cofferer, Mr Parry, and her governess, Lady Ashley, introduced her to Mother and Father and Neville and I, and we were friends straight away.

Today is Sunday, so Neville has not had school and I have not had the displeasure of spending the day with my wretched old witch of a tutor, Lady Makepeace. When we returned from church this morning, Father let us go and play with the Princess Elizabeth in the gardens around Over Court. Oh, the fun we have had. Neville has been rescuing the Princess from a horrible monster with two heads (me), armed with a big stick that we pretended was a sword. I did start to tire of being the monster, so Neville let me be the knight and he was the monster and I got to rescue the Princess. Even the Princess wanted to be the monster! So I got to pretend to be the Princess too. That was the most fun of all.

We played for hours, it was wonderful. I do not want her to ever go back to London.

June 7th

It is most strange. Neville and I have not seen the Princess Elizabeth for a week, yet we saw her almost every day before. The Princess would come to the house and we would play, usually for an hour after dinner. Now she has stopped coming. I spoke to Neville about this earlier. He said she must be attending to her royal duties.

I am sure my brother is right. I just wish she had told us.

What am I saying? She is the King's daughter and I am expecting her to come and tell us when she is busy?

It is no wonder Father says I am ill-mannered.

June 8th

I am still trying to understand the things that have happened today. This morning Lady Ashley and Mr Parry paid us a visit. I did not hear the start of what they talked about with Mother and Father, but I heard Lady Ashley say to Father, "Take us to see the children, Mr Ingleby."

They came into the room where Neville and I were sitting

reading. Mr Parry looked sad. He did not say much. Lady Ashley wasn't friendly like she was the day we met her. She said to me in quite a stern voice, "Come here please, child." She knew my name was Margery, so I do not know why she called me that.

I just had to stand in front of her so that she and Mr Parry could look at me. In a moment, Lady Ashley turned to Mr Parry and said, "She is too young."

Mr Parry nodded. I thought, too young for what?

She looked at my brother and said, "Come here, child," this time without the "please" and in an even sterner voice.

Neville went and stood where I had. Lady Ashley and Mr Parry looked at him and then each other. She said, "Can this work?"

Mr Parry replied, breaking his silence at last, "I see no other choice, my lady."

Lady Ashley turned to Father and said, "Yes, I'm afraid he will have to do."

Father looked distressed and started to say something. I think it was something like, "Please don't. He is my only boy. Can you not speak to Her Highness and –"

Lady Ashley interrupted him and said, "I'm afraid not. Please make the arrangements."

It was at that moment that Mother started to cry. She rushed to cuddle Neville. After Mr Parry and Lady Ashley left, Father sat with Neville and I and explained.

Tears fill my eyes as I write this. Neville is leaving us, by order of the Princess Elizabeth. Father does not know why, just that the Princess needs one of us to go and live with her at Over Court, and Lady Ashley and Mr Parry have decided that it has to be Neville.

When he said that, I said I didn't think it would be so bad. Over Court is not far. We would all still see each other, if not as much.

But Father shook his head. "No, Margery," he said, and I saw a tear drop off his nose. "Neville will not be allowed to see us. And when the Princess returns to London, Neville will be going with her."

Then Neville started crying too. I didn't though. I reacted differently. I shouted all kinds of profanities about the Princess. Mother and Father had to calm me down.

I am calmer now. I have to be strong for my brother. Father says that Lady Ashley and Mr Parry will be returning to collect him tomorrow, so it could well be our last night together for some time.

I have been talking with Neville for most of the evening, telling him that everything will turn out well. The Princess must have a very important task for him. It could even be something exciting. And we will speak again. I am certain we will.

I am going to try and sleep now.



Well, I couldn't sleep. I wanted to know why the Princess wanted Neville and if she would be willing to take me instead.

So I took myself from my bed, redressed myself in today's clothes and went downstairs. Mother and Father and Neville were asleep, but two of our servants were still awake and in the billiards room.

I tiptoed into the kitchens and sneaked out of the door to the pantry. I don't think the servants heard me. I was very quiet. I went to Over Court. I thought when I got there that everyone was probably asleep, but then I heard voices. I hid behind a rosebush in the gardens and peeked through one of the windows.

I saw Lady Ashley. She was talking to a man with a long face and dark eyes. I had never seen him before.

When their backs were turned, I crept beneath the frame of the window and listened as hard as I could.

I heard Lady Ashley say, "We are bringing the boy here tomorrow, as you instructed."

What to make of that? Is the Princess behind this or isn't she?

"Good," the man replied. "And you are certain he's the most suitable candidate?"

Lady Ashley said, "He's the only candidate." She then said quite sharply, "If you had not acted with such haste, we might have had more options."

"We had to act quickly," said the man. "She would have

"THE BISLEY BOY"

revealed what she knew to her father. We cannot allow anyone to threaten our work."

She? I thought. Who? The Princess? What in the world were they talking about?

"Well, it's done now," said Lady Ashley. "So we just have to make the best of it."

Lady Ashley and the man left the room after that. I wanted to storm into Over Court and confront them all. Tell them they were not taking my brother. But the man scared me and I lost my nerve.

I went home. I'm in bed now. I do not think I will sleep at all tonight. I want to cry. I want to cry and cry but I'm not going to do that either. I'm going to hold the tears in and pray. Pray all night that they do not take my brother tomorrow.

I hope He listens.

June 9th

My prayers have gone unanswered. My brother is gone. They took him. I don't know when I will see him again. I miss him already. I miss him so much. I don't know what else to write.

June 12th

My family isn't allowed near Over Court. Father has tried several times to see Neville, but nobody will let him. I sneaked into the gardens again last night, like I did the night before he was taken. I did not see or hear anything.

I hate her.

July 3rd

A royal carriage left Bisley today. People said it was the Princess returning to London. I wonder if Neville was with her.

August 30th

Mother is dead. The grief has killed her. O Lord, how do you expect Father and I to go on?

1549

September 29th

It is my birthday today. I'm fourteen. Neville was sixteen last month. I wonder how different he looks.

It has been five years, three months and twenty days since they took him. So much has changed. The horrible King Henry is dead. The Princess Elizabeth's little brother, Edward, is king. By little, I do not simply mean younger. I mean actually little. He is only eleven. Nine when he was crowned. Too young to be king if you ask me, but what do I know of it.

We hear nothing of the princesses, Elizabeth and Mary, and of course, we hear nothing of Neville. It is as though he never existed. The only time I see Neville now is in my dreams. Nearly every night, we play together. Chess or Fox and Geese. He loved those. And pretend sword-fighting in the garden, too. That was my favourite.

I never played again after Neville left. I just didn't feel like it anymore. Now I read. Book after book after book. With books I can escape from this world into countless others. Still, if Neville came back tomorrow, I would play with him again in a heartbeat.

I hope he is well. O Lord, I hope you have protected him. So many times have I questioned your wisdom, but perhaps your plan for Neville Ingleby is much bigger than I can understand?

I cry myself to sleep every night. It is habit now, like something I must do when I get into bed.

O Lord, if you have a shred of love for me in your heart, please give me a sign that my brother is well.

September 30th

Finally, a tardy answer to my prayers. I could hardly believe it when the letter was delivered. A letter from my beloved brother. It had a shiny red wax seal with a Tudor rose imprint and was addressed to Father, Mother and I. Neville doesn't know about Mother.

My hands are shaking as I write this, but I will try to

continue. Neville spoke kindly and confidently in his letter. His handwriting has changed, but parts of it were familiar. He asked us how we all were. He said that he missed us, particularly Father's riddles, Mother's cherry pies, and all the games he played with me. He especially missed Mother singing us to sleep at bedtime. Oh, how I miss that too.

He wished me a happy birthday and told us that he was safe. But he couldn't say where he was or what he was doing, or whether he would be coming back.

Father looks sicker and sicker each day. I am not sure if Neville's letter made things better or worse. The pallor in his face as he read it... It was like each word was draining the life from him. I'm not sure what to do.

Please Lord, while I am eternally grateful to you for keeping Neville safe and allowing us the privilege of knowing so, I must ask your help again. Not for me, this time, but for my father. Heal him of this pain, I beseech you.

1559

January 15th

What a day. I do not write much these days, but today I must. Today I am compelled. Today, everything has changed.

I have not spoken to the Lord in years. I'm not certain how to speak to Him anymore. I decided a long time ago that there was little point in trying to understand His inscrutable ways, and after today, I maintain that wisdom.

Still, though I may not understand, I am thankful nonetheless that our gracious and bewildering Lord has chosen to finally bestow on me the answers to the only questions I have. Why now? I do not know, and fear I never will.

I have just returned home from the coronation of our new queen. Elizabeth. The woman who took my brother and killed my mother and father. I didn't want to go, of course. I've been wishing the woman dead for years. Why would I want to celebrate her becoming queen? But I went not to celebrate, but to gaze upon the object of my hatred in the

hope that she might return my gaze, seek a dialogue with me, and then explain to me why she has utterly broken my family.

I knew all of that was unlikely. There would be thousands of people there. I held no importance. And were she to meet my gaze, she wouldn't recognise me anyway. I have not seen her since we played together in the gardens of Over Court. My face has changed. I look tired all the time now. I was such a spirited child, but years of grief have withered me.

I took a carriage to London and joined the crowds outside Westminster Abbey. There was so much merriment. I spent much of the day feigning a smile as I waited to look upon the woman who destroyed my life.

Organs boomed, trumpets blared, drums pounded and bells jangled as the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth was presented for the people's acceptance.

As I cast my eyes upon her, I knew the truth immediately. Her feminine graces, her fine dress and coronation robe, her long, flowing, golden hair. They were all a sham, a disguise. This was no woman. It has been a lot of years. But every sister in the land will know her brother when she sees him.

And so, for the first time since he was carried away from Bisley, I saw Neville. At long last I have learned why he was taken from us. I still do not know what happened to the real Elizabeth, but I know that God's remarkable plan was to ensure that nobody else did either, because He was to have my brother, Neville Ingleby, pose as her.

What a day indeed.

My brother has just been crowned Queen of England.

THE BOX

“Wooooow...”

Miranda collapsed on the bed, chest heaving, drenched in both David’s sweat and her own. Her fitted sheet had sprung loose and was twisted into a crumpled, damp lump beneath her.

“I know,” agreed David, smiling.

David jumped in the shower. It was Sunday and Miranda had nowhere to be, but David was a doctor and had a long shift ahead at the Princess Caroline Hospital in Central London, so he was in a hurry. Meanwhile she just lay there, allowing her body to slow and the tingling in her fingers and toes to fade, feeling like she was drifting away on a cloud.

She traced the swirls on the ceiling and listened to the splatter of the shower. Not normally a relaxing sound but, right now, a power drill would’ve been a relaxing sound. When the yelp of the shower tap brought the splatter to an end, Miranda snapped out of her trance and dived off the bed to grab the duvet they’d tossed on the floor ages ago. She lay back on the bed, pulled the duvet across her body and fluffed up her matted, sweaty hair. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t just lie there, sticky and dishevelled and everything hanging out for David to see. Minutes ago she’d felt like the sexiest woman on Earth. She wasn’t about to spoil the image he had of her.

She watched David get dressed. When he was about to go, he leaned over the bed and kissed her tenderly. “I love you, M,” he murmured, and she smiled in response – not an awkward smile, but she felt awkward, mainly because she still wasn’t ready to say it back.

That’s not to say she wasn’t utterly infatuated with him. She was. She just didn’t want to let him know that until she was absolutely sure he was genuine.

She hoped – desperately – that he was.

David left the bedroom. Shortly afterwards, she heard the front door open and close. She snoozed for half an hour, then switched on the TV, half-listening to a documentary about Queen Elizabeth I on BBC Two while she skimmed through statuses on Facebook and replied to a text message from Simon.

She remembered that David had been talking about Elizabeth I at the bar last night. What was it he was saying?

Something about a conspiracy theory to do with Elizabeth and some village called Bisley. Miranda for the life of her couldn't remember what it was or why it had come up, but remembered that it was pretty 'out there' and that David believed it. If only she hadn't had that second bottle of wine.

A good hour later, Miranda realised that she needed to do something productive with her day. The lounge hadn't been hoovered for weeks and the kitchen was a right mess. She unstuck herself from her bed and showered.

Drying herself after her shower, she heard a knock at the door. She wasn't expecting anyone.

I hope it's David. Back for a quickie.

She put on her lilac cashmere dressing gown and went downstairs.

She opened the door. A man was on her doorstep. She barely registered his appearance because her eyes went straight to the gun in his right hand, pointed at her waist.

"Don't scream," said the man in a deep but soft voice.

Miranda swallowed. She dug her fingers into her palms.

"May I come in?"

Well of course you can fucking come in. You're pointing a gun at me.

Shaking, Miranda stepped aside. The thirty-something man was good-looking, had vivid green eyes and a coiffed moustache, and was well-dressed in a black suit and trilby. He stepped into her hallway.

"Is this about money?" Miranda asked.

"No, Miranda. Not money. I know you don't have much of that."

Shit. The bastard knew her name – and her financial situation, apparently.

"What then?" said Miranda.

"I'm here for the box." The man had such a mild, disarming tone to his voice. Soothing almost. If he wasn't holding Miranda at gunpoint – clearly having done his homework on her – she might've been tempted to go for coffee with him, just to hear him talk.

"Box?" said Miranda. "What box?"

"Pfft. Now I know how you like to play, Miranda. But please don't do it with me."

She hadn't a clue what he was talking about. "I don't... I

don't know what you want from me."

"Miranda, are you telling me David hasn't told you about the box? I find that hard to believe."

"You know David?"

"I know David."

"I don't know anything about any box."

"And I suppose David hasn't mentioned anything about Queen Elizabeth I?"

Now that was a different question. He had, yes. Last night. But the wine had erased all the details. In any case Miranda wasn't going to say anything – not until she knew exactly what was going on.

"No," she replied. "Nothing."

"Interesting. Well, the thing is, what David may not realise is that the box has a tracking device on it. So, you see, we *know* it's here in this house."

Miranda shrugged helplessly, "I don't know what to tell you."

"You won't mind if I take a look around?"

That wasn't really a question. "Go ahead," Miranda said.

The man started searching the living room, looking behind the chairs, behind the sofa, inside cupboards. Passing the mantelpiece he picked up the Valentine's card Miranda had placed there yesterday. "Oh yes – happy Valentine's Day," he said to her, smiling, before reading the card: "*All my love, Simon*. Simon? Oh, that's right. He's your husband, isn't he? Away on business in New York."

He was taunting her, the cunt.

When the man started checking the cupboards in the kitchen, Miranda grabbed her phone from the dining table and sent a quick, surreptitious text to David: Man here. Got a gun. Looking for 'the box'. Come back now!!!

She pressed 'send' and tucked the phone into the pocket of her dressing gown. She considered dialling '999' and putting it on loudspeaker so that they could hear what was going on. She could even make deliberate conversation with the man to communicate her predicament – like they do in the movies. She held off. She wanted to make sure David wasn't in any trouble first.

"Mind if I check upstairs?" said the man.

Why do you keep asking? She challenged his hypocritical politeness, “What if I say no?”

The man smiled knowingly and swept past her to go upstairs. She followed him into her bedroom. He went straight for her floor-to-ceiling fitted wardrobe, spanning the length of the wall next to the en-suite. The obvious place to start. He groped heavy-handedly through every compartment, shoving delicate blouses and expensive dresses aside, clearing shelves of shoes, pulling out piles of towels and bed linen and just chucking them on the floor.

“Ah ha!” he said suddenly. He’d dug past a load of Simon’s shirts and seen something in the lower left corner of the wardrobe.

Miranda shot forwards. The only things down there were Simon’s old gym bag and some shoeboxes – or so she thought.

The man hauled out a box that was hidden beneath Simon’s things. Some kind of large, cubic, metal trunk with a small black panel on the bottom right corner of the lid.

David must’ve put it there – but why?

“You’re telling me you didn’t know this was here?” said the man.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” said Miranda. It was true, too.

“And you’re telling me you have no idea what’s inside it either?”

“Not a clue.” Also true, although she was now wondering if David had told her about it last night and she’d forgotten.

The man dug a small, plain blue, plastic card from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He waved it over the black panel on the lid of the box. A little green light flashed.

Miranda’s eyes fixed, the man lifted the lid.

Inside, notebooks. Old, tatty-looking notebooks with brown leather covers tied with string and no titles. Loads of them. They looked like they were hundreds of years old.

“What are they?” Miranda asked.

Stooped over the box, the man looked up at her. She couldn’t tell if he was going to answer, but then someone else answered for him.

“They’re the journals of Margery Ingleby.”

Miranda whipped her eyes towards the familiar voice. David was standing in the doorway of the bedroom.

The man straightened fast. His gun-toting hand shot up. David, too, raised a gun.

David has a gun?

“David, what the fuck is going on?” cried Miranda.

Both men now had guns pointed at each other’s heads. Fear and confusion rumbled through Miranda.

“Margery Ingleby is the sister of Neville Ingleby,” said David.

“Am I supposed to know who they are?” said Miranda.

“Not yet,” said David. “But you will. Because those journals expose the biggest lie this country’s ever known.”

“Don’t make me kill you, Tanner,” said the man. The way he used David’s surname suggested to Miranda that he knew him well.

“You really ought to rethink that,” said David. “If you kill me, all this is going to get splashed across every major newspaper in the country by tomorrow morning.”

“What have you done?” said the man.

“You’ll find that three of the journals in the box are missing,” replied David. “The three most pertinent ones, shall we say. If anything happens to me, I’ve arranged for those journals to go straight to the press. Then everyone will know the truth.”

“What fucking truth, David?” shouted Miranda. “What’s going on?”

“We talked about it last night, M.”

“I was pissed as a motherfucker last night! I don’t fucking remember!”

“Quite a mouth on her, this one,” said the man.

“Fuck you!” She remembered too late that this man was still waving a gun about and could shoot her in the face at any moment. At the same time, she felt safer knowing that David was there, pointing his gun at the man. If he tried to get off a shot at her, David would stop him. She *hoped* David would stop him.

“Queen Elizabeth I – she was a man,” said David.

Miranda stared blankly. She vaguely remembered him talking about that now, not that any of the details were coming back.

“The person who became ‘queen’ was a man called Neville Ingleby, forced to step in and pose as the real Elizabeth.”

"That's ludicrous!" She remembered saying something similar last night.

David shook his head. "No. There have always been rumours. Only a few trusted physicians were ever allowed to attend to Elizabeth. She refused all offers of marriage and couldn't have children. She always wore wigs and heavy makeup and gave an express directive that no autopsy could be done on her body when she died. And for centuries in the village of Bisley, every May Day, the 'May Queen' was always played by a boy in an Elizabethan girl's costume. Because the people there knew." He glanced at the box of journals. "And Margery Ingleby's journals are the proof."

"So what the hell happened to the real Elizabeth?"

"She was killed – by my organisation."

"Your organisation? I thought you were a fucking doctor!"

"I am. I'm also a member of a centuries-old organisation –"

"Enough!" blared the man, thrusting his gun. "I will put you down, Tanner!"

"What's the big fucking deal here?" said Miranda. "So the Virgin Queen was a Virgin King. So what?"

"Ireland," said the man. "That's what."

"Ireland?"

"Elizabeth I instituted the first mass plantation of English Protestant settlers in Ireland. That she was a fraud means that every legal action she took was void – including all the lands she granted to those settlers. If all those titles are capable of being called into question then the fragile peace between the Unionists and the Nationalists in Ireland could be broken. The Troubles could begin again."

Honestly, Miranda couldn't give two fucks about any of that. She just wanted this asshole out of her house so she could confront David about all his lies.

"What do you want?" the man said to David.

"You know what I want. I want to save her."

Miranda's stomach flipped. *Save her? Save who? The Elizabeth that died?*

"We can't let you do that."

"You *will* let me do that."

"Save who?" cried Miranda. "The real Elizabeth? How can you do that?"

Keeping his gun poised, David looked at her, a deep

sadness in his eyes. "No. Not her. You."

Miranda shook her head. "Me? What are you talking about?"

"Your appointment at the hospital this Wednesday. I've seen the test results, M. You're about to be told you have stage four brain cancer."

David's words didn't register. Not at all. She shook her head with disbelief. "What?"

"You're dying, M."

She felt faint, dizzy. She couldn't take in what she was hearing.

David shifted his gaze back onto the man. "But you're going to be okay. Because I'm going to go back in time and get you treatment before it metastasises. And this man here is going to give me the means to do it."

Miranda felt like she was alone in a dark tunnel, both ends closing in. She couldn't move. That David had just said something bizarre about travelling back in time bounced right off her.

"You can't, Tanner," said the man. "That's not how we work."

"You're going to make an exception. You know what'll happen if you don't."

In that moment the fear and confusion that had frozen Miranda to the spot began to ease, overtaken by a warm feeling that was rippling up from Miranda's knees to her shoulders, pulling her lips into a smile.

He really does love me. That's why he's doing all this. He's doing it for me.

A flash of green light behind David yanked Miranda out of her trance. He grunted, juttied his chest and threw up his arms – something had hit his back. The gun flew out of his hand, landed near the wardrobe. For a moment David was stuck in what looked like a painful spasm, then he dropped heavily to the floor and Miranda saw the blonde woman standing behind him, also holding a gun.

Oh my God oh my God oh my God. Miranda dived to the floor and tried to shake him awake, screaming his name.

"Take your time, won't you," said the man to the woman.

The woman said nothing.

"What have you done!" Miranda yelled at the woman, tears

blurring her vision.

Again, the woman was silent.

"Yes, ma'am," said the man. "Tanner's down. Do we have the other journals?"

Miranda looked at him. He wasn't looking at the woman who'd just shot David. He seemed to be talking to someone else.

"Yes, ma'am, will do."

He must've had an earpiece in.

"And what shall I do with Olsen?"

Olsen. Miranda's surname.

Obviously, Miranda didn't hear the answer. But when the man said, "Yes, ma'am," and pointed his gun at her, the answer was pretty fucking clear.

Panic spearing through her, Miranda shot to her feet and made a run for the window.

Same green flash. This time something slammed into her back.

A short sequence of thoughts occurred to her in her last moment of awareness. *Wasn't that painful. Probably a better way to go than stage four brain cancer. And at least I know David loved me back.*

THE BABUSHKA LADY

Crap. We killed them. JFK *and* Marilyn. We killed them both.

Alright, it's probably not as simple as that, given that I don't fully understand Rachel Evans' abilities. I don't really know what to think. But since I'm in charge of reporting back to Boone on Rachel-shaped progress, I have to be thorough.

I suppose I should explain who Rachel Evans is. She's one of our latest assets, brought to us because she is able to see the events of a parallel timeline. And when I say parallel, I guess I mean *original*. The timeline as it was before our Time Travel Department made certain interventions, certain changes to advance our work. Rachel can see how things were before.

Our doctors and scientists are still trying to get a handle on her abilities, to pinpoint how and why they occur. It's involved lots of non-invasive procedures, some rather nasty invasive ones, and a regime of hypnotherapy.

I'm listening to a recording of Rachel's most recent hypnotherapy session. She's just recounted, under hypnosis, the details of a world-famous speech delivered by President John F. Kennedy about ending the Vietnam War, which she says she remembered learning about in school.

"Er – sorry, Rachel," says hypnotherapist Dr Masood. "Can we backtrack? You said President *Kennedy* ended the Vietnam War? W-when was this?"

"Mid-60s, I think," Rachel replies.

The tape is silent for a minute or so. This monumental development has obviously caught Dr Masood off guard.

"So you don't recall anything happening to President Kennedy in November 1963?" asks Dr Masood.

"Er – no."

Wow. Rachel knows nothing of JFK's visit to Dallas, Texas, when he was shot dead. According to her, JFK completed a two-term presidency and left office when Hubert Humphrey was elected. In our timeline, Hubert Humphrey never made it higher than Vice President.

On another tape, Rachel talks about going to the cinema to see the movie *Titanic* in 1997. That famous blockbuster movie we're all familiar with, starring Leonardo Di Caprio as Jack Dawson, Claire Danes as a young Rose Dawson and...

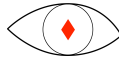
Marilyn Monroe as an elderly Rose Dawson.

Again there's silence on the tape, as Dr Masood processes what she's hearing. "S-so Marilyn Monroe was in *Titanic*?"

"Yeah. Marked a bit of a career resurgence," says Rachel. "It's funny though. Marilyn Monroe was only seventy when they filmed it, but she was playing a hundred-year-old. They say that because of Marilyn's smoking and drinking over the years, she hardly needed any make-up."

So Marilyn didn't die aged thirty-six. She wasn't found dead in her home in Brentwood, Los Angeles, the result of acute barbiturate poisoning, in August 1962. Not in the *original* timeline.

I've decided I need to get a handle on what happened in *this* timeline before I compile my report for Boone.



Christ. I look at Marilyn first and see how riddled with inconsistencies the official records are. No wonder her murder is one of the most famous conspiracy theories of all time. Why has no one blown this wide open?

The first big question is the timings. Allegedly, it was after midnight that housekeeper Eunice Murray decided that something was wrong and called Marilyn's doctors. Both her psychiatrist and physician attended and indicated that her time of death was about 12.30am.

Yet the undertaker argued that the state of rigor mortis in Marilyn's body suggested an earlier time of death – between 9.30 and 11.30pm.

And then both doctors went and changed their stories, claiming instead that Marilyn died just before 4am – six hours later than the undertaker's estimate.

Even more bizarre is the fact that Marilyn's lawyer, Mickey Rudin, informed her agent, Arthur Jacobs, at 10.30pm that she had overdosed.

So how could her time of death be 4am? And how did Mickey Rudin know about the overdose before Eunice Murray and the doctors?

Why, also, did Eunice Murray travel to Europe so soon after Marilyn's death, even though she was a key witness?

THE BABUSHKA LADY

Then go on to change her story numerous times over the next few decades?

Somebody's pants are on fire.

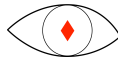
The next big question is the medical evidence. The cause of death was a self-induced drug overdose, but the autopsy results were destroyed and much of the rest of the medical evidence went missing. And wait... Pathologists said the overdose wasn't from swallowing the drugs or an injection. So how did they get in her system? The only other option would be an enema.

Suicide by enema?!

This is more than a conspiracy theory. Even Sergeant Jack Clemmons, the first LAPD officer to arrive at the death scene, believes Marilyn was murdered, saying, "It was the most obviously staged death I have ever seen."

Alright, so if *we* did this, we did a really botch job.

Onto JFK...



There are tons of unanswered questions with this one. Officially, Lee Harvey Oswald fired the shots that killed the president from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository building, as the presidential limousine, carrying Kennedy, his wife Jackie, Governor Connolly and his wife Nellie, passed through Dealey Plaza. It's undisputed that the bullet that hit Kennedy's throat came from the back – the direction of the Depository. But that bullet also had to have been the same one that hit Governor Connolly a split second later, because there wasn't enough time between the wounding of the two men for Oswald to have reloaded his gun and fired a second shot.

And yet, if it was the same bullet, there's the pertinent issue of the physics-defying trajectory the bullet would've had to have taken. It would've had to have changed direction several times to cause the injuries it did to Governor Connolly. Conspiracy theorists call it the 'magic bullet'. They use it to argue that there must've been a second bullet.

A second bullet that, because of the timing, couldn't have been fired by Oswald.

Added to this are numerous witnesses who testified to hearing shots coming from the grassy knoll, a small, sloping hill on completely the other side of Dealey Plaza to the Depository.

I watch the Zapruder film – Abraham Zapruder’s amateur footage of the assassination. The fatal bullet – the one that blows half of Kennedy’s brain across the back of the limo – hits him from the *front*. I mean, surely it does. It’s right here for everyone to see! The Depository is behind him, but the bullet blows the *front* of his head off, and knocks him *backwards*. A bullet fired from the Depository wouldn’t have done that, but a bullet fired from the grassy knoll...

I’m now convinced that Oswald didn’t act alone when he shot JFK. There was a second shooter somewhere on the grassy knoll. I’m sure of it.

Shit.

One of the witnesses was an unidentified woman with a camera. She was right there as the motorcade went past, camera to her face, snapping away. In fact, she continued snapping photos after the first shots were fired, even though all the other witnesses took cover. Not remotely afraid.

She never came forward with her photos. Nobody knows who she is. They call her the ‘Babushka Lady’ because of the pink headscarf she was wearing, similar to the headscarves worn by elderly Russian women. ‘Babushka’ means ‘old lady’ in Russian.

That’s my headscarf.

No question. Most of the photos are blurry or distant, but there’s one close-up photo of the headscarf and it’s got the same floral patterns as the one my Russian grandmother gave to me – the one she *made* for me. It’s unique.

And since she’s also wearing a trench coat that looks exactly like the one I own, it’s certainly becoming clear why the Babushka Lady never came forward.

She’s me.

Bloody hell.

I wasn’t really expecting today to turn out quite like this. But I think I’ve got enough to go to Boone.



"We didn't do it," says Boone at the start of my meeting with her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am?" I say.

"I should clarify. We didn't do it – *yet*."

"You mean, killed JFK and Marilyn Monroe?"

"None of our operations have involved orchestrating the deaths of President Kennedy or Miss Monroe. But that's not to say we won't do so at some point in the future."

I snigger. "You mean the past?"

Boone is straight-faced. "I mean *our* future."

I know what she means, but the paradoxical absurdity of time travel amuses me.

"Not that I can think of any reason why we would want to have them killed," Boone continues. "Do you have any theories, Draper?"

Shit. She has my full written report in front of her. I think it's probably the best piece of work I've ever done, but at no point in it have I proposed any theories as to why we might've wanted to kill JFK and Marilyn. I thought she wanted the facts, not conjecture. Talk about being put on the spot.

"I – er – " A couple of ideas dart through my head as I sit there in Boone's office. "Well, nowadays it's pretty much common knowledge that JFK and Marilyn Monroe were having an affair. UFO nuts say that the government assassinated them because JFK learned more than he was supposed to about aliens and Roswell and shared those secrets with Marilyn during their trysts. Thing is, perhaps it's not UFOs he learned about. Perhaps it's us."

"You think JFK knew about us?"

"It's just a theory, but it makes sense."

"Hopefully you can verify it when you go back."

I basically knew that was coming, but I was hardly going to volunteer. Yes, I work in the Time Travel Department, but we're not all time travellers. I've been quite happy reporting on Rachel Evans and her parallel memories. "Er – go back?"

"Yes. If I read your report correctly, you've identified yourself as the Babushka Lady."

"Er, well, I was just – that was purely – "

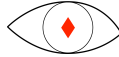
"Don't get cold feet now, Draper. You've got plenty of time to train and prepare yourself. The past isn't going anywhere."

“Are those your orders?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. Insofar as I can order you to do something you’re already predestined to do.”

“Er... yes.” When the paradoxical absurdity of time travel isn’t amusing me, it’s giving me a fricking headache.

“Good luck, Draper. Keep me apprised regularly. I hope your investigation proves fruitful.”



After weeks of time travel training, researching and psyching myself up, I go back to Los Angeles, 1962. Well, what I think is 1962. I actually end up in 1937, only realising I’m twenty-five years too early when I see a copy of the *Los Angeles Times*: celebrated pilot Amelia Earhart has just disappeared over the Pacific Ocean. I thought I selected the correct date – maybe I didn’t. I’m hardly a pro at this – I failed time travel training three times and when I finally passed, my trainer warned Boone that she should avoid sending me on time travel missions wherever possible!

Anyway, my little accident means I have to make an extra jump, from 1937 to 1962. Not ideal, but my body’s coping with the stresses. The time travel doesn’t seem to be affecting me like I’ve seen it affect some of my colleagues.

I spend two months in 1962 not really getting anywhere. A week and a day before Marilyn’s death, everything changes.

I’ve not been able to get near Marilyn’s house – the grounds are always swarming with bodyguards. Then, late in the evening, I clock the housekeeper, Eunice Murray, leaving Marilyn’s home. I follow her in my lovely 1961 Cadillac to a bar in Santa Monica called The Lucky Munchkin. She purchases a gin and tonic and looks upset, cheeks and eyes red.

“Are you alright?” I ask, joining her at the bar.

“I’m fine,” the bespectacled lady replies sharply. “Please leave me be.”

“Forgive me, but you look like you’ve got the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“Go away. You don’t know the half of it.”

Right. Time to change gear.

"I bet I know *all* of it."

Murray does a quick head-turn towards me. Her previously sullen features stiffen into angst – lips apart, eyes virtually out on stalks. Way to look guilty.

"What do you mean?" she asks, a slight quiver in her voice.

"I mean I know. About Marilyn."

"Did he send you?"

He?

I'll play along. "Yes, he did."

"Look, I'm sorry it's taking so long. But tell him it's all in hand. It *will* happen. It's just taking longer than I expected to arrange everything."

Wow.

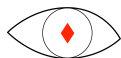
"He understands this isn't easy," I say.

"Tell him I'll call him when I know exactly when it's going to happen. And please stop following me."

She downs the rest of her gin and tonic and hotfoots it out of the bar.

Christ almighty. After two months of nothing, I get *that*!

Looks like Eunice Murray is in on the whole thing, but there's someone else pulling the strings. Could this 'he' be one of us?



I don't see Eunice Murray again. I pretend to be a reporter doing a piece about the medical profession in LA and try to arrange meetings with the two doctors who changed their stories. But they refuse to meet me. And I can't get anywhere near Marilyn's house on the night of her death because of her security.

So Marilyn dies. And, while I know now that Eunice Murray was part of a conspiracy to murder her, I've hit a wall.

What does Boone expect me to do? I'm here on my own. No support, no special means of getting in and out of places undetected, no real plan, and I'm not supposed to interfere with the timeline. Even my brief meeting with Murray – and my attempted meetings with the doctors – were risky moves. But how else does Boone expect me to investigate?

I call her, tell her what's happened, explain the predicament. She's not mad. Not at all. She takes the pressure off, actually. Says she expects my best, nothing more. I can't interfere with the timeline, which naturally limits my ability to investigate. She says to do what I can, and if I come back with zilch, so be it.

So I jump forwards to October 1963 and initiate the next stage of my mission. I fly to Dallas, Texas, base myself at a Downtown Dallas hotel and tail Lee Harvey Oswald in the weeks leading up to the JFK assassination. I figure that makes the most sense. Oswald works at the Texas School Book Depository as an order-filler, stays at a boarding house in Oak Cliff, Dallas during the week, and goes home to his wife in Irving at the weekends. He doesn't drive; he commutes between Irving and Dallas with a co-worker, and during the week he walks.

I slip inside the Depository one afternoon and locate the beige jacket he always wears, hanging up in the staff room. I secure a listening device in the jacket lining – 21st-century tech that he wouldn't detect even if he was looking for it – and slink back out of the building.

Frustratingly, I record nothing but a couple of phone calls Oswald makes to his wife from the communal phone at the boarding house. Perhaps he's communicating with his co-conspirators by letter? I do see him making regular trips to the post office in his lunch hours.

Or maybe the lack of communication is because everything is already in place. Kennedy's trip to Dallas was publicly announced back in September – ample time for the architects of this conspiracy to prepare.

Conjecture is getting me nowhere.

Ironically, the day I most need Oswald to wear the jacket is the day he leaves it at the boarding house: November 22nd. Assassination day.

Not that I'm planning to stay in my hotel room listening to Oswald's interactions anyway. I've somewhere to be, don't I? Must do as history says. (Not sure what would happen if I didn't... Would all of time unravel? Probably best not to think about it.)

Wearing my trench coat and my grandmother's 'babushka' headscarf, armed with the bulky Kodak camera I purchased

last week, I leave the hotel and head to Dealey Plaza.

The morning rain has stopped, the clouds have dispersed, and a light breeze fans the trees. Shame. If the rain had persisted, they might've kept the top up on Kennedy's limousine, making the assassins' job a lot more difficult.

Arriving at Dealey Plaza, I go to stand on the grass between Elm Street and Main Street. It's just before 11am when I get there. The biggest crowds are on Main Street; this area is a bit quieter.

It's surreal and haunting to stand there, knowing full well what is coming. My chest is thudding. A film of sweat breaks out across my body. I want to take off the trench coat – it's hardly cold. But I know I can't – because I didn't.

I try to focus on the task at hand. Being the only one there with foresight, I observe the grassy knoll, which is in front of me on the other side of Elm Street. I keep a close eye on the steps that go up the knoll to the Bryan pergola and the wooden stockade fence, flanked by trees, that separates the knoll from a parking lot – where many people thought the second gunman fired from.

It isn't until 11.40am, fifty minutes before the assassination, that I notice something moving behind the fence, darkening the slim gaps between the fence posts. For a moment I can't tell if they are just shadows cast by the windblown trees.

Then a silhouetted head, donning a fedora hat, peeks over the fence. I raise my camera to snap a picture, but he ducks down again by the time my finger's over the shutter button. I snap a picture anyway.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have our second shooter.

I wait, watch and bite off all my fingernails. The next fifty minutes are literally an eternity.

The man behind the fence stays hidden, but I think he's positioned himself about two metres back from the corner. Previously, sunlight was squeezing through the slits in that part of the fence – now something's blocking it. He's still there, waiting for his moment.

When the first car in Kennedy's motorcade, a white sedan, makes the sharp left turn from Houston Street onto Elm Street and excitement billows through the crowds, flutters of panic rise from the pit of my belly and claw up my throat. I

check my watch. 12.30pm.

Oh God.

The president's limousine turns onto Elm Street. JFK is waving to the crowds. I raise my camera to my face, look through the viewfinder and hone in on the stockade fence. Trying to maintain my aim – not easy with trembling hands – I arc my gaze around the camera so I can see the fence with my own eyes. I thumb the wind-on lever and push the shutter button, snapping a picture. Wind-on lever, shutter button. Wide-on lever, shutter button.

And there he is. The fedora-wearing shooter rises from behind the fence, and I detect the shadowy contour of a rifle. He takes aim.

Wind-on lever, shutter button.

Shots ring out.

The president's limousine goes past. I glance fleetingly at it. JFK is hunched over in his seat, leaning towards his wife, Jackie – he's been hit. My eyes dart back to the fence.

Bang.

The shooter's rifle flashes. My eyes, quick as the bullet that's slicing through the air, are on Kennedy.

Wish they hadn't been.

Seeing the bullet blow open the president's head – flecks of blood, bone and brain flying across the back of the limo – will be etched on my memory forever.

When my eyes are back on the fence, the shooter is already gone. My eyes pore over the entire length of the fence that is visible, searching for movement.

Wind-on lever, shutter button. It's now an automatic process. I'm not even aware I'm doing it.

The Kennedy limo hastens through the triple underpass, out of Dealey Plaza. There's a secret service agent on the trunk, trying to shield the president and his wife from further gunshots. Members of the crowd have dived for cover. I continue snapping pictures – though I'm not sure what of anymore.

The rest of the cars in the motorcade go by. After the second White House Press bus passes, some of the crowd – including several cops who've been accompanying the motorcade on motorcycles – scramble up the grassy knoll to search for the shooter. I join them, putting away my camera

in my handbag and crossing Elm Street, climbing the steps to the stockade fence. Along with others, I look over the arrowhead-shaped fence posts. Police are checking the cars in the parking lot, but the shooter is nowhere in sight.

Now what?!

It's as I go back down the grassy knoll onto Elm Street that I see a figure in a grey fedora walking behind the Bryan pergola, headed for the short Elm Street abutment that runs along the front of the Texas School Book Depository. There are loads of people around, plenty wearing fedoras, so he could be anyone. But something in my gut is telling me otherwise.

Walking east along Elm Street, I'm parallel to the man for a moment, before he walks away from the pergola and out of my sight. I carry on along Elm Street, walking towards the Depository, hoping to regain sight of him.

Reaching the corner of Elm and Houston Street, near the front entrance of the Depository, there he is. He's wearing a grey suit to match the fedora, carrying a long briefcase, and though his face is only visible from the side, I see the contour of spectacles. He's conversing with a man in dark trousers and a white t-shirt, a man whose face I've got to know extremely well over the last month.

Oswald.

Gotcha.

After a brief exchange, the pair diverge, Oswald heading along Elm Street, the briefcase man up Houston Street.

Fired with adrenaline, I pursue Briefcase Man along Houston Street. He crosses another parking lot onto Ross Avenue, which has a wide spread of buildings, plenty of cars and pedestrians and nowhere for me to accost him. Fortunately for me, he turns up a street of tightly clustered apartment buildings and then down a narrow alley between them – exactly the kind of claustrophobic space I've been waiting for, with only walls as witnesses.

I reach into my handbag and take out my firearm, capped with a silencer. I shoot him in the right calf.

What?

Briefcase Man gives a distinctly *female* groan, staggers to his knees and drops the briefcase, which hits the pavement with a crack and springs open.

Red-handed and then some. A rifle tumbles out.

By the time the assassin has turned on the ground, I'm standing over... her. Jesus. Briefcase Man is a woman. And a woman I know.

"You!" she says breathlessly to me, lips quivering, propping herself up against the wall and clutching her bleeding leg.

"Eunice Murray?"

"I – p-please! I did what he asked!" she splutters.

"Is that the gun that killed President Kennedy?"

"Y-yes!"

"And did you pull the trigger?"

"I-I – !"

I press the muzzle of my gun against Murray's forehead.
"Did you?"

"Yes!"

"Who are you working for?"

"What? You mean you're – you're not – ?"

I press the gun harder against her head and say in a gritted voice, "I won't ask again."

"D-Delfino!" she screams. "Mack Delfino. He's a – he's a banker in LA."

No bells are ringing. Is Mr Delfino one of our employees?

"Delfino's the 'he' you referred to when I met you in that bar?"

"Y-yes."

"So he instructed you to kill Marilyn Monroe as well?"

"M-me and a couple of others, yes." Her gasps for breath crack into sobs. "I – I needed the money."

"*Money?*"

"Yes. I had loans. So many loans, loans I couldn't pay. I was so stupid."

"But you were the housekeeper for the biggest star in Hollywood."

"Yeah. But Marilyn wasn't paying me enough to settle the loans. Not nearly enough. I had loan sharks chasing me. Threatening me. Threatening my children. Mack paid them off, but the condition was that I... that I be part of this. A plot to kill Marilyn and... and the president."

"So you just shot President Kennedy to pay off a loan?"

"I tried to back out. After Mack paid the loans, I tried to

reason with him, tried to convince him that surely there was another way. He got nasty too. Threatened my children just like the loan sharks did. I had nowhere to turn.”

“The police?”

“Mack Delfino’s a powerful man. Surely you’ve heard of his father, Jon Delfino. Probably the richest lawyer in LA, and he’s got half the LAPD on his payroll.”

Maybe Jon Delfino is connected to us? Still no bells are ringing. “Why did Mack Delfino want Monroe and Kennedy dead?”

“I don’t know. That’s the truth, I swear. He never said why.”

“Is that all you know?” My gun’ll perforate her skull if I press any harder. She winces with the pain.

“YES!”

I pull the gun away, her taut grimace loosening in relief.

“Get up,” I say, stepping back. “Take the gun and do whatever you were about to do. When you go to the hospital, tell them you were mugged at gunpoint or something. And never tell a living soul of your encounters with me. Is that understood?”

“Y-yes. Understood.” She labours to her feet, in between yelps of pain, picks up the gun and replaces it in the briefcase.

“Go. Get out of here.”

She limps down the alley and disappears behind the buildings.

I head back to my hotel. By now the news of the Dealey Plaza tragedy has spread through Downtown, furore swelling. Everyone on the streets is talking about it, but I zone them out. Even the voices in earshot are nothing but a jangling blur of sound.

Once I’m back at the hotel, I take some Prozac and lie on the bed for five minutes, just so I can breathe.

Eunice Murray was always suspected of being involved in the death of Marilyn Monroe.

But no one ever accused her of killing the president.

Composing myself, I dig out my chronopad, which gives me access to the internet of the future. I Google ‘Mack Delfino banker Los Angeles’.

Google brings up a news story about a young, staunchly

Catholic banker who worked in Downtown LA and, despite being Catholic, committed suicide in 1968, five years from now.

It seems that Mack Delfino was known for having an obsession with Jackie Kennedy, and for persistently sending her letters professing his love for her. His obsession soon spilled into his professional life. In 1961 he was fired by City National Bank, after continually missing deadlines and taking time off so he could attend Mrs Kennedy's public engagements. Friends believed he had a shrine to her in his apartment, a fact confirmed when police investigated his suicide.

He was found hanged in his home in Westchester, Los Angeles, on October 20th 1968 – the day Jackie Kennedy remarried. A note by the body read: *Jackie, I'll always love you.*

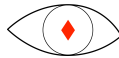
I can't quite take it all in.

But even though a picture is coming together, there are pieces missing, and I want to find them.

I book my flight back to LA – I leave tonight. I'm going to try and locate this Mack Delfino. I check in with Boone, but I don't tell her what I've learned. Not yet. I mainly just want to make sure I've not done anything to buggger up the timeline. (In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have shot Eunice Murray. Guess I was getting impatient, after weeks of tailing Oswald to little gain.) Luckily the timeline is intact.

And I'm not going to confront Delfino. History knows nothing of his connection to Kennedy and Monroe, which means I have to keep it that way.

I have a plan...



"Welcome back, Draper," Boone says to me at the start of our review meeting, after I arrive back in the present. "Are you well?"

"I'm well, ma'am," I lie.

"What's the lowdown?"

I give it to her – *nearly*. I'm certainly not going to give her the whole story.

"I can guess what the motive might be," she says, after I explain that Jackie Kennedy-obsessed nut Mack Delfino orchestrated JFK and Monroe's deaths.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "I guessed the same, but I wanted some proof. So I found out where he lived in LA and broke into his house while he was out. I found a scrapbook in a box under his bed. It couldn't have spelled out his motive clearer. Photos of Jackie Kennedy plastered across every page. Newspaper clippings about her, love poems he'd written to her, even drawings he'd done of her. And the last two pages had photos of President Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe with their faces scratched out. Bible passages about infidelity. And a headline, written in red, deliberately made to look like dripping blood, that read: *Jackie, I will avenge you.*"

"So Delfino was punishing Kennedy and Monroe for their affair. Because he was infatuated with Jackie."

"Sure looks like it."

"Did you find out what Delfino's connection is to us?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. That was the only piece of the puzzle I wasn't able to find." Okay, so that part *isn't* true.

"Then our little mystery shall remain unsolved."

"For now, yes. But perhaps JFK and Marilyn Monroe's deaths are actually nothing to do with us. There's still a lot we don't understand about Rachel Evans' abilities. Not every timeline abnormality she detects is necessarily our doing."

"Perhaps not."

I don't expect her to agree. I'm talking out of my arse.

See, what I deliberately leave out of my story is that I did some further research into Mack Delfino's background. I found out some more about his father, Jon Delfino – the "richest lawyer in LA" – as Eunice Murray described him. He has enough of a profile to have a Wikipedia page. The head section says: *Jon Delfino was an LA lawyer between the 1930s and the 1970s, most recognised for representing famous athletes and sports personalities.*

But it's the 'Personal Life' section that drew my attention: *In 1937, Jon Delfino met his wife Gillian by accident. He bumped into someone on the streets of Downtown LA, dropping a folder of case papers on the sidewalk. By the time he had picked up his papers and was on his way, he had missed the bus he normally took to his office. He caught a*

later bus and on it met Gillian. They dated briefly, married six months later and had their first child, Mack, the following year.

When I looked again at the black and white photo of him on his Wiki page, I was hit with a twist of dread that I suspect won't ever leave me.

I remembered him.

I'd only just arrived in 1937. I was disoriented from the time travel. I hadn't yet realised that I'd accidentally gone back to the wrong time.

The 'someone' Jon Delfino bumped into – the one who made him drop his papers and miss his bus – was me.

PAUL

November 9th 1966

Sixty-five. Seventy. Seventy-five. Alyson Ramirez's foot hit the floor and her 1964 Ford Cortina screamed, straining for speeds it wasn't used to. She felt the deep shudder that rose from the core of the car grind against her foot, palms and fingers through the accelerator and steering wheel.

But she had to push this feeble bucket of bolts to its limits, otherwise she'd never keep up.

A shrill ringing cut into the Cortina's reverberant roar.

"Not now!"

She had to answer. Being dead was the only acceptable excuse for not answering her boss's call. Twitching with the usual flutter of fear, she pressed the call answer button on her hands-free kit.

"Have you found her?" Her boss's half distorted voice hissed and crackled from the car's 1960s speakers.

Ramirez swallowed, eyes locked on Nina O'Brien's blue Alfa Romeo Spider up ahead. "Yes. I'm pursuing her now."

"Be careful. Remember, the fact that Nina has altered the timeline means that any changes you make now will be permanent. If you fuck up, we can't send you back to undo it. So whatever you do, don't do anything to make things worse."

Ramirez saw Nina's car surge round a blind corner. "Understood, sir. I'll call you when –"

It all happened before Ramirez's mind could register it. At three times the speed limit, she turned round the same blind corner, half on the other side of the road. Being nearly 5am, her brain had adjusted to the solitude of suburban West London's roads, so she didn't expect to meet the dazzle of oncoming headlights.

Tyres howling, the other car swerved. So did Ramirez. A reflex by both. Head-on collision avoided, the rear of the other car still clipped the front of her Cortina, the crash and squeal of metal assaulting her ears.

Foot on the brake, Ramirez came to an abrupt stop. She glimpsed the other car in her rear-view mirror. Then it was gone. Spinning in her seat, she realised from the continuous thumping, rattling and crunching that it had careened off the road and was lurching down the tree-strewn embankment.

Smash.

All the noise stopped. Ramirez guessed that a tree had broken its descent.

Her stomach turned. Her boss's words from a moment ago were in her ears, repeating over and over. *Don't do anything to make things worse.*

Ramirez flew out of the car and dived across the road to the embankment.

Oh God – what have I done?

The other car was a white Austin Healey, its one operational headlight spreading light over the scene in the embankment. Most of the front was crushed against a thick oak tree with low sprawling branches, some of which had punched through the car.

A woman in a blue dress with bloodied legs was floundering towards the car from a little further up the embankment. It looked like she'd been tossed from the car, or had jumped out as it careered towards the oak tree.

"Ma'am!" hollered Ramirez, hurtling down the bank towards her. "Stop! Get away from the car!"

The woman stopped and faced Ramirez. Her blue dress was ripped and streaked with blood. Her brown locks were in disarray, rain-wet and tangled. Her face, too, was smeared with what looked like a mix of blood, tears, mud and purple mascara.

"W-we have to help him!" the woman screamed.

"Ma'am, what's your name?"

"Rita. R-Rita Northam."

Rita Northam, Rita Northam. Ramirez didn't know that name. Couldn't be important.

Oh, who was she kidding? Rita Northam might be the most important woman in the world!

"Okay, Rita," said Ramirez gently. "You're hurt and this car could explode at any moment. I'll go. You head up the embankment and get to a safe distance."

Rita's eyes darted up and down Ramirez's black suit. "Are you the police?"

"Of sorts."

Sobbing, Rita nodded, murmured, "O-okay," and began climbing towards the road.

Ramirez clambered over rocks, bushes and uneven, muddy

ground to reach the car. Tiny shards of shattered windscreen flecked the mud all around it and shone like silver coins.

Her stomach turned when she saw the carnage inside the car. Leather seats, formerly white, now pink with smeared blood. Tree branches inside the car, sprayed red and dripping blood. Blood splashes all over the dashboard and glove compartment. Blood, blood, blood. It was like someone had exploded.

As it happened, someone almost had. She retched when she saw the driver's body, head missing, a thick branch mashed against the bloody, sinewy remnants of his neck.

Ramirez glanced around, hand over mouth. In the faint glow from the headlight, she saw the head. There was a large wound to the right side, probably from the impact with the branch, but the facial features were still intact, if twisted in an awkward grimace.

"Shit," she whispered, recognising the face immediately. "Shit, shit, shit."

Ramirez hurtled back up the embankment, dashing past Rita, who was sitting crying in the foetal position. She heard Rita call, "Is he okay? Is he alive?" She ignored her and leapt inside her car.

Her phone call still active, her boss's voice whirled from the speakers as she got in, "Ramirez, what happened? Ramirez? Are you there?"

Ramirez released an inaudible sigh. That flutter of fear she felt when talking to her boss was gone. Yes, she'd face her boss's wrath over this. Yes, she'd lose her job. None of it mattered.

"Sir, we have a problem," she murmured.

"Ramirez – I told you I can't send you back to undo anything. What the hell have you done?"

She swallowed hard. She was just going to have to come out and say it.

"I think I've just killed Paul McCartney."

January 3rd 2031

Bailey pulled into the gravel driveway of her grandfather's Buckinghamshire mansion and parked. From her car she

gazed at the three storeys of redbrick gable walls, bay windows and dressed granite quoins – a lavish picture of her grandfather's wealth. Lessening the picture was the veil of dirt, bird muck and Sahara sand that covered her windscreen. No rain for two weeks, and she kept forgetting to fill up her screen wash.

She smiled. Her grandfather made fun of her for only washing her car once every three years. He'd leave little messages in the dirt.

That is, he used to. He used to cook her bacon sandwiches every time she visited too. Always fried, never grilled. Always smoked. The unhealthier the better.

He used to do that. Before he got so old. Before cancer began its recurring and relentless assault on his body.

Bailey fought a tear, sighed deeply, willed the knot in her stomach to loosen, and got out of the car.

Looking back at her brown, formerly green Mazda Dimension, she smiled again, remembering a note her grandfather once left on her bonnet: *I'll play nothing but the Frog Song till you clean me.*

Nancy, Bailey's step-grandmother, greeted her at the door. "Do come in, my love. He's been looking forward to your visit."

Bailey made her way to her grandfather's bedroom. There he was, sitting up in bed, watching the news. Sinking eyes, thinning hair, pale, leathery skin clinging to every point and curve of the bones in his face. Now just a wisp of the former Beatle and rock legend Paul McCartney. Yet his eyes were wide and alert, and when he saw Bailey, some pink glowed on his cheeks. Very, very old – yes. But you wouldn't have guessed that his doctor had given him just days to live.

"Bailey, my darling," he said. His voice was breathy, strained. "Come closer. We must talk."

Bailey kissed her grandfather's head and pulled up a chair next to his bed. "How are you, Grandpa?"

"No time for that. Where's your phone? I need you to record everything I say."

"Okay..." Bailey removed her phone from her pocket, opened the dictation app and pressed record, and set it down on her grandfather's bedside table. "What's this about, Grandpa?"

"Bailey, I need you to use the information I'm about to give you. Use it to expose them."

"Grandpa, you're not making any sense."

"Bailey, decades before you were born, in 1966, there was a horrific car accident. A white Austin Healey with a man and woman inside collided with another and crashed into a tree. The man was decapitated."

Bailey threw her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God," she mumbled through slightly parted fingers. "Who was he?"

"Paul McCartney."

Bailey and her grandfather stared at each other for a moment. Though his face was drawn and tired, his eyes were alive and vehement, like they belonged to someone else – a person who wasn't dying.

Bailey said gently, caressing his withered hand, "No, Grandpa. *You're* Paul McCartney."

"Honest to God, Bailey, I'm not," he insisted, still with the same poised expression.

Bailey humoured him. "Alright... Then who are you, Grandpa?"

"My name is William Campbell Shears. I was a Paul McCartney lookalike. Used to go to parties and pretend to be him at the height of the Beatles' fame."

Bailey shook her head. "Is this a joke?"

"No. I promise you. No joke."

"Grandpa, I think you're confused –"

"I'm not. A man and a woman came to see me, introduced themselves as Blake and Maxwell. It was November 1966. They told me Paul McCartney had been killed and that they would make me rich if I pretended to be him. Paul was my idol, I was devastated that he was gone. If there was anything I could do to keep his legacy alive, I was prepared to do it."

Bailey swallowed. "Okay. So you... became him?"

"Yes. I was young. Young and stupid and easily led. I didn't know what I was getting into. They made me have like a dozen cosmetic surgeries to make me look even more like Paul and I just went along with it."

Sighing, Bailey stood up. "Grandpa, I'm going to go and get Nancy."

"No. There isn't much time. I could be dead tomorrow."

"But Grandpa –"

“Bailey, please. You’ve heard of the ‘Paul is dead’ conspiracy theory, right? The one that circulated at the end of the 60s?”

Bailey sat back down. “Yes.”

“It’s real.”

Bailey frowned.

“After Blake and Maxwell recruited me, they introduced me to the others. George, John, Ringo.” Her grandfather’s voice seemed to grow coarser, more broken, as he spoke. It was difficult to imagine he was once a great singer.

“We talked. They told me Paul was recording with them at Abbey Road Studios on the night of the crash. He and John had an argument and Paul stormed out. I still remember how cut up John was about it.”

He paused for a moment. Bailey could see the pain in his eyes as he mentioned John.

“Blake and Maxwell had been pretty vague with the details so George, John and Ringo did some investigating of their own. There were local reports about a car crash involving a celebrity and some woman in a blue dress. They did some digging, found out this woman’s name. Rita Northam. They were able to track her down. She was a meter maid – what we called a female traffic warden in those days. She was reluctant to talk to them at first, said she’d been threatened. But she came around, realised that they deserved to know the truth about their friend. Apparently, on his way home from the studio, Paul saw her walking by the side of the road and offered her a lift. Minutes later their car collided with another and crashed. She blamed herself, wondered if she’d distracted Paul from the road.”

“Are you two alright in here?” said Nancy from the bedroom doorway.

Her grandfather’s grave face loosened as he shifted his gaze to Nancy. His eyebrows bobbed and a smile formed on his thin, blue-grey lips. “Yes, my darling. Fine.”

“Would either of you like tea? Bailey, you look chilly.”

“No, thank you,” her grandfather answered for her. “We won’t be long.”

When Nancy turned and started in the direction of the staircase, her grandfather whispered, his grim frown reformed, “Go and close the door.”

Bailey did as asked, before returning to her chair by his bed.

"I don't want her to find out like this," he said. "I will tell her. But I want to make sure it's all properly recorded first."

"Grandpa, I really think –"

This time he simply ignored her. "Blake and Maxwell made us all promise to say nothing. They threatened our families, our friends. We had no choice but to agree to their terms. But John never took that too well. He felt so guilty about what had happened and he hated that we were lying to the fans. So he started inserting 'clues' into our records. I think it was his way of dealing with it. His way of letting the fans know the truth without breaking the rules."

"I've heard about the clues. You're saying they were real?"

"Some of them, yes. Like that picture of the four of us on the *Abbey Road* cover that was like a funeral procession, with me as the corpse. And the back cover, the girl in the blue dress – 'Lovely Rita' – as we called her in the song. John wrote lyrics about Paul's death and put secret messages into the songs that you could only hear if you played them backwards. Like at the end of *I'm So Tired*, you can hear 'Paul is a dead man, miss him, miss him, miss him!' when you play it backwards. The clues worked. Rumours started to spread that Paul had died."

"And then what?"

"Blake and Maxwell realised what we were doing and made us stop. The conspiracy theories died down. We heard nothing more of it. Until..."

He reached towards his bedside table, pulling open the top drawer and lifting out an envelope, his face creasing with pain as he did so.

"Here. Read it."

He handed the envelope to Bailey. She scanned it briefly. It was addressed to Paul McCartney at an address she'd never heard of. Not a surprise. Her grandfather had lived in a lot of places.

She slipped the letter out of the envelope and read it:

Dear Paul

I'm sorry but I've had enough. I know we've all been living with this for a long time, but it's wrong. I will not continue to defile the memory of our friend - the real Paul McCartney - any longer. It's been coming between me and Yoko. She's been pleading with me for years to tell the truth, and she's right.

I've decided to put an end to this. It's time everyone knew the truth. Not through guessing silly clues in our albums. It's time people heard the full story of the night Paul died and how we helped cover it up. I've been speaking to Rita. It's been eating her alive for years too. We're going to do it together. I've arranged for us to have a meeting with a journalist next week.

Please understand that I don't blame you for any of this. I know there have been times when I made you feel like I did and I'm sorry for that. You were just a fan who wanted to help. You didn't know what you were letting yourself in for.

Let's talk soon.

Your friend,
John.

When Bailey looked up, a single tear was teetering on the brim of her grandfather's lower left eyelid. When he blinked, the tear fell, rolling down his craggy cheek and into the corner of his mouth.

"There was no meeting with any journalist," her grandfather said dismally. "I got that letter two days before John was shot dead outside the Dakota in New York."

"You think they got to him?"

"No doubt in my mind. And they got to Rita too. She went missing shortly after John's death. I tried contacting her." Bailey could see that he was starting to break into sobs. "I went to see

her. There – there was evidence of a break-in, but – ”

A sudden clink and heavy thud startled the both of them. Her grandfather flinched. Bailey jerked towards the sound. A vase of flowers, still intact, rolled on its side on the carpet, its water spilled in a growing pool around the rim and starting to seep into the pile.

Evidently, from the continued flailing of the curtains around the window sill where the vase had stood, a sharp draught through the partly open window was responsible. It was becoming increasingly grey and storm-like outside. Finally some rain was on the way.

Fitting.

Bailey lurched from her chair to pick up the vase and place it back on the window sill, closing the window as she did so. “I’ll go and get something to clean this up,” she said.

“No, it’s only water. We need to finish this.” Her grandfather’s breathing had quickened and each word fell off the edge of a breath. A start like that was the last thing his frail, failing body needed.

Bailey sat back down.

“Where was I?” he asked.

“Er – you were saying – you think they got to Carolyn – sorry, *Rita*.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. His thick, unkempt, grey eyebrows dipped low over his eyes.

“Carolyn? Where did you get Carolyn from?”

“Sorry – slip of the tongue.”

“No, but... Carolyn *was* her first name. She went by the name Rita, but that was actually her middle name. How could you know that?”

“Like I said, Grandpa. Slip of the tongue.”

He bent his emaciated body stiffly and awkwardly towards the bedside table, leaning over Bailey’s phone.

“The microphone’s on mute. Why aren’t you recording?”

Bailey’s heart thumped. A dry swallow lodged in her throat. “Oh, Grandpa. I’m so sorry.”

His face, drawn into a pointed frown, unfurled into a wide-eyed look of horror. “Oh my God...”

As he opened his mouth to cry out for Nancy, Bailey sprang forwards, swiped a pillow from next to him and plunged it over his face, forcing his head against the bed. She

pressed down with both hands, till she could feel all the bones in his face. His arms flailed. His skeletal hands grasped her forearms in a futile attempt to pull her off, but his upper body strength was negligible. It was no more difficult than restraining a child.

When he stopped squirming and his arms fell limply at his sides, Bailey lifted the pillow and placed it back where it was. She fixed his dead stare, lowering his eyelids and closing his mouth so he looked asleep. Then she kissed his forehead, whispered, "I'm sorry," grabbed her phone and left the room.

"Is he alright?" said Nancy, sitting with a cup of tea in the kitchen as Bailey entered to say goodbye.

"He fell asleep while he was talking to me," said Bailey. "Bless him."

Nancy uttered a faint gasp. "He isn't – ? You – you checked he was – ?"

"He was still breathing when I left, yes. I'd leave him for a bit – let him rest. He seemed to get so exhausted just talking to me for a few minutes. But when he wakes up, tell him I said goodbye. And that I love him."

"I will."

Bailey departed. A fierce squall of rain-filled wind pelted her face and whipped her hair as she dashed towards the car. Once inside, she took out her phone and called her boss.

"What happened?" he asked.

"It was as you suspected, sir."

"A deathbed confession?"

"Yes."

"Mmm. I trust you sorted it? After keeping history more or less intact all these years, it would be shame if it all fell apart now."

"Yes, sir. He – " She felt a small tremor of emotion spiral up her throat. She swallowed, forcing it back down. "He won't be telling anyone else."

RACHEL CAN STILL SEE

Nina O'Brien

A knock at the door stops me – *delays* me – from swallowing all the pills at once and washing them through my digestive tract with cheap, vinegary Merlot. I sigh and rise to answer it.

Bill. Friend-cum-foe, Bill. I've been waiting for him to show up. He was my closest friend and colleague before I 'went rogue', as they keep describing it.

"Hi, Nina," Bill says, his lips pressed flat and straight in that sympathetic look that always comes across as condescending.

"Hi, Bill," I reply. I gesture with my glass of wine. "Merlot?"

"Better not. I'm driving. Wouldn't say no to a cup of coffee though."

"Sure. Come in."

The treacherous bastard who sold me out to the bosses steps inside my glorified prison cell. A 'safe house' they call it. Normally safe houses are to protect people from threats in the outside world. This safe house is to protect the outside world from me. I'm the threat. Little, unpredictable old me.

"You'll have to have it black," I say. "They haven't given me any milk in days."

"That's fine," says Bill, finding a seat on the cold, grey leather sofa in the cold, grey, cramped kitchen/living room as I switch on the kettle and prepare a mug. "I'm sorry, I'll arrange for some to be brought to you."

"If it's not too much trouble." I mean to say it sarcastically, but Bill's oblivious. No change there.

"How have you been?" he asks.

What an idiot.

"Oh, I've been wonderful. I have this itchy ankle monitor that sounds an alarm if I go a centimetre beyond these walls. I have security guards watching the house day and night, ready to shoot me if I do a runner. I spend my time gorging through a freezer of out-of-date ready meals, polishing off dusty bottles of *nearly* undrinkable Merlot and watching Freeview. Oh, and I've been prescribed a bunch of tranquilisers and antidepressants to 'help me get my shit together' while I wait for the bosses to decide what they're going to do with me. You know what, Bill? I'm having the

time of my life.”

His cheeks go pink and he swallows with embarrassment. This time he catches my sarcasm, but I’m hardly being subtle about it.

“I’m sorry, Nina,” he says, sheepish. “I know this is hard.”

“You don’t know shit.”

He shakes his head. “Why did you do it?”

“I used to think so much more of you. But you’re a puppet like all the others.”

“I’m not. I just believe in what we’re doing.”

“Can you not see that they’re changing time to suit their own ends?”

“You know why they’re changing time. They’re doing it for everyone.”

“Bullshit.”

Bill sighs. “You’ve lost your way, Nina. I get that. But we need you and you need us.”

“They sent you here to talk some sense into me, did they?”

“I’m your friend. I’m just here to talk.”

“You were never my friend, Bill. I see that now.”

The Meeting

“Meera, wonderful to see you. Come in. Please, take a seat.”

Miss Morgan tore into another twenty-pack of Marlboro Red cigarettes as Meera Yasir – petite, demure, softly spoken and one of their most powerful investors – stepped into her office, sporting a stylish tartan jacket over a deep purple skirt suit. *Nice.*

“Can I get you something?” Miss Morgan asked as Meera seated herself across from her. “Coffee? Tea? Vodka? Bourbon?”

“Tea, please. Thank you,” said Meera quietly. “Splash of milk, one sugar.”

Miss Morgan called through to her PA and repeated Meera’s order. She thumbed her silver Zippo lighter into life and muttered around the stub of her cigarette, “So, Meera, what can I do you for?”

Meera leaned forwards in her chair and entwined her hands on the desk in front of her. “Some of the shareholders,

including myself, have concerns.”

Miss Morgan took a deep drag, blew a ring of smoke in Meera’s direction and made her cough slightly – her little lungs were probably quite sensitive. She too placed her hands together on the desk, the cigarette dangling lightly from her fingertips. “Concerns?”

“Yes.” She had a trace of a frown, a chastisement for smoking that Miss Morgan ignored. They were in *her* office.

“We understand there have been some problems recently with one of your employees,” said Meera. “We gather she’s created a... a rather sensitive security issue.”

“Ah. You mean Nina O’Brien?”

“Correct. What can you tell me?”

She took another drag. Meera turned her face away as she blew out. “There was a problem with Miss O’Brien, yes. There is no longer.”

Enough

“Come on, Nina,” Bill says. “You’re one of us.”

Jesus. Is he actually serious? “One of you?” I say. “Bill, I was kidnapped and given two choices: fake my death and become an asset of the company, or die for real. In other words, no choice at all. My poor mum – if she’s still alive – has spent the last ten years thinking I was killed in a hit-and-run after running away from the hospital I was in. I’ve been poked, prodded, hypnotised, scanned and cut open so you lot can see how much you’re fucking up the timeline with your reckless visits to the past. So don’t give me that bollocks. At no point was I ever ‘one of you’.”

“You were given your own assignments. You had responsibilities. A more-than-generous salary,” Bill continues, effectively ignoring what I’ve just said. “I thought you enjoyed it. We... we had a laugh, you and me. And we did some good work.”

“I was biding my time. You need to start questioning what’s going on around you, Bill. What they’re doing isn’t right. Surely you know that. In your heart, you know that.”

“You’re a hypocrite, Nina. What you did in the 60s had a devastating effect on the timeline.”

“I was trying to stop them.”

“Well you failed. And your actions cost a life. A life that wasn’t meant to be lost.”

“That accident wasn’t my fault!”

“Technically it was. They were trying to undo what you’d done to the timeline. It took a lot of resources to put everything right.”

“A good argument for why time travel shouldn’t exist in the first place.”

The kettle boils and clicks off. I’m now wondering if this plan I’ve been hatching while Bill and I have been talking is going to work. If it doesn’t, I’m going to get myself killed. Bill’s pretty agile – I’ve seen him in a fight before.

Screw it. I’m pretty agile myself. I can take the fucker.

I pour the water into the mug, give it a quick stir and bring it to Bill, who’s still seated on the sofa.

Then I hurl the boiling coffee into his face.

Bill screams, throws his hands up to his face, jumps to his feet and lunges at me. I swing a punch. My fist connects with his cheekbone and he lurches backwards. While he’s dazed, I grab his head, pull it down and slam my knee into his jaw.

Bill crumbles to the floor, moaning, clutching his scalded face.

I reach beneath his jacket, find his disruptor holstered to his belt and yank it out. I search his pockets and find his phone and the keys to his Lexus.

“Nina, stop...” Bill murmurs. “You won’t get away...”

“Fuck you, Bill,” I say. “And my name isn’t Nina. It’s Rachel Evans.”

The Problem

Miss Morgan’s PA brought in Meera’s coffee. Meera took a sip and said, in those quiet, delicate tones you could listen to all day, “Perhaps you could explain to me what happened.”

“Of course,” said Miss Morgan, tapping her cigarette on the ashtray on her desk. “How much do you know about Nina O’Brien?”

“I know that she used to be Rachel Evans. I know that she was brought in because she could somehow remember events

from the original timeline, prior to our interventions, thereby – in some cases – foreseeing changes we were yet to make.”

“Indeed. Miss Evans agreed to work with us, and began proving rather useful. Her revelations helped us identify a number of unforeseen incursions. We’ve come to rely on her insights as...” She smiled. “...Well, we like to think of it as time travel quality control.”

“What went wrong?”

“She earned our trust and professed to believe in our cause, so I gave her a job. That’s when she became Nina O’Brien. But was preparing to betray us the whole time. During a mission in 1966, she went rogue and assassinated some of our key people, completely derailing history. We sent a traveller back to stop her but there was an accident. Since we were already there to undo Rachel’s changes, we couldn’t then go back and undo the accident. It would’ve caused a temporal earthquake. So the accident became a permanent change to the timeline.”

“What happened?”

“A car crash. A car crash that killed Paul McCartney.”

“*The* Paul McCartney?”

“The very same. As you can imagine, that made things worse. And since we couldn’t undo the crash, we had to resort to more rudimentary means to get history back on track.”

“What did you do?”

“Replaced him with a lookalike.”

Meera raised both eyebrows. “Wow. Well, I have to hand it to you. That lookalike was a damn good musician.”

Miss Morgan smiled.

“Where is Rachel now?” said Meera.

“She’s secure.”

“How secure?”

Miss Morgan took one last drag from her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. She stood and buttoned her suit jacket. “Come, Meera. Let me show you around the Time Travel Department.”

“I’ve seen it before.”

“Not for a while. We’ve made some changes. And there’s something in particular I’d like to show you.”

Escape

I check the clock. 8.37pm. Bill is writhing on the floor in pain as I adjust the settings on his disruptor.

Okay, feeling pangs of guilt now. He's really hurt and he'll probably have scarring. And he's not evil. Just... misguided. He believes in what they're doing. He's brainwashed.

I decide to call him an ambulance soon after I leave. Right now I need to focus on getting out. Settings adjusted, I produce a narrow, concentrated beam to sever the lock and the mechanism in my ankle monitor. I unclip it, rub my sore ankle and re-adjust the disruptor to *blast* mode – low force. I don't want to kill anyone.

"I'm sorry, Bill," I say. "I'll get help, I promise."

I head upstairs to the bedroom. I keep the lights off. I don't want the two guards outside to see me. But I get close enough to the bedroom window to see them, sitting watching the house from their Mercedes.

Not too close. The streetlamps might trace my shape in the darkness.

They seem oblivious. The driver's eating a sandwich.

I raise and straighten my arms to point through the window.

I fire.

A sharp spear of green light pierces through the window, which shatters. It flies across the street, smashes the windscreen of the Mercedes and blasts the driver's chest. He flops back against his seat.

I shift aim but his colleague moves quickly, swinging open his door and diving out. He stays low, shielding himself behind the car, and I can no longer see him.

I wait. I don't want to alert him to my position by shooting again.

He stays hidden.

A minute passes. The longest minute ever. I keep my gun and eyes homed in on the car, cognisant of the remotest flicker of movement.

Then my target grows impatient.

He must've seen the broken bedroom window, because he stands and fires in my direction.

I fire simultaneously.

His beam surges through the window, misses and blasts the wardrobe behind me.

My beam doesn't miss.

Guard Number Two is down.

A breath of relief escapes my lips. I can feel my heartbeat in my toes, my fingers, everywhere. My armpits are wet.

The guards won't be out cold for long. I don't have much time.

I race downstairs. Bill has passed out.

I hope to God he isn't dead. He really was my friend. Once.

I'll call him an ambulance in the car. He'll be fine. Yeah, he'll be fine.

I bolt outside, unlock and dive inside Bill's Lexus on the driveway. I'm not sure exactly where I am, but I enter Mum's address into the sat-nav, and pray she's still living there.

I'm an hour and six minutes away.

What if they find me in that time?

Whatever. I have to take the risk. No choice. I'd rather die than spend one more minute as their prisoner.

I drive through a labyrinth of innocuous residential roads. There's a turn every few seconds – the American sat-nav lady literally doesn't shut up.

I use Bill's phone to call an ambulance to the safe house, which takes some weight off my conscience.

I try and relax.

I'm free.

It's over.

Finally I come to a main road. There's a succession of roundabouts and I end up on the M3 motorway – now I know where I am.

I know the road home like the back of my hand – still – even after ten years. I keep the sat-nav on anyway. The American lady's instructions are soothing, and I like the way she calls all the roundabouts 'traffic circles'.

She's bang on, too. An hour and six minutes after leaving the safe house, I pull into Acacia Avenue and Mum's house is straight ahead. Same draughty sash windows, same red front door.

I swallow. Hard.

There's a light on in the kitchen. I can see movement through the same pale green net curtain that Mum loved and I

thought was horrendous. A human-shaped shadow.

It must be Mum.

No one else would've kept that curtain.

I get out of the car and approach the house. My heartbeat is racing again and my stomach's doing backflips. It's late October, gone ten at night, and I can see my breath. Yet the rest of my body is reacting as though it's noon on a July day in the midst of a heatwave.

Please be Mum.

I knock on the door, hold my breath.

A moment later, footsteps. The latch jangles. The door opens.

A rush comes over me. I'm lightheaded and my knees shake. I'm about to fall.

But it's a good feeling. Warm, freeing.

It's Mum.

She's in her dressing gown. Her hair is greyer, but not totally. Her face is a bit older, bags under her eyes, more lines on her cheeks and round her mouth. But she's still as beautiful as I remember.

"Hi Mum."

The only thing I can say, and even that barely comes out.

She looks at me, lips parted slightly, eyes flickering, trying to register what's in front of them. Then, as realisation hits, she shudders, stumbles forwards, and her mouth falls open, imparting a sound that's half sigh, half cry. She claps her hand over it.

I take her in my arms, hold her as she crumbles and releases ten years of pain, grief and hope into my shoulder, and cry with her.

How I've missed her cuddles.

When we finally part, she asks in a voice broken by sobs, "H-how can you be here? Is this another dream? Are you... are you in my head?"

"I'm here, Mum," I say, wiping my tears with my sleeve. "I'm really here. And I'll explain everything. But right now I have something really important to ask."

"A-anything, my darling. Anything."

I smile. "Please can I have some homemade hot chocolate with mini marshmallows?"

The Solution

After giving Meera a tour of the Time Travel Department, explaining the recent systems changes and having the Department Manager give her a brief report on the latest missions, Miss Morgan led her inside a room containing a large machine.

She watched as Meera circled the machine, her eyes poring over its proportions, examining its coils, conduits, manifolds and four columns of pale, roiling liquid, and trying to make sense of the data on its various integrated screens.

“We call it the Augur,” said Miss Morgan. “We use it to monitor time and track incursions. Changes that have been made. Changes that *will* be made.”

“Remarkable,” said Meera. “How does it work?”

“The Augur is a novel blend of technological and biological components.”

“Biological?”

“Yes. Specifically, Rachel Evans.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Rachel Evans’ brain is the biological core of the Augur. We decided she was a liability we could no longer afford, but we couldn’t lose her ability. Our scientists and engineers were able to extract Rachel’s medial temporal lobe, fuse it with cybernetic components, and house it inside a central processing unit. This allows us to transform her ability to see changes to the timeline into data. We actually get more detailed and accurate data than we did before. But we didn’t try it till now because we didn’t want to risk damaging her ability. When Rachel went rogue, she didn’t leave us much of a choice.”

Meera stared harder at the pale fluid in the cylinders, twiddling the top button of her jacket. “How do you maintain her brain functions?”

“By keeping her synapses stimulated. We transmit a virtual reality simulation into her mind and replay it over and over. Rachel experiences a scenario wherein she overpowers a colleague, takes down two guards, escapes the safe house we’ve confined her in and tearfully reunites with her mother.”

As she said it, she felt a pinch of guilt and a wisp of

melancholy over how things with Rachel Evans had turned out.

But she quickly reminded herself of the importance of why they were doing this, and the guilt and melancholy were gone.

Nina O'Brien

A knock at the door stops me – *delays* me – from swallowing all the pills at once and washing them through my digestive tract with cheap, vinegary Merlot. I sigh and rise to answer it.

OPERATION LOCK MESS

August 14th 2164

Paisley knew when he woke up that it was going to be a bad day. He was already late getting refreshments to the board meeting, forgetting that the CEO, Lynette Priestly, had asked for non-synthesised veneef. Veneef, the meat from a dow – a genetically engineered deer/cow hybrid – was a delicacy and it was notoriously difficult for synthesisers to get the taste right. Paisley didn't leave himself enough time to make thirteen veneef sandwiches the old-fashioned way, and now, halfway to the boardroom and getting a whiff of something fruity, he'd realised that all his drinks were wrong. He'd just absently loaded them all onto the refreshment trolley with the sandwiches, biscuits and cream slices without checking. Lifting several of the cups to his nose, he determined that the synthesiser he'd asked to dispense nine coffees and four teas had given him thirteen cups of hot cherryade. The damned beverage files were corrupted again.

Silently scolding himself for rushing, Paisley walked back to the kitchens with the trolley to relay the drinks orders to a different synthesiser. Then he began his journey to the boardroom again.

"Finally," said a frowning Miss Priestly as he entered. "The meeting's nearly over."

Embarrassment tingled all over his face. "My apologies, ma'am."

"That had better be non-synthesised veneef. I'll know if it's not."

"It is, ma'am."

"Good. I will speak to you about this matter later."

He couldn't wait.

Miss Priestly continued addressing the directors, "I understand the costs implications here, but nobody wants a starship with a temperamental gravity system."

Paisley finished laying out the refreshments on the conference table and distributing the coffees and teas to each director.

Then, as he started out of the room with the trolley, he felt dizzy and doubled over, clutching the frame of the trolley to stop from falling. The directors' voices were a thick rumble, just indistinct noise like he was underwater.

He took a deep breath, shut his eyes. The dizziness subsided gradually and he straightened, opening his eyes again.

The board of directors, mid-conversation a second ago, were pin-drop silent. Perhaps they'd all felt that...

Paisley turned round. "Huh?"

The only person in the boardroom was him. The refreshments were still laid out on the table, and untouched cups of tea and coffee marked empty chairs.

They couldn't have left the room. Paisley was standing in front of the only door.

He walked over to the window and stared out across the Loch Ness cityscape.

Everything appeared normal, at first. Shuttles zipped through the airways. The Skytrain passed overhead. In the walkways below, people went about their business. Most people, anyway. Paisley noticed a few looking disoriented. One man had stopped outside the Royal Bank of Scotland – Loch Ness's tallest skyscraper – and was clutching his forehead. A woman in front of the Loch Ness Memorial – a scale model of what Loch Ness used to look like before it was drained and became a city – was glancing around as though she'd lost someone.

Paisley sat down at the empty conference table, tucked into a veneef sandwich and called reception to tell them what had happened.

The next day, thirty-seven people in Central Loch Ness were reported missing.

February 21st 2097

"Loch Ness used to be the largest lake in Scotland by volume, and contained more fresh water than all the lakes in Wales and England combined," explained Silas to a throng of tourists, gathered at the centre of what used to be the watery depths of Loch Ness.

The group had taken shuttles to the bottom of the dried-up, empty loch, over a hundred metres below what would've been the surface. Surrounding them now were steep, rocky, vegetation-flecked inclines, capped by the green hills and

sprawling forests that had overlooked Loch Ness, virtually unchanged, for thousands of years.

“Many of you probably want to know why Loch Ness is now dried up,” said Silas. “Well, the truth of what happened still eludes us, but a number of conspiracy theories have sprung up to fill the gaps, which I’ll tell you about later. All that’s publicly known is that something very strange happened to the water in Loch Ness more than twenty years ago. Nobody knows why or how, but the water became highly toxic, highly poisonous. A number of swimmers suffered fits and blood clots, and all of the resident fish species died or suffered bizarre mutations. Since Loch Ness was one of the primary water supplies for Inverness, whatever was in the water managed to get past the treatment process and kill a lot of people in the city before anyone realised what was going on.”

Silas’s audience was silent and captivated, their lips apart in horror. In part it was probably down to Silas’s delivery – he loved mysteries, particularly unnerving ones, so always told them with the enthusiasm of a man telling a ghost story around a campfire. It was the thing he enjoyed most about being a tour guide.

“Of course, whatever happened to the water twenty years ago is only one short chapter of a much longer story. For centuries Loch Ness has been plagued by ghosts, unexplained disappearances and monster sightings...”

“You mean the Loch Ness Monster?” said one of the tourists, a Liverpudlian woman. “People don’t still believe in that, do they?”

Silas grinned. “Funny you mention that. There haven’t been any Loch Ness Monster sightings for a very long time. But as you know, developers are in the process of turning this vast, empty space into a new city. Foundations for skyscrapers are being laid at the northern end of Loch Ness as we speak, and rumour has it that construction workers have excavated the remains of a creature that could be the Loch Ness Monster...”

Muffled gasps and murmurs billowed through the group.

“But ssshhh.” Silas winked. “I didn’t tell you that. Nothing’s been made pub – ”

A wave of dizziness hit him, cut his sentence short. Pins

and needles biting through his limbs, Silas felt himself leaning, about to fall. Looking up, everything – the tourists, the ground, the surrounding cliffs, the sky – were all absorbed inside a dense, white, blurry fog.

Gradually the fog lifted, the pins and needles scattered and blood rushed back to Silas's head. He straightened and noticed that his audience looked disoriented and were clutching their heads. Some were doubled over, others on their knees. Slowly they regained themselves, lowering their hands and standing.

It wasn't just him. All of them felt that.

"Oh my God," said one of the tourists, a Japanese woman, standing close to Silas. Staring at something on the ground, she stepped away.

"Look!" a man behind her said, eyes on the ground in a different spot.

The tourists dispersed, watching their footing as they went. Silas looked down and saw exactly what it was they were avoiding stepping on.

Fish.

Live fish, scattered everywhere. Silas turned on the spot, looking around. All over the ground for more than a thousand metres in every direction were different species of fish, flapping, shaking and jumping. All of them in unison made it look like the ground itself was rippling. The winter sun bounced off their scales as if they were encrusted with jewels. But it wasn't jewels. Studying the fish closest to his feet, Silas saw that they were wet. Beads of water leapt off those juddering the most violently.

What the hell?

It was like all the fish had been teleported from a body of water to the dried-up loch. But teleportation hadn't been properly developed. It was still years away, maybe even decades.

How was this possible?

"Where did they come from?" "What's going on?" "H-how did this happen?" A few of the exclamations he discerned from the jangle of disturbed voices.

"We should do something – they're dying!" a man shouted as the rippling ground began to soften and slow.

But there was nothing they could do, only watch the fish

suffocate. If it hadn't been dry for two weeks, there might've been the odd deep puddle in the uneven floor of the loch to save a few, but the ground was as dry as desert sand.

So they watched and, moments later, all the fish were dead.

September 19th 1971

"I'm opening an investigation into Loch Ness and I want you two running it," said Detective Chief Inspector Mark Kerry, head of Division 6, a top-secret plain clothes division of the Metropolitan Police responsible for investigating strange phenomena.

Sitting across from DCI Kerry in his office, Detective Sergeant Claire Garrison, the first and only female police officer to work for Division 6, sighed heavily. "Sir, isn't there anything more pressing for us to do than search for the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Sergeant, you're not going to be searching for the Loch Ness Monster – not specifically anyway. You're going to be searching for a man, an amateur Loch Ness Monster hunter called Robert Doyle, who went missing up there. According to his wife, he disappeared right in front of her eyes. She was on the shore to greet him after he'd been out in his boat. He'd just finished mooring his boat and come ashore, when she suddenly experienced a wave of dizziness and nearly fainted. When she gathered herself, Doyle was gone."

"So presumably he left the area while she wasn't looking," said Detective Constable Gavin Enright, Claire's deputy.

"Apparently not. His wife says she only looked down for a moment, and could see a great distance all around her. If he'd walked or even run off, she would've seen him. That makes it a case for Division 6."

"Do you suspect an abduction, sir?" Claire asked.

Gavin snickered next to her.

"There's no evidence of an alien presence at Loch Ness, but I'm keeping an open mind. As I'm sure you are, DC Enright." DCI Kerry cocked a disapproving eyebrow at Gavin.

"Always, sir," murmured Gavin with flagrant sarcasm. He was the sceptic of the pair. While he seemed to enjoy the

variation that Division 6 provided, he wasn't that open-minded, abhorred science fiction, and was eternally dubious in his approach to the paranormal phenomena that he and Claire investigated.

"What do you mean, we're 'not specifically' searching for the Loch Ness Monster?" Claire asked.

"Well, Doyle disappeared right next to the lake. So, while I'm not discounting aliens or dimensional shifting" – Claire could almost sense Gavin rolling his eyes – "I'm also not discounting the possibility that he was dragged into the water by... by something."

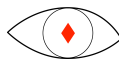
"So you believe in the Loch Ness Monster, sir?" said Gavin.

"Like I say, I'm keeping an open mind. What I do know is that there is something strange about that lake. Numerous expeditions and sonar studies of Loch Ness have been carried out since the monster sightings started, and they've all yielded unusual results. Large moving objects. Strange sounds and echoes that can't be explained. Something's going on. Whether there's some kind of creature in Loch Ness – or something else entirely – I think it's high time Division 6 did an investigation."

"What are your orders?" asked Claire.

"Have you ever been scuba diving?"

Claire's heart sank.



Claire hadn't been scuba diving before. She'd hoped to go through life never needing to. Although she could swim, an incident where she nearly drowned as a teenager had led her to avoid water wherever possible.

Still, the case required that she and Gavin do a dive and she wasn't about to let DCI Kerry down. Not while she was still proving herself.

It took a week for Claire and Gavin to find what they were looking for. Piloted by a small, specialist crew, the *Goodspeed*, the Division 6 submarine, happened upon a large, metallic structure sitting at the bottom of Loch Ness, two miles north of the ruins of Urquhart Castle.

It was unlit, box-like, with pipes, levers, cylinders, turrets and hatches. An underwater bunker of some sort. Not marked on any maps and not known to Division 6.

“So what are you thinking now?” Claire asked Gavin as they got into their scuba gear.

“I think we’ve found an underwater bunker,” Gavin replied flatly.

“A *secret* underwater bunker. What if whoever’s down there has teleportation or dimensional shifting capability?”

“Both are impossible.”

“Says who?”

“The laws of physics.”

Claire huffed.

They proceeded to the *Goodspeed’s* lock-out chamber and prepared to enter the water. As their colleagues flooded the chamber, anxiety hit. The water thrashed and frothed about their ankles, rose up their calves, past their knees, thighs, stomachs, up to their necks... Even though Claire was receiving air from the gas cylinder on her back, she felt an instinctive urge to suck in a deep breath as the water rose over her head.

They’d both undergone an intensive scuba diving course, as Gavin hadn’t been diving before either. He was fine, though. A right water-baby. To be fair, Claire was a lot more confident by the time the training was over, but that didn’t quell the flutter of nerves now. In the end it was her unremitting curiosity about what awaited them (coupled with continual mental reminders that her scuba mask and gas canister would protect her) that drove her into the water.

Once the chamber was completely flooded, the hatch opened and she and Gavin kicked themselves through into the murky depths of Loch Ness. The odd flush of freezing water penetrated Claire’s wetsuit as she swam, stinging her skin. Frustratingly, as soon as her body heat had warmed the trapped water, fresh water sneaked in.

Ankles tiring, Claire swam towards the bunker, Gavin close behind. She realised as they neared it that it was a much larger structure than she’d originally thought.

How could they not know about this? She would’ve been surprised if it was a secret government installation – Division 6 was supposed to have knowledge of those.

She and Gavin swam beneath the structure, which was mounted on thick metal struts that burrowed into the lake bed. For a few minutes they swam under its impenetrable base, looking for an entry point. Then Claire saw lights. A moon pool. Relief swept over her – they'd be out of the water soon. She gestured to Gavin, signalling her intention to ascend to the surface, and they both swam up.

They met a warped blur of multiple black shapes as they emerged. As the water poured off their scuba masks, the blur sharpened into a ring of men and women in unusual black uniforms, standing around the edge of the moon pool and pointing guns at their heads.

Ah. They saw us coming.

Claire removed her mouthpiece, lifted her mask and announced breathlessly, "My name is DS Garrison of the Metropolitan Police. This is my partner, DC Enright."

Apparently no one was interested. Claire and Gavin were dragged from the water, ushered into a small chamber and searched with metal detectors. Division 6 detectives were allowed to carry handguns. These were swiftly found, tucked into pouches in their wetsuits, by the two men who were removing Claire and Gavin's scuba gear.

They were told to wait and the door to the chamber was shut. A man and a woman stood guard outside and, ten minutes later, a moustached man in his fifties, wearing large, round spectacles and a white lab coat, entered the chamber. The two guards entered behind him, guns poised.

The man frowned, lips and eyebrows twitching with what appeared to be both worry and infuriation. "I want to know exactly who you are and who told you to come here."

Claire stayed cool-headed. "As I told your associates, I'm DS Garrison of the Metropolitan Police and this is DC Enright."

"You're lying. The Metropolitan Police doesn't know about this facility. Who sent you?"

"Okay, look. Here's what's going to happen. You're going to stop asking questions and release us immediately. Then you're going to start answering some of mine. Do that and there's a good chance I won't have you arrested for obstructing, threatening and falsely imprisoning police officers. Deal?"

“No. This facility is beyond your jurisdiction.”

“Don’t think so, mate,” Gavin chimed in. “We’re from a special branch of the Metropolitan Police. This is *exactly* our jurisdiction.”

The man shook his head. “I’m afraid you’re wrong.”

“Alright,” said Claire. “Seems we have a stalemate here. You’re not going to answer our questions. We’re not going to answer yours. So why don’t you explain what you plan to do with us.”

The man answered by turning and gesturing to the two guards. At once the guards lunged towards Claire and Gavin.

His answer was pretty clear.

Claire faced Gavin and nodded. As the male guard stooped to grab her, her arm shot up, grabbing him first and yanking him towards her, at which point she socked him in the throat with an open hand, knocking him back. Gavin headbutted the female guard as she tried to grab him, causing her to hurtle backwards. Both guards stunned, the female clutching her head and looking dizzy, the male coughing and spluttering, Claire and Gavin had time to jump to their feet. As both guards started raising their guns, Gavin punched the gun from the female guard’s hand and pushed her to the floor of the chamber, and Claire executed a high kick to the male guard’s chest, hurling him against the wall, knocking the gun from his hand.

Seizing both guns, Claire and Gavin exited the chamber, pointing them at the man in the lab coat, who’d moved away from the melee and was standing outside. He raised his hands immediately. Other black-uniformed guards crept forwards into the area around the moon pool, guns raised.

“Come any closer and I’ll lodge a bullet in your boss’s head,” Claire warned them, her voice rebounding in a tinny hum off the metal walls and floor of the bunker.

“Stay back!” shouted the man in the lab coat to the guards.

The guards shrank back.

“Now,” said Claire, “let’s try this again. What’s your name?”

“Dr Harper. Dr Alan Harper.”

“And who do you work for, Dr Harper?”

“That’s classified.”

“We’re declassifying it,” said Gavin.

"You can't do that. This operation is bigger than you. It's bigger than me."

"What operation?" said Claire. "What the hell are you doing down here?"

"Experiments."

"What kind of experiments?"

He paused and sighed, "I'm sorry. That's as much as I can tell you. Shoot me if you want."

A voice crackled out of a small walkie-talkie half-sticking out of the chest pocket of his lab coat, "*Dr Harper, spatiotemporal stability levels are dropping.*"

Dr Harper's right hand plunged to grab the device, probably to switch it onto mute – too late. He rolled his eyes and blew a sigh, chastising himself.

"Spatiotemporal?" said Claire. "Time travel?"

Harper said nothing.

"Well, Doctor, please." She gestured towards one of the many doors off the moon pool chamber. "Lead the way."

"What?"

"Clearly one of your associates needs you. Let's all go."

Harper didn't move.

"Dr Harper, I could kill you now and trigger a messy shootout. But even if my partner and I didn't survive, we have a team that knows we're here. If they don't hear from us, they'll come after us. So it's in everyone's interests that you cooperate."

Harper sighed. "I'll take you to the lab. But I'm not saying another word."

"We'll see."

Claire and Gavin followed Dr Harper through one of the doors off the moon pool chamber, down a narrow corridor, into a larger room. There were machines, control panels, monitor screens, all kinds of unidentifiable contraptions. Lab workers in white coats stood at countertops with beakers, pipettes and liquid-filled Erlenmeyer flasks, looking through devices resembling microscopes, and operating the machines. At the centre of the lab was an enormous tank, connected to various pipes and columns, filled with a profuse red gas that swirled, roiled and pulsed as if it was alive.

"Sir – w-what's going on?" cried one of the lab workers.

"Nobody move," Harper ordered. "We have some guests."

“We’re police,” Claire announced. “This facility is now under our control. If your liberty is important to you, I suggest you – ”

She stopped and jerked her head towards the fast, clanking footsteps. One of the lab workers had decided to be a hero and was charging at Gavin. Harper spun round. “*No!*” he shrieked as the lab worker went for Gavin’s gun.

The lab worker tried to wrestle the gun from Gavin’s hand. In the struggle, one of them hit the trigger.

The bullet tore across the lab, hitting a control panel just next to the huge tank of swirling red gas.

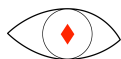
Dr Harper clamped his hands to the sides of his head. Claire’s gaze shifted to the tank, the control panel sparking and hissing. A moment later, a black gas began filtering into the tank from one of the connected pumps, rolling into the red.

“Oh... shit!” screamed Harper.

Shooting the control panel had done something to the tank’s settings – clearly the release of the black gas wasn’t supposed to happen. The red gas started reacting – it swirled and roiled quicker, then flickered and flashed, then dazzling bursts of light made everyone squint and shield their eyes.

“Dr Harper!” Claire hollered. “What is hap – ?”

She couldn’t finish – something big, bright, white and hot was coming straight for her face.



I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive.

When Claire came to, her left cheek was squished against damp, shingly mud. She lifted her neck and opened her eyes to a kaleidoscopic blur. Adjusting, they revealed a gently sloping bank, lapped by soft waters, crowned by grassy hills and lush Alder trees stretching towards a cloudless sky. Whatever had just happened, Claire had – by some miracle – washed ashore and was alive.

Stiffly, she rolled over and sat up, every muscle twingeing. Her boots were missing. Must’ve come off in the water. And something had happened to her wetsuit. The arms and legs extended past her hands and feet by half a metre, and the

waist and back were hanging off her. It felt like it had expanded to twice its size.

Weird.

She pulled up the stretched sleeves and legs to free her hands and feet, and glanced around. Further down the bank was a person in a lab coat, half-submerged in the lake, water lapping at his or her thighs. A little further on was a person sprawled face-down on the bank, motionless, in a wetsuit much like her own.

Gavin!

She launched to her feet and ran clumsily over to her partner, weighed down by her damp, oversized wetsuit.

Wait, that couldn't be him.

The man's hair was white and thinning, not like Gavin's thick, healthy brown locks. Yet his wetsuit was identical to Gavin's.

Claire lowered to her knees and placed her hand on the man's shoulder in an effort to rouse him. He didn't budge. She grasped his upper arms and lifted as gently as she could, rolling him onto his back.

She gasped. *No.*

It *was* Gavin. But his face was wrinkled, drawn in places, drooping in others, his lips thin, his eyes framed by white, wildly unkempt eyebrows and flaccid sacks bulging beneath them, his white, thin hair receding.

It was Gavin, alright, but he looked forty years older than he was.

"Gavin! Can you hear me?" she cried, feeling for a pulse.

Nothing.

When she spoke, though, her attention was drawn to something else. Her hand shot up to her throat and she repeated, "Gavin."

Her voice had changed. It was several notes higher than it should've been.

As she lowered her hand, she noticed that as well.

What the - ?

When she'd freed her hands and feet from the stretched sleeves and legs of her wetsuit, she hadn't paid attention to what they actually looked like. At the time, her head was still spinning.

Now she realised. Her hands and feet were tiny. Or at least

much smaller than they were before. Her fingers and toes were shorter, the nails stubbier, the skin softer.

She rose to her feet and sprang for the water. Stepping into the fringe of the lake, she leaned over and stared – in open-mouthed dismay – at her rippling reflection.

No longer was a thirty-six-year-old woman staring back at her. Staring back instead was a child. A child who couldn't have been more than seven.

July 22nd 1933

George and Elaine Spicer were driving home to London, returning from a holiday in the Scottish Highlands, when it happened.

At half three on Lakeshore Road, the road that ran along the eastern side of Loch Ness, George was struck by a wave of dizziness. He slouched over the steering wheel, lightheaded, vision blotted with white. He glanced over at his wife, barely saw her through the white but just made out that she had her head in her hands, evidently hit by the same feeling.

He needed to stop. He pressed his foot on the brake. The car slowed to thirty.

But the dizziness subsided as he raised his head, and the road shivered back into view. He lifted his foot from the brake.

"I – are we – are we about to see...?" he murmured.

He noticed his watch as he clutched the steering wheel. All three hands were moving faster than normal time, and speeding up. He watched – they slowed again, almost back to normal, then turned anti-clockwise and spun so fast he couldn't see them.

"Look at my watch," he said, showing Elaine.

Her disillusioned expression had re-formed, the one she'd worn ever since they left Golspie in the Highlands. She glanced at George's watch and her own. "Mine's the same." First words she'd spoken since they got in the car.

"Darling, please..." George started, but something up ahead crept into his peripheral vision, yanking his attention back to the road. "*Shit!*"

He slammed his foot on the brake. He and Elaine lurched

forwards as the car skidded to a stop. Eyes on the road, both of them were silent. They just stared, awestruck.

A huge, extraordinary-looking creature that was wider than the road and rhinoceros-grey, with a small head, long, thin, undulating neck and thick, bulbous body, slogged across the road in front of them with seal-like movements. A dip in the road meant they couldn't see any legs. Nor could they see a tail, but just above the dip was some kind of appendage flopping up and down – the end of a long tail swung round to its side? Difficult to tell.

“Darling, do you see what I'm seeing?” said George.

“I see it. And please stop calling me ‘darling’.”

Their eyes followed the creature as it plodded into the undergrowth on the roadside, heading for the waters of Loch Ness. Moments later, it was out of sight.

George looked at his watch again, now ticking normally.

He waited some minutes, hoping the creature would come back so he could make a more definitive determination of what it was.

Although he already knew what it was. He and Elaine had got the full story yesterday morning, while they were still at their hotel in Golspie.

It was while they were packing to go home. A seventy-something woman with silvery, shoulder-length hair, wearing a smart, dark green skirt suit, had turned up at their hotel room, out of the blue.

“Are you George Spicer?” the woman had asked in a gravelly, aged voice, holding up a Metropolitan Police badge, as George opened the door.

“Yes...”

“Sir, do you mind if I speak to you and your wife for a moment?”

“Er – okay. What about?”

“Perhaps I could come in?”

Reluctant, George let the policewoman in. Elaine paused what she was doing – folding and packing George's jumpers. Taking his hand, she sat down with him on the small couch by the window. The policewoman sat in the armchair opposite.

Elaine was quick to ask, “Are we in some kind of trouble?”

“Not at all, ma'am. My name is DS Claire Garrison. I've

come to speak to you about tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Tomorrow, when you’re on your way home, you’re going to see something. Something that will change the world forever. I’m here to stop you from seeing it.”

“I’m sorry – what?” said George.

“I can’t tell you much more. It would defeat the object of what I’m trying to do. But I need you to take an alternative route back to London. Do not under any circumstances drive along Lakeshore Road between Dore and Foyers. Find another way home.”

“DS Garrison, we have a very long journey back to London tomorrow. I’m not going to add to it. Lakeshore Road is the most direct route.”

“Sir, you have to trust me.”

“I’ve only just met you. Unless you tell me what’s going on, I have no intention of doing as you ask.”

“George, she’s from the police!” said Elaine.

“I know that, darling. But I know my rights. She can’t just turn up at our hotel room and start barking orders. Unless you’re going to arrest me for something, DS Garrison, I suggest you leave.”

“Sir, it’s imperative that you do not drive down that road tomorrow.”

“Why? What is it you’re so determined that we do not see?”

DS Garrison gave a sharp, irritated sigh. “If I tell you, it will be so you understand and appreciate the importance of what I am doing, and why it is so vital that you cooperate with me.”

“We’re all ears.”

“Fine. Tomorrow, while you and your wife are driving along Lakeshore Road, you are going to see a dinosaur.”

George sniggered. “A – a what?”

“A dinosaur. A plesiosaur, to be exact. A water-dwelling dinosaur.”

“Er, I’m no dinosaur expert. But I do know they all became extinct millions of years ago.”

“That’s correct. I believe the creature will fall through time from the Cretaceous period to now.”

George frowned. “Time travel? Are you serious?”

DS Garrison was straight-faced. “Completely.”

“So how will it fall through time?”

“In 1971, thirty-eight years from now, a group of people will be conducting time travel experiments in a covert underwater facility at the bottom of Loch Ness. Something will go wrong and the facility will be destroyed in an explosion. But it will not be a normal explosion. When matter explodes, it creates a shockwave that propagates to the surrounding area, like ripples on water. This will be a *temporal* explosion. It will create a shockwave that propagates in time rather than space.”

“In English, please.”

She sighed again. “The explosion of the facility will cause a disturbance in time in the Loch Ness vicinity. As a result, things will become displaced. All across time, living things will be pulled from one time into another. From the future to the past. From the past to the future. That is how the dinosaur will end up here. Because that is how *I* ended up here.”

“You?”

“Yes. I was pulled back in time to 1863.”

“Wait a minute. 1863? That’s seventy years ago. How old were you when you – as you say – went back in time?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six. Right. So you’re asking me to believe that you’re” – he did a fast sum in his head – “a hundred and six years old!”

“It’s complicated. Suffice it to say, being at the heart of the explosion did something to me.”

“Fried your brain?”

“Mr Spicer, I’m telling you the truth. It’s vital that you take on board what I’m saying because *you* are the cause of all this.”

“What? How?”

“When you drive down Lakeshore Road tomorrow, you and your wife will be the first ones to see the creature. You will then go to the press and provide the first legitimate sighting of what will thereafter be known as the Loch Ness Monster. Your story will spark worldwide interest in finding the creature – from researchers, scientists and amateur monster hunters. Loch Ness Monster societies will form. Countless expeditions and sonar studies will be conducted. Documentaries will be made for the TV.”

“For the what?” said Elaine.

“Never mind that. The point is, because of your story, the Loch Ness Monster will become the most famous example of cryptozoology in the world. And ultimately it will lead a man called Robert Doyle to conduct his own search for the monster. He will mysteriously disappear – probably pulled into another time frame like I was. But his disappearance will lead me and my partner to the underwater facility where the explosion happens.”

“So *you* are the cause of it.”

“I can’t get back to 1971. And I certainly won’t live to see it. I can’t do anything to stop the explosion directly. Trying to stop the chain of causation that leads to the explosion is the only play I have left.”

“The problem is, DS Garrison, the monster isn’t a cryptid. It’s real. That means others will see it.”

“Perhaps. But if I’m able to avert the first major sighting, I believe that everything – all of time – will change as a result. The butterfly effect.”

“The butterfly what?” said Elaine.

George knew what she meant. “Hardly an exact science.”

“No. No, it’s not. But it’s all I’ve got. I’ve been stranded here for the last seventy years. Seventy long, miserable years. I left a daughter in 1971. A daughter who hasn’t even been born yet, and won’t be in my lifetime. Those bastards at the facility ruined my life. If there’s a chance I can reverse what they’ve done, get my life back, I’m going to take it. Please. Mr and Mrs Spicer, I’ve told you all this so you’ll understand why it’s so important that you do not drive down Lakeshore Road tomorrow, and that you do not tell your story of the Loch Ness Monster to the press.”

“We do understand, DS Garrison,” said Elaine. “Well, alright, I don’t really have the faintest idea what you’ve been saying” – she laughed – “but it’s fine. George and I will find another route home.”

“What if I refuse?” said George.

“Georgel!” barked Elaine, pulling her hand from his. “Why would you do that?”

“Yes, sir, I must echo your wife’s question,” said DS Garrison, frowning in confusion. “Why would you refuse after everything I’ve just told you?”

“Just tell me,” said George. “What will you do if I refuse to do as you instruct? If I drive down Lakeshore Road tomorrow, see the monster, go to the press and let everything you’ve just described happen?”

“I – I – ” George had caught her off-guard. “Well, I’m afraid I would have to compel you to cooperate.”

“Compel me... I thought as much.”

George had no choice. She wasn’t going to stop. He dived forwards, swiping the firearm that was strapped to his ankle, concealed beneath his trousers. He pointed the weapon at DS Garrison’s head and, before the old woman could react, pressed the trigger. The silenced gun made a small, sharp cough sound. Blood and fragments of bone erupted from the back of DS Garrison’s head as the bullet went straight through. She flopped onto the hotel room floor with a thud.

Safest thing to do.

Elaine shot to her feet, hands raised and shaking, screaming, “*George!* George, what have you – ? What have you done?”

“Darling, please. I’ll explain.”

“George... George, I – I – wha – wha – ” Fraught sobs and a deep trembling broke her voice into pieces.

“Darling, sit down. Let me explain.” He replaced the gun in his ankle strap.

Sitting down, Elaine crumbled into convulsive sobs. George placed his hands over hers, but she slapped them away. “Don’t touch me.”

“My darling, I had to do that,” he said softly. “That woman was trying to destroy our history. She would’ve derailed millions of lives had I not stopped her. You heard what we were talking about.”

“I... I don’t understand,” Elaine replied through the sobs. “She... she said she was trying to change things back. She was trying to stop the explosion.”

“My love, the timeline in which the explosion happens and influences thousands – no – *millions* of years of history is the timeline that *we* are living in. You and me. Our children, our friends. All that could’ve been lost. We might never have met in DS Garrison’s rewritten timeline. Or even existed. My colleagues were not going to let that happen.”

“Your colleagues?”

“Yes, darling. The people DS Garrison spoke about. The people at the facility. I am... I’m part of their organisation. And in the future, they *will* invent time travel, and it will be a momentous day. I have to do my part to make sure nothing interferes with that.”

“George... George, I don’t know you... I don’t know who you are.”

“You do, my love. I haven’t changed. I’m the same man. The man you love.”

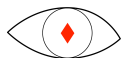
She looked up and whispered with abrupt poise, “You’re a monster.”

George sighed sadly. He glanced at DS Garrison’s body. There was blood everywhere. He stood. “I have to make a call from the hotel phone. I need my colleagues to come and deal with this. Stay here. Do not leave the room.”

Elaine wiped her eyes and shot him a glare. “If I do, will you shoot me as well?” She wasn’t upset anymore. She was furious.

“Please. Just let me deal with this. Then we’ll talk.”

“Do what you have to do.”



You’re a monster. George couldn’t shake Elaine’s words. He wasn’t surprised she’d called him that. She’d watched him blow open an innocent woman’s skull. His only source of comfort right now was knowing he’d done the right thing and hoping, one day, that Elaine would see that.

“Are you okay?” said George.

Elaine was staring through the windscreen at the undergrowth, trampled flat just minutes ago by soon-to-be the world’s most famous dinosaur.

She whipped her gaze to him, now a sharp scowl. “Are you actually asking me that?”

Yeah, that was dumb. “I’m sorry. Shall I go?”

“Yes. Go.”

Elaine stared blankly ahead. George wished he knew what she was thinking. Alas, the silence between them returned and George continued along Lakeshore Road, resuming what was to be the longest drive of his life.

WHAT HE REALLY REMEMBERED

“There’s been an accident. You’re going to be alright.”

Mum’s voice. Just. It’s garbled, like I’m underwater and she’s above the surface.

Oh God. I can’t see any better than I can hear. Only one eye is working, and not well. It follows the voice, finds what looks like the shape of Mum’s head. She’s all blurry, again like I’m looking at her through water. And what’s all this around my eye? My field of vision is tiny, like I’m looking through a toilet roll tube, or somehow my eye has sunk to the back of my head.

Why can’t I see out of my other eye?

I open my mouth to ask that very question. Or try to. *Shit* – I can’t. Mouth won’t move. And it’s like my vocal cords have disappeared. I push but not even a whisper gets past my lips. I can’t even be sure I’m breathing – there’s no air going through my nose or mouth. But I must be!

Don’t panic don’t panic don’t panic.

I try to move my arms. I feel them, just, but they’re stiff. I can only move them slightly. It’s like they’re in restraints. My legs are lead weights but I can wiggle my toes. My chest feels like there’s an elephant sitting on it. I can’t be paralysed if I still have feeling, can I? At the same time it’s as though I’m submerged in cement that’s about to dry. If I don’t move now, I’ll be stuck forever.

My heart begins to pound – at least that’s working.

I hear Mum’s voice again. It’s a bit clearer this time, soothes me. “You’re in a hospital in Paris. You’re in good hands. Don’t worry. Ernie and I are here.”

I think that’s Ernie, my stepdad, who leans in as she says it. He’s blurry too.

“Yes, we’re both here, Trevor. We love you. You’re safe.” Yes, it’s Ernie.

But I need to find out what’s happened to me. I need to know. How do I find out when I can’t move or speak?

I feel sleepy. Mum and Ernie keep fading in and out. I try to stay calm. There’s nothing I can do right now.

I close my eyes. I think I’d rather be asleep to be honest...



Shame. I'd almost convinced myself all of that was a dream. Then I wake and can only see out of one eye again. And I can't move or talk or even open my mouth.

If I could, I'd scream.

"Trevor, it's us, we're here," says Mum. "Mum and Ernie. We're right here with you. You've been in an accident but you're going to be okay. You're in a hospital in Paris."

If I could speak, I'd say, "Yes, I know all that. You told me that last time." But what's clear is that Mum has no idea if anything she's saying is going in. How can she? I have no way of responding to her.

It means my body is in a worse state than my mind. But I know that already. I just wish I knew *what* was wrong with me. I wish someone would tell me.

I must've fallen asleep again. I wake up later – no idea how much later – and everything's dark, quiet, empty.

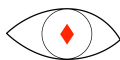
Mum and Ernie aren't there.

There's a flicker of movement. Think it might be a nurse. Maybe two nurses. Can't tell – everything's blurry still.

What's happened to me? Why am I here?

Fragments of memory dart through my head, none shedding any light. One second I'm on the rugby field, the next I'm in the pub with the lads, the next I'm with Sue, listening to her tell me she wants a divorce all over again. For a moment her voice is clear as day.

I slip away again.



"Trevor... Trevor, it's Mum. I'm here. We're both here. Mum and Ernie. We're right here with you. You've been in an accident but you're going to be okay. You're in a hospital in Paris."

This time it's different. I can see through both eyes, thank the Lord. Things are still pretty blurry, but less than before. My peripheral vision is back. I can see the room I'm in, the machines I'm wired up to, Mum and Ernie sitting either side of my bed. There's a white cover over my legs. My left wrist is in plaster. I can hear Mum's voice clearly; I don't feel like I'm underwater anymore.

I want to stand. How long have I been in this bed? I've lost all sense of the passage of time. I've no idea what day it is or when I was awake last.

All I know is, I want out of this bed. I feel much better now. Now I'm awake, I can go home.

I try to move. *Shit*. I'm so weak. So stiff. I've got a neck brace on, I realise, and tubes coming out of me left, right and centre. I want to cough but one of the tubes is coming out of my throat and I can't.

"No, darling," says Mum, leaning over me. "Don't try to move."

Mum, what's happened to me? That's what I want to ask, but still my mouth won't open.

Think, Trevor, think. What's the last thing you remember?

The Ritz Hotel in Paris flashes into my mind. I see Dodi Fayed. I see Princess Diana. We're in the hallway, outside the Imperial Suite. I'm mad at Dodi, trying to hold it in.

Why? Why am I mad?

The memory dissipates. I know it's there in my brain. But it's as though my brain just said, *that's your lot – for now*.

I drift in and out of consciousness. I'm so tired. Every time I wake up I try and focus my memory.

The hours – days? – roll into one. I still have no idea how much time is passing between awakenings, how long I've been in this hospital, the name of which nobody's told me.

My brain serves up small portions of memory at a time so as not to overwhelm me. I remember now why I was mad at Dodi.

I'm back at the Ritz and Dodi and Diana have suddenly decided to leave. It's nearly midnight, I think. But Dodi won't tell me – me, his bodyguard, for fuck's sake – where they're going. He keeps making plans without consulting me or Kes, my partner. We're so frustrated. How does he expect us to protect them when he keeps us in the dark?

The next thing I remember is Dodi telling us that dodgy Ritz security man Henri Paul's going to be driving him and the Princess. That he wants both his bodyguards to go in the cars leaving from the front!

Dodi, you're a fucking idiot! I want to scream at him.

"This breaks every single security protocol in the book," says Kes.

“Do you want to argue with my father about it?” says Dodi. Oh yeah – the boss, Mohammed Al-Fayed, okayed this fucking ludicrous plan.

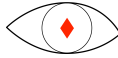
I want to grab Dodi by the shoulders and shake him. Instead I say through gritted teeth, “Sir, we don’t mean to question your father’s instructions” – have to say that; Al-Fayed is paying my wages – “but you can’t leave this hotel without security. How can we protect you or the Princess if we’re not with you? I’m sure your father appreciates that. For your own safety, you need at least one of us with you.”

“He’s right, Dodi,” says Diana, standing behind him.

Dodi sighs, “Fine. Trevor, you’ll come in the car with Diana and me.”

Dodi’s words go round and round – *you’ll come in the car with Diana and me, you’ll come in the car with Diana and me, you’ll come in the car with Diana and me.*

I hear Mum again, “You’ve been in an accident but you’re going to be okay. You’re in a hospital in Paris.”



I’m visited by a French maxillofacial surgeon, Luc Chikhani. He mentions the name of this hospital. *Finally*. The Pitié-Salpêtrière, a teaching hospital. I’m in Room 107 of the *Réanimation* department, he tells me. He explains what’s happened to me, goes into a *lot* of detail, says he had to perform an eleven-hour surgery about a week ago to reconstruct my face, which was utterly and completely crushed. The reason I can’t open my mouth is because it had to be wired shut to heal. Dr Chikhani tries to make light of it, says it was like I’d been hit in the face with a frying pan in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon. He says he used photographs of me that Mum and Ernie gave him and that he basically had to peel off my face so he could knit together all the shattered bones using titanium screws and plates, then roll it back over the bones. God in Heaven, it sounds like something out of a horror film.

How do you thank the man who gives you back your face? Unfortunately I can’t thank anyone at the moment. And no one’s let me look in a mirror yet, so I haven’t seen the fruits

of his labours. I've no idea if this eleven-hour surgery actually worked. He seems pretty confident, though.

Meanwhile, a few further gaps in my memory have been filled in. I remember going downstairs to the Ritz's rear entrance to wait with Diana and Dodi for the third car. The one Henri Paul was going to be driving. When it arrived I remember us catching the attention of some paparazzi and thinking, those bastards are literally ready for anything. I knew this stupid decoy plan wouldn't work.

Everyone picked up the pace. Diana and Dodi got in the back and I closed the door behind them and curved round and got in the front passenger seat. Henri Paul got in the driver's seat, started the engine and pulled away at speed.

After that – nothing.

I keep trying but my brain won't give me any more pieces. It's like it ran out of film and didn't record the rest of what happened.

But, my God, *something* happened. Something horrendously violent and awful from the sounds of it, since it left me without a face.

Mum and Ernie have developed a crude way for me to communicate with them while I'm unable to speak or write anything. A chart with the alphabet on it. I point at the letters with my good hand to form words. It's so incredibly slow and tedious. During one of their visits, I use the chart to get them to talk about the crash. I want to find out if the other passengers – Dodi, Diana, Henri Paul – are okay. Mum and Ernie look at each other uncomfortably, like they already know something but don't want to tell me. Mum says they'll try and find out and changes the subject quickly.

A few days later, Mum sits down next to me, takes my good hand, and whispers softly, "Trevor, my darling, you're the only survivor of the accident."

What? No.

No, no, no.

I'd been fearing that at least one of them had died. Not *all* of them. Surely not.

I try to absorb Mum's words. I can't. It's like they've hit a wall and bounced off. I need more. It's not registering. It's not going in. I need more.

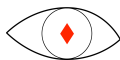
I start pointing at my alphabet chart. I spell out, D-O-D-I.

Mum shook her head. "I'm sorry, darling. Dodi's dead."

I feel a tightening in my chest as I spell out, D-I-A-N-A.

"Diana was killed as well. As was Henri Paul. You're the only one who made it, Trevor. You're the sole survivor."

I can literally feel my heart sinking in my battered chest. I want to scream and sob. I can't do either.



Days later – I'm not sure how many – I'm transferred from *Réanimation* to Dr Chikhani's maxillofacial unit. I'm much better now. On my feet. Talking more. I've got a lot of my strength back. I still don't remember what happened after we pulled away from the Ritz but I live in hope that something will come back.

My room here's much nicer than Room 107. Bigger, has toilet facilities, lounge chairs. There's a TV. I can listen to tapes on my Walkman. I can walk around by myself. I can wash my own face.

When I arrived I took the chance to look at myself in the mirror for the first time. I don't look good but I imagine I look a lot better than I did. My eyes are dark. My teeth are smashed up – I'm definitely going to need a dentist. A lot of cuts and swelling. And I'm lopsided. The left side is lower than the right. Dr Chikhani says he can fix it. He's booked me in for a second surgery.

One evening, I decide to stretch my legs and go for a wander. It's late. All the other patients are asleep. I haven't been sleeping well.

I pass near to one of the nurses' offices. In there is the one I don't really like. I can hear her talking to someone. A bloke.

I move a little closer. I can see their faces now. It's dark and I'm behind a pillar so I don't think they can see me. The nurse is talking to a thin man in his mid-forties. He's not a doctor. He's wearing a suit.

Then I notice his eyes. They're different colours. I can't tell what colour they are but one's much darker than the other. *Strange.*

"How much does he remember?" the man says. It doesn't take a genius to work out that he means me.

“He doesn’t remember anything after the Mercedes pulled away from the hotel,” replies the nurse.

Who’s this bozo? Maybe another detective, I guess. But I’ve not seen him before.

“And he’s said nothing about the seatbelts?” says the man.

What? The seatbelts?

“Nothing.”

“You’re certain about that?”

“Yes. You told me to keep an eye. That’s what I’m doing. Now I really do have a lot of work to do.” She sounds irate. She often does.

“I want to know the second he remembers anything else.”

“I’m not sure he will. Memories don’t always come back after a traumatic incident.”

“Let’s hope not. We can’t let this get traced back to us. She’ll have our heads.”

I swallow hard. *Us? She?*

“Believe me, I know that,” says the nurse.

The man starts heading for the door – in my direction.

I hurry back to my room, chest pounding.

That guy was *not* a detective. How could he have got past the guards? Security’s really tight around me. Has been since I got here.

And I *knew* there was a reason I didn’t like that nurse.

I try to calm down. I’m sweating like a whore in church. My face and chest are twingeing.

I can barely take in what I’ve just heard.

I may not have my memory but I have my answer. The answer to the only real question I’ve been asking since I learned I’d been in a crash.

Was it an accident? No. No, it wasn’t.

I’ve just been listening to Princess Diana’s killers.



“Mum. Ernie. I need to talk to you about something.”

It’s several weeks after I left the hospital and returned home to Mum and Ernie’s in Oswestry, Shropshire, the lovely country town close to the Welsh border that I’ve lived in all my life. I’m a lot better but I still have to be

chauffeured back and forth to doctors, oral surgeons and ophthalmologists. I have metal staples in my face from the second surgery and one of the scars is infected. There's still more surgery ahead – including on my wrist. Got a long way to go on the road to recovery but I'm getting there.

Something much more important has happened than my physical improvements. My memory has come back. A lot of it, anyway. I have to tell Mum and Ernie first. I need their advice on what I should do.

Mum sits down next to me on the settee with a cup of tea. Ernie's in his chair with a coffee.

"What is it, Trevor?" says Mum.

"I remember," I reply.

"What?" says Ernie.

"I remember the crash. Or at least, the minutes before it. Not all of it. But some of it."

Mum puts her tea down on the coffee table and takes both my hands. "Tell us."

I take a deep breath. "I remember as we pulled away, we all tried to put our seatbelts on. But they weren't working."

"None of them?" says Ernie.

"No. None of them. I remember Henri Paul saying we should pull over and Dodi saying no. He was worried about the paparazzi catching up, I think. There were motorbikes everywhere, following us. Cameras flashing everywhere. And... I remember when we got near to the tunnel, there was a white car following us too. A Fiat, I think. And as... as we entered the tunnel, Henri Paul screamed something."

Mum leans towards me. "What? What did he scream?"

I swallow. "I'm not a hundred percent but I think it was, 'They set me up.'"

Mum sighs heavily and sits back. She and Ernie look at each other, shake their heads in disbelief.

"Do you remember anything else?" says Ernie.

I shake my head.

Mum looks at me. "Who do you think 'they' are?"

"I've been thinking about this," I reply. "There's something else I haven't told you. One night at the hospital, after I was transferred to Dr Chikhani's unit, I overheard a conversation between one of the nurses and some man. From what they said it was clear they were in on it. He asked her if I'd said

anything about the seatbelts. He also said they can't let the accident get traced back to them because 'she' will have their heads."

"Why haven't you mentioned this before?" says Mum.

"I didn't want to drag you and Ernie into it until I had something a bit more concrete. I've been doing some investigating of my own since I got back – as much as I'm able to. Haven't really got anywhere till today. And that's only because I suddenly remember more of what happened, and it all links together. I think the Mercedes was rigged."

"And you want our advice on what you should do?" says Mum.

"Yes."

A look of sadness overtakes Mum's features. She looks at Ernie, who's similarly troubled. Then she leans over the coffee table and grabs the phone. She lifts it into her lap, picks up the receiver and starts dialling a number.

"Who are you calling?" I ask. "We can't talk to anyone till we've worked out a plan."

She ignores me and keeps dialling.

I look at Ernie. He has his face in his hands.

What's going on?

Someone answers Mum's call. She says, "Yes, ma'am, it's me. We have a Code Black."

What the hell?

I hear the mutterings of a person at the end of the line but can't make them out.

Mum replies, "He also overheard a conversation at the hospital. Two of ours. There was mention of the seatbelts."

My heart races. What is she doing? What does she mean – two of *ours*?

More mutterings at the end of the line.

Mum sighs sadly and hands the phone to me.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"Just speak to her," says Mum, tears in her eyes.

I take the phone and put the receiver to my ear. "Who is this?"

"Trevor, hi," says a smooth and silky female voice.

"Who is this?" I repeat.

"That's not important right now," the woman says. "What's important is that you listen to me very carefully."

My heart is pounding so hard my chest is hurting. My armpits feel hot. I swallow hard and say nothing.

"I understand that you have remembered certain details about the crash," says the woman, "and that you heard a conversation you shouldn't have while you were at the hospital. What I need you to do is promise me that you will never breathe a word of any of these things to anyone. As far as you are concerned, you remember nothing of what happened after the car pulled away, and that conversation at the hospital never happened. Is that understood?"

"What if I say no?"

"If you say no, and if you tell someone, I will have everyone you've ever cared about killed. Your mum. Ernie. Your brothers, Gareth and John. Your best friend, Lara. Your ex-wife, Sue. Every person you've ever loved will die. And I will kill you last."

My stomach turns. A chill runs down my back. I fall silent.

"Is that clear?"

I swallow. My hand is trembling as I hold the phone. "It's clear."

"I need you to promise me you will say nothing. I need to hear it."

"I promise."

"Good. And know that I have eyes everywhere. I'll be watching."

The call ends. My fingers go limp and the receiver slips through them, falling into my lap.

I look at Mum and Ernie. They both have tears streaming down their faces. What have they got themselves into?

I say gently, "Mum, who are these people?"

She takes a deep breath, wipes her tears. "People you don't want to get on the wrong side of."



Six years later, I'm in a coffee shop in London, grabbing a latte on my way to the train station. I've been visiting a friend, but I'm heading back now. Heading back to my new wife, the lovely Ann, who reminds me every day how lucky I am to be alive, and how important it is to appreciate your

family, your friends, little moments of each day.

As I head for the exit with my latte, I see someone I recognise. A man. Sitting at one of the tables, reading a newspaper, with a pot of tea.

It takes me a few moments to place him. When I do, my chest and throat tighten, my stomach does a barrel roll and I feel all the blood start to drain from my face. My fingers shake and I almost drop my latte.

It's him. The man from the hospital. The man I saw talking to the nurse about the seatbelts.

But something's different. How can that be? He's *younger*. Much younger! He looks like he's in his twenties.

That doesn't make sense. When I saw him at the hospital, he looked in his forties. It's six years on. How can he possibly look twenty years younger?

It can't be the same man. Can't be. It was years ago that I saw him, and I was pretty beaten up at the time. I'm sure I'm mistaken.

But wait. His eyes. His eyes are different. One's darker than the other.

It *is* the same bloke!

My brain whirs. I'm holding my latte so tight my hand is burning. I barely notice.

How? How can he be younger? *How?*

A totally crazy scenario suddenly occurs to me.

He's a time traveller. The man I saw at the hospital was a future version. A future version who'd come back in time.

But that's ridiculous. That would mean time travellers were responsible for the crash!

Oh, Trevor.

I shake my head, silently scold my brain and, sipping my latte, turn and walk out of the café.

Clearly I've been watching too much *Doctor Who*.

MILLION EYES



C.A. BERRY

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by

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Read an excerpt overleaf

May 29th 2019

HERE STOOD THE OAK TREE, ON WHICH AN ARROW
SHOT BY SIR WALTER TYRRELL AT A STAG, GLANCED
AND STRUCK KING WILLIAM THE SECOND, SURNAMED
RUFUS, ON THE BREAST, OF WHICH HE INSTANTLY DIED,
ON THE SECOND DAY OF AUGUST, ANNO 1100.

KING WILLIAM THE SECOND, SURNAMED RUFUS BEING
SLAIN, AS BEFORE RELATED, WAS LAID IN A CART,
BELONGING TO ONE PURKIS, AND DRAWN FROM
HENCE, TO WINCHESTER, AND BURIED IN THE
CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF THAT CITY.

Standing reading the inscriptions on the Rufus Stone in the New Forest was Gregory Ferro, a married, bespectacled, bearded, fifty-four-year-old father of two and former history teacher who went grey before his time and, while not exactly fat, was fatter and unhealthier than his doctors wanted him to be.

Ferro was on his way to St Margaret's Church in Highcliffe – a coastal town just south of the New Forest – for an important meeting. Since the events described on the stone were to be the topic of discussion, he had to pay a quick visit. The scene of the crime itself.

Ferro took in the surroundings. The Rufus Stone was next to a quiet country road in a pretty clearing dotted with lush trees, including a sprawling mature oak said to be the direct descendant of the original oak tree off which the fatal arrow supposedly ricocheted. Ferro had always struggled with that account. Glancing off a tree would surely dispel the force required to puncture a man in the chest. But the Rufus Stone, along with most accounts of William II's death, called the shooting an accident, and Ferro struggled with that too. To him it had always reeked of murder. As he listened to the brushing of the trees, Ferro imagined Walter Tyrell firing his arrow deliberately at an unsuspecting king.

After a few minutes of quiet contemplation, Ferro returned to his clapped-out Rover Metro, for him the biggest hardship of quitting his job five months ago. One hundred pounds it

cost him to buy and it surely wasn't worth a penny more. If anything, less. It had a hundred and sixty thousand miles on the clock, made all kinds of concerning noises as it trundled along, had dozens of dents and scratches on the bodywork (already an unsightly yellow), the air vents were broken and it still had a tape deck and manual windows. The old rust-bucket was an unutterably poor substitute for the stunning, silver Suzuki Swift he'd had to trade in.

The car was parked nearby in a little car park for tourists visiting the Rufus Stone. It was a hot day and even though he'd only stopped at the stone for five minutes, the fraying car interior felt hot enough to roast something.

The broken air vents meant that Ferro had to open all the doors and wind down all the windows, which were stiff with age, then stand by the car and wait for the hot air to escape. As he wound down the passenger window, the crank broke and it jammed half-open.

Ferro sighed and exclaimed, "For pity's sake." A couple walking near to his car on their way to the stone glanced at him, thinking he was addressing them. "Don't mind me, I drive a car from the Middle Ages," he said, laughing briefly. They smiled awkwardly back.

Ferro lost patience and got in, sliding into a hot seat and scalding his palms on the steering wheel. The car juddered and coughed into life. The digital clock was also broken – naturally – so he tugged the silver pocket watch from his waistcoat and clicked it open, just to check. The last thing he wanted to do was keep Reverend Thomas waiting.

Closing the pocket watch, he stroked his thumb across the inscription on the front. He always did that – habit. *I wonder what the weather will be like*, it said. His mother's last words before she died, when Ferro was thirteen. The watch was hers, and his grandmother's before her. She'd given it to him when he started secondary school, but it had no engraving then. He had engraved it with her words shortly after her death, and had worn it ever since.

Ferro continued on to Highcliffe, humming along to Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, aka *The Exorcist* theme tune, crackling out of the car's feeble speakers. It was the only cassette he could find to play in the tape deck, but he was surprised by how much he was enjoying it.

His mind wandered to his impending meeting. He was writing a book about William II, or 'the one after William the Conqueror', as he was probably better known. The king more famous for his death than his life. Ferro had been reaching out to local churches, monasteries and libraries for information, and two days ago Reverend Thomas at St Margaret's Church got in touch. Apparently he had happened upon some enlightening new evidence pertaining to William II's death and was about to hand it over to the British Library when he got Ferro's email. Ferro wasn't sure what to expect.

Ten minutes from Highcliffe, Ferro's phone started buzzing against his leg. He had to burrow into his pocket to get it, not easy while driving but he managed. *Beth calling*. He thumbed the answer button and lifted the phone to his ear. "Hi, love."

"You're not driving, are you, Greg?" she said.

"It's fine. There are no police around," he replied.

"It's not about not getting caught. The law's there for the safety of others, and for you."

"Yes, love, but I've been driving a long time. I'm safer than seventy per cent of the people on these roads."

"Not the point."

Alright, enough now. "Did you call for a reason?"

Beth sighed. "I wanted to know if you're coming home for dinner. We're having steak. Would be nice to see you." That last sentence was both barbed and imploring. Ferro hadn't been around much lately. But he'd always had a tendency to get swept up in his work. His passion was something she loved about him, or she used to.

"Probably not, my love," Ferro said carefully. "I'm following up on an email I got from a church in Highcliffe. I'm heading there now."

"Fine. I won't wait up."

"I'm sorry. We'll go out this weekend, just the two of us. I promise."

"With what money, Greg? You've been unemployed for five months now. We're living on a shoestring."

That wasn't fair. "*Self-employed*, Beth. And a shoestring's a bit of an exaggeration."

"Self-employed people are supposed to make money."

"And I will. As soon as I sell this book."

"And until then, you'll sponge off me."

Ferro said nothing – what on earth could he say to that?

Beth took back her comment at once, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“I suspect you did.”

“No. I didn’t. That wasn’t fair. You’ve looked after me when I’ve been between jobs before. I just... I think the thing is, I had it in my head that we’d spend more time together after you left teaching. You even said that yourself. And if anything, I think we’re seeing less of each other. You’re always in libraries and churches all over the place. At least when you were teaching, you came home every night. To be honest, a couple of times I’ve wondered if you’re having an affair.”

“Beth. Seriously.”

“I don’t really think that. But I do feel like we’re drifting apart.”

He really should’ve told her why he left teaching. She would’ve been more sympathetic, more understanding, but he was embarrassed. Embarrassed to tell his own wife and children. So he’d kept it from them for eight months – and counting.

It was because they looked up to him. He was the man of the house, the one who was supposed to protect everyone. But if they knew he couldn’t protect himself...

The truth was that after teaching history in secondary schools and colleges for thirty years with no real issues with any student, he’d had a nasty, violent encounter with a Year Ten boy, Dominic Flynn, who’d repeatedly punched and kicked him in the school corridor after Ferro gave him a ‘D’ on a mock exam.

Dominic Flynn was an extremely troubled, angry young man who lost his mother to cancer at a young age – Ferro could sympathise with that – and whose father had spiralled into alcoholism and depression. Ferro understood, and he forgave the boy. But the incident had destroyed his confidence as a teacher. He was on a knife-edge all the time.

He’d managed to avoid any facial injuries, which made it easier to hide the incident from Beth. These days they rarely had sex, so that wasn’t an issue. And although Ferro didn’t always wear pyjamas in bed, he made sure he did until the bruising was gone. Meanwhile he told her he was bored and

restless and wanted to do something different.

Of course, losing his love for teaching didn't mean he'd lost his love for history, hence the decision to start writing history books. And he'd dabbled in writing before. A couple of unpublished, unfinished novels here and there. It had been an on-off hobby for many years. Why not turn it into something more? Life was short and the pressures of teaching, as much as he used to love it and go with it, had put a good ten years on him. It was time to get a few back.

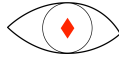
"I love you," said Ferro tenderly, "and I promise we'll go out this weekend and spend some proper time together. Okay?"

"Okay," Beth murmured.

Ferro saw a sign for Highcliffe and turned left at a roundabout.

"I'll see you later," she continued. "Hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thank you, love. See you later."



Ferro arrived at St Margaret's Church and parked in the small car park next to the building. He grabbed his phone and messenger bag from the passenger seat and jumped out, welcoming the cooler air and squawk of seagulls that reminded him he was by the coast. The front passenger window was still half-open thanks to the broken crank, but if someone were to break in and steal the car, it wouldn't have been the worst thing. He headed inside the church.

He dunked his fingers in the holy water inside the entrance door and crossed himself. He'd not been in this church before, so took a moment to appreciate his surroundings. Small and quaint, with parts – he'd read – tracing back to the reign of William the Conqueror, the church had a short nave with half a dozen mahogany pews down each side and a beautiful timber-beamed ceiling arching overhead. Light spilled into the church in a spectrum of warm colours from a large stained glass window behind the altar, which depicted Jesus and the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

There was no one here. Ferro checked his pocket watch –

he was on time. He took a seat in a pew near the back of the church to wait. He closed his eyes and prayed.

"Mr Ferro?" a man said gently.

Ferro opened his eyes. A thin man in a black shirt and trousers with a clerical collar stood over him. He looked young, perhaps late twenties, early thirties, but his hair was already receding – poor chap.

"Yes," replied Ferro, standing up to greet him.

"Hi, I'm Reverend Thomas. Welcome. Thank you for coming."

They shook hands.

"Thank *you*. This is a beautiful little church."

The reverend smiled. "Yes, it is. A lot of history too. More history, in fact, than we thought."

"Yes, so I understand."

"Come with me, please."

Ferro followed Reverend Thomas into the vestry, a tiny room with a kitchenette, storage cabinets, a table and two chairs in the centre, and another door, probably leading to a toilet.

"Take a seat," said the reverend. "Cup of tea? Coffee?"

"A peppermint tea, if you have one, please."

Reverend Thomas prepared drinks and placed them on the table. Then he unlocked one of the storage cabinets and removed a clump of old-looking papers, loosely held together with frayed string, with a brown leather bookmark sticking out of the top. He handed them to Ferro.

"We found those papers during renovations of the crypt, hidden in a secret compartment in the wall. A compartment that we suspect nobody has opened since the 12th century."

"What are they?"

"The chronicles of a Benedictine choir monk called Father Jerome. He was writing during the reign of Henry I, William II's successor, from Canterton Priory in the New Forest, a monastery that fell victim, sadly, to Henry VIII. I've been studying them. They provide a fascinating insight into what life was like for monks in that period. But when you get to February 1105, that's when things become rather more disturbing, surreal even. In fact, Father Jerome stopped writing immediately after, which is when he must've hidden the manuscript. I've bookmarked the relevant section. You

said you can read Latin?"

"I can, yes."

"Then by all means. I'm keen to hear your thoughts."

Ferro removed the string and went to the section that was bookmarked.

This evening, after Vespers, I was called to the village to administer the Last Rites to Purkis the charcoal-burner. It was an extraordinary and deeply troubling conversation.

Purkis believed that our Lord was punishing him. That was why He saw fit to take away his wife, Cecilia, and his daughter, Eva. That was why Purkis himself now lay on his deathbed.

I asked what Purkis could have done to warrant such punishment and he confessed to being responsible for the death of King William II, brother to the present king. I asked him how. He told me that one afternoon, five years ago, he wished the king dead. That same afternoon, the king was killed.

I asked Purkis if he shot the fatal arrow himself. He said no, but that he had seen it happen. He had been collecting wood nearby and witnessed a confrontation between His Grace and a man who used a false name, "Walter Tyrrell". Strangely, both spoke the common tongue and Purkis was able to understand their conversation.

According to Purkis, this man, Tyrrell, questioned His Grace about a book. The king pretended, at first, to know nothing of this book, but later admitted otherwise and said he had hidden it. Tyrrell demanded to know of the book's location. His Grace refused and Tyrrell released his arrow, piercing the king through the breast and killing him.

Afterwards, Purkis described Tyrrell removing a flat, black, rectangular object from his tunic, placing it to his ear and talking to it, or himself, about having killed the king. What he did next was even stranger. He removed a small pot from his tunic, opened it and took out a tiny red stone, which he proceeded to swallow. A white, silent light burst from where he stood, blinding Purkis momentarily. When his eyes could see again they searched for the man who had killed the king. But he was, by some heinous spell, gone. Purkis said he would have heard footsteps if Tyrrell had walked or run away, but he did not. It is Purkis's belief that Tyrrell used a dark and forbidden magic to make himself disappear.

Purkis is dead. I must now decide what to do with the knowledge he has bequeathed to me. My hope is that the Lord will guide me to a right and just decision.

Ferro felt a rush of adrenaline. This was huge. He knew it in his bones.

He placed the papers on the table. His throat was dry. He drained his cup of tea, the peppermint crisp and cold at the back of his throat.

“So, what do you make of it?” said Reverend Thomas. “It almost sounds like Tyrrell was talking on a phone! Which is impossible, I know.”

“Yes.” Ferro picked up the papers. “Can I borrow these?”

“What for?”

“I want to get some tests run on them to prove their age.”

“Won’t the British Library do that?”

“Yes, but I can do it faster. I have a friend who can do it.”

“Mr Ferro, these are important historical records. I’m sure you can appreciate that, being a history tutor. I’m uncomfortable handing them over to someone I just met.”

“You have my word that I’ll return them.”

“Yes, but with respect, I don’t know what your word is worth.”

Ferro sighed. “Alright. What if I made a donation to your church?”

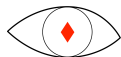
“I’m listening.”

“Five hundred pounds, and I’ll return the manuscript to you in three weeks – maximum.”

“Make it a thousand, and you have yourself a deal.”

Ferro chewed on this, leaning back in his chair, sighing heavily. He had to walk out of there with those papers, and Reverend Thomas could tell how much he needed them. But all he kept thinking was, *Beth will eat me for breakfast.*

He stuck out his chin, scratched his beard and extended his hand for a handshake. “Deal.”



Ferro decided, driving home, that he wasn’t going to tell Beth. He’d transferred the money from some savings he had – she’d never know. And now, tucked up safely in his messenger bag on the passenger seat, was a manuscript that could change everything.

Stopping for a late dinner at a service station, he got home

at gone eleven. Beth and his two teenagers, Maggie and Ryan, were all asleep, or at least he thought they were. Walking past his daughter's room, floor creaking as he went, he heard Maggie say quietly, "Night, Dad."

He whispered loudly, "Night, sweetheart," and creaked into his bedroom.

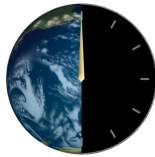
Beth stirred as he undressed and climbed into bed. He kissed her cheek with a soft, "Goodnight, my love," and lay down next to her. Not that he was expecting to get much sleep with the implications of Purkis's deathbed confession turning over and over in his head.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Beth replied sleepily.

"I think I found the first piece," Ferro murmured.

"The first piece of what?"

"Something big."



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ABOUT C.R. BERRY

C.R. Berry caught the writing bug at the tender age of four and has never recovered. His earliest stories were filled with witches, monsters, evil headteachers, Disney characters and the occasional Dalek. He realised pretty quickly that his favourite characters were usually the villains. He wonders if that's what led him to become a criminal lawyer. It's certainly why he's taken to writing conspiracy thrillers, where the baddies are numerous and everywhere.

After a few years getting a more rounded view of human nature's darker side, he quit lawyering and turned to writing full-time. He now works as a freelance copywriter and novelist and blogs about conspiracy theories, time travel and otherworldly weirdness.

He was shortlisted in the 2018 Grindstone Literary International Novel Competition and has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Storgy*, *Dark Tales*, *Theme of Absence* and *Suspense Magazine*. He was also shortlisted in the Aeon Award Contest, highly commended by Writers' Forum, and won second prize in the inaugural To Hull and Back Humorous Short Story Competition.

He grew up in Farnborough, Hampshire, a town he says has as much character as a broccoli. He's since moved to the "much more interesting and charming" Haslemere in Surrey.

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