

‘Listen, Frank, have you ever read *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells?’

Frank looked momentarily surprised by the left-field nature of the question, then pushed out his bottom lip in lieu of a shrug. ‘Can’t say as I have. He’s the coward, isn’t he? Always going on about war being wrong and all that?’

‘I don’t think he’s a coward,’ I said. ‘A pacifist maybe.’

‘Same thing, ain’t it?’

‘Not really. But anyway – you know of it? *The Time Machine*? You know the story?’

Frank screwed his face up, as if trying to recall the name of a distant cousin. ‘Is that the one about the bloke who can go into the future?’ He snorted. ‘A bit daft, if you ask me. Kids’ stuff.’

Resisting the urge to discuss the merits and demerits of Wells’s far-reaching vision, I said, ‘Yes, but what if it was true? What if you *could* go into the future? Or the past for that matter?’

Frank looked at me as though I was simple. ‘You can’t, though, can you?’

‘Just bear with me,’ I said, trying not to become frustrated at his lack of imagination.

‘Bear with what?’ he said, a note of irritation in his voice. ‘What’s the point of this, Alex? Whatever I might look like to you, I’m not a bloody kid any more.’

‘I know that,’ I said, ‘and I’m not making fun of you. Think of this as... a hypothesis?’

His eyes narrowed. ‘You mean as something that’s daft, but that we pretend is true? That we take seriously even though we *know* it’s barmy?’

‘Exactly!’

‘Why?’

‘Just because... well, because sometimes it’s good to think outside the box.’

‘What box?’

I waved a hand. ‘I’m not talking about a real box. What I mean is... think of the world as having boundaries. Within those boundaries is everything we know about, everything we accept.’

‘Everything that’s true and real?’

‘Everything we *accept* as being true and real. The sum of all human knowledge.’

‘All right,’ he said slowly.

‘Now imagine there are things we *don’t* know about. Things we haven’t learned yet. And they exist outside these boundaries – not because they’re not real, or because they’re daft or childish, but simply because we don’t know about them yet.’

‘Like finding a way of travelling into the future?’

‘Or the past, yes.’

He sighed indulgently. ‘All right. But I still don’t see what you’re getting at.’ Abruptly he laughed. ‘Sometimes, I think you’re half-cracked.’

I grinned, was about to agree with him, and then had a sudden thought. I put my hand in my jacket pocket, aware that my heart was beating hard. ‘I want to show you something,’ I said. ‘To illustrate my point.’

He looked at me uncomprehendingly, but shrugged as if to say: *Go ahead.*

I glanced around me, ever wary, and withdrew the obsidian heart. Frank took a nonchalant sip of his pint, but to me it felt like a charged moment. Keeping the heart below the level of the edge of the table, out of

sight of prying eyes, I extended my arm towards him and opened my palm.

‘Here,’ I said, ‘take it.’

He glanced down, his expression dubious. In the gloom of the pub it must have looked as if I was offering him a lump of coal.

‘What is it?’

‘Take it,’ I repeated. ‘Have a look.’

He gave a little shake of his head, but then sighed and took the heart from my hand. I tensed as he lifted it in front of his face so he could peer at it more closely, and subtly tried to adjust my position so that I was shielding it from sight.

If I expected anything to happen, for the heart to respond to Frank in some significant way, or for him to respond to it, I was disappointed. He simply stared at it in bafflement, moving it from side to side. ‘What is it?’

‘What does it look like?’

He glanced at me, as if uncertain whether I was trying to catch him out. ‘It’s a heart, ain’t it? Carved out of ebony or something.’ He hefted it in his hand. ‘It’s a nice piece.’

My own heart was thumping harder now. I was half-surprised the vibrations weren’t causing pint glasses to rattle on tables, curious eyes to turn in our direction. My mouth felt dry and I licked my lips. I said, ‘Imagine that’s *your* time machine, Frank. Imagine that with that you could go anywhere, backwards or forwards. That you just had to think yourself there and there you’d be. Where would you go?’

He looked at the heart and scowled. ‘Well, I don’t know, do I?’

‘Isn’t there anywhere you want to go? Anything you want to see?’

‘I’ve never really thought about it.’

‘Think about it now.’

‘Why?’

I sat back, smiled, tried to take the intensity out of the situation, to make it into more of a game. ‘Call it... an intellectual exercise.’

‘The only exercise I want to do is lift me arm with a pint glass in it.’

I sighed, on the point of giving up. Then I had a brainwave. ‘What about the War?’

‘What about it?’

‘Well, wouldn’t you want to end it if you could? Stop it before it had even started?’

For a moment I thought he was going to say no. He looked almost sulky, like a schoolboy who’d been asked whether he wanted to cancel his birthday party. Then he said, ‘Suppose so.’

‘So what if, using the heart, you could travel back in time and... I don’t know... stop Gavrilo Princip from shooting Franz Ferdinand? Would you do it?’

‘Dunno,’ he said, and then grudgingly, ‘Maybe.’

‘But what if, by stopping Princip, there was the possibility you’d be opening the door to something worse?’

Now he was looking confused. Hastily I said, ‘Hang on, let me put it another way. What if someone said to you that if you didn’t stop Princip there’d be a terrible war, the worst war this world had ever seen? What if they said that was a definite? What if they said the war would last for four years, and twenty million people would die, but then it would be over and the world would carry on? And what if they said that by stopping Princip you could stop that war? But that if you did that there was the possibility – not a definite thing this time, but a *possibility* – that something even worse would happen?’

Frank was now looking at me wide-eyed. It was as if I'd half-mesmerised him. 'What could be worse than twenty million people dying in a war?'

'I don't know. The whole world being wiped out maybe. What if, by stopping Princip, you might upset some... some cosmic balance—'

'God, do you mean?'

'Well... yes, if it makes it easier, think of it as God. What if, by stopping Princip, there was a *chance*, just a chance, that you could upset God enough to make him destroy the world?'

Frank was scowling, though not out of irritation this time; now he seemed to be genuinely contemplating the moral dilemma I'd set him.

'So I can leave things be,' he said, 'let Princip kill this Franz feller, knowing there'll be a war and twenty million people will die, but the world will be all right again afterwards. Or I can stop this Princip, and stop the war, and save those twenty million lives – but by doing that it *might* upset some... what was it you said?'

'Cosmic balance.'

'That's it. It *might* upset some cosmic balance, which would end us all.'

'That's the crux of it,' I said. 'Which would you choose? The terrible thing that was definite? Or the even worse thing that might or might not happen?'

Frank looked at me, then at the heart again. Then he placed the heart on the table, between our pint glasses.

'I'd stop the definite thing and take my chances,' he said.

I looked at him, surprised – but then realised I'd have been surprised whatever his answer.

'Would you? Why?'

‘Because I can’t cope with maybes. If you always think about what might happen, then you’d never do anything, would you? But if I can stop something that I know’s going to be bad, I’ll stop it. Every time.’

I put the heart back into my pocket, then picked up my pint and took a swig. I must have looked thoughtful, because Frank said, ‘So? What about you?’

‘The same,’ I said automatically. ‘I’d do the same.’

That night I used the heart.