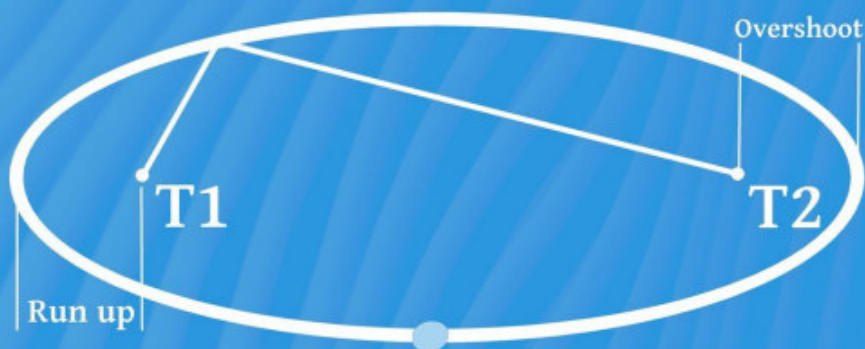


Time T_1
and T_2



again T_2

Merlin Smallbone

Time and again

On his sixteenth birthday orphan Tristram is told he can have a legacy of millions if he will research time travel. For the next five years he studies Maths and Physics hard, and from then on runs a research company. It's quite stressful but he's young, rich and happily married. Some events are impossible to dismiss as dreams brought on by obsession. Soon others are trying to steal his secrets and it gets quite unpleasant. After making a theoretical breakthrough he's had enough but there's no peace as previously mysterious events are explained and his sad fate which he knew about from the beginning becomes reality.

In this book I'm looking at a number of time related issues. For example if the future is determined then freewill is an illusion, premonitions might be real but humans have to be ghosts before they could travel.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems, short stories. Visit vulpeculox.net/books for details.



Preview

The full version of [Time and Again](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 162 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

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Time and Again

by

Merlin Smallbone

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Notes about editions

Publisher's note

As far as the publisher is aware this is the first edition published in this time-frame although, for reasons that will be explained, this is the fourth edition as far as we know in all time-frames.

Preface to fourth edition

On St. Valentine's day 2014 a white plastic dodecahedron about the size of a football appeared on the lawn of Griffin Grange. One face was marked 'press here'. It turned out to be the first of over forty steps needed to unlock it. After a month I found out how to open it. Inside was DVD and a hand-written list of winners of the Grand National meeting from 2000 to 2025. I risked two pounds on an accumulator bet at three different bookies. I've had no more luck than Mister Clark tracing any of the people mentioned but I do have four and a half million pounds. I purchased the other half of Griffin Grange, demolished it and the whole site will soon be old-people's flats.

*Merlin Smallbone, Aix en
Provence, November 2014*

Preface to first edition

On St. Valentine's day 2014 a white plastic dodecahedron about the size of a football appeared on my lawn. One face was marked 'press here'. It turned out to be the first of over forty steps needed to unlock it. After a month I found out how to open it. Inside was USB memory stick and a hand-written list of winners of the Grand National meeting from 2000 to 2025. I risked a pound on an accumulator bet. With the money I tried to trace Nottages and Digger Lawson but so far without success.

*Arthur Clark, Griffin Grange,
November 2014*

My first fifteen years

I had arranged to spend half term with one of the day boys, Nottage. It might be muddy November but Mister Nottage said he would take us to construction sites. Gordon was good at higher maths and hoping to go to the Royal Academy of music but totally hopeless at working out volumes of trenches and the difference between sand and gravel. I was practical and hopeless at playing the piano or any other instrument but then Gordon couldn't organise a concert like I could. Of course I have to make everything happen myself and get sneered at for the drudgery of the publicity and tickets while he is the darling of the musical mafia mothers. Still, he realises it's unfair and does try to make it up to me. Like in the black and white films, he's the decent officer and I'm the plucky tommy.

Gordon's dad got me into crosswords and bridge, failed at getting me excited about breeding tomato plants and asked me to help him with plans for new steps down to their tennis court. I was doing O-level technical drawing so this was my first commission! I volunteered to help with the tree-cutting, root-pulling, shuttering and pouring because what else was I going to do? I was sent in turns to relatives in the school holidays. None of them had a car, none of them had children my age, none of them seemed to be interested in anything. Spinster

Auntie Rose had tea-rooms in Chipping Norton. On Wednesday afternoons we went by bus to Banbury for a walk by the river in the park if it was fine or cinema if it was wet. By the end of the holiday's I'd be accepted by the local children as a circus exhibit with strange ideas to be made fun of. The Christmas holidays were always at Torquay where Auntie Fern and Uncle Dick were delighted to see me, take me to the Co-op dairy where Uncle Dick worked, take me to Corbuts commercial garage where Auntie Fern worked, and spend lots of time smiling and making jokes I never understood. Their accent was foreign to me, not that I disliked it and not that I disliked their well-meaning suggestions but it was like a left-handed person trying to be right-handed. I wanted to operate the machinery at the dairy. I wanted to find out how trucks were maintained and how people mended them, but everything was 'see the fun but don't touch'. Easter was spent at uncle Sam's police house in a village on bitterly cold flat Lincolnshire. Auntie Violet had died suddenly and now there was a busy and happy 'Auntie Janice' who was as good as Mrs Uncle Sam. He tried to interest me in police work and growing things and his hundred relatives in every lane in every village. At least there were always some mates that were almost family to join in with go-carting or throwing stones or fishing in the drain or visiting the level crossing in the hope that the signalman would show us the complicated procedure of levers, buttons and lights that kept trains safe. Last Easter I asked about relays and interlocking frames. It was like Einstein

had appeared in the signal box! The signalman arranged for me to visit when the 'S-and-T' man came and I shared an hour being shown relays in glass cases and how cables and rods worked and were adjusted. I had to listen very hard to understand his accent but it all made sense. The very best bit was when the signalman made all three of us tea, like I was a man! I asked who I should write to at their head office to thank but was told it wasn't necessary. Next day I visited again and asked if I could make a drawing of the interlocking mechanism. I had four cups of tea. That was the happiest day of my life. As well as interlocking in signals so say lever numbers 1,3,9 and 12 couldn't be 'off' if the crossing gates were open so there was interlocking in people. The district inspector would be angry if he found me in the box so that was exclusive interlocking in a way when I couldn't be there at the same time as him. But I could be there with Bob or Bobbie the signalmen who took the daily shifts but not with Kevin. I asked why but they wouldn't say. A 'Bobbie' is what the railwaymen call a signalman.

I'd arranged to be with Gordon Nottage at half-term because it would be my birthday. On my birthday I would always be visited by Mister Harrison. He pretended to be a sort-of uncle but was really a solicitor administering my trust. I was an orphan and there were certain monies which presumably paid for school fees at Howardbridge Grammar school. My three aunts had shown me photos of

my mother. Both my parents were killed in a car crash while on diplomatic service abroad when I was six. Last Easter uncle Sam told me it wasn't an ordinary car crash.

"No lad. They be caught in crossfire. An ambush."

"You mean like Kennedy?"

He winked at me across the kitchen table as he put on his cycle clips before visiting some relations to find out who was cheating at leek-growing. "You get the idea 'Erbert.'" I was always known as 'Erbert' rather than Tristram in Lincolnshire. "When you go to bed mind you switch the telly off." I hated going to bed in the dark! That was for Neanderthals.

I'd had three days of gently definite but exciting questioning at the point of a pipe-stem backed by a smile when Mister Nottage posed hypothetical, or do I mean philosophical questions, which I had to attempt. After a day and a half I realised this was like charging an air receiver with compressed air or a battery with electricity. I was to spark or shout as the day unfolded. Everything in the Nottage household was so leisurely but so obviously, differently, important.

November 8th 1973. My sixteenth birthday. As a treat Gordon and I had been shown the surface bits with a few minutes at the bottom of the excavation for the new Jubilee tube line in London. Gordon's fingers were for piano playing but mine were for pressing buttons to blow air, suck water and have a skip of

grout arrive on time. Heroes. These were my heroes. Hard-hatted labourers carving the clay from its home so they could place cast iron segments. I wanted to build tunnels. In the slightly foggy air I tried to imagine the mathematics and logistics and how I'd control the noisy trains of tubs. One day I'd be down here as a general leading his army.

Going back home I said "Gordon. You can see the maths behind the spoil and the segments and the air pressure and the shield. With computers this should be easy." Mister Nottage pointed his happy pipe at Gordon.

"I don't know why we bother" he said "What difference does it make being able to get from Leicester Square to Charing cross by underground when we could have gone by bus."

"For the same reason we can't have overhanging Tudor houses and juggernauts? We've got to move people faster."

"Why?"

"For the reason we're sat stationary in a train half way between New Cross and Orpington. Don't you want to get home for Tam's birthday cake?" Mister Nottage smiled at me as he puffed his pipe. At school I'd been forced to try a cigarette, it was just as horrible as I expected, but perhaps one day I might try a pipe when I'd got people to point to.

"People shouldn't commute anyway." said Gordon.

I can see it now. There was Gordon, Mister Nottage staring at nothing in the roof of the compartment, me and a couple by the other window who looked cheap. Mister Nottage said "Good point Gordon. How many could we get in the music room at a pinch?"

"I don't know. Fifteen?" He knew his logic was missing the point.

I stepped in. "Let's see. Income required 20 thousand. Overheads 50%. Fifty concerts a year. That's 200 quid profit per week. Call it two-fifty 'cos you may have holidays. Say you sell 100 tickets every week you have to spend half that on hiring the venue and half on publicity. And anyway you haven't got the repertoire or the reputation."

"That's why I'm going to the Academy."

"Why Gordon?" Mister Nottage was smug behind his pipe.

"How am I supposed to know Tristram? You're going to be a rock scientist and I'm going to play the piano because I don't know any better."

"Bollocks! Gordon." I looked at Mister Nottage for guidance but he was still smiling towards to the compartment roof. At that moment something clicked. Mister Nottage liked using me to push Gordon but also he saw something in me.

Sixteenth birthday shock

That evening Mister Nottage graciously let Mister Harrison use his study to interview me. I wanted a study like Mister Nottage's. Shelves of books, pictures, cactus plants, trays of seedlings on the radiator, civil-engineering magazines in string-bound piles. His large desk had a little jungle of personal mementos from round the world covering most of it. In the corner by the window was a drawing-board! One day I would unroll bridges and dams or interlocking diagrams on my own drawing board to point out salient features that my subordinates could admire. The whole room smelled of scented pipe tobacco. Mister Harrison filled the stereotype small-town solicitor or estate agent perfectly. He sat behind the desk while I was pinned in front, braced for fifteen minutes of 'how was I doing at school' interrogation. He smiled behind his steepled hands and said "Happy sixteenth birthday Tristram. Now then Tristram" he looked at me over his half-moon glasses "I've got very important news for you." His expression was like masters use when they want you to listen carefully with the hint of a reward for good boys at the end of what they have to say. I'd imagined his moment of poking his nose in many times.

"Would you like a cup of tea Mister Harrison." Yes or no I would break his flow.

"No. I won't be long. Now/"

/"Excuse me I won't be a moment." It could take twenty minutes to make tea in the disorganised Nottage household. I was only going to set it in motion. It wasn't his fault but I wanted to show I had a voice now.

When I returned he said "Your great grandfather's will was very specific. At the age of sixteen the first male descendent must make a choice between joining the Army or building a time machine to go back in time. Your great grandfather was HG Wells. Your branch of the family was one of the hushed-up branches and you're the first male to reach sixteen." His smile reflected a joke of circumstance. His voice was completely serious.

"You're telling me I'm a descendent of the HG Wells who wrote the *War of the Worlds* Mister Harrison?"

"Exactly. Herbert George Wells." I saw the connection to my names. "Your education has been part paid from his estate."

"I'm sure if he met me he would want me to be a civil engineer."

"We can't ask him Tristram. What we do have is his legal will. It's clear, I've brought you a copy. You have to decide on Army or building a time machine. In it he says that technology would be so much more advanced that time travel should be as possible as flying. He wrote fantasy stories about flying long before the Wright Brothers and lived to see thousand-bomber raids. He is quite determined that a breakthrough in time travel should be attempted."

"Show me the original Mister Harrison." He passed me a dozen photocopied pages then unfolded browned typed pages. "Compare this with your copy Tristram." the first and last pages looked alike. "There is a lot of money invested to use for building it. Tens of Millions. You're the lucky man to inherit it."

"What if I don't want to Join the Army or build a time machine?"

"Then when you finish full-time education your allowance stops."

"So I've got two and a bit plus three is five and a bit years to decide."

He looked at me like my uncles, except he'd got glasses that made him look like a junior accountant that had stayed junior. "I've good reports from school. The Trust wants you to make the best choice. If I may be so bold I would say read the will, the funds are about fifty million pounds and there's a sealed envelope addressed 'To my first male descendent aged sixteen.' signed *Wells*. Here it is." He handed over a large brown envelope that obviously contained quite a few papers. "I don't know what's in that envelope. You see it's sealed with sealing wax."

"Thank you Mister Harrison." He looked at me in frozen time.

"Open it Tristram." No I'd save it for later. I didn't mind Mister Nottage looking at it but what business was it of Harrison's? "It's a legal document. The trust needs to know about it – for all sorts of reasons." I fell for his authority and tried pulling open the flap but the crater of red wax with the initials HGW embossed defeated me long enough for me to

realise it might be best to slit-open one end.

Gordon brought a tray with single teacup sitting in a saucer. "Gordon! Mister Harrison has told me I'm a descendent of HG Wells and I get fifty million if I make a time machine." He giggled in his gurgling way that I liked because it was posh. Mister Nottage's desk had a paperknife amongst the various ready-use tools so I was soon holding faded blueprints and type-written notes in various rectangular shapes on flimsy paper. There was a smaller pale green envelope no more than three inches square inscribed 'To Tristram'. I wasn't going to open that yet. "Look at this! To me. Either he knew my name or it's a hoax."

Mister Harrison said "It's not a hoax. Our firm can say categorically that envelope has never been opened since it was sealed by HG Wells himself."

Perhaps HG Wells had travelled in to the future or pulled the future to him otherwise how would he know my name. There's not many boys called Tristram so the odds were a thousand against. His stipulation had been a time machine to travel *backwards*.

Gordon said "How do you know it was sealed by HG Wells? Anyone might make a false seal."

"What's the alternative. Who would wake up one morning and decide to give me fifty million? Even if a mad man did then why pick me and not you? And why try to pretend they were HG Wells."

"It's creepy."

"How do I know there really is fifty million Mister Harrison?"

"We can start by showing you documents in our offices and go from there."

Then I realised he hadn't given me five hundred pounds to spend on a house and a car but fifty million! I could spend a million pounds a year for the rest of my life if I wanted. Nothing else mattered. "You don't have to decide now Tristram but I think HG Wells wanted you to know now so you could prepare. A-Levels and University could help you prepare."

When Mister Harrison had gone the Nottage family, Dad, Mum, Gordon and his older brother examined the papers with me round the rickety antique living-room table. Gordon said 'Bottom' with laughing jealousy. Mrs Nottage said it was nice. Mister Nottage fiddled with his empty pipe. I realised when he was at home he only lit his pipe in his study or gardening. One day I wouldn't smoke a pipe! I said "The most useful thing I can think of is to buy the school and sack Pyford. But they'll never let me have the money until I've got a degree in time-travel at Oxford or something."

Mister Nottage said "Either it is completely true or not. Which? It's a funny joke to play who would play such a joke on you?"

Mrs Nottage said it could be spite. Gordon recognised his father's prompting. "How do we test the hypothesis?" I explained that the solicitors had been fooling me by paying school fees and an allowance for ten years so there must be some actual money in the case. I'd

visited their offices so they really existed and Harrison was real."

Gordon was thinking alongside me. "But the millions might be made up."

Mrs Nottage said "Perhaps they existed once but the trustees have embezzled it."

Mister Nottage said "So let's move on. Until we can see bank statements we won't know. Or should I say Tam won't know. It's nothing to do with us."

Everyone looked at me. "Thank you all. If it's true then I can't think of a nicer family to share the news with. If it's false then we can get at the truth together."

Gordon said "You won't have lost anything if you never had it."

Mister Nottage said "Shall you talk to my accountant tomorrow Tam? He should show you how to get to the bottom of it."

"Yes please. There's nothing secret."

"Perhaps best to keep it very quiet for the time being Tam. What do you think would happen if everyone knew there was a multi-millionaire school-boy at school with nobody to stop him spending it all?"

"Oh I see. And anyway it's got to be a hoax."

Gordon said "What would you spend the money on Tam?"

"No idea. A speedboat."

Mrs Nottage said "What about making a time machine? Isn't that impossible?"

I said "So was heavier than air flight a hundred years ago. Atomic bombs and power stations were impossible. Radio and television. Electricity even."

Gordon said "But if anybody invented a working time machine in the future then we'd know because you'd come back."

Gordon's older brother said "Perhaps he's gone back already as HG Wells, invested in things he knew would do well then come back again as Tam. I've been thinking of that letter addressed to you by name. Have you looked inside Tam."

"No. I think I'll wait until I see the actual money."

"Wise move Tam. Having your name on it is freaky. If it's genuine and written by HG Wells then how did he know your name? Perhaps the solicitor is under instructions or making things up." There was a silence as we all understood the unpleasant logic that if the money was real then the name on the envelope probably wasn't a hoax either. "Or, perhaps HG Wells had told his secret daughters that the first male heir should be called Tristram. That would be a less spooky explanation."

Mrs Nottage brought the remains of my birthday cake from the kitchen. Mister Nottage fetched a bottle of home-made damson with vanilla pods wine from his laboratory as he called it. The five of us shared this very special wine in the warmth of the livingroom. Mister Nottage made us raise our glasses to 'sixteen years preparation for sixteen hundred' and could he have a ride in my speedboat. Gordon improvised a Chopinesque version of Happy Birthday on the piano. Mrs Nottage told me not to worry.

It turned-out the will and the money were genuine. I asked Mister Nottage in private for advice. His first question was a surprise. I had three options, the army, engineering or researching time travel. Was the money worth it? I'd already answered this in my mind but he insisted on a proper answer. I said I thought HG Wells had given the Army option to weed out wooden-heads, then I'd stick with engineering as if I was to make a time machine that would be engineering. He suggested a different emphasis at school and then maths or physics at a big university on the grounds that the difficulty of the time-travel problem probably lay in the physics and maths. If it came to making an actual time machine then I could call on specialist engineers in say materials or electronics while still having a rough grasp of the overall plan. It took him a while to persuade me that if there was so much money available then perhaps my future was to create a huge research organisation, and in that organisation I needed to have the specialist vision. The best engineers were by nature jacks-of-all trades. They might build a solution from a score of disciplines each with a dozen very clever people but they could only work with technology, and technology depended on science.

"If you're to succeed Tam you'll have to lead people who know how to do the possible into a world where they do the impossible. And another thing. When we want a bridge or tunnel built we ask the firms we know who can do the job to tender. We don't put an advert in the local paper asking for builders and

decorators do we? H.G. Wells has a good reason to think you can make it."

Change of speed and course

On the next Saturday I skived-off school, caught the train to London, and went to the science bookshop in Paddington then asked how to get into Imperial College library in West Kensington. Gordon came with me. I knew the school could throw me out but why did I care if I could afford any school in the country, so I pulled and pushed on locked doors or met with official indifference. Gordon had the gift of meeting odd people and talking to them and introducing me. Of course we could take a taxi but Gordon wanted to stop and walk through a park or divert to a musician's café. I had to endure visits to art galleries with him out of politeness at first and then because I felt I should be learning. I kept a lookout for people having coffee while reading a book on physics or maths but I never found one. Gordon took twice as long as any normal person to have a coffee. He'd arrive at a café as if it was a foreign planet. Having studied the menu in the window he'd make a nuisance of himself getting his coat off and putting it on some seat by some table then drift back to the counter only to change his mind three times about having some cake or pie. Oh no! Not the apple pie! Then there would be indecision about custard, cream or ice-cream to go with it.

After embarrassing me by holding everyone else up he'd now attract people by leaving his briefcase case or coat in the aisle. I stared at my empty coffee cup while Gordon made friends.

I used the Christmas holidays in Torquay to read all I could of and about HG Wells. Although Mister Harrison had told me I was on the love-child side of the family, none of the books about him covered that aspect. I wrote to a couple of authors via their publishers and forgot about it. But it did show that what was in print was only part of the sum of human knowledge. Already I knew it was my job to go from the sure ground of text books through the grey area of lectures and experiments to the screaming, empty air of the unknown like standing on Hay Tor in December. Somebody told me that the difference between physicists and mathematicians was that the former hung the latter over a theoretical cliff at the edge of knowledge on a long pole so the mathematicians were always working over the abyss of the unknown. The physicists were behind them pushing the land out using the mathematician's lesser screams as a guide to where to place the next experiment to prove the real world was real as a firm base for going a bit further. Then my informant told me. 'What about the pole the physicist is using to dangle the mathematician over the edge with? Where did that come from?' He told me. 'It was made by God but both the Mathematician and the Physicist know God doesn't exist. So they call it beauty instead and everyone can breathe again while a little beauty rubs-off on both of them.' I debated which to be but couldn't

really decide. The mathematicians were heroes making knowledge from nothing but the physicists proved the knowledge was safe to stand on. I was hooked. I was shocked at the level of maths I needed to know to properly cope with real physics but it was only a skill to work at and this was either making it easy for me to do A-levels or better than A-levels.

I didn't really want to leave the devil I knew of Howardbridge Grammar School so I pretended I'd mend my ways. Once the science staff recognised I was hooked and demanding, I was indulged because they knew I was a special star that would be good for their reputations and the school. After O-levels, which were no bother except waste-of-time French and vague history, I asked myself if I should move to another school or even get private tutors instead. I stayed but looked around for a flat or house close by that I could have for myself instead of being a boarder. My first plan had been to have parties for boarders but soon found the responsibilities of property weren't compatible with rowdy parties. I installed a piano so Gordon and his friends could practise in peace and we'd often stay up late drinking coffee and the occasional bottle of wine from I don't know where. I still felt like a child whose parents would come back any minute and want to know why there was washing-up left in the sink. I tried a number of times to get girls to visit but they always came with boyfriends or were very 'proper' or tried to boss me about how I should decorate my flat. They were so middle-class, narrow-

minded, opinionated and mind-numbingly accepted the pontifications of others as regards what was suitable for me, that I rejected them as excitable and expendable. One 'older sister' came as baggage but it was obvious she was a bit simple, with red highlights on her cheekbones, slightly puffy lips and sticky-out ears. She was slow and looked around to see who to agree with but I spent many hours wondering how I could lure her into my bedroom. She didn't come often and I didn't know how to invite her on her own.

My A-level years 1974 to 1976 were tedious at school but I'd take days off if needed to find out about London, Oxford and Cambridge. I felt best about Cambridge. I found out who the professors of Mathematics and Physics were and wrote asking if they could recommend a book or two that would prepare me. I included stamped addressed envelopes. Their replies gave me confidence to give-up Chemistry A-level and get private tuition in computer programming. I was already far ahead of any teacher at school. None of them had even heard of Donald Knuth! I managed to get time on Imperial College's computer to write simple programs including of course Conway's Life rattled-out on a Teletype. It was amazing how ingenious we could be. I spent a month writing and perfecting a program that would paint a sphere with reflected light by printing 'more inky' characters like * through to . and space where there were highlights. I had to learn physics of light

scattering as well as the maths of making sure only the bit of the sphere that an imaginary eyeball could see were calculated and shown. The results were satisfying for the new knowledge they represented.

In 1974 or 1975 I had to spend a few days with the bloody Combined Cadet Force one half-term messing about with lighting fires and cooking while being shown how to be good clean friends of the countryside somewhere on the edge of Wales. We had one of those how to cross a river using only two planks, lots of rope and a couple of old oil drums exercises. We were supposed to show what good team-players or problem-solvers we were or something. I couldn't see the point so sat with my back to a tree, got out my paperback of Feynman lectures and let the others get all excited. The teacher complained. I said "Either I'll test it for them or make my own way. If they need my help they can ask but as far as I can see it's all chiefs and no Indians. And anyway what's the point? The other side of the river looks about as exciting as this one." Gallstone wasn't pleased, but to try to keep my interest he showed me his ordnance survey map and explained we were aiming for a camp-site behind an isolated 'PH' about six miles away. I saw a public footpath a quarter of a mile downstream from where we were so there must be a bridge. "I'll sit under that tree further down sir and if anybody falls in I'll rescue them. That would be useful." After ten minutes I sneaked-off round the corner. A few

minutes later I casually walked into the vision of the raft-builders on the other side of the river. I'd found a stick to make me look like a proper hiker and pretended to be reading my book. I acted all surprised when my name was called across the river. By now they'd got a very wobbly raft in the water but ropes seemed to have been used with optimism based on length of rope used rather than what they were there for. "Do you want to throw a rope across? Then I'll tie it to a tree and you can use that two at a time to haul the raft across?" Nobody had thought how to paddle it and although the current was probably less than half a metre per second just one crossing would mean say ten metres drift down stream which would then mean the raft had to be hauled out, walked up stream on land then put back in the water then sent back with one person paddling like mad. With a rope they could pull themselves across and even attach a safety runner. And even send the raft back unattended if it had a rope on the runner. Once they'd managed to throw the rope across I tied it to a tree I shouted "Good luck! See you at the pub." and left buried in my book. I'd got a packet of crisps, a pound note, six miles to go and three hours to myself. I headed for the main road to see if there were buses because I might be able to visit a town and get back to the camp-site behind the pub in the time allowed. I did manage that although the town wasn't too interesting I brought a postcard of the 'Jubilee Gardens' to prove I'd been there. When the bus dropped me right outside the pub the others had arrived

and were putting-up tents in the field behind.

Gallstone was angry that I hadn't been waiting when they'd trudged-up. "Where have you been Swiftton!"

"To the brothel in Farksworth. It's ever so convenient. Right next to the bus station."

Nobody ever suggested I should go camping again but all the boys assumed I'd really taken the afternoon off to visit a brothel. I had to make it up after lights-out in lurid but off-hand stages. How I'd wondered if I'd got enough time for two. How there were four blonds waiting to have me and it was difficult to choose. How they'd rubbed their breasts in my face to tempt me. How I'd settled for the oldest one because she must know more than the others and I wanted to learn! To Burden's question "What was it like" I said "So so."

"No I meant shagging a woman."

"Well. You know. Shagging is shagging."

"What was it like?"

"Oh the usual panting. Got to get 'em panting. Then slip it in and how's your father." Other seventeen year-olds had crossing-a-river challenges. I wonder what they learned that day?"

My A-level grades were two As and an A* in maths but of course universities wanted to count so I wrote explaining why I'd quit Chemistry and what I'd done instead and how I'd been focussed on Maths and Physics at Cambridge for two years. If I hadn't had the money I could

have wangled a scholarship because I'd taken the trouble to pester some professors and because I was possibly a year ahead of most of the other candidates. I mulled over the idea of buying a house and sharing it with others from Howardbridge but decided I was going my own way and didn't need distractions. I brought the house anyway as an experiment to see what it was like. I still hadn't got my speedboat but I had fallen in love with an old MG midget that needed a garage. I made a mistake with getting a three bedroom semi in a nice street. I thought it would be nice to have somewhere cosy. Then I discovered I needed at least two guest bedrooms with en-suite facilities, a larger dining room so I could have ten dinner guests, (I'd decided against parties) a larger kitchen so I could get a cook in regularly, a garage for at least two cars, a private study and a living room of course for relaxing with the telly. I also found that some estate agents are not time-wasting arseholes. Barbara was a cheerful middle-aged lady who realised I was a stranger way out of my depth. She explained the general process, got me to tell her what I wanted then teased out lots of things I'd never thought of about property. Then she introduced me to solicitors and seemed to keep them in check. When it was all over I invited her and her husband to a tiny house warming and gave her a £500 gold necklace as a thank you. Cycling was my sport so I decided to give golf a miss unless useful professors played. I joined the university cycling club and began pushing myself. After a couple of months I was beginning to settle in to

university life and getting a clearer picture of how I could use it to my advantage. That's why I was there after all!

I picked-up various girlfriends but a week was about as much as I could stand before rejecting them. I soon became callous. Why not? The experiment had failed so move-on. What was a few minutes of pleasure in bed against a millstone of a million trivial distractions and demands. If God created Woman then why the hell didn't he program her to have an alternative to my suggested Greek restaurant rather than just 'I'm not keen on Greek'. Memo to God: When your Woman says she likes something in a jeweller's window I know very well she means 'get out your chequebook when I'm not looking so I can be ever so falsely excited by a false surprise'. I don't play that game.

Jane

One Sunday morning in the spring of 1977 Gordon rang with an invitation to go for lunch out to the Mill hotel where he'd been booked to play at short notice.

My then girlfriend Gillian and I cycled out there along the tow-path, still bare of weeds through the feeble spring sun. She wanted me to drive but I felt I might want to go on further after a couple of pints. Reluctantly she cycled in front of me wobbling at every little rut rather than using momentum to carry her over. Still it was pleasant to be cycling behind her struggling in a head-scarf knowing that I might be showing her some

superior muscle and tender sympathy for her averageness later in bed.

At the hotel Gordon was late as usual but it wasn't very busy yet. From necessity I'd invented a party piece for this situation. A drinking straw was the only prop I needed. It helped if the venue had a music stand loose but I could do without. With flipped-up collar, hair tousled back and jacket opened I was ready. Gillian tried to dissuade me but I said "What's the worst that can happen."

The first act was to 'test' the piano. Hopefully nobody would know I wasn't the real performer. Little pushes to make sure it was solid. Dusting the keyboard with a handkerchief. Looking inside under the lid and flicking the handkerchief across the strings. Now a few individual notes each one being listened to. Then the notes became a ragged Colonel Bogey and I was satisfied. Auntie Fern had taught me act two. Until now the audience hadn't existed. Not a moment of eye contact. Now I shook my jacket straight and marched out to a bare music stand or a stand that would have to be imagined. The important thing was to have a semi-confident smile with eye contact and plenty of facial expression and body movements. "Ladies and gentlemen. If time permits I will now conduct Schubert's unpaid-for symphony." Now I've got to search for my drinking-straw baton. "Ah!" Then it gets in the way as I have to swap it between hands as I get out an imaginary score from an imaginary inside pocket then have to twist it the right way up before putting it on the stand in front of me. "As you

know he liked a bit of fun did Schubert... Good old Franz!" Act three is the most difficult. It helps a great deal if you have a couple of stooges into the audience for this. You get various tables or sections to be 'the bass' with coughs, 'the melody' with hums and whistles. 'Shimmering strings' with shuffled feet and cutlery scraped across plates. When each section has it's rhythm put them all together then play the melody from the Nutcracker Suite on the piano with one hand while conducting the 'orchestra' with plenty of emotion and encouragement. Finally, using both hands, play an up-rolling chord with a final top 'plink'. Smile at the audience to show you're happy and fulfilled. All that remains is to start an exit but remember your imaginary score at the last minute before heading for the bar. If the performer arrives in the middle don't let them crash your gig! They can be lined-up to play the final 'plink'. Gordon is instructed to keep clear until my exit when he must play a jazzed-up Nutcracker with more frolic than a musical box on speed then perhaps a minute of Art Tatum pastiche. If I have to lead then I demand people follow my instructions.

I found out later that Gordon had arrived in good time but judged that audience was suitable for my silly symphony so he hid until I was holding the fort. Anyway between us we won the audience. As Auntie Fern had told me 'make the audience curious then you *must* make them like you.' Even though only a couple of tables might have known what to expect they liked Gordon a lot and he

liked being liked. I tried to teach him the trick but he was always too stiff. I'd have to introduce him to Auntie Fern. Gillian hated me 'making a fool of myself' then sulk for a few minutes. I was always nervous starting but once being in the spotlight kicked-off the adrenaline-buzz it lasted for hours afterwards. Each time I learned a bit and flowed a bit and invented a joke or mannerism out of nowhere. After my exit I'd hardly reached the bar for a gulp of beer when a girl I immediately categorised as 'horsey' with big brown eyes caught my hand, turned me round then gave me that upper-class kiss film stars have in public. "Hi. I'm Jane. That was brilliant."

"Hello. Just a sec." I drank half my pint in one go to steady my nerves. "Sorry. I needed that. I'm Tristram." Her perfume was nice and abundant. Like her golden hair.

"Come and meet the family Tristram." She pulled at my hand.

"Give me a minute. I need ten minutes to calm down." I wiped the sweat from my face. It was always after the performance that the sweat came.

"I'll come with you outside Tristram." There was no doubt she was nice. My age. My sort. Ready. Positive. Her voice was assured. Medium breasts and a face I could kiss and simple bare arms. Five minutes later I remembered Gillian. By then Gillian was history, but she was always going to be history sooner or later. I wondered if I should feel sorry but decided not. Jane's effort at makeup was a cleverly understated performance like Gordon's Art Tatum pastiche. I was invited to join her mother, father, sister,

Sarah, and her partner Lawrence, at their table. Already I was being led by the hand. Her family were very pleasant. I introduced myself as the orphan great grand-child of HG Wells and I was researching the possibility of time travel using a trust fund he'd set up. They were partly interested and partly worried. As she squeezed my hand Jane said "How exciting."

Lawrence said "Like Doctor Who?"

I saw my opening! "It probably can't be done but proving it can't be done is hard. It's like saying I can't go more than seventy in my MGB when I know I could if I had the right roads. I just haven't tried."

Sister Sarah said "Have you got an MGB?" I like direct questions.

"Yes. I got rid of the Midget. That trust has grown into tens of millions over the years. But do you know – I's nice to show off but I don't care about going fast, 'fast' is for kids. I want to go far."

Jane said "You're not still acting? Have you really got an MGB?"

"Yes. Ask Gordon."

"Who's Gordon?"

"The chap playing Chopin on the piano. He's rubbish... Doesn't look a bit like him." Nobody laughed. All this time Jane was staring at me with sappy devotion and smile in her cheeks. I'd have to devise an intelligence test or else I'd be stuck with a pretty bit of distracting furniture. She was obviously on the make but I wanted to test her in bed. She wore a simple pink jumper that ought to be investigated. I calculated my options and chose the simplest. "If you're

still here in an hour's time then I'll be too." I disengaged hands with Jane. "Enjoy your meal. I'll be back later."

By road with a motive it was only a twenty minute cycle home. A shower, a second shave, a bespoke suit, a hamper with champagne and glasses from the fridge and I was ready. The trembling engine of the MGB as I started it in the garage was the best feeling ever. The grumble as I pulled out onto Parkway was thunder for a storm to come – so I hoped.

Jane was quick, intelligent and my ideal companion. She realised I hated uncertainty and deviousness. She turned my rough lust into gentle sex. Her father, Richard Hewson, was some economist in the City with the same or better income and laid-back view of youngsters as Mister Nottage. Mrs Hewson combined keeping horses, riding horses down every bridleway she could find, women's village charities, coffee morning fund-raisers and savaging parish politics, with musical soirees and the local coterie of musical maffia ladies I knew so well from Howardbridge. Never underestimate the power of gossip. Whoever invented the telephone turned spiteful rumour into a supernova of outrage and accusations. I'd seen it from the outside. Now Gordon was one of their darlings. Now I was one of their special darlings, not expected to perform just expected to be at performances and remember their names. I didn't mind this in moderation because when listening to

somebody playing something classical – only classical is purity for the musical mafia – I could drift away for twenty minutes after making my mind up about the performer's faults. The first couple of times I tried to listen as I listened to Gordon but it was clear that I wanted something else from the music than the musicians were providing. I wanted petrol and they were giving diesel. I was caught making notes about the CP theorem in my notebook. When asked by a rather cross host what I'd thought of some darling's performance I said "I wasn't really listening. I can't play a note but perhaps John could come to my house Monday at six-fifteen for a free lesson." I'd already taken the trouble to visit that moment when it was in the future and so decided on my answer in advance. What I didn't say was 'If they were old enough to plonk or scrape then they should be old enough for a drink in the Archers Arms.'

Jane's parents very kindly adopted me. I liked them. Within a month I was odds-on son-in-law-to-be. After two months of me enjoying Jane's intelligent company while shopping, me enjoying her enthusiastic body, after two months of discussions about families, after two months of the most stressful academic study where there wasn't time for everything no matter how hard I tried to ration my time, after two months of trying to trap her with choices between poverty with love and wealth without, after two months I gave up fighting the future. I would be that son-in-law. I phoned uncle Sam and told him what I was thinking of doing.

"What's the worst that can happen 'Erbert?"

"She'll make me miserable and unable to work for six months."

"And what's the best thing that could happen young shaver?"

I'd never thought of this. Statistically I'd expect something like the average. "We're happy, have children, and er.."

"Stop 'Erbert. Children's the key. They're the future. You 'ave to feed 'em then watch 'em grow up to do stupid things and then leave. Sort that out with this Jane and if you're of one mind get on with it. You're only young once."

"Every word you've said makes sense Uncle Sam. You should meet her."

"Bring her over 'Erbert." My worried silence must have tipped him off. "If thy posh bird can't cope with us then you'll be a bit wiser eh? I don't say nothing about what you should do but you got a smart car so why not come over." His wisdom and casual acceptance of inferiority humbled me. That's what we did the next Sunday. We arrived at half-eleven. There was a five minute period of formal politeness then Sam took Jane to the shed at the bottom of his garden. Auntie Janice winked at me as she peeled the potatoes. "Don't worry Tam." Two more half potatoes went into the parboiling pan. "He's interrogating her strictly according to judge's rules. Jane may have to sip some parsnip wine but it ain't half bad this year." Anybody would see my anxiety. "Stop worrin' Tam. They got to know each other to know you ain't they?"

I struggled to parse this sentence but the meaning was clear. I realised Sam and I would be sent across to the Crown for 'just one mind you!' while Jane would have to show she could fight on the side of the cooks with Auntie Janice.

Jane passed the tests but we both failed the 'small-talk on Sunday afternoon' test until Janice asked about Jane's family. They were so interesting. I learned lots of things I'd never bothered asking about. Their origins, occupations, source of wealth. Of course I knew Jane was studying Applied Psychology but she'd never volunteered to me that the clinical side and anything like psychiatry gave her the creeps. I'd helped her with all of her work like she seemed interested in mine. I'd brought a VT100 terminal and dedicated phone line and got permission to hook it up to the Physics Department's system. I used it a lot of course and showed Jane how she could use it as a 'glass typewriter'. She struggled with it. In an exasperated moment when she'd meta-Xed instead of meta-Cd she said "Can't we have a typist?"

"Yes of course dear but just let me show you how to undo that." I knelt down beside her to help press the keys without looming over her.

"You think I'm just trying to get at your money don't you Tam?"

"I'm taking the risk Jane. We've got lots so why not use it? You really should have an engagement ring."

She leant over in the seat and hugged my head. "Have you got it then Tam? Show me."

"No. Don't you want to choose it. I'd get something unsuitable."

"It's not very romantic Tam."

"I'm not very romantic."

She'd been sitting in front of a surly computer terminal while I was on my knees. Now my knees were aching. "Tam. We're not married. We haven't announced the engagement even."

"Are we engaged Jane? I mean will you marry me."

"Of course I will. Why take it for granted Tam?"

"Because that's what I read in you. I don't use the old formulas because they've got so many faults with them. Logically if I ask you if you will marry me you could say yes and I could say 'oh that's something to think about'.

"You're not like other men. You do love me don't you?"

"Yes of course Jane. You make me want to see you, see you happy, see you undressed, see you pregnant and happy, see you safe and warm, to see you swearing at a bogged-down landrover in the bottom meadow of our ten acres somewhere in the country, happy to see you give up applied psychology, happy to see you making the other girls envious with your skiing tan and designer clothes. Oh! And happy to throw away those bloody hideous hoop earrings. You might as well wear bicycle rims!"

She commanded me. "Stand up!" Not a moment too soon, my knees were painful. She stood up and we embraced. "If only you knew the future Tam. I feel like I've got a new doll to play with so

precious I mustn't tell anybody about it." She kissed me. I kissed her back. She slid her hand around me while gasping like surf running up a beach.

I said "I'll not let you down as a husband and I'll not let you down when you're a mother." Now I'd had enough. I'd proved the hypothesis of love and it was time I got back to the symmetry of bloody Quantum Chromodynamics. In my opinion there had to be a simpler explanation and something more worthy of investigation. Beauty might be a reflection.

"You're not here are you Tam?" It was Jane talking to me from three inches away. I examined her question and applied a suitable frame of reference. Aha!

"I'm sorry dear I was away with the fairies... " Yes! I'd ask why you could have an up or a down quark-state but not a sideways. What was this binary thing. North pole – South pole is binary. Matter and anti-matter are binary. Time and gravity were continuous, unary in a way. What was significant about binaryisms? "Move out of the way Jane. I've got to write something down. If there's fizzy in the fridge then I'll share your happiness in five minutes. I remembered to kiss her before banging commands into the terminal."

First summer with Jane

Gently rolling Wiltshire downs provided an ideal canvas for atmospheric phenomena. The wind snatched at Jane's loose hair but stroked the green barley fields to give silky waves that coursed across the endless undulations. The view for miles with lightning in the distance at night. Tumbling sailplanes lifting on the thermals in the day. The cloud shadows that melted one green into a darker hue then ran away to leave the rustling barley heads to show off their dancing again. Sitting on the top of Silbury hill we could see the distant church and roofs of Avebury where we would stay the night. On the other side Kennet Long Barrow. All around us four thousand years of human imagination was realised in the landscape. Layers of imagining I couldn't reach. Layers of time I wished I could reach. All we had for our imaginings were sketchy theories of why and how. The archeologists could tell from preserved insect wings that the building of Silbury hill started in the summer but not which summer. Whoever had built it had left me a machine to defy a lifetime but there was no human context. A white chandelier of a clover flower and a butterfly met for a second in their own worlds.

Just like with the crop circles that had started appearing there was everyday context but nothing human. Of course, just like the stone avenues and circles they were made by humans for humans

to gaze at in awe. Of course the perpetrators got a buzz from doing it and fooling people. It was like bringing gods to earth. If only they'd left some holy tablets. Instead they posed the question without providing the answer. 'Now then guys you've got to sacrifice a virgin at the full-moon or else the crop-circle god will feed you more nonsense about tornadoes and UFOs.' I owed the hoaxers a big debt. That's another mystery: Why 'gullibility' never appears in dictionaries. My dictionary definition of love wasn't very big. I wondered what Jane was writing in it.

By now Jane knew my head back, eyes-closed pose meant 'deep thought – Try not to disturb'. After a few minutes she moved right next to me and leant into me with one hand over mine and the other round my shoulder. "All those years. All those people." At least she'd got the importance of time.

"They made this hill for me to sit on."

"In your dreams Tam!"

"In my dreams yes. What's your theory?"

"I don't have one. I'm still at the awesome stage."

"I'll always be at the awesome stage Jane. Everything's awesome." I put my arm around her waist to make her happy.

"But you tunnel into everything awesome. I don't know where to start."

"Yes you do. Alright. Think what matters to you now and add a small amount of time. Go on Jane." I held her hand to show I wasn't a dead-eyed statue talking. "I'll tell you my question when you've asked yours." With my eyes closed I could take a helicopter trip away from

the figures of two young lovers and watch them from a distance. Fifty feet then five hundred, silhouetted against the conical skyline in silence. Then I swirled in aerobatics to perch behind their naked bodies. Then I gave the woman a child in a buggy and the man a wedding ring and a sack of love-sparks for his wife. I was about to clock-forward a couple of decades and then more when she, I mean Jane, said.

"We're just two of millions. Perhaps spacemen of the future will find us like preserved pollen grains and ant-wings and read something about us."

"You see. You're looking at now from the future. Most people can't." She *could* catch the thoughts that whirled through her brain like the gliders rising on invisible power we'd seen earlier. "To the people who built this we are as advanced as spacemen. To the spacemen we'll be just as primitive."

"But will they understand why we're here Tam?"

"I don't know. I mean I don't know why we're here. It would be nice for them to come back and tell us."

"You don't believe in the great scheme of things do you Tam?"

"No but the prehistoric people must have. Perhaps they knew they were insignificant insects but they must have made up reasons for building Stonehenge, making circles and lines. They must have understood they were a small part of a bigger world." I opened my eyes and stretched my neck. Why had she painted her eyebrows? In these moments of returning from 'deep thought'

I could intrude for a second into the forbidden underworld of women. I stole a macro-lens view of her lips. What logic was it that painted eyebrows but not lips? Her hands held me close as her hair flicked onto my cheek. I hadn't fully returned from my imagination. It was her skeleton holding me with muscles attached to a question-mark.

"So what's your question then Tam?"

"Take something that matters and add time. Will we be together in five years?" There was a swirl of uncertainty then I watched her copy my 'deep thought' pose. That's what I like about time. It's so unpredictable. Now I didn't have to close my eyes to see the landscape full of unknowns.

Then...

Pressures increase as Tristram builds a research organisation. There are others, including 'the security services' who want to know what he's up to. Lucky for him he has a happy family. Then it gets really ugly...

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.