



A MOMENT IN TIME

There was just time to look around his favourite bookshop. On the last occasion he had come here – which must be, ooh, about ten years ago – Benjamin had been attending a conference and again, because he hadn't had much time, had popped inside for only a few minutes. The place looked different these days. Still huge, of course, except that now there was a different colour scheme, more modern titles and, unusually, a games section, which he couldn't recall before. He struggled up the stairs. Truth to tell, he had not been in the best of health lately. He had put on a lot of weight and was experiencing the odd dizzy spell. If Jackie was alive, she would no doubt insist that he go and see a doctor.

It was June 18th, a beautiful sunny day, and Cambridge was looking its prettiest. Tourists strolled through the narrow medieval streets, perused the attractive gardens and doubtless, in a few cases, drifted along the River Cam.

The thought occurred to Benjamin, not for the first time, that he had been incredibly lucky to have come here as a student 51 years ago. He had completed a degree in Psychology and Behavioural Sciences after changing from Natural Sciences at the end of his first year. And now he was to receive an honorary doctorate – the highest honour that the university could bestow. What a fantastic culmination to his career! The other six distinguished individuals to receive such a degree were all leaders in their field. One had even won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

He glanced at his watch. He mustn't take longer than ten minutes to look around before heading off again. He had just over an hour before he needed to be at Corpus Christi College.

The itinerary of the day was a throwback to another era. After a reception and luncheon given by the Chancellor, he and the other honorands, together with the principal university officers, would follow the two Esquire Bedells with the university's silver maces along King's Parade. The dress code could not be described as understated. In full view of a huge crowd, he would wear a voluminous scarlet gown with open sleeves, the lining of the gown (pink silk shot with light blue in the case of a Doctor of Science) turned outwards and fixed in position by a twisted cord and button. It would be a magnificent spectacle: the bells of Great St Mary's, the university church, would ring out and flags would fly on their



flagpoles. Outside Senate House, the procession would be temporarily held up, when it would be joined by the heads of colleges, professors and higher doctors, and their collective arrival in the building would be greeted by a fanfare of trumpets. Proceedings, in Latin, would then start when the two proctors, the elected officers of the Regent House (the university's governing body), announced the business of the day.

An interesting and arcane point: honorary degrees were never conferred in absentia. On the other hand, there was nothing, really, for him to do on the day, no speeches to give. All he had to do was turn up and – well – bask.

The bookshop had numerous quaint touches. A skeleton wearing a mortarboard on its head had been propped up against the end of a bookcase; a witch's hat and a cape had been hung on a hatstand; even a cake, presumably left over from an author's book signing, occupied a table in an alcove.

Benjamin plodded over to the psychology section. The shop was known for its excellent selection of educational books. Here, the mood was more sombre. Pictures adorned the walls – copies, mainly, of famous paintings. Benjamin had attained a global reputation as an authority on neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism, schizophrenia and ADHD, and there would almost certainly be copies of his work on the shelves.

This section of the bookshop was virtually deserted. A member of staff, a chap with wild grey hair surmounting a bony face, walked past and they exchanged a smile. He reminded Benjamin of someone. Who? The trouble was that these days everyone reminded him of somebody else. The name of the person would probably come back to him in the next hour or two...

He turned into the final alcove along the corridor. Ahead of him was a door-sized opening in the wall covered by a bamboo curtain. A notice over the door read 'Staff Only' and yet, although he was not generally the rule-breaking type, Benjamin, after a furtive look behind him, could not stop himself from parting the curtain and swishing through to the other side.

Ah, but wasn't all this familiar? A wall faced him and there were narrow stairs immediately on his right. He was almost sure he had been here before but, in any case, would probably know one way or the other once he had reached the top of the stairs.



He began his slow ascent. The stairs had a strip of red carpet down the middle and a rail on which to place one's hand. Oh dear, this was hard work! Benjamin reached the sixth or seventh step and took a break. On his right, there was a painting in dark colours of a man sitting on a chair with symbols drawn on the wall behind him. Everything sort of juddered. Was he having another dizzy spell? Perhaps. But because it had all happened so quickly, perhaps it hadn't happened at all.

He proceeded the rest of the way up the stairs and then along a corridor. This was all very strange. He hadn't expected so many twists and turns. He turned right, went down a couple of steps, and then up a short flight of steps. Ah, now he was back on familiar territory. He descended a spiral staircase to a basement where a party was being held.

It was 51 years earlier. To be more precise, it was the end of October and he was in his first term at Fitzwilliam College. He specifically remembered this party and specifically remembered the spiral steps. In any event, one could have guessed that it was the sixties by the way that everyone was dressed. The men were split between mods and teddy boys, and the women were split between those in shift dresses with geometric designs and those in kaftans with floral motifs.

A table to Benjamin's left held a selection of sausage rolls, crisps, nuts and cocktail sticks with cheese and pineapple. All very stodgy fare, typical of the period. The centrepiece was a quiche Lorraine.

'Brown ale, Ben?' said somebody wearing a Fred Perry shirt.

A glass of brown liquid with a creamy head was thrust into his hand. He gazed around at the kaleidoscopic spectacle that confronted his eyes. Would he recognize anybody? It was so long ago now. He couldn't remember the man who had handed him his drink, who had now moved on to serve somebody else.

Oh, goodness, he had just seen a couple of people he *did* recognize. Selina Brulay was standing in one corner, sipping something fizzy, and talking to Adam Belcher, her future boyfriend. More memories were returning. Benjamin had wasted most of the evening trying to chat Selina up. He could see why he had found her attractive, those huge brown eyes and that wide smile, but it was nevertheless amazing that he hadn't realized sooner how gossipy and superficial she was.

'You made it, then?'

A man in a grey tunic was talking to him. He knew – or thought he did – this person as well.



Come on, come on, he must know him! It was... Neil Hennessy. Yes! And Neil Hennessy, of course, was the person the assistant in the bookshop had reminded him of. He knew he would get it eventually! Hennessy had got in touch with him on Facebook after a hiatus of forty years or so when his hair, according to his profile picture, was wild and grey. At that time, he had just retired as a deputy head teacher at a top private school.

'Neill!'

Somebody was shouting at Hennessy to come and join him, a little chap with a pronounced gap in his teeth. This was Stephen McClellan, a future Secretary of State for the Environment. Benjamin was getting better at recognizing people now, getting more used to their youthful appearance.

He returned his attention to Selina. She was enjoying a joke with Jocelyn Prendergast, the hostess of the party, who was dressed in a risqué miniskirt. Before going up to Cambridge, Benjamin had thought that all his fellow students would be fairly nice. Why he had thought this, it was difficult to explain. It was not as if intelligent people couldn't be nasty (and in Jocelyn's case, have vicious tongues). In any case, Jocelyn had been at the university for one year only. She had failed her preliminary examinations, including the retakes, and had had to leave. As for Selina, fluttering her eyes now in a typical come-hither pose, she wasn't in truth as attractive as he remembered. Take away her hair, in fact, and she was quite ordinary-looking. They had lost touch after leaving Cambridge and, to be honest, he hadn't felt tempted to try to contact her. Jackie was vastly superior as a partner, far more intelligent and in tune with his thinking.

A feeling of sadness crept over him. It was two years since Jackie had died. His life hadn't been the same since that awful afternoon when he had found her lying in their bed after she had complained of feeling tired and needing a nap. God, how he missed her! Besides anything else, she had played an important part in his career. Not only had she helped with his fieldwork, she had checked every draft of his books, arranged his schedule and systematically collated his work – without which it was debatable whether he would be receiving an honorary degree. Jackie hadn't attended this party. Indeed, he hadn't met her until the following year after he had changed subjects.

This first year at Cambridge, when he had been studying Nat. Sci., had represented a transitional period of his life. Most of the people at this party, many of whom were from Selwyn or



Newnham College, were unknown to him at the time, let alone now. Nevertheless, there was one person at the party who had been a major influence on his life to come, even though Benjamin had never spoken to him. He could see him now through a gap that had opened up between two groups of people. The chap in question wore small-framed glasses, a suit, and had a straight fringe. There was nothing particularly unusual in his appearance, as other men were dressed in a similar fashion but, judging from the way he was fidgeting and avoiding everyone's eye, he clearly felt uncomfortable. At the time, Benjamin had asked Selina if she knew him and had been told that his name was Lucas Tillman and that he lived at the end of her corridor.

'He's weird,' she had said. 'He has a really loud voice and talks in a robotic fashion. Also, he jumps up and down when he's excited, usually over something to do with maths. Richard Conway – do you know Rich? – says he's a genius. Don't go over and talk to him, Ben, whatever you do. You'll rue the day.'

And so, as per instructions and to his everlasting regret, he hadn't talked to Lucas. Instead, he had simply looked over at him from time to time. It appeared that everyone at the party was avoiding talking to him. At one point, a girl sat on the couch he was occupying but towards the other end, addressing someone sitting beside her on the arm.

Lucas appeared more uncomfortable than ever. Why didn't he leave? He was making no effort to engage with anyone, perhaps in the hope that they would take the initiative and engage with him. Benjamin could feel himself willing Lucas to get up and go, as if he could transfer his thoughts across the room.

Eventually, though, after a sigh and as if he had arrived at a decision, Lucas rose from his place and, just as he had all those years ago, hesitantly joined a group that included Jocelyn Prendergast. Benjamin just happened to be looking over in his direction at the time. No one in the group created a gap for him to slot into, but worse, just at that moment, with one of the speakers beside him, the music was turned up to a much higher volume. The previous song had been something by Doris Day or some other fifties' icon and, perhaps, the person who had adjusted the volume felt that something in keeping with the times was called for. It was almost certainly not an intentional act of sabotage on that person's part but, in any case, the effect of the blast of sound on Lucas was stupendous. As the song *I Can't*



Explain by The Who belted out, he threw up his hands theatrically, accidentally knocking Jocelyn's elbow and causing her to spill her drink. This circumstance wouldn't have been so bad – and might even have been seen as comical – but simultaneously he shouted, 'AAAAAAH!' This, in turn, startled Jocelyn who promptly fell over and revealed more of herself than she would have wished, as her miniskirt rose up.

If one wanted to defend her subsequent behaviour, one could say that she must have felt humiliated in front of her friends and perhaps, in passing, had noticed a smirk on somebody's face. Even so, she didn't react to the mishap in the kindest possible way.

Getting to her feet in a somewhat ungainly fashion, she bawled at Lucas, 'GET OUT, YOU FREAK! GET OUT!'. Her outburst was made all the starker by the fact that the volume of the music had hastily been turned down again.

Lucas stood facing her for a few seconds, trembling. Then, just when he seemed about to burst into tears, he swallowed hard and walked out of the room. No one tried to stop him. Perhaps a few people there – not only Benjamin – sympathized with him and thought that somebody else, somebody who knew him better, might run after him and console him.

But the upshot was that no one wanted to be the person to take his side. Peer pressure outweighed all other considerations. All Benjamin did, after Lucas had left the room, was divulge to Selina that he felt sorry for him, to which she had replied, nonsensically, 'Do you think he did it on purpose?'

'What do you mean, "did it on purpose"?'

'Well, honest to God, no one reacts like that, do they? Screaming their head off and throwing their hands up in the air. Perhaps somebody bet him he couldn't get her to spill her drink and he overdid it.'

Even at the time, he knew that this was an inane thing to say – the sort of thing that only somebody lacking in empathy would suggest. And yet – the stupid idiot! – it hadn't stopped him over the next few months, based solely on her looks, from trying to go out with her.

The fact was, as he knew now, the effect of the music blaring out would have come as a devastating shock to Lucas. It would have felt like an assault on his senses, the equivalent to anybody



else of a punch out of the blue. Moreover, Jocelyn shouting at him afterwards would have added to the trauma. He would have wanted to get away from her at all costs – which, given the circumstances, he had done with remarkable dignity – to brood, unless something drastic was done to rectify matters, over the incident probably forever.

After the party, Benjamin had only seen Lucas a couple of times. On both occasions, he had been on his own, once sitting by himself in a teashop and then, another time, riding a bike, which he did awkwardly, with his heels on the pedals. Then, six months later, at the start of the Easter term, Selina had told him, almost as an aside, that Lucas had committed suicide. He had hanged himself from a tree in his local wood. No one knew the exact circumstances, but then, as she admitted herself, no one had really got to know him over the last couple of terms.

‘He was a loner. He kept himself to himself.’

Or, rather, he desperately desired friendship but the reality was somewhat different.

Benjamin finally broke away from her after that conversation. And, indeed, the news of Lucas’s death had a profound effect on his life. An immediate effect was that he changed subjects a fortnight later – moving from the physical world of Natural Sciences to the mental one of Psychology – but also, in the long term, there probably hadn’t been a day that had gone by when he hadn’t thought about Lucas. A mystery hung over why he killed himself, which Benjamin couldn’t face finding out more about (even if not knowing why had probably only prolonged his ruminations), and he would have distressing thoughts about how Lucas’s family were coping. Presumably, his parents would have felt enormous pride over him getting into Cambridge, telling their friends and neighbours about their son’s achievement. In retrospect, it was an incredible act of bravery for him to go to that party. Benjamin imagined that he had been teased at school and wanted to make a fresh start where he hoped to make friends with people with similar interests. For 51 years, Benjamin had felt guilty over his role, or non-role, in what had happened that evening, never envisaging that he would one day find himself back in the same place at the same time...

And so, without hesitation and to atone for his error, he stepped forward and approached Lucas. It was probably only a few minutes before the music would be turned up. Lucas was looking down and scratching his neck.



'Hi,' said Benjamin.

Lucas jumped. Nevertheless, he smiled to himself while still looking down.

'You're Lucas, aren't you?' Benjamin went on. 'I've just been chatting to Selina Brulay, who has a room along the same corridor as you. She says that you're a mathematician. Hey, do you mind if we move somewhere else to talk? The speakers are close by and when the music gets turned up, it's pretty deafening. My name is Benjamin, by the way. Pleased to meet you.' They shook hands and Benjamin beckoned to Lucas to follow him. 'Let's go over here.'

They returned to near the spot where Benjamin had come in. Lucas was taller than Benjamin had imagined. He was also – Benjamin felt he could use the word – beautiful. A beautiful person, inside and out.

'Have you got a drink?' Benjamin asked. 'What would you like?'

'Coca-Cola.'

'There you go.' By chance, there was a bottle on the table next to him, which he handed over. 'Now tell me about your course. I did maths at A level and was thinking of doing it for a degree. Is it mainly pure maths or applied maths that you do?'

Lucas scratched his neck again with his long, tapered fingers. He was still nervous but gained in confidence as he spoke. His voice was not as loud as Selina had led him to believe. Nor was it true that he always avoided eye contact. It was typical of her to exaggerate what she was saying in order to make herself seem more interesting.

He and Lucas had been talking for about five minutes when the volume of the stereo was turned up. Lucas let out a small exclamation but nothing compared to what had happened all those years ago. Ironically, Jocelyn spilled her drink all on her own, but of course this time laughed the incident off as a joke.

'I don't think much of this party, do you?' Benjamin said. 'It's too loud. You need to shout to make yourself heard. Shall we go somewhere else? I know other people, much nicer, who we can mix with in quieter surroundings.'

Lucas happily nodded his agreement and Benjamin gestured to a door from which a light was shining. Walking off together, they headed towards the door, as the light grew brighter and brighter...



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Sergeant Taylor smoothed down his goatee beard, which he had been cultivating for the last fortnight. He was very young for a sergeant and, in addition to his beard, tended to use old-fashioned phrases that he thought gave him more gravitas.

'I won't detain you for very long, sir.'

'I don't mind,' the old assistant replied. 'To tell you the truth, I'm still in a state of shock.'

Sergeant Taylor smiled sympathetically. 'That's perfectly understandable. It must have been a very upsetting experience. From what I can gather, you acted in a very responsible manner.'

They were seated near the top of the stairs in an alcove that contained a cake. It had been the old assistant Ivor's idea to place the cake on the table that morning – it was the manager's birthday and the two were always competing to stock the shop with unusual items – but now it gave off a forlorn appearance. The bookshop had closed half an hour earlier and now the only people on their level were a couple of paramedics.

'I believe,' Sergeant Taylor continued, 'that you saw Mr Yanofsky shortly before you came upon his body.'

'Yes.' Ivor ran his hand through his remaining grey hairs. 'I'd passed him a few minutes earlier along the corridor and he smiled at me. It was one of those déjà vu moments. I thought I might know him – his face seemed kind of familiar – and the way he acted made me wonder if he recognized me as well.'

'He's reasonably famous, isn't he?'

'He's very well known in his field. I have a nephew who's autistic, and my sister has one or two of Mr Yanofsky's books.'

Sergeant Taylor glanced at the cake and wondered whether to ask a question about that as well: he had never seen anything like it in a bookshop. No, he answered his own thought, it was probably better to stick to the subject at hand and then go off to have a belated lunch.

'In case you're wondering,' he said, 'the reason I'm here talking to you is because we got a call



from the university asking about his whereabouts. He didn't attend a meal organized partly on his behalf and, later, a procession was briefly held up while everyone waited to see if he would arrive. We're making enquiries on the off-chance that he might have had a jealous rival who, for example, resented his getting an honorary degree. Unlikely, I know, but we like to cover every avenue.'

'It's very sad, isn't it? Now he won't get his degree at all.'

'Really? Shouldn't he get it posthumously?'

'You have to turn up for the ceremony. I suppose it's possible the authorities might relax the rules because of the exceptional circumstances. It will be interesting to see what they do.'

Sergeant Taylor shook his head in bemusement. He had not gone to university himself and the old assistant's remarks supported his belief that many academics were devoid of common sense. All kinds of awards, Oscars and so on, were conferred posthumously, and in the case of military medals in which the recipient had died in combat, it would be ridiculous not to honour their bravery.

'So,' he went on, 'after seeing Mr Yanofsky walk past, you went back to check on him. How many minutes later was that, would you say?'

'About ten. He seemed quite fragile on his feet and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen him come back this way. That part of the shop is a cul-de-sac. The staff only section consists of stairs that lead just to toilets. I heard a mobile phone go off before I reached the end of the corridor and was surprised that no one was answering.'

'The call may have been from the university. They called his home number and his mobile phone before they called us. Did you happen to look at his phone?'

'No, I was rather overtaken by events.'

'Yes. Fair enough. So you reached the end of the corridor...'

'Yes. His arm was sticking out from under the bamboo curtain. I suppose I must have run over to join him. He was lying on the floor. There was no blood or anything; his body wasn't in an awkward position. But I knew instantly that something was wrong. I placed my hand about an inch over his mouth for a few seconds.'

Ivor held his hand, palm down, just over the cake to illustrate what he had done. It was a somewhat odd gesture, at least to the sergeant's eyes, as if he was about to plunge his hand down into



the icing.

'I couldn't feel anything,' he added.

'Did you check any other vital signs?'

'His pulse. I've done a course in first aid and so I knew that he had, as it were, passed on. I didn't want to disturb him any more than that – you know, to preserve the scene. I imagine... if I may be allowed to speculate?'

'By all means.'

'There was a picture beside him that had been hanging on the wall about halfway up the stairs. Heaven knows why he would have been climbing those stairs in the first place, but it occurred to me that he might have gone up a few steps, had a heart attack or a stroke, and knocked the picture off at the same time.'

'It's not a significant clue, is it, this picture?' Sergeant Taylor said with a wry smile.

'I shouldn't think so. In fact, I hung it up myself last week. It's a copy of Diego Rivera's *The Mathematician*. The mathematician, if you ask me, looks a little sad, sitting on his own. That was why I situated it away from the rest of the shop. I found it depressing.'

'Life can be very depressing,' Sergeant Taylor replied, with a surprising degree of openness. 'Why do you think Mr Yanofsky was in a staff only section?'

'I have no idea.'

'You didn't hear a bump when he fell down the stairs?'

'No.'

'And you're sure that you didn't see anyone else around?'

'I'm almost certain that it was just the two of us.'

Perhaps it was this realization that he had categorically been the last person to see the dead man – and that one could never predict when or where death might occur – that produced the quaver in Ivor's voice.

'You may feel further after-effects from your experience,' Sergeant Taylor said considerately. 'It's not surprising. Please get some help, if that is the case. Here is my card. We have people who are very used to counselling others in such situations.'



'Thank you.'

'Anyway, just to confirm before I go, there was nothing suspicious you remember seeing in the minutes before and after coming across the body?'

'No.'

'Okey-doke.' Sergeant Taylor rose to his feet. 'Well, thank you for your help. As I say, don't hesitate to get in touch with us. It's still possible, through the effects of shock, that you may think of something that could be relevant.'

'Has he got any relatives?'

'We haven't come across any so far. His wife died a couple of years ago. He came up from Richmond this morning.'

Ivor remained sitting in his chair as the sergeant departed. He thought about his own family and, in particular, his nephew, who had recently been transferred from a mainstream school into a special needs school. His sister would doubtless be upset when he told her about the death of Benjamin Yanofsky. She had said more than once that his work had helped her in her understanding of her son's condition. He would call her shortly, when he could face doing so, and pass on the news.

Benjamin Yanofsky, Ivor reflected, was somebody who had made a difference, who had changed people's views. Hopefully, that thought had given him much satisfaction at the end of his life.

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