

JACOB AND THE TIME MACHINE

Richard Overton

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It was nearly three weeks after the funeral when Jacob found his father's will. A fat manila envelope was wedged between bills and tax returns in the filing cabinet, with *Alan Moss, Last Will and Testament. FAO Burton Moss* written on the front in a hurried cursive. Jacob turned it over and looked closer, but he couldn't see his own name anywhere. He knew immediately the omission was deliberate and his heart sunk. He stood up and walked around the room, breathing slowly to control his nerves. When he looked again, he noticed that the second sentence was underlined. He swung at the pencil holder on the desk, sending the contents across the room. Not knowing what to do, he stared at the envelope until a thought struck him: he'd open it anyway. There was no one else that the will could be of concern to, certainly no one who took precedence over himself. An uncle and a couple of cousins on his mother's side were all the family he had left. It was absolutely his right to read it. He opened the envelope and tipped the contents onto the desk.

As he sorted through the dozens of papers and documents, the sheer size of his father's estate became apparent. He had numerous interests, Jacob knew that, but they'd rarely spoken about money. There were shares, bonds and ISAs along with his partnership in the law firm and the property portfolio. It all amounted to a small fortune. Lost among the papers was a smaller envelope with his name written on it. He opened it and began to read. *Sorry that it has come to this, Jacob. Not my death as that is as inevitable as taxes, more so as you can't mitigate against the grim reaper. No, I'm sorry I have left this world with you in it the way things are.* Jacob felt his hands tremble and he put the letter down. After a moment's pause, he continued reading. *It's all yours Jacob. The shares, the properties, the savings. I won't tell you how to spend it. You never listened to one piece of advice I gave you anyway and you never had the opportunity to benefit financially from good decisions because as far as I could see, you never made any.* The news he was the sole beneficiary did not lift Jacob's mood. As he read the words again, he could almost

hear his father's voice, with its tone of exasperation and disappointment. He put everything save the letter back into the envelope.

It would be quicker to take it to the solicitors himself than post it, but it was already past six o'clock and he was supposed to be meeting Maria that evening. It had been several days since he'd been over to see her. Maria. Kind Maria. Why was she even with him? It was Maria who had encouraged him to move back for the final months of his father's illness and she'd supported him throughout, bringing around meals and taking them out for drives and trips to the coast. She'd expected Jacob to eventually move back in with her. Part of him wanted to, but there was much to do in the house and dealing with the estate would take up even more of his time. He took out his phone and messaged her. *Found the will. Still have lots to sort, so will be a little longer. Have to cancel tonight. Sorry.* She would understand. She always did.

That evening, he heated a frozen lasagne in the microwave and opened a bottle of red. He took out the letter again and put it on the table. His eyes danced tentatively across the text, fearful of settling on another admonishment. Halfway down the page, one sentence drew him in. *Time passes quickly and you must do something with your life.* 'Do something,' Jacob muttered. His father had said those words many times: after parents' evenings, after quitting university, after another career abandoned. He forced himself to continue. *I'm in part responsible for what went wrong and some things I could not admit to or even face myself, so I cannot blame you for how things have turned out. We all make mistakes and I made plenty.* 'What does that even mean?' said Jacob and pushed the pages across the table, unwilling to read further.

He poured the last of the wine into his glass and downed it in a single gulp. One bottle wasn't enough these days, but one bottle was all he had and the shops were shut. The old drinks cabinet in the dining room was his only hope. He reached inside and took one of the bottles from the back. It was a cheap blended whiskey with a lid stuck so fast he

had to use a tea towel to prize it open. He poured the amber liquid into a tumbler and took a slug, grimacing as it burned his throat. Half the bottle was left, more than enough to see him through the evening.

There was nothing on TV apart from the usual reality nonsense and comedy panel shows. The old programmes he remembered from his childhood were still his favourites and there was no shortage of footage online. FlashbackKid's channel had hundreds of obscure sitcoms and dramas. Videowarp was good for old advert reels and channel idents. Atariboy had a huge collection of old children's programmes and he usually uploaded something new every day. Watching those shows had become part of Jacob's new routine and it was time again for some nostalgia. He went up to his bedroom and logged onto YouTube. At the top of Atariboy's playlist was a fifteen-minute clip of Dexter and the Time Machine. It was a shock to see the programme again after so many years. He'd watched it religiously every week as a child and memories returned of the space dog, the classroom set and trips back in time to people and events in history. And there was the little electronic ditty of a theme tune he couldn't quite remember well enough to hum.

He pressed play and sat back, nervous with anticipation. The titles were animated simply, with the time machine zigging back and forth over a moving collage of historical figures and events. The theme sounded like something recorded on a Casio keyboard. When the time machine landed, a door opened and Dexter—a blue dog in a silver space suit—emerged smiling and waving. The episode opened as always with a classroom set. Jacob immediately remembered the pastel green walls and the chairs and desks, dark with scratches and biroed graffiti. Kenny stood writing at the blackboard. He was Mr. Abbott to his pupils, but always Kenny to Jacob and the other viewers. Kenny was his real name, like Geoffrey from Rainbow and Matthew from Sooty. It made him seem like a friend or older sibling and with that perm, the wide collared shirt and the drainpipe trousers, he looked more like a soap actor or pop star than a teacher. He turned to the camera and

smiled. 'Have you ever imagined what life was like a hundred, maybe two hundred years ago?' he said. He put the chalk down and walked towards the camera. Sitting on one of the desks, he crossed his legs and pointed at the camera. 'Well, a long time ago, nearly two thousand years ago, in fact—' The sound suddenly disappeared and the picture scrolled and distorted. Video tape didn't age well, especially when stored in damp lofts or played excessively, but to Jacob's relief, it returned to clarity almost immediately. 'Do you know how long the Romans ruled Britain?' Kenny said. 'You might be surprised. It was four hundred years. Imagine that? That means that if they were just leaving Britain today, they would have arrived sometime around the time of the Gunpowder Plot.'

As he watched Kenny writing dates on the board, lost memories returned, like fragments of a past self, long gone. And with them came the feelings of raw happiness and endless time that had disappeared with the onset of adult life. 'Wednesday, three-thirty,' he said as he pictured his grandpa standing at the school gates, with the pipe clenched tight in his teeth and giving his mock salute, then his grandma enveloping him in a lemon smelling hug. The stop on the way home for cola bottles, flying saucers, pear drops and every flavour of bon bon. More sugar back home: custard creams, figs, Garibaldi. Lying sunk in the sofa, with a huge mug of tea, watching children's television for the remainder of the afternoon.

Just then, Arabella walked into the classroom. It was never explained exactly who she was. An assistant, maybe, or an enthusiastic pupil who had no home to go to, but there she stood, looking like a girl guide, wearing big glasses and a brown shirt and carrying a box full of books which she banged down theatrically on one of the desks. 'Gosh this is heavy. What were you teaching them today?' she said. Jacob checked the feed. There were a few minutes remaining—plenty of time for Dexter to make his appearance and maybe enough for a snatch of this episode's adventure.

'We were talking about the Romans and Queen Boudica,' said Kenny. 'I don't think the pupils were very interested. "I guess you had to be there," one of them said.'

'Imagine if you could be there,' said Arabella. 'Imagine if you could go back to those times. What a history lesson that would be.' She said those lines in every episode.

'I know someone who could help with that,' said Kenny. He looked at the camera and smiled.

The pair of them moved to a set made up like a boiler room, with brickwork painted onto cardboard backdrops and pipes covered in foil. Kenny took out something which looked like a walkie talkie, with buttons and an aerial. He put his mouth to the device. 'Calling Dexter, calling Dexter,' he said. They both stepped back and waited. A second later, there was a rumble. The camera shook and they pulled exaggerated expressions of fear and excitement before the time machine appeared in a puff of smoke. It was a Tardis like object, with lights flashing down its sides and a date counter, still spinning, above the door. Dry ice spilled from its exterior and sank to the floor. Kenny stepped forward and knocked on the door. 'Are you in there, Dexter?' There was a muffled shout from inside before the door swung open and Dexter emerged.

'Salutations from Canis Major,' he said. Jacob remembered his funny voice. His grandma always said he sounded like David Niven as she sat watching it with him.

'How was the journey?' Kenny asked.

Dexter shook his head and groaned. 'I spent half of it stuck behind an asteroid next to Betelgeuse.' Every week he would complain about something. If he wasn't being sucked into a wormhole, he was tailgated across the Milky Way by flying saucers.

Arabella told him about Kenny's indifferent pupils. 'Show them what it was like,' she said. 'You could go and visit in your time machine.'

'You know how much fuel costs now with galactic inflation,' Dexter moaned. He was always reluctant and they pleaded with him. Jacob knew what was coming next. 'It'll cost

you, said Dexter. I want my beans on toast.' Always beans on toast. He was obsessed with them.

Kenny and Arabella agreed and briefed him on the mission. 'We need you to go back to 60 or 61 AD in Colchester. Boudica is readying her troops for the uprising. Can you see if you can speak to her?'

'I heard she can be tough,' said Dexter.

'You can do it,' they told him. 'We want to know if she's going to ride a chariot into battle. No one really knew if she had one, or if it was a myth.'

'That sounds dangerous,' said Dexter. 'I don't fancy getting run down, or sliced in half by one of those things.'

'Think of those beans on toast,' said Arabella.

'Ahh, yes,' he said, staring into the camera. 'On buttered brown bread. No white, thank you very much. I need my fibre.'

Kenny and Arabella ushered Dexter back into the time machine and closed its door. A shot appeared inside of him at the controls. Jacob felt his heart thumping as he said the words along with Dexter. 'Readying dimension dial, engage cosmic carburettor. Let's go back in time. How the hell do I remember this?' Jacob said and downed more of the whiskey. The time machine disappeared in a flash and dry ice swirled around the boiler room.

The camera cut to a field and Dexter emerged from the time machine in a flurry. He turned to the screen, holding a microphone to his mouth as if mimicking a news reporter. 'I am at the camp of Queen Boudica, just outside Colchester,' he whispered. 'It is the night before the uprising.' He approached a gate and knocked loudly until a booming voice called him in. The camera cut to a woman dressed in plastic armour. She was holding a spear and sitting on a wooden throne. Thick red hair spilled from the golden helmet on her head.

‘Ask her if the troops are ready for battle and if she’s got a chariot,’ Kenny said.

‘Yes, yes,’ replied Dexter, impatiently, and held the microphone up to the warrior queen. She looked at him and was about to speak when the clip abruptly ended. Jacob checked the feed; the fifteen minutes was up. He poured more whiskey as he tried to remember the rest of the episode. They always ended with Dexter solving a problem, or getting the information Kenny had asked for. Then, he’d return and have his beans on toast before jumping in his time machine and heading back to the Dog Star. At the end of each programme, Arabella would sit with Kenny and they would sing a song about the episode and the adventure that Dexter had been on. Jacob played the clip again. It was the music on the introduction that got to him. Upbeat but poignant, it expressed at that moment the sadness of things lost and liberated more memories of his past. He was on a clifftop somewhere. A bright sun sat in a cloudless sky and the sea below stretched out for miles. He stood, mute, while his father angrily lectured him on good behaviour and taking responsibility for his actions. Jacob’s silence endured until a hand struck his cheek. It was never mentioned again. Perhaps his father had felt ashamed, or was the event not a memory but an imagining?

Below the clip were dozens of comments. *You have brought back a memory I hadn’t realised was lost*, wrote ViceDomain. *I remember this! Happier days when there was no CGI crap, just great characters and stories with meaning*, Pacermint35 added. *Anyone out there got a time machine? I want a lift back to my childhood*, Nostalgia nut asked. *I’ve been searching for this show for ages but couldn’t remember the name. In the end I typed in “blue space dog” and Dexter appeared. LOL!!*, exclaimed MrTea.

Jacob had to add something himself. He sat with his fingers over the keyboard, trying to summon a memory or anecdote. In the end, he just wrote what he felt. *I can’t believe I am seeing this after so many years. Please upload more if you have it*. He pressed return

and continued reading the comments. All were full of the same amazement and disbelief he felt, as if everyone were sharing a collective experience of a memory recovered.

One remark further down was different in tone. *Cultural vandalism*, Paul Kinnear had written and posted a link underneath. Jacob clicked on it and an article appeared onscreen from The Ashworth Globe. *TV Studio Set for Demolition*, the headline announced. A picture showed a boxy, decrepit building, fenced off and disappearing behind scrub and bushes. He read the opening sentence. *Oak Community Action have lost the latest appeal to prevent a luxury flat development on the site of Limetree studios*. Jacob had never heard of the place. He skimmed the rest of the article, stopping at a sentence at the bottom. *Limetree studios was best known for children's television programmes, including The Magic Theatre, Picturetales and Dexter and the Time Machine*. Looking at the photo again, he felt saddened at the thought of yet another part of his past disappearing. He'd never thought about where the programme was made and it was hard to believe it all took place inside this shabby little building.

He played the introduction again, nodding his head to the music and knocking back more of the whiskey. His head began to spin as he descended into a state he'd known lately more than ever. Alcohol eased the pain; it also loosened his imagination. Ideas came, ideas leading to ideas, and the one that hit him at that moment was something like a revelation. He jumped out of the chair and staggered around, scanning the mess on his floor, until he found a pencil and an empty envelope. Slowly and with intent, like a lyricist or poet acting to preserve a moment of inspiration, he started to write. He went over the letters, pressing hard in case they disappeared along with the thought. Holding the paper up to the light, he read the words he'd written. 'Buy Limetree Studios.' He repeated the instruction, raising his voice to a shout and laughing manically, like a parody, though the emotion was real. He thought of his father's letter. That 'something' he'd urged Jacob to

find was clear. The whiskey was finished, but it didn't matter. No alcohol, drug, or memory recovered could add to his elation.