

Time  
Travelling  
with a  
Tortoise

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*'The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future.'*

Stephen Hawking

# PROLOGUE

I should really do one of those ‘Previously on . . .’ things like they do on Netflix.

So here goes.

*[CLEARS THROAT]*

The story so far . . .

*[WISTFUL MUSIC PLAYS]*

On my *first* twelfth birthday – which was only a few weeks ago, but to say ‘several lifetimes ago’ isn’t *completely* wrong – I, Albert Einstein Hawking Chaudhury, received a pet hamster and a letter from my dad. My dad’s name was Pye and he died four years ago, leaving the letter for me to open.

By then, Mum had remarried a bloke called Steve, who came with a daughter, Carly: my stepsister, and we’d moved up the coast to Blyth. I didn’t like either of them to begin with.

Dad’s letter told me where I would find a time machine

that he had built in secret, in our old house in Culvercot. He begged me to use it to go back in time to prevent . . .

*[DRAMATIC CHORD]*

. . . the accident that claimed his life.

Accompanied by my hamster (named Alan Shearer by football-mad Steve) and against the advice of my wise old Grandpa Byron, I ended up in 1984. There I met Pye – my own father! – as a twelve-year-old. We quickly became friends, teaming up against the local bully, Paul ‘Macca’ MacFaddyen.

Pye did not know we were father and son.

*[SOUNDS OF VIOLENT STORM]*

One day in 1984, Pye and I went out with his home-made go-kart, the Lean Mean Green Machine. He steered it off the promenade in Culvercot, drowning in a stormy sea.

(I know, I know. It doesn’t make a lot of sense written down like that. This is just a catch-up, remember?)

*[SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC BUILDS]*

If my dad drowned before I was born, where did that leave me? Could I even exist? I was terrified that Alan Shearer and I would be stuck in 1984 and – among many other things – I had to set fire to my school in order to get back to the present day.

I had one more task: I sent my hamster back in time with a written warning to my dad to avoid using the Lean Mean Green Machine on that day.

Amazingly, it worked! My dad – Pye – read the message: he didn't go out on his go-kart at all that day. That meant he avoided:

- a) the accident that later killed him when I was eight,  
and
- b) steering the kart off the promenade into the sea.

When I finally made it back to the present day myself, the time machine was all but destroyed.

*[HAPPY MUSIC]*

I did not care about that, though, because I had succeeded in my mission.

In other words (and to make a much longer story short), he's alive. He recognises me as the boy from his childhood who sent him a hamster to warn him of the impending accident.

I got what I wanted.

I am so happy! So very, very happy.

*[MUSIC STOPS ABRUPTLY]*

Well, I was. To begin with . . .

# Chapter One

You may remember that my dad died twice. As for me, I ended up having two twelfth birthdays, which *sounds* like a whole lot more fun. Trust me: it isn't.

It all happened because I rebuilt my dad's time machine. (Which looked nothing like you'd imagine, by the way. It was a laptop, a bunch of wires, a black box the size of a paperback book and a garden tub.)

You know those films when the nerdy hero does something brilliant with a computer and there's a clock ticking down because the bomb's about to go off, and his fingers are flying over the keyboard, sweat pouring down his face, music, lights flashing, a klaxon blaring, and then he hits the button with two seconds to spare and saves the world?

Well, it wasn't like that. It was a lot more boring: there were no flashing lights, no warning klaxon. I didn't actually do anything except ask an artificial-intelligence bot to fix the damaged computer program, and even that was Carly's idea.

(Oh yeah, Carly's back in the picture: more of her later.)

Still, it worked – only not perfectly. Very *imperfectly*, as it turned out.

Which goes some way to explaining why we are in a cave, many millions of years ago, being eyed up as a potential lunch by a family of dinosaurs.

Who is this 'we'? Well, there's me, my hamster (Alan Shearer, remember him?), a small tortoise (Tortellini, don't ask), my former stepsister Carly, and the soon-to-be-eaten Paulie MacFaddyen – the nephew of Macca, the meanest kid I ever met back in 1984.

None of it's my fault, I should say. *Definitely* not my fault. Apart from the rebuilding-the-time-machine bit.

Last time I time-travelled, all I did was sit in a zinc garden tub, type in some code and hit 'enter' on the old laptop and then it just kind of happened. There was a slight misting of my vision for a few seconds, as though looking through steam, and that was it: 1984, here I come!

This time, though, it goes on for ages. Everything is dark. The air seems to swirl around us while Grandpa Byron's electric tuk-tuk – a vehicle a bit like a golf buggy – vibrates. I hear Carly moan.

'Al? Al? Is this meant to happen? Can you stop it?'

*No* and *no* are the answers to that, but I don't say it aloud.



‘Woss goin’ on, Chow?’ says Paulie MacFaddyen in his strong Geordie accent.

‘Al, I think I’m gonna be . . .’ followed by the unmistakable sound of Carly throwing up, although it’s too dark to see much.

Still it continues. Ten seconds? Longer? As my namesake Albert Einstein said, ‘Time is an illusion.’

‘Can anyone else smell spew?’ says Paulie. ‘Ah . . . *gross!* You’ve puked all over me feet. Ergh, I’ve just put me hand in it!’

‘Al, for goodness’ sake, make it STOP!’ screams Carly and, as if in response, that is when the vibrating stops and the light returns. We all stare out, panting, at a bleak landscape dotted with clumps of tall ferns and low twisted trees.

Paulie looks up, his eyes wide with astonishment. ‘What the . . . ? How? How’ja do that? Is this VR or summit?’ He steps down cautiously from the tuk-tuk and crouches to touch the sandy earth. ‘Whoa!’ he gasps, and he reaches his arms out as if exploring the limits of the illusion.

We’re on the edge of a swamp. Behind us, dark, dense trees sprout from marshy earth and a flat dry plain stretches ahead of us. About a hundred metres away, the land slopes steeply down to a grey sea. Everything is lit by pale late-afternoon sun and I just know what Carly’s reaction will be. She’ll say, ‘Wow. Frea-key!’

Except she doesn't.

She turns, her face contorted with fear, and screams, 'What have you done, Al, you complete flaming pinhead?'

I'm asking myself the same question. None of this was meant to happen. Consequently, I find myself getting defensive.

'What have *I* done? *Me?* I haven't done anything. It's this massive brain-fart here who . . . who . . .' I point at Paulie, then realise that I don't know what I'm talking about. 'What *did* you do?'

Paulie's fake hardman swagger is nowhere to be seen. The wonder has vanished from his face too and his voice has taken on a nervous bleat. 'Me? I . . . I didn't do nowt. I only came to play wi' your flippin' hamster, so calm doon. I'm the one wi' spew all over me—'

'*Calm down?*' says Carly. 'How dare you! Something's gone wrong with his time machine and you're telling me to *calm down?*'

'Wi' his . . . *what?*' says Paulie.

Carly is breathing heavily through her nose like an angry bull, and she and Paulie stare at each other, both of them terrified and furious.

I say, 'This was not, erm . . . intentional.'

'Oh, no kidding?' says Carly, sarcastically. She releases the air in her lungs with an exasperated sigh.

Paulie has regained some of his confidence and juts out his chin. 'Did she just say "time machine", Chow?'

‘Yeah. Yeah, she did.’ I sigh.

‘Hello? I’m here, you know. Name’s Carly.’

Paulie ignores her. ‘You’re kiddin’? Ha’way, man, y’can just turn it off, can’t you? It’s pretty good, though. I mean – no goggles, helmets. Did y’make this yourself, Chow? How come you never told me? I’m supposed to be yer best mate. I saw this thing once on KlickMe . . .’

I’ve tuned out. *Chow* is Paulie’s nickname for me. Short for my last name, Chaudhury. I hate it. Every time he calls me ‘Chow’, I’m reminded of Macca, his horrible Uncle Paul, back in 1984. It was my dad’s nickname too. ‘Best mate’ freaked me out as well because I hardly know Paulie. I’ll explain in a bit.

I interrupt his story about something he once saw on KlickMe and say, ‘Carly’s right. About the time travel. Well, we say “time travel”, although . . .’

But I’m not sure I want – or am even able – to explain in more detail. Not yet.

Paulie says, ‘Although what?’ He takes an aggressive step towards me and I flinch. ‘*What?*’ he repeats.

So, as simply as I can, I tell him. My dad invented a sort of time machine that seems, on this occasion, to have malfunctioned. To say the least. I think Paulie more or less believes me. He kind of has to because about a minute ago we were in my garage and now we’re not. His flash of aggression dies down and he does his nervous squint, like a huge blink that contorts his face.

He says, ‘You’re gonna gerrus back, yeah? I mean, from wherever we are?’

‘Of course,’ I say with more confidence than I feel.

I turn back to the tuk-tuk. My hamster, Alan Shearer, is safe in the bottom of a lidless yellow cool box wedged beneath the rear seat. On the seat is the key to it all – the laptop that I lift out, wiping some of Carly’s sick off it with my sleeve. The blistered screen is blank. There are, so far as I can tell at this stage, only two reasons why that might be. The first is that the whole thing has broken, burned out. That would mean we were stuck here forever. Out loud, I voice the second possibility.

‘I think . . .’ I begin hesitantly, ‘I think the battery has run down.’

‘Oh, fantastic, Al, you total chump,’ snaps Carly. ‘Didn’t you charge it?’

‘Of course I did. It’s just . . . all of that . . . that stuff that happened just now must have depleted the charge super-quick. It’ll recharge from the tuk-tuk battery. I’m, erm . . . certain.’

I turn the switch on the front panel of the tuk-tuk. Nothing happens.

‘We’ll have to wait for it to recharge from the solar panel on the roof. It might take a while. Look: the solar charger light is on at least.’ I point to the panel where a tiny blue light indicates that the recharging is underway. ‘At a guess, the time-counter malfunctioned and we just

kept going back into the past until the battery drained. Then we stopped.'

The three of us eye one another.

Paulie squints again. 'You're not kiddin', are you, Chow?' Again there's that wobble of fear in his voice. I can't blame him for being scared. I am too.

I shake my head. 'It looks like we've ended up where no one lives.'

I'm not sure if I have ever been anywhere where there's no sign of humans at all. There are no houses or roads, no ploughed fields, or planted hedges, or telegraph poles, or electricity pylons, or wind turbines, or even litter . . . Nothing.

'Wherever we are, it's flippin' cold,' says Carly, hugging herself. 'How long till that thing charges again?'

'A few hours, at a guess?' I say. Carly and Paulie both take out their phones.

'Oh great. No power, no nothing,' Carly says, tapping the screen repeatedly.

'Me neither,' says Paulie.

Carly tuts and then screams as a massive bird swoops down from behind us, skimming close to her head before flapping off with a strange, growling squawk. Carly cowers with her arms over her head. 'What was *that*?'

Paulie follows the bird with his gaze and its huge wings make a loud snap like a sail in the wind. It joins two others high in the sky. 'That's norra bird that I recognise.'

‘You know birds?’ says Carly, lowering her arms cautiously. She stares warily at the sky. ‘Didn’t have you down as a twitcher.’

He gives her a dark look. ‘Didn’t have you down as a pain in the neck, but we live and learn. I know a bit. Enough to think that there’s summit up wi’ them.’

Still keeping a wary eye on the circling birds, Carly heads towards the cliff. Paulie and I hang back while I dislodge the cool box containing my hamster. I say to him, ‘If they’re not birds, then what are they?’ He doesn’t answer at first, instead craning his neck upwards towards the creatures. ‘Paulie?’

‘Hm? What? Dunno for sure.’ He puffs out his cheeks, then adds, ‘No one knows, really.’ He sees my puzzled expression. ‘Reptiles, Chow. Reptiles. Sorta related to birds, but . . . not birds, if y’know what I mean.’

‘Not really.’

‘Put it this way: think of them like dinosaurs.’

‘*Di . . . dinosaurs?*’

‘Aye.’

‘And you know this how?’

He shrugs. ‘KlickMe. There’s a section called DinoKlick and, well . . . them’s dinosaurs.’

‘*D-dinosaurs?*’ I say again.

He glances around as though someone might hear, then squints. ‘Are you scared, Chow?’

*He* is scared. It's obvious. Why wouldn't he be? And so I lie.

'Scared? Me? Nah. The battery'll charge up. Just gorra wait.'

*Gorra wait.* I talk more Geordie with Paulie. I don't even know why. As for being scared: I'm absolutely terrified.