

Ouroborus

Tevenson Hopkins took the head off his pint while he waited for the barman to return with his change. He was careful to count it before dropping into his pocket, satisfied he nodded his thanks and carried the drink back to his seat in the corner. Scowling at the youths sat in his usual spot just to the left of the inglenook fireplace (tucked away from general view but still close enough to feel the warmth) he placed his pint on a beermat then removed his raincoat, folded it up and put it on the stool next to the table. He undid the buttons on his dark grey polyester/ wool blend single breasted suit jacket before sitting. Loosening his purple and green striped tie he sat back and stared out at the room.

Besides the lads, the pub was empty, unsurprising as it was early in the evening in between the time of an after work pint and the all night session. He glanced at his watch, frowned and held it to his ear. He pulled out the crown and set the time against the clock above the bar then wound it up. Not many people wore watches nowadays, but it held sentimental, if not any actual, value (a plain steel scratched case, Roman numerals printed on a white face, the leather strap replaced repeatedly as the old ones wore out) being the only thing his 'mother' Lucy Hopkins had found him with. "You had it clutched in your tiny fist as you lay there screaming away, naked as a Jay bird." She had thought he had been about two months old but they celebrated his found day not his birthday every year, next week would be the forty-third since he had been abandoned in the carpark of 'The Seven Arms' pub.

He finished winding it and reached for his drink.

The local micro-brewed beer had a warm nutty taste with a subtle undertone of hops, he savoured the flavour, sloshing it round his mouth before swallowing. He pulled out a Moleskine notebook and a pencil stub from his left inside pocket and flicked through until he found the requisite page. Made a note about the beer, giving it a mark of 8.5 out of 10 (half a mark off for the finish, another for the price).

Laughter made him look up, a frown forming at the interruption to his contemplation. It was the boys (men he should say as they were drinking pints; even if it was a gassy foreign lager). They had been joined by a couple of girls (women; again with pints of that tasteless stuff) and were puffing themselves up, starting to strut their courtship dance. He watched them for a minute with a mixture of annoyance and envy at their youthful exuberance. Despite working in a pub from childhood, first as a glass collector then moving up to serving drinks once he was of age, Tevenson had been awkward around people, especially women. Oh there had been dalliances, he couldn't call them relationships due to their brevity, but they all ended the same way as they became frustrated by his obsession, his folly they called it when he was finally persuaded to explain what he hoped to accomplish. They thought he was crazy, he could even hear it in his mother's voice.

"You're not still messing with that foolishness are you Tev?"

"It's a valid scientific principle, it will work, I just have to iron out the kinks."

"People cleverer than you say it's impossible, that fellow on the TV, one in the wheelchair with the squeaky voice..."

"Maybe they're too clever, sometimes you just have to try."

"Oh Tevenson." Her eyes had softened and she smiled at him as she reached out to hold his face between her hands. "Stop this now, you're 42, what have you to show for your life?"

He had pushed her away, "How do I even know that?"

"Know what?"

"That I am 42, you just guessed, I could have been any age."

"A year here or there doesn't matter."

"It matters to me!" He had turned from her, unwilling to let her see his eyes filling up with tears.

"Tev, you can't just live in the past. It's destroying you, I had hoped for so much for you." She had touched his arm. "A wife, children. Grandkids for me."

"So its all about you is it?"

"You know that's not true. I took you in, me and your father, you were a blessing. You still are. I just don't want you to be unhappy."

"Then support me in this."

"How can I support you when I don't even understand it?"

"I've tried to explain."

"Yes." She had waved her hands. "I just don't see the point."

"So I can know who I am."

"You're my son."

"But I'm not am I?" He had said, then faltered when he saw the pain in her face. "Mum I..."

"It's OK, I understand."

But he wasn't sure that she did.

He finished his pint and debated whether to get another, deciding to leave it and keep a clear head so he could get some work done before going to bed. He stood, pulled on his coat, brushed black hair that was beginning to grey at the temples from his brown eyes and left 'The Grateful Beggar' to walk home.

Tevenson closed the door to his flat securing the deadbolts and putting the chain on. He hung his raincoat on a hook in the hall and removed his brown leather shoes, replacing them with a pair of worn tartan slippers. He passed the first door on the left that lead into his sitting room and instead opened the one on the right into his bedroom where he changed out of his work clothes into a pair of sweatpants and a dressing gown over his vest.

In the kitchen he emptied a can of tomato soup into a bowl and put it in the microwave. He twisted the dial on the front then frowned when the light failed to come on, his expression becoming a scowl when he remembered using the transformer from it for his project.

He tipped the soup into a saucepan and put it on a low heat on the hob. Leaving it he walked back out into the hall. The door to the sitting room had been replaced by one with a steel core and locking bolts on each edge, the frame in which it was seated was also reinforced and the wall was load bearing brick. He punched an eight digit code into the keypad and waited for the bolts to disengage, released its weight caused it to swing inwards. He walked in to the room and pushed it closed listening for the click. He pressed the light switch mounted next to it being careful to turn on both switches then the left one off. The cold stutter of a cheap fluorescent added to the residual hum in the room as Tevenson went to a large battered desk pushed up against windows covered with black plastic. On it was a laptop and various displays both analogue and digital. He studied the readouts there, compared the time with his watch and altered the latter to match. Long skeins of cable fed out of the back of the table and wound their way round the room, some terminating in boxes or large loops, a few connected to a wardrobe standing in the centre of the room, the rest to an array that spread out along the walls creeping up like dry rot.

The mice he kept in cages next to the boarded up fireplace began to squeak and scurry about, he checked their water levels and threw in a handful of pellets before returning to the desk.

He pressed a button on it, nodding as a needle flickered in response, he tapped a command into the laptop and watched a string of numbers flicker up the screen as the hum increased.

Satisfied with the preliminary results he powered it off. Squatting he looked under the desk and traced one of the wires, pulled on it to make sure it was secure. He picked up a pair of thick rubber gloves, their surfaces covered with scorch marks, and goggles with smoked glass lenses from the desk and put them both on. Stumbling in the resultant gloom he made his way to the knife switch mounted above a thick cable that had been pushed through a hole in the wall to where it connected to the mains bypassing the meter and fusebox. He pushed it down closing it, charging the room with potential and causing the mice to scurry about in panic.

The wardrobe doors were held closed with a cable that he unclipped then stooped to brush some ash from inside it.

"Eeny meeny." He said as he pointed at the mice cages letting his finger rest on the furthest left.

"Time to make history, or rather futury." He placed the cage in the wardrobe along with a clock, closed the doors and reconnected the cable. On the desk were two analogue readouts showing the current time, he altered the second one to ten minutes ahead and pressed the button again. The hum increased and became a throb that was palpable as a metallic tang on his tongue. He typed commands into the laptop watching the needle respond. As it reached the zone he had coloured in red the light in the room began to increase until it was unbearable even in the goggles. He squinted against it as he watched the wardrobe begin to fade, the mice running frantically around their cage the last to disappear.

The needle dropped back to zero, he powered it off, pushed his goggles up onto his forehead blinked and then began to smile.

"It's worked!" He jumped up and down, punching the air with a fist. Feeling foolish he stopped and walked back to the knife switch being studious to avoid where the wardrobe had stood. He disengaged it and removed his gloves and goggles then checked his watch, ten minutes to wait, enough time to get his soup and be back before the return.

He flicked the light switch off and opened the door heading back to the kitchen.

The soup was a thick bubbling gloop burnt to the bottom of the saucepan, cursing he grabbed the stainless steel handle screaming as it seared his fingers. He threw it into the sink, turned on the cold water and held his hand under it to quell the pain. Water sprayed up from the basin soaking his trousers. He swore again and turned the flow down. He examined his hand scowling at the blisters forming on the palm and first two fingers. He loosened the pull cord on his sweatpants and let them drop to the floor, the underpants following after. Wrapping the dressing gown around himself and tying it shut he looked through the cupboards for something to eat before settling on a can of tuna. From a drawer he got a fork and ate as he stood by the sink with his hand back under the water. Finished he dropped the can into the sink along with the cutlery and examined his burn. The skin had lifted in long tubes along his fingers and bubbled up on his palm. It would be painful for days, making his work awkward. His work! He looked at his watch and hurried back to the sitting room being careful to repeat the process to disarm the fail safes. The wardrobe stood again in the centre of the room, he approached it carefully, reaching out with his uninjured hand to touch the wood. It felt normal to him, or at least still like wood. He disconnected the cable and opened the door. Inside the mice scurried about and he shouted in elation. The clock beside them was ten minutes behind. He picked up the cage and counted the occupants making sure all were moving and appeared healthy. Excited he placed them back in the corner with their fellows and updated a sheet of paper hung from the corner of a whiteboard screwed to the wall above them.

"This is it, this is it." He said trying to suppress the urge to cackle like a mad scientist. The consuming need to know why he had been abandoned forty three years before in a pub car park had driven him to this point, to attempt and now achieve what many believed was impossible, that had caused nothing but incomprehension to anyone he had tried to explain it to.

"So what happens then?"

"Huh?" Tevenson had looked up from his notebook where he had been adding tasting notes for a rather peculiar stout that was guesting. "What happens when?"

Gretchen had put her drink back on the table and said. "If you manage it, travel back in time, what are you going to do?"

"Well." He had sat back, put the pencil in his pocket and closed the book. "I see who dropped me off, find out who they are."

"Would you stop them?"

"No, that would cause all sorts of complications."

"Complications?"

He had liked Gretchen, thought that in some other life they could have been good together, she was pretty; long brown hair, green eyes, a snub nose and well defined lips. She dressed for her age, which was something he approved of, smart but with a hint of her ample cleavage, shapely legs emerging from a knee length dress.

"Yes, if I stopped them leaving me there then my life would be different. I wouldn't have been

abandoned so there wouldn't have been a need to invent a time machine." He had taken a sip of his drink and wiped the foam from his top lip. "Do you see?"
She had frowned, "I guess so, but if so, then what's the point?"
"I would know."
"Yes, but what good does that do if you're not going to change anything?"
"I can change it now. I mean." He had waved his arms about, "I wouldn't change it in the past, but I could come back to the present and change it."
"What?"
"I could find them now, tell them I am their son."
"But if they abandoned you then." She had tried a sympathetic smile, "What makes you think they would want you now?"
"I don't care if they want me! I just want to know why."
"Oh Tevenson, it seems pointless."
"You don't understand."
She had shrugged and said "I guess I don't."
They had finished that night, another one who didn't get why he had to do this, needed to do it. But now he had succeeded, now he could find out.
What was he waiting for?
He checked his last test subjects, removing one from the cage and letting it run up his sleeve. It seemed OK but it was hard to tell, perhaps he should try with a dog or cat, maybe a monkey if he could get hold of one.
He laughed out loud thinking about ordering a monkey off the internet and sending it through time. He dropped the mouse back into the cage and stared over at the wardrobe.
"Why wait?" he thought. At the desk he started a program on the laptop answering the prompted questions of time; an hour before Lucy had found him, and location; he entered the co-ordinates of a street near the pub. He pressed Y and then set the second analogue readout to the value on the screen. He pressed Y again, then typed YES at the next prompt to start a one minute countdown. He went over and closed the knife switch causing the mice to squeak and scurry as the hum increased and the metallic taste returned. The wardrobe doors were open, he stepped inside and pulled them shut then realised he couldn't fasten the outer cables. He pushed them open and started to exit as the counter hit zero.
Fire scorched his nerves, his body feeling like it was being crushed and twisted apart. He clawed at his eyes in a vain attempt to stop the blinding light searing his retinas.
Screaming in agony he faded from view as the laptop screen displayed one word: COMPLETE.

Lucy Hopkins rang the bell for last orders and smiled over at her husband Steve.
"Another long night love." He said.
"A good one though." She replied, "keep the wolf from our door another week."
He waved at their clientèle. "Think the wolves are in."
"Oi watch it Steve. I resemble that remark." Harry said as he approached the bar, "two pints of bitter, the good pump if you don't mind."
"All our pumps are good."
"Well not the one you use for the riff raff."
Lucy laughed, "I'll take out the rubbish, you see to his lordship."
"I'll do that in a minute Luce."
"It's not a problem. I'll scream if I need to."
"Not many would take you on Lucy." Harry said.
"What do you mean by that?" She said, her face screwing up into mock indignation.
"Uh, nothing, I mean, well."
She laughed again as she turned and picked up the bag from behind the bar. She unlocked the door at the rear and went outside.

On the way to the dumpster she paused, "what the?" She said as she spotted the wardrobe in the centre of the car park. Someone must have dumped it there. She scowled thinking of how they were going to get it to the tip. Still it didn't look in too bad condition, maybe they could use it in one of the upstairs rooms. Steve had talked about hiring them out, turning the pub in to a B&B. He had said they had the room now.

Now that it didn't look like they would have kids.

Her face fell and her hand went to her belly as she thought about their expectation becoming hope then acceptance. She threw the rubbish into the bin and then went to look at the wardrobe. As she approached she could hear something, it sounded like crying. She speeded up and pulled open the door. Inside, wrapped in some old clothes was a baby, its little eyes screwed up as it bawled its lungs out. A little boy she noticed as she reached out to him, "Shush, shush little one." She said in a soft cooing voice. He stopped crying and opened his eyes. When he saw her his face lit up and his mouth twisted up into a smile. Lucy's heart shattered as she screamed out,

"Steve!"