

Time Travelers Never Die

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Prologue

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They buried him on a gray morning, unseasonably cold, threatening rain. The mourners were few, easily constraining their grief for a man who had traditionally kept his acquaintances at a distance. The preacher was white-haired, feeble, himself near the end, and Dave wondered what he was thinking as the wind rattled the pages of his prayer book.

"Ashes to ashes--."

Shel had been the first time traveler. Well, the second, really. His father had been first. But of all the people assembled at the funeral, only Dave any of that.

He stood with hands thrust into his coat pockets. He'd buried friends before, Al Caisson after he'd been struck down by an aneurysm, and Lee Carmody, who'd fallen out of a tree at scout camp. But neither loss had been this painful. Maybe because Shel had seemed so alive. Maybe because he and Shel had shared so much. It was true the guy was odd, sometimes annoying, unpredictable. Selfish, even. He didn't have a lot of friends. But on that final day, Dave realized that he'd loved him. Had never known anyone like him.

"--In the sure and certain hope--."

Dave wasn't all that confident about a resurrection, but he knew with cold clarity that Adrian Shelborne still walked the earth in other ages. Even up ahead somewhere. Shel had admitted to only brief jumps downstream, nothing beyond a month or so,

just enough to satisfy his curiosity. But Dave had sensed recently that he was hiding something. Shel, he suspected, had gone deeper into the future than he'd admitted.

Not that it mattered anymore.

The preacher finished, closed his book, and raised his hand to bless the polished orchid-colored coffin. The wind blew, and the air was heavy with approaching rain. The mourners, many anxious to be about the day's business, bent their heads, queued up, and walked past, placing lillies atop the coffin. When it was done, they lingered briefly, murmuring to each other. Helen stood off to one side, looking lost.

Lover with no formal standing. Not even known to Jerry or the other family members. She dabbed jerkily at her eyes and kept her gaze riveted on the gray stone that carried his name and dates.

She looked his way, and their eyes touched.

The mourners began walking toward their cars, exchanging a few last words, starting the engines, driving away. A few seemed reluctant to leave. Among them, Helen.

Dave strode over and joined her. "You okay?"

She shook her head yes.

Shel had never understood how Dave had felt about her. He used to talk about her a lot when they were upstream. How she'd enjoy Victorian London. Or St. Petersburg before the first war. And of course he'd never shared the great secret with her. That was always something he was going to do later.

For that matter, she had never understood how Dave felt.

Time Travelers Never Die

He'd introduced her to Shel and had stood by while he walked off with her. Dumb.

It occurred to him that maybe he was getting a second chance. The thought no sooner entered his mind than a flush of guilt ran through him. He pushed the idea away.

Still--.

She was trembling.

Her cheeks were wet.

"I'll miss him, too," David said.

"I loved him, Dave."

"I know." He caught her arm. "Let's get out of here."

They started toward the road. Tears leaked out of her eyes. She stopped, tried to say something, tried again. "I would have liked," she said, when she'd regained a degree of control, "to have had a chance to tell him how much he meant to me. How glad I was to have known him."

"He knew, Helen. He was obsessed with you." She sniffled, wiped her eyes. "Are you going back to the house for coffee?"

"No. I think I've had enough."

"Why don't you let me take you home?"

"It's all right," she said. "I'll be okay." Her car was parked near a stone angel.

Linda Keffler, Shel's boss for a good many years, came over and expressed her condolences. "We'll miss him," she said.

She obviously had no idea who Helen was, so David introduced them. "They were close friends," he said.

"I'm so sorry, dear. To lose him like that--."

Helen didn't try to speak. She just stood, trying to control her emotions.

Linda looked a bit weepy herself. "Let me know," she said, "if there's anything I can do." Then she was striding toward her car, moving quickly, anxious to be away.

When she was gone, Helen started for her own car. Dave walked with her. "When you get a chance," she said, "give me a call."

He opened her car door for her. She got in, started the engine, and lowered the window. "Thanks for everything, Dave," she said.

She raised her left hand in farewell, and drove slowly away. She had known so much about Adrian Shelborne. And so little.

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Jerry was Shel's older brother. He wasn't much like Shel. He smiled more easily, and was more aware of what was going on around him. He'd been staring down at the coffin, which waited on broad straps for the workmen who would lower it into the ground. When he saw that Helen was gone, he came over. "Dave," he said, "I appreciate your coming."

"No way I wouldn't have."

"I know. I know you guys were pretty close." He took a deep breath. "It's hard to believe."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Jerry."

"You coming over to the house?"

Time Travelers Never Die

"Yeah. I could use a drink."

They shook hands, and Jerry walked away. Dave thought how superficial the guy was. This was the first time he could recall that Jerry had actually seemed to care about anything important. If Shel's father had taken him into his confidence, had given him access to the converter as he had Shel, he wouldn't have known what to do with it.

Jerry ducked his head and climbed into his limo. He pulled out into the road and scattered a few pigeons.

Dave took a deep breath and turned away. Hard to believe. Gone now. Shel and his time devices.

They'd been destroyed in the fire. Dave had the only surviving unit. Safely hidden in his sock drawer. When he could summon the will, he'd get rid of it, too. Let it go.

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On the way home, he turned on the radio. It was an ordinary day. Peace talks were breaking down in Africa. Another congressman was being accused of diverting campaign funds. Domestic assaults had risen again. The economy wasn't doing well. And, in Los Angeles, there was a curious conclusion to an expressway pileup: Two people, a man and a woman, had broken into one of the wrecked vehicles and kidnapped the driver, who was believed to be either dead or seriously injured. They had apparently run off with him.

Only in California.

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Shel had never talked much about his father. But Michael Shelborne had been a Nobel candidate on two occasions, for work that Dave couldn't begin to understand. And he had found a way to travel in time, a feat that nobody except Dave even knew about. He recalled Shel mentioning that his father had been disappointed at his career choice. Shel, like his dad, had become a physicist. But he apparently lacked Michael's genius, and had eventually become the public relations director for Carbolite, a high tech firm. But if Michael had been disappointed in Shel, what must he have thought of Jerry, who'd become a lawyer?

Dave already missed Shel's voice, his sardonic view of the world, his amused cynicism.

He sighed. The world was a cruel and painful place. Enjoy life while you can. He remembered his grandfather once commenting that he should live life to the fullest. "While you can," he'd said, his intense sea-blue eyes locked on Dave. "You only get a few decades in the daylight. Assuming you're lucky."

Ray White, a retired tennis player who lived alone near the corner, was out walking. He waved as Dave slowed down and pulled into his driveway. Dave waved back.

He got out of the car, went inside, and locked up. He didn't usually drink alone, but today he was willing to make an exception. He poured a brandy and stared out the window. The sky, finally, was clearing. It would be a pleasant evening. In back somewhere, something moved. It might have been a branch, but it sounded inside the house.

Time Travelers Never Die

He dismissed it. It had been a long day and he was tired. He sank into a chair and closed his eyes.

It came again. A floorboard, maybe. Not much more than a whisper.

He took down a golf club, went into the hallway, looked up the staircase and along the upper level. Glanced toward the kitchen.

Wood creaked. Upstairs.

A hinge, maybe.

He started up, as quietly as he could. He was about halfway when the closed door to the middle bedroom clicked. Someone was turning the knob. Dave froze.

The door opened. And Shel appeared.

"Hi, Dave," he said.

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