

Wien, Dienstag, den 30. Juni 1914.

Redaktion: Wien, IX/1, Pramerstraße 29.  
Tel. 12906, Tele-Ed. 14330. Manuskripte werden...

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principals in Tragedy

INTERNATIONAL  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

BEN ELTON

TIME

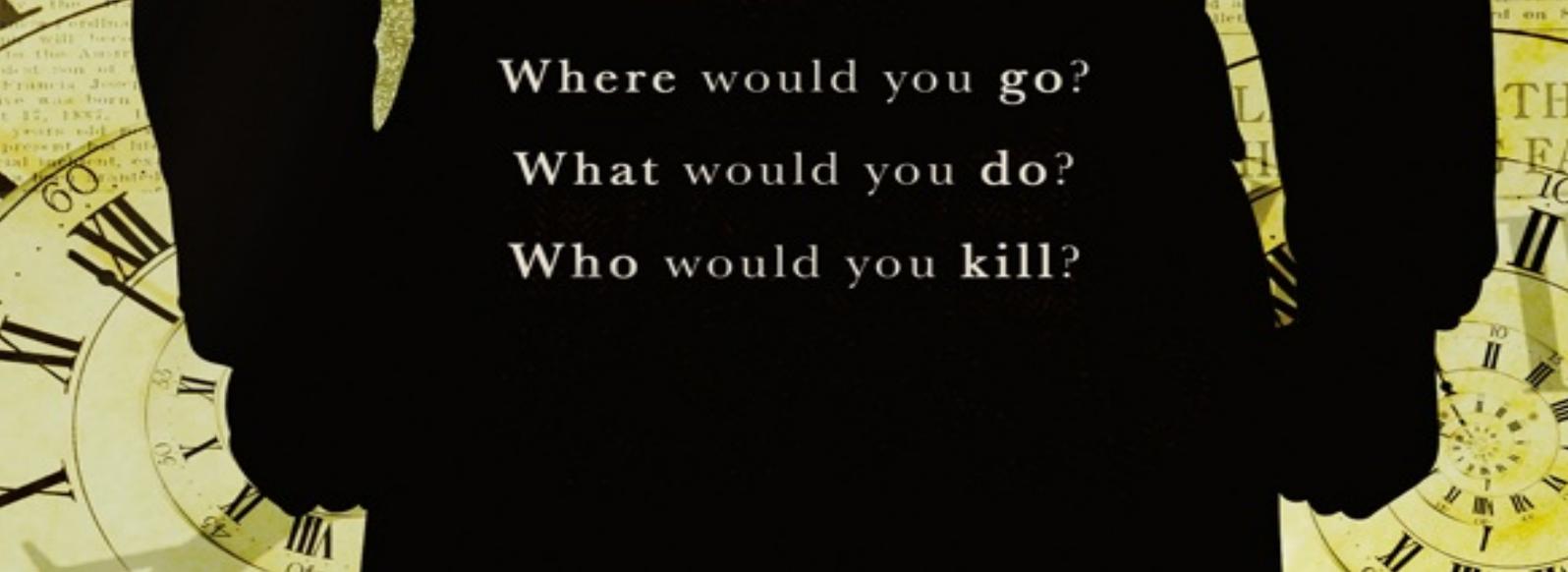
AND TIME AGAIN

If you had one chance  
to change history...

Where would you go?

What would you do?

Who would you kill?



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# TIME AND TIME AGAIN

BEN ELTON



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To History teachers.  
History was my favourite subject at  
school – and has been ever since

# Historical note

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In 1687 Sir Isaac Newton published his *Principia*, a work generally acknowledged to be the most influential publication in the history of science. In the book, Newton described his three laws of motion and thus revolutionized human understanding of the physical universe.

Six years later in 1692 Newton suffered a nervous breakdown. The symptoms included insomnia, deep depression and debilitating paranoia. This crisis in Newton's life is known as his 'Black Year', a period during which even his closest friends and associates thought he had gone insane.

Newton eventually recovered his mental faculties but had seemingly lost all interest in science. He turned his attention instead to the study of alchemy and the search for hidden meanings in the Bible.

In 1696 he became a civil servant, taking an administrative job at the Royal Mint. The world's greatest physicist, mathematician and natural philosopher was to remain in this position until his death, thirty years later.

The cause of Newton's breakdown and his subsequent retirement from science was not known during his lifetime and remained a mystery thereafter.

\* \* \*

Newton's Epitaph by Alexander Pope:

*Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night;  
God said, 'Let Newton be' and all was light.*

IN CONSTANTINOPLE, on a bright, chill early morning in June 1914, Hugh Stanton, retired British army captain and professional adventurer, leant against the railings of the Galata Bridge and stared into the waters below. There was a stiff breeze blowing and the early light sparkling on the gun-metal river made the choppy crests twinkle like stars.

Stanton half closed his eyes and forgot for a moment that this was the mouth of the Bosphorus, an ancient sewer of Byzantium, and imagined instead a heavenly firmament. A faraway galaxy dotted with infinite points of divine light. A gateway to an incandescent oblivion.

Opening his eyes wide once more he saw the river for the poisonous shit soup that it was and turned away. If he ever did decide to kill himself a bullet would be quicker and a great deal cleaner.

The morning traffic creaked and rattled across the newly metalled bridge and Stanton found his eye focusing on a woman in a burka on the opposite side. She had been bending low over the sweets and pastries on display at a coffee stall and now she turned away, a billowing black cloud followed by a small girl and an even smaller boy, both clutching paper bags into which they dipped sugar-coated fingers.

Stanton realized to his surprise that he was crying. Tears that had been prickling behind his eyes for months were all of a sudden glistening on his cheeks. Those children were so very like his own. Different colouring and clothing, of course, but in scale and attitude they could have been his Tess and Bill. Even the way the little girl put her hand on her brother's shoulder to restrain him at the kerb, so proud of being the older and the wiser of the two. That was exactly what Tess would have done. Probably all big sisters were like that.

Angrily he wiped a sleeve across his cheek. He didn't believe in self-pity. Not under any circumstances.

Just then the peace of the morning was disturbed by the throaty roar of an engine as on to the bridge from the northern side skidded an overloaded, open-topped tourer. Stanton recognized the model, a Crossley 20/25. Cars were a passion for him and he knew every British type ever built. The occupants of this one were all young men, well-heeled hooligans on a spree, braying and hollering, clearly still drunk from the night before. *Feringi*. Foreigners bent on mischief, coming down from the Pera district where the Westerner was king.

Pedestrians scurried for the pavements as the car clattered across the bridge, the driver beeping his horn and shouting as if this busy public thoroughfare were his own private driveway. Stanton heard English voices, merry laughter laced with effortless contempt. They were embassy staff perhaps, servicemen in mufti; the British had a lot of military in town, advising the sultan on how to drag his army and navy into the twentieth century. Or, more importantly, trying to stop His Munificence from seeking advice on such matters from the Germans.

The young Muslim family who had been occupying Stanton's attention were in the process of

crossing the street when the car came into view, Mother concentrating on ensuring that the children avoided the various piles of horse dung that lay in their path. Now she swept up the boy with one arm and grabbed the girl with her other and began to hurry them towards the opposite side, a scurrying black flurry of burka and kids.

But then the little girl dropped her bag and, being only about seven and not quite as grown-up and mature as she liked to think, pulled away from her mother to retrieve it. The mother turned back in panic and now the whole family stood in the path of the oncoming car.

The massive machine bore down on them. Nearly fourteen feet long and six wide, it seemed to completely fill the bridge. Almost a ton and a half of wood, glass, rubber, brass and steel, a monster roaring and trumpeting as it approached its kill, the great shining black fender arches framing its huge goggling eyes. The thrusting tusks of its sprung-leaf suspension threatened to skewer any soft flesh and young bone that lay in its path. Black smoke billowed from its rear. Sparks spat from behind its grille. No dragon of ancient legend could have seemed more terrifying or more deadly.

The monster was still perhaps some fifteen yards away from the terrified mother trying to hang on to the squirming little boy while pulling at the girl, who was frozen with fear. Any car Stanton had ever driven would still have had ample time to brake. But this was a very different type of machine with primitive steel and asbestos disc brakes fitted only to the rear wheels. What was more, the stunned-looking youth at the wheel was drunk, and the road was wet with morning mist and covered with slippery horse dung. Even if the driver did manage to hit the brake, the wheels would lock and the beast would surely skid wildly for tens of yards, taking the woman and her little children with it.

These thoughts occurred to Stanton all at once and only in the most fleeting and compressed form for his whole being was already in motion, his body accelerating away from the railing against which he had been leaning with all the energy of a man who by both instinct and training kept himself in a state of permanent physical readiness.

The young mother turned, her coal-black almond eyes staring out from the letterbox window of her face covering, wide with terror as Stanton, having covered most of the distance between them, launched himself into a long dive with arms spread wide. He hit them perhaps a half second before the car would have done, he and the little family passing in front of the oncoming machine with so little time to spare that the fender knocked Stanton's foot as it swept by. He felt himself turning in mid-air as the family still gathered in his arms, causing the whole group to spin almost full circle as they crashed down on to the stones together.

The monster bumped and skidded on its way, horn still tooting and its braying occupants shouting more merrily than ever, pleased if anything with the terror they had caused. It was time sleepy old 'Istanbul', as the locals still insisted on calling it, recognized that the pace of life in Turkey was changing. If they wanted to be a Western nation they'd better learn to act like one, and they could start by getting out of the way of traffic.

Stanton was lying on top of the woman. Her veil had been dislodged and his cheek lay against her. He felt her hot breath gusting past his ear and her breast heaving against his body. The little boy was

half caught between them and the girl stretched out alongside.

He got quickly to his feet. This was Ottoman Turkey after all and the woman was clearly high orthodox. While he couldn't imagine even the most conservative of mullahs taking exception to the physical contact he had been forced to make, it was still an uncomfortable and threatening intimacy. He didn't want an irate husband getting the wrong end of the stick and reaching for the long curved knife so many of the locals wore openly on their belts.

He had a job to do, and currently his first duty was to leave no trace.

He helped the young mother to her feet as she stuttered her thanks. Or at least he presumed they were thanks. She was speaking Turkish, which he recognized but did not understand. However, the gratitude in her eyes as she readjusted her veil would have been clear in any language.

People were gathering round, babbling in a variety of languages. Besides Turkish, Stanton recognized Greek, French and Arabic, and there were certainly others. The Galata Bridge must have been the most cosmopolitan thoroughfare on earth. Babel itself could scarcely have been any more polyglot.

'I'm very sorry, uhm, madam,' Stanton began in English, not quite sure how to address the woman. 'but I don't speak—'

'She's saying thanks, although I'm sure you guessed that,' a voice said at his shoulder. Stanton turned to face a middle-aged man in the ubiquitous linen suit and straw boater of the European nabobs. 'She says you saved her children's lives, and hers, which of course you did. Neat bit of work, I must say. You shot across the bridge like you had the bailiffs after you.'

A man in a uniform pushed his way through the crowd. Stanton thought he was probably a policeman but he may have been some sort of militia or even a postman. Turkish officials loved an extravagant uniform.

He felt someone take his hand and shake it.

Someone else slapped his back.

An old French gentleman seemed to be offering to stand him a drink, although by the look of the man's red and bulbous nose this was more by way of grabbing the excuse to have an early one himself.

This was all wrong. His duty was to pass through the city like a shadow and suddenly he was the epicentre of a crowd. He needed to get away.

But the young mother kept thanking him; holding up her crying children, her big dark eyes shining with gratitude, thanking him over and over again.

'You – my – babies,' she said in slow, faltering English.

Her meaning was clear. He had saved her babies, nothing in the world could be more important.

But he hadn't saved his own.

How could he have done? His family had never even been born.

IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE, in the early morning of Christmas Eve 2024, Hugh Stanton, retired British army captain and professional adventurer, was riding his motorbike through the frozen dawn.

There was thick mist on the ungravelled, icy road and the markings had long since faded from the potholed tarmac. If Stanton had deliberately sought out the most treacherous and deadly conditions which to ride a powerful motorcycle at high speeds he would have struggled to find better.

Which suited him very well.

Death was the only prospect in life to which he was looking forward with any degree of enthusiasm.

It would be such a simple kill too. The road was empty, no other headlight beam illuminated the freezing darkness. There'd be no risk, no collateral damage. A clean hit. Not like on those awful desert operations he'd sweated through back in his army days, when there always seemed to be dead women and babies caught up in the tangled wreckage of exploded Toyotas.

This target was isolated and prone. Stanton had only to action the strike. One tiny turn in the direction of a tree. A little twist on the throttle for good measure, and oblivion.

Except ...

What if there really was a hell?

Stanton was as close to being an atheist as prudence allowed but Cassie had been a Catholic. He therefore had to allow for the faint possibility that hell existed and, if it did, then self-murder would surely condemn him to it. Not that the idea of fire and brimstone bothered him much. An eternity of satanic torture might actually serve as a distraction from his own company, which he was beginning to find almost unbearable. The fear Hades held for Stanton was simply that if there was such a place then it was a certainty that Cassie and the children wouldn't be there.

Angels didn't go to hell.

The possibility of him spending eternity in a different place to his lost family was simply too terrible a thought for him to take a risk on, no matter how remote. Therefore, despite his longing for release, he kept his grip steady on the handlebar and his concentration firmly on the road as the tree ahead shone briefly grey-bright through the misty dark, branches spread wide and welcoming. Like a lover's arms, promising peace.

Stanton flicked on his indicator. The Cambridge turn-off was approaching. He knew the road. He'd ridden it many times as a student, hurtling back from London in the small hours, a takeaway meal clamped between his thighs, feeding himself through the open visor of his helmet.

Now he was returning, on his way to have breakfast with an old tutor, Professor Sally McCluskey, an eminent military historian who had been his favourite teacher as an undergraduate. More than just a favourite, in fact, McCluskey was one of the few people in Stanton's life whom he'd ever felt close to. A large, jolly woman with bloodshot cheeks and a poorly bleached moustache who liked nothing

better than to hog the fire with a drink in her hand and revel in the glorious and bloody past. The McCluskey history was alive and vibrant, a thrilling cavalcade of heroes and villains, deathly plots and brave dreams. She had held weekly debates for her students in her cosy drawing room in Green Court, which she called her 'What ifs?' Long lazy afternoons during which she'd serve beer and crisps and challenge terrified but delighted undergraduates to imagine and justify alternative historical scenarios. Scenarios which, but for chance and luck, might easily have made up the content of her lectures.

Stanton could see her still, standing before the fire, wearing an ancient military greatcoat, which she used as a dressing gown, vast arse placed firmly and unashamedly between the flames and the students. Cheery glass in hand. Barking out her chosen 'What if'.

'Come on, you dozy swine!' she'd boom in a voice that had developed its tone on school hockey fields and been honed to rafter-rattling perfection over decades of coaching ladies' rowing teams on the river Cam. 'What if King George had accommodated the American colonists' demands and allowed them a handful of MPs at Westminster?'

The debate that followed would always be loud and lively and end invariably with McCluskey ignoring her students' efforts at a conclusion and barking out her own.

'Well, there'd have been no bloody War of Independence for a start, and the US would have developed along Canadian and Australian lines. The hamburger would never have been invented, there'd be no chewing gum dotting the pavements, and the world would never have heard of high school massacres. Can you credit it? *America*, lost for the sake of an extra dozen members in the House of Commons. *AMERICA!* The richest prize on the bloody planet. Gone, for want of a few paltot seats on the cross benches. George the bloody Third wasn't just mad, he was *completely tonto!* Bugger him, say I! Who cares if he did a bit of farming and was nice to children? He lost us America and he was an *arse!*'

What fun those long, semi-drunken Sunday afternoons had been. The debates always degenerated into loud, name-calling battles between the Marxists, who contended that much of history was inevitable, the result of preordained economic and material forces, and the romantics, who believed that history was made by individuals and that a single stomach ache or an undelivered love letter could have changed everything.

Professor McCluskey had been firmly in the romantics' camp.

'Men and women make history! Not balance sheets!' she'd shout at some cowering Dialectical Materialist. 'The great and the flawed. The evil and the honourable. Josephine married Bonaparte because her previous lover was threatening to throw her on the street! She *despised* the little Corsican corporal. Is it therefore any wonder that two days into their honeymoon he bugged off to conquer Italy, thus sealing Europe's fate for a generation? If that old town bike had put as much effort into servicing Boney's boner as she put into pleasuring her numerous other lovers he might have hung around screwing her instead of prancing off to screw an entire continent!'

In Stanton's view, Professor Sally McCluskey had really known how to teach history.

He'd kept in touch with her after graduating, maintaining a sporadic email correspondence from the various parts of the world in which he'd found himself, and when her note had arrived asking that he spend Christmas with her at his old college, he'd accepted. Since Cassie and the children's death he had cut himself off entirely from what few old friends he had, but he couldn't help being intrigued by the urgency of the professor's tone.

*I beg you to come, she'd written. We have matters to discuss of the utmost importance.*

He was skirting through the edges of the town now. Early workers were shivering at the bus stop, hunch-backed figures bent in supplication over their phones, each face an ash-grey ghost illuminated by the screen.

It had been fifteen years since Stanton had graduated and Cambridge, like all towns, had become a wind-blown shadow of its former self. Faded signs promised books, toys, pharmacists' and fresh market produce but the only things for sale behind those broken boarded windows were drugs and semiconscious girls. Shops were history, just like horse troughs and suits of armour. Nobody bought their stuff in the physical world any more.

Dawn was breaking as he approached the College. A pale monochrome light gently stirred the frost-crisp sleeping-bag cocoons pupating in the alcoves of the old familiar walls. Venerable stone edifices that had stood since the Tudors. Graffiti-covered now but still deeply stirring to a man like Stanton, who loved the past. Those stones held within them the sonic echo of every footfall and every cry that had ever disturbed the racing molecules at their core. If Stanton had had an instrument sensitive enough he could have listened to the hammer blows on the very cold chisel that had shaped them.

There was a porter at the Great Gate just as there had been when Stanton first arrived in 2006 as an eighteen-year-old undergraduate. There, however, the similarity ended. Gone was the avuncular strawberry-nosed Mr Pickwick figure in a bowler hat emerging from his cosy lodge. The porter who welcomed visitors to College in 2024 sat behind a thick screen of glass and wore a fluorescent yellow high-vis jacket, despite there being scant possibility of anybody bumping into him.

'Look at the camera,' the porter instructed, scarcely glancing up from the game he was playing. 'No fucking way, bro! That is fucked. That is fucking mental.'

Stanton didn't take offence at the tirade; the porter was just communicating with some third party on the phone on which he was playing his game. Undivided attention was a thing of the past; if you got annoyed about people talking to their phones while also dealing with you, your head would explode before lunch. Besides, if you were slightly famous, as Stanton was, it was a sort of blessing. If a person didn't look at you then they wouldn't ask to have a photo with you either.

The iris machine beeped, flashing up Stanton's identity, a barrier opened and he tried to hurry through.

He wasn't quick enough. His fierce blue eyes, lean, weathered, handsome features and closely cropped, sun-bleached hair were unmistakable, particularly to the sort of young man who stared a day at his phone.

‘Oh my God, it’s you, innit?’ the porter said. ‘It’s Guts.’

‘No,’ Stanton replied. ‘Not any more. Just Hugh.’

‘Fuckin’ hell! It is. It’s Guts,’ the porter insisted. ‘Eh, man,’ he went on, now speaking once more to the third party on his phone. ‘You won’t believe who’s standing here. It’s only Guts! Guts Stanton! Yeah! *I know!* Fucking mental!’ The porter addressed himself once more to Stanton. ‘I love your stuff, man. I can’t believe it’s you. This is amazing. Can I get a photo?’

Stanton wanted to say that he was in a bit of a hurry but he knew it would be more trouble than was worth. The young man was already struggling out of his tiny cubicle and Stanton had plenty of experience of ‘fans’ whose adoration turned instantly to outrage and vociferous offence when they considered themselves dissed.

‘Yeah. Fine. No worries. Happy to.’

The porter tried to throw an arm round Stanton’s shoulder but Stanton was well over six feet tall and the porter’s high-vis jacket made it hard for him to raise his arm. He had to settle for grasping Stanton round the waist, which was slightly uncomfortable for both of them. Then he reached out with his other hand and took the selfie.

‘Nice one. Fucking mental,’ the porter said, already thumbing at his phone to post the picture online. ‘What’re you going to have for breakfast then, Guts? Gonna dig up some worms on the quad? That’d do you for the day, wouldn’t it? Plenty of protein to keep your core temperature up.’

‘Yeah, probably,’ Stanton replied.

He hated being famous. He hadn’t asked to be a celebrity, although he knew very well that it had been his own fault nonetheless. And it had been fun for a while – and important in its own small way. Those little survival videos he’d begun posting on the net in an effort to kindle the spirit of adventure in disaffected young people were something he’d enjoyed doing and been proud of. Why should only posh kids get to experience the exhilaration of testing yourself in the wild? He’d wanted to lure a few gangstas out of the ghettos and on to the hills. But then he’d done some cross-promotion with some city charities and youth groups and it had got out of hand. He’d become an internet celebrity and been chucked out of the Regiment for blowing his anonymity. Like they weren’t all scrabbling for publishing deals themselves.

Stanton walked through the arches of the magnificent old gate and into Great Court. That certainly hadn’t changed. It was still ‘great’ by any standards: the chapel on his right and the fountain to his left. The same gravelled paths that had been trod by centuries of undergraduates. A non-stop stream of bright, optimistic young spirits that stretched back for five hundred years. Spirits for whom even sadness and sorrow were living, vibrant things, the stuff of poetry and song. Burning passion, impatient ambition, unrequited love. Not like the sorrows that come later.

Failure. Disillusionment. Regret.

He passed the entrance to the chapel and thought about the names on the memorial to the Great War inside. Sometimes, as a young student, he had sat alone in the darkening evening and read them. All those young men, cut down at their beginning. He’d felt so sad for them then. Now he envied

them; they died at the high tide of life. When the sun was rising.

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*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.*

Lucky bastards.

‘I WAS SO VERY sorry to hear about your terrible loss, Hugh,’ Professor McCluskey said, pouring tea from the same china pot she had used during Stanton’s student days, ‘and I thought since neither of us has anyone to spend Christmas Eve with, we might as well spend it together.’

Stanton accepted the proffered steaming cup but declined to return the warm smile that accompanied it.

‘I’m not really interested in Christmas, professor,’ he replied. ‘Christmas doesn’t mean anything to me any more.’

‘Christmas means the birth of our Saviour,’ McCluskey remarked. ‘That means something surely.’

‘The bastard never saved me.’

‘Perhaps he hasn’t finished with you yet.’

Stanton looked at his old professor long and hard. There were few people he respected more but there were limits.

‘I really hope you didn’t get me here to suggest I take comfort in religion,’ he growled.

‘Not in the slightest,’ McCluskey replied. ‘I don’t think religion should *be* comfortable. That’s where it all went wrong for the Anglicans, trying to be comfortable. Deep down people want fire and brimstone. They want a violent vengeful God who tells them what to do and smites them if they don’t do it. That’s why the Prophet Mohammed’s doing so well these days. I’ve occasionally thought about switching myself. At least Allah’s got a bit of fire in his belly. But you see I could never give up the turps. Speaking of which, drop of brandy? You’ve had a chilly ride.’

It was scarcely eight thirty in the morning and Stanton was about to refuse but McCluskey didn’t wait for a reply before reaching down for the bottle of cognac that was standing on the floor between her swollen ankles. She snorted at the large picture of a diseased liver that government statuary required the bottle to display, then slopped a substantial shot into each teacup. ‘Quite frankly, when it comes to comfort I’ll take booze over faith every time.’

‘I don’t need booze. I’ve had plenty of booze. It doesn’t help.’

‘Still, since it’s Christmas. Cheers!’ The professor chinked her teacup against Stanton’s and having blown loudly on the surface of its contents, drank deep, sighing with satisfaction.

‘All right, prof,’ Stanton said, ‘what’s all this about? Your email said you needed to see me urgently. Why?’

‘You’ve been in Scotland, haven’t you?’ McCluskey asked, ignoring Stanton’s question. ‘I spoke to your colonel.’

‘How the hell does he know where I am? He chucked me out.’

‘They keep tabs on you. Still think you might go blabbing about all your thrilling clandestine missions. You could make a lot of money.’

‘I don’t want to make a lot of money. I never did. They ought to know that. And anyway, even the bastard does know where I am, what’s he doing telling you? I thought the Regiment was supposed to be discreet.’

‘Your colonel was a Trinity man. That sort of thing still counts for something even now.’

Hugh nodded. Of course it did. Even now. With the country torn apart by every kind of division society could produce, sectarian, religious, racial, sexual and financial, those ancient ties still bound you. You had to be born to it to get it, and Stanton’s mother had driven a bus. Cambridge on an army sponsorship had been the first time he’d become aware of the shadowy workings of the Old Boy network and it still took him by surprise.

‘All right then, what do you want?’ he asked. ‘Why did you go looking for me?’

‘Getting there, Hugh, getting there,’ McCluskey replied with that touch of steel in the soft tone that had cowed so many generations of undergraduates. ‘But I’d prefer to come at it in my own way and my own time.’

Stanton bit his lip. Some things never changed. McCluskey was still the professor and he was still the student. You never grew out of that relationship, no matter what happened in later life. McCluskey had taught students who went on to become cabinet ministers, ambassadors and in his case a decorated soldier and celebrity adventurer. But they’d all be eighteen again sitting on that ancient Queen Anne chair with those wild, bloodshot eyes drilling into them from beneath the great tangled eyebrows. McCluskey’s Hedges they were called, now painted a quite ridiculous jet black. Stanton wondered why if she could be bothered to paint them she didn’t also trim them a bit. He took a sip of his tea. Even through the taste of cognac he recognized the leaf McCluskey always served. English Breakfast infused with strawberry. He hadn’t tasted it in fifteen years.

‘I’ve been in the Highlands,’ he conceded. ‘Up in the remote north-west. In a tent on the hill above Loch Maree.’

‘Chilly.’

‘A bit.’

‘Scourging and purging, eh?’

‘I just thought some serious physical discomfort might be a distraction.’

‘Which of course it wasn’t.’

‘No.’

‘Bloody stupid idea.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘If you’re going to mope about, you might as well do it with the heating on.’

‘I suppose I was kind of hoping I might die of hunger or exposure.’

‘Goodness gracious! Really? Then why don’t you just shoot yourself?’

‘I don’t believe in suicide.’

‘Ahh. In case there’s an afterlife. I understand. So you thought if you pitted yourself against the elements, Mother Nature might do the job for you and dispatch you to oblivion without a stain on your

conscience?’

---

‘Yes, I suppose that’s what I had in mind.’

‘But unfortunately you’re “Guts” Stanton. The man nothing can kill. Too much edible lichen on the rocks. Still some sea trout beneath the ice for you to impale with a sharpened biro. Enough twigs and heather to weave a life-preserving windbreak. We all loved your shows here at College, Hugh. *Terribly* proud. Undergrads are always asking about you. I tell them you used to catch rats with your bare hands during lectures and eat them raw.’

‘I caught *one* rat,’ Stanton replied, ‘and I certainly didn’t eat it. That probably *would* have killed me.’

‘Well, you can’t help your legend growing. *Guts Versus Guts*. Brilliant show. I downloaded all of it. Even paid for it. Well, it was for charity.’

Stanton winced. *Guts Versus Guts* had been a good enough *idea* for a title. None of this *Man Against the Wild* stuff, that was just bullshit. In Stanton’s experience *Man* was never *against* the *Wild* because the *Wild* didn’t care if you lived or died. When man tested himself against Nature that was exactly what he was doing, testing *himself*. Which was why Stanton had given his little video hobby the title that he had. But it had been stupid to use his old army nickname. It was all very well for your mates to say you were one crazy, fearless motherfucker and name you ‘Guts’, but it was just showing off to use the name in the title of a webcast.

‘Anyway,’ McCluskey went on in something slightly less than her usual booming volume, ‘just to say sorry and all that. About the accident. Commiserations ... meant to write when I heard about it. Dreadful business.’

McCluskey was stirring extra sugar into her tea and looking very uncomfortable.

‘Accident? I don’t see it as an accident,’ Stanton replied. ‘It was murder.’

McCluskey looked up from her cup. ‘Murder, Hugh? Really?’

‘Well, what else would you call a mum and two kids getting wiped out in a hit and run? On a zebra crossing?’

‘Well, yes, put like that—’

‘As far as I’m concerned it was murder, and if I could I’d give each of them the death sentence and carry it out myself.’

‘And I’d hold your coat,’ McCluskey replied. ‘But they never found them? All four got cleared away?’

‘Yeah. Back to whatever crack house or meth lab they came from.’

Stanton held out his mug. McCluskey splashed more brandy into it.

‘So you’ve just cut yourself off then,’ McCluskey asked, ‘from your previous life?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘What about friends?’

‘I never had a lot of friends. In my job it was easier.’

‘Family then?’

Stanton eyed McCluskey with a hint of suspicion.

‘Is there a point to this?’

‘Just making conversation, Hugh.’

‘I don’t think you are. I think you want to know.’

‘In that case,’ McCluskey replied sternly, ‘you might do me the courtesy of giving me an answer.’

Amazing, she’d turned the tables and put him on the back foot in half a second. He’d faced down bears in the wild but he couldn’t face down McCluskey over a cup of tea. You didn’t get to be the first female Master of Trinity without knowing how to run a conversation.

‘I know your mother’s dead,’ she went on. ‘Ciggies, wasn’t it?’

‘Lung cancer, yes.’

‘Good for her. If you’re going to get killed might as well get killed by something you love. And you’re an only child, of course. Father still around?’

‘Don’t know. Don’t care. Never knew him. Now come on, professor, what is—’

‘And your wife’s family?’ McCluskey ploughed on, refusing to be drawn. ‘Surely they’d be your family too now. United in grief and all that.’

Stanton shrugged, no point fighting it.

‘Tact never was your strong point was it, professor? All right. Since you insist. No, I’m not close to Cassie’s mum and dad. They’re New Agers, hippies really. They never came to terms with the daughter marrying a soldier, particularly one from Special Forces, who they think are just terrorists in uniform. And the webcast thing pissed them off even more; thought I was encouraging yobbos to kill endangered species. They never liked me, and Cassie dying didn’t change that. I haven’t seen them since the funeral.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Excellent? Why excellent? Where’s this going, prof?’

‘All in good time, Hugh,’ McCluskey replied. ‘The weather’s dreadful and we’ve got all day. So where have you been living in general? I know you haven’t been home and you can’t have spent three months on Loch Maree. Even you couldn’t have survived the deep freeze we had last November.’

‘Oh, I’ve been here and there,’ Stanton replied. ‘Guest houses, travel lodges. Bit of sleeping rough. I find moving on passes the time.’

‘Passes the time until what?’

‘Till I die, I suppose.’

‘So you’re just giving up?’

‘What’s to give up? The world’s a mess, I’ve got no interest in it and I’ve got no interest in myself either.’

‘And what would Cassie think about that?’

‘Cassie isn’t thinking about anything. She’s dead.’

‘You’re a soldier, Hugh. Even if they did chuck you out. Good soldiers don’t give up.’

Stanton smiled. That wasn’t the sort of sentiment you heard a lot these days. Even in the army of

fashioned notions such as courage and honour were viewed with deep suspicion. Not ‘inclusive enough.’

There was a knock at the door. Breakfast had arrived.

‘There you go, Sally,’ one of the caterers said as the professor signed for the food. ‘Enjoy, Sal.’

Stanton had never heard McCluskey addressed by her first name before, let alone heard it reduced from Sally to Sal.

‘Ah yes,’ McCluskey remarked once the caterers had left. ‘I’m Sal all right. There are no exceptions in the new cultural egalitarianism. But the funny thing is that no matter how many times everybody uses each other’s first name, the rich still get richer and the poor still get poorer and nobody actually gives a damn about anyone. Ain’t life grand?’

‘Look, professor,’ Stanton said, accepting a plate of fried breakfast, ‘are you going to tell me why you asked me here or aren’t you?’

‘I’m going to try, Hugh, but when you’ve heard me out I think you’ll concede that it’s not a simple thing to explain.’

‘Have a crack at it.’

McCluskey helped herself to some bacon and eggs, on top of which, to Stanton’s disgust, she drizzled honey. ‘I knew getting into this was going to be difficult,’ she said through a mouth full of food. ‘Let’s start with this. If you could change *one* thing in history, if you had the opportunity to go back into the past, to one place and one time and change one thing, where would you go? What would you do?’

‘Professor, you know bloody well I’d—’

‘Hugh, *not* you personally. You can’t go back to the street in Camden and stop your wife and children from stepping into the road. I want an *objective* not a subjective answer. This isn’t about you and your private tragedy. It’s about us and our *global* tragedy. About humanity.’

‘Screw humanity. I don’t give the whole stinking bunch of us more than a couple of generations and good riddance. The universe is better off without us.’

‘But surely we’re not irredeemable?’ McCluskey suggested.

‘Aren’t we?’

‘Of course not. No race that could produce Shakespeare and Mozart is irredeemable. We’ve just lost our way, that’s all. But what if you could give us a chance to do better? Just one chance. One single move in the great game of history. What’s your best shot? What would you consider to be the greatest mistake in world history and, more to the point, what single thing would you do to prevent it?’

‘All human history has been a disaster,’ Stanton insisted. ‘If you want to fix it, go back a couple of hundred thousand years and shoot the first ape that tries to get up and walk on two feet.’

‘Not good enough. I won’t accept lazy apocalyptic cop-outs. I want a proper answer, argued from the facts.’

‘Missing your students, prof?’ Stanton asked. ‘Can’t survive the holiday without one of you?’

“What ifs”?”

‘If you like.’

‘I don’t much. I’m not really in the mood for games.’

‘You’re not in the mood for anything. You told me you were just passing the time till you die so clearly you don’t have anything better to do. What’s more, it’s Christmas and it’s minus ten outside. Why not indulge me? Eat your brekkie. Have another cognac and do a favour to a lonely old bitch who’s fancied a bit of company and knew you’d be free because you’re even more lonely than she is.’

Stanton looked out of the window once more. There was a big storm brewing and even to a man who didn’t care if he lived or died, Christmas Eve in a Travelodge was an unpleasant prospect. McCluskey’s sitting room was warm and filled with lots of comforting-looking things, things that dated to a time before he or Cassie or the children had ever existed. Books, pictures, antiques. He closed his eyes and sipped his tea and cognac. It occurred to him that he was already slightly drunk. But it was a nice mellow sort of high, the first booze buzz he’d enjoyed since ...

He shut the thought from his mind and focused on McCluskey.

‘All right, professor,’ he said, ‘since it’s Christmas.’

‘Then game on!’ McCluskey said, clapping her yellow, nicotine-stained hands together. ‘Come on. Best shot. What is humanity’s biggest mistake? Its worst disaster?’

As if on cue, there was an alarming rattle at the window and a squall of heavy hail crashed against the glass, threatening to smash it in. The two of them turned to watch as icy stones the size of marbles began bouncing off the pane, which fortunately had been reinforced against what was becoming a common occurrence.

‘Well, there’s your answer, I reckon,’ Stanton said. ‘Climate change. Got to be the big one, hasn’t it? Earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, floods, tornadoes, mini bloody ice ages. The Gulf Stream gets turned off and suddenly East Sussex is Northern Canada. A couple more years of failed harvests and the whole world will almost certainly starve.’

‘Climate change is a *consequence*, Hugh,’ McCluskey replied sternly. ‘A consequence of global warming, which is *also* a consequence. A consequence of burning carbon, which among other things powers our cars. Would you uninvent cars?’

‘Not me, prof, I’m a petrolhead, you know that. I reckon a perfectly tuned V8 engine’s worth a couple of icebergs any time.’

‘Central heating then? Refrigerated food? Incubators for the premature? Stair lifts for the infirm? We don’t normally think of those things as *disasters*, do we? But they all contribute to global warming. Shall we uninvent them?’

Stanton felt a familiar sensation, one he hadn’t felt since he was twenty-one, the sense of McCluskey running rings around him.

‘Well, it’s a matter of scale, isn’t it?’ he said, struggling to hold his own. ‘Of course, there are lots of benefits, but the fact is that ever since the industrial revolution—’

‘Would you call *that* a disaster?’ McCluskey interrupted, pouncing gleefully. ‘Would you prevent

it? That thing that brought health and plenty to untold billions? Cheap food, cheap clothes, cheap power. Levels of comfort delivered to entire *populations* that previously not even *kings* had enjoyed. Besides which, you couldn't prevent it even if you wanted to. The industrial revolution wasn't a single event, it was the result of any number of scientific and technological breakthroughs. No one thing began it, not even the Spinning Jenny, despite what was once taught in schools, and I'm only allowing you to change *one* thing. So, sorry, Hugh, no good, you'll have to try again.'

Stanton actually laughed. He hadn't laughed in over six months. It felt strange. But also liberating.

'Come on then, professor, out with it.'

'Out with what?'

'It's pretty obvious you've decided on your own answer. You're just waiting to shoot me down in flames a few times before you tell me what it is. Just like you did to us when we were students. I couldn't say anything. The invention of gun powder. Splitting the atom. Taking small pox to the New World and bringing back syphilis. The Romans coming up with decent plumbing then ruining it by using lead pipes. And you'd tell me they were all wrong because you know where this is heading.'

McCluskey drained her teacup and splashed another shot of cognac into it.

'Well, you're right and you're wrong, Hugh,' she admitted. 'I do have the answer, but I certainly don't know where this is heading, no one on earth could know that. But I know where it *began*. In this very room, as a matter of fact. Possibly in these very chairs. Two hundred and ninety-seven years ago.'

Stanton did the mental arithmetic.

'1727?'

'1727 indeed.'

McCluskey pushed away her half-finished plate and put her Nike-clad feet up on a little padded footstool. Then, with stubby brown-stained fingers she filled an ancient tar-coated pipe with tobacco which she appeared to keep loose in the pocket of her greatcoat.

'Don't mind if I smoke while you're still eating, do you? Illegal, of course, within fifty metres of a person or a building, but what's the point being Master of Trinity if you can't be master of your own sitting room?'

'I don't mind,' Stanton replied. 'I did two tours in the Mid East; everybody smoked, including me.'

'Well, I do think you need a pipe to tell a good story.'

'You're going to tell me a story?'

'I'm going to tell you the first half of one, Hugh. The second half hasn't been written yet.'

TWO HUNDRED AND ninety-seven years before Stanton returned to his old university to visit the Master of Trinity, another ex-student, and one rather more eminent, had stood at the lodge door with the same intention.

The Master's Lodge had been quite new then, a relatively recent addition to the College, scarcely a century old. Not much older in fact than the ex-student himself, who was eighty-four, an immense age for the time. The old man had gout and a suspected kidney stone but he had nonetheless come all the way from the comfort of his niece's home in London, where he was spending his final years, in order to deliver a package of papers and a letter.

A letter to Professor McCluskey.

The old man had hoped to be discreet about his arrival at College but a hundred eyes had stared from leaded windows as he made his slow progress across the Great Court. Word, he knew, would be spreading like wildfire. After all, he was a very famous man and that fame had been established here in Cambridge, at Trinity. He was, without doubt, the College's most celebrated son, and in all probability would ever remain so.

It was he who had brought order to the universe.

The laws of motion. The movement of planets. The nature and substance of light. Optics, calculus, telescopics and, above all, gravity were all areas of understanding that the searchlight of the old man's mind had revealed to an astonished world. Small wonder then that crowds of young men in black gowns had thrown down their books and come scuttling from their various rooms and chambers anxious to catch a glimpse of a legend, to be for a moment close to the very epicentre of modern practical philosophy, long gowns flapping like wings as they scurried across the quad. A swarm of intellectual moths drawn to the blinding light of true genius.

But that light was fading now. Sir Isaac Newton's eyes were dimming. Pain racked his body and torment troubled his extraordinary mind. It was this torment that had led him to make the taxing journey back to Trinity. To deliver the letter and the package of notes into the care of Richard Bentley, the Master of the College.

Having entered the lodge, leaving the crowd of chattering students outside, Newton paused in the hallway while a servant took his coat. He glanced ruefully up at the long sweeping stairway he knew he still had to climb.

The Master appeared at the top of the stairs, his arms thrown wide in salutation.

'Welcome, Sir Isaac! You do your alma mater and my house a great honour.'

Newton grunted and patted the ornate banister. 'It's every bit as ridiculous as word has it,' he said.

Richard Bentley winced. His decision to install a spectacular new staircase in the Trinity Master's Lodge had been a matter of considerable controversy.

'The cost has been much exaggerated,' Bentley replied primly.

‘One can only hope so,’ Newton muttered, putting an unsteady foot on the first step, ‘or I doubt Trinity will be buying any actual books for a while.’

‘Ha! There speaks His Majesty’s Master of the Mint,’ Bentley said, but rather too loudly and pretending to laugh. ‘I hope you haven’t come here in your official capacity, Sir Isaac. Am I to be audited?’

‘I do not *audit*, Mr Bentley. I am not a *clerk*.’

‘I was being merry, Sir Isaac.’

‘Then I envy you that ability,’ Newton said, puffing as he laboured up the last of the stairs. ‘I am come not in any official capacity, Mr Bentley, but on an entirely personal matter. A matter, in fact, of the *utmost* privacy.’

‘You intrigue me, sir.’

‘So private that it will require the swearing of a solemn and binding oath of secrecy.’

‘My goodness, how exciting.’

‘It is. But not for us.’

Bentley helped the great man into his drawing room where wine was served, after which Newton instructed Bentley to dismiss all the servants and lock the doors.

‘Now draw the curtains if you will, sir, and light a candle,’ Newton said. ‘For this thing which must remain in darkness should begin in darkness.’

Bentley couldn’t help smiling at the old man’s sense of drama. Newton was well over eighty, after all, and perhaps approaching the doddering senility of Shakespeare’s seventh age.

When the room had been rendered suitably dark and mysterious, Newton produced a cross and made Bentley swear an oath upon it.

‘Do you, Richard Bentley, on your honour as Master of Trinity College and before God as a Christian gentleman, swear that all that passes between us in this room will *remain* in this room and no word or hint of it shall ever be divulged to another soul, save to one person and that be in a letter to your successor?’

Bentley agreed.

‘Kiss the cross and repeat your promise,’ Newton demanded.

Again Bentley did as he was told, but this time the indulgent smile was replaced with just a hint of impatience. Newton might be universally acknowledged as the greatest mind in England and probably all the world but he, Bentley, had written the celebrated *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris* which was no small thing either.

‘There, Mr Bentley,’ Newton said. ‘You are become a Companion of the Order of Chronos. The first of their number! Unless you count me, which I suppose we should. So let us say the second of their number.’

Bentley gave a spacious wave as if to indicate that he was content to be number two. ‘Chronos, God of Time?’

‘The very same, Mr Bentley.’

Newton settled himself into the beautiful new Queen Anne winged chair on which he was sitting and took a sip of claret. ‘You will recall,’ he began, ‘that many years ago, at the time when first we corresponded on theological matters, I had some disturbance of the mind?’

Bentley nodded uneasily. He was indeed aware. There could have been few members of Britain’s intellectual establishment who hadn’t known about the nervous breakdown Newton had suffered thirty years earlier at the height of his fame. Or the deranged and paranoid letters he had written at the time to both friends and rivals, letters filled with wild accusations of conspiracy and betrayal. Or the day-long talk of alchemy and the search for hidden messages in the Bible, which had led many to conclude that Newton’s mind was gone for ever.

‘The world believes I had a fit,’ the old man went on. ‘That my mind was crazed with madness.’

‘You were over-worked, Sir Isaac,’ Bentley said soothingly.

‘They thought me mad, Bentley,’ Newton snapped, ‘and well I might have been, for what I discovered should have driven anyone to lunacy.’

‘Discovered, Sir Isaac? But all the world knows what you discovered and you are rightly lionized for it.’

‘The world knows only what I *published*, Mr Bentley.’

For the first time Bentley’s supercilious manner deserted him.

‘You mean,’ he asked, ‘there’s more?’

The great philosopher was silent for a moment. The creases on his thin, lined face deepened a little and the heels of his shoes tapped on the parquet floor. He scratched absent-mindedly at that famous long, lean nose, then passed the hand beneath his wig to scratch his head.

‘You remember how it was a year before my madness,’ Newton began, ‘when you delivered your little lecture ... what was it called?’

‘A *Confutation of Atheism*,’ Bentley said. ‘Though I venture “little” is too small a word. It was after all considered the most—’

‘Yes, yes,’ Newton interrupted. ‘Whatever its size, in it you sought to show that my work *proved* the existence of God. That my great theory of planetary movement self-evidently required the hand of an *intelligent designer*, the architect of all things.’

‘Yes I did, Sir Isaac. I treasure the letters of approval you sent to me at the time.’

‘Well, I was grateful for your intervention. Some called me a heretic then. Many still do.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t put it as strongly as—’

‘Don’t mollycoddle me, Mr Bentley. A heretic is what they call me. But just because I question the theology of the Trinity doesn’t mean I’m not a Christian man.’

‘Sir Isaac, is this really the place to...’ Bentley could see that Newton was about to go off on his infamous and downright dangerous hobbyhorse.

‘The trinity is a mathematical impossibility!’ Newton barked, slapping the little table on which his glass was standing and upsetting his wine. ‘Three separate entities *cannot* also be the same thing. Three peas cannot also be one pea! Any more than can a father, a son and a holy ghost. Such a thing

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