

It works both ways

She grabbed my attention, she would have grabbed anyone's, striding down the road towards me that summer's day. From her coat, long and black and out of place in the warmth of the sun, to her hair, short and dark brown, framing sharp features, she stood out. It's a trick that some people have, the effortless style and confidence that I so envy. And I got a wink as she passed me, along with a perfume that made me think of a walk by the sea. I turned but she had gone, into a shop or around the corner.

I'm Dave by the way, twenty-five; single but available. And what I'm going to tell you, well you might think that I'm crazy but then again you may just believe me.

I couldn't get her out of my mind, there was something more than just the sight or the smell of her, being a bit of a loner and socially awkward I had never really got involved with people, the whole thing seemed so complicated to me. I didn't understand the rules and usually managed to say the wrong thing. And that made it worse. That's why I drove lorries; I could avoid most of my phobias and live in my bubble. But work was quiet and I had a few days to myself and like it or not I had to face the world sometimes. Maybe I could get the courage to speak to her, if I ever saw her again.

I don't know why, maybe it was the perfume but the next afternoon I ended up walking along the cliff path. It was a perfect day; light breeze, blue sky and a faint buzz from the bees around the flowering blackberries. The sun shone on the flat sea with the odd sail from a yacht drifting on the tide. People walked dogs and children ran; a normal day.

I heard a noise. A rustle in the undergrowth, the sort of noise that a dog makes when they're chasing rabbits. Looking around I saw movement in a patch of bracken.

Curiosity got the better of me and I waded into the waist high foliage, heading towards the part that was waving on this calm day, like a local breeze had taken hold. As I got within six feet it stopped.

There was nothing there; whatever animal had caused the motion had gone, melted away into the deep brush. A splash of colour caught my eye, a purple case, about the size of a book lay on the ground.

I picked it up, it was warm and it felt like fine leather, polished and well used, the corners of the case were scuffed. I turned it over in my hands, it was closed but had no visible lock, the seam just wouldn't open, no matter how hard I tugged.

I carried it home, and over a cup of tea I looked at it. There were no marks on the case and again, I couldn't open it. I even resorted to trying to push a blade between the two halves of the seam but to no avail. Frustrated at my inability to open it, I tossed it into an armchair.

Next day it rained and I got on with other things, the case was where I had left it and I had no idea what to do with it. So I did nothing, perhaps I would see the owner on my walk, or perhaps it was broken and unwanted, thrown away. Maybe I should just put it back where I had found it and forget about it.

In the end it was nearly a week before I walked that way again, and when I did I forgot to take the thing with me.

She was there, in her long black coat, hunting through the bracken, swishing a long stick around as she flattened the leaves.

“Hello,” I shouted. “Are you looking for something?”

She turned to me and smiled, and I realised that although I had remembered her just about perfectly, I had forgotten the way her face was sharp and alive, how her short hair and delicate eyebrows framed bright grey eyes and a generous mouth. She was as tall as me and moved quickly, like a cautious gazelle peering all around. But today it wasn't happiness but worry on her face.

"I've lost my recorder," she announced. "If I don't find it then I'm in trouble, they allowed me to come back for it but if I don't find it I'm finished. It'll be the end of my career." She seemed distraught at the prospect.

"Was it in a purple case?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Oh do say you've got it, where is it?"

"It's broken," I said and her face fell.

"But it can't be, it's built to withstand far more than my journey." She stopped. "I mean it can stand up to being dropped quite a distance. Anyway, how would you know?"

"I can't open it," I said. She shook her head.

"Of course you can't open it, it's not yours, where is it?"

"At my house."

"Come on then." She grabbed my arm, her grip strong and decisive. "I *need* it!"

"Hang on a minute." I was intrigued. "Before we go anywhere, who are you and what were you doing in the bracken to lose it?" There were about a thousand more questions; none of what she was saying made sense.

“I’m Jayne, I can’t tell you anything else,” she replied. “Please just take me to it, I’ve done too much already, taken risks, the line may become unstable if I say much more.”

Now I was interested, and it looked like I had the upper hand, after all I knew where this thing was and she was clearly agitated about its return. Perhaps that explained her rambling.

“What are you talking about, the line, what line?”

She took a deep breath. “OK I’ll tell you, but not here, take me to your house, and give me the recorder, then I’ll tell you everything.”

She sat on my sofa; she had asked to use the bathroom as soon as we had arrived. Fortunately I had cleaned the place up a little. She sipped the tea I’d made, holding her hands around the cup like she was cold.

“This is nice,” she said. “I can’t afford to drink tea much.”

“What?” I said. “Everyone has tea, it’s not expensive, we even grow it in Cornwall, just down the road.”

She ignored my comment. “Where’s my recorder?”

I passed it to her and she grabbed it from me, when our fingers touched there was a spark, or at least that’s what I felt. Something between us that I didn’t understand. She hadn’t noticed in her excitement as she touched the seam and it opened. It was a standard looking tablet computer with a keyboard. She pressed various keys and let out a sigh. “It’s all OK,” she said. “There’s no damage but now I have it I have to go.”

“You told me you’d explain.” I stood to block the way to the door; she wasn’t going anywhere until I got some answers.

She pressed more buttons. “I lied, I’m sorry.” She turned away from me and ran into the bathroom. The lock clicked.

“What’s going on?” I shouted. There was no reply; I rattled the handle as I heard the window open. In desperation I stood back and charged at the door, bursting into the bathroom with the crash of a splintered frame.

She was gone. I went to the window and looked out, there was no sign of her, just a small patch of material from her coat hooked on the catch was all that was left.

I sat there, not really understanding what had happened. I had felt something, attraction or whatever for the first time and wanted more. I tried to remember all the things she had said, they made no sense to me, all that talk about lines and risks. And I had never heard of a tablet that only opened for one person, I Googled for hours, nothing I found made any sense.

For the next few days I walked to the spot where I had found her tablet and just stood there, trying to work it out. Things she had said went round in my head, what had she meant, the line, and why had she said that tea was too expensive? And what had I felt when we touched?

I couldn’t sleep and eventually saw my doctor. I didn’t tell him much; just that I couldn’t sleep. He gave me pills and told me that I would get over it.

After a while, I realised that she wasn’t coming back, I hadn’t told anyone, it all sounded so weird and besides there was no evidence. I had to get over it. I went back to work driving all over the country, living in my cab, using the concentration of the job to purge the thoughts from my head. It didn’t work.

Then, one night, three weeks later, when the memory had receded and gone to that place where it’s almost unreal, there was a sound from the hallway. I looked up and she was there.

“What are you doing? How did you get in?”

She smiled again, this time she had no coat, just a white blouse and black trousers, together with long boots and a big bag. The hair was longer, a lot longer and hung around her shoulders.

“I had to come back and explain,” she said, “it might be against the rules but I’ve thought about it and can’t see how it can do any harm. And to be honest I don’t care anymore. I know you’ve looked online but you haven’t actually told anyone anything have you?”

I shook my head. “Who would I tell? What would I say? Anyway, I would just sound crazy. Your secret, whatever it is, it’s safe with me.”

“Can I have some tea?” she asked. “It tasted so good and I’ve missed it so much.”

“As long as you don’t disappear while I make it.”

“Not this time,” she replied. “I’m here to finish what I started.”

I made the tea and again she held the cup in both hands, sipping and savouring every drop.

“First you must promise to keep what I’m going to tell you between us, no-one else must know.” She looked so serious and earnest, but at that moment I wondered about her sanity. She had sought me out, run from me and come back; perhaps she was as crazy as her actions had made me feel.

“Alright then,” I agreed, trying to humour her. “Just as long as you don’t try and tell me that you’re some sort of time traveller or anything daft like that.” She looked shocked.

“That changes things, how did you work it out?”

“Work what out?”

“That I’m a time traveller, was it the tablet, or the clothes? I tried to be careful but it’s so difficult.”

“Listen, you can’t travel in time, no-one can.”

“There’s no point in messing about,” she took a deep breath. “I’ve come back to kill you,” she said, quite matter-of-fact. At first I didn’t realise what she was saying. This couldn’t be right, perhaps she was crazy.

“But now I’ve met you I can’t. I should have the last time I was here, six months ago, and the time before that, when I lost my tablet.”

“That was only a couple of weeks, not six months ago.”

“For you it was.” She touched her hair. “For me it was six months.”

“What are you talking about? Look, you seem like a nice young lady but I think you may have some sort of medical problem, you turn up and then you disappear, and you seem to be following me but I don’t understand what’s going on. Why would you want to kill me?”

“Because it has to stop, you haven’t done anything except be who you are and I’m who I am. It’s all very unfortunate, very unfair.”

This was making less and less sense to me. “I think you’d better start from the beginning.”

She sipped her tea. “Well, you were right, I am a time traveller, it was all my work, I invented it and it’s all my fault.”

“OK.” I decided to humour her, I didn’t feel threatened, she couldn’t kill me, could she? She didn’t seem that resolute, surely I could talk her out of it. “From when?”

“About fifty years from now,” she said in a matter of fact way. “I solved the problems five years ago and here I am.”

“And why do you want to kill me?”

“Because I wish I hadn’t done it.”

That threw me. “Why would you wish that? Surely it’s a brilliant achievement.”

She gave me a pitying look and I realised that she was crying, I didn’t know what to do, the old social phobia kicked back in and I just sat there, squirming. In the end I got up and made more tea. When I brought it in she had stopped crying but now she sniffed and wiped her face with her sleeve.

“You can’t realise,” she said, “just what I created, I didn’t at the start. It sort of sneaked up on us.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well it should have been wonderful. I was stupid; I went to the government and told them. They took over, pushed me out and used it to see the future. Now they control everything, they can see what will happen; they experiment; changing the present to make the future they want. It keeps them in power.”

I tried to imagine it and I could see what she meant; I could see how knowledge like that could be used for control of a population.

“We’ve become a stagnant dictatorship,” she went on, “and anyone who tries to change it, well they can’t, we’re all watched and life is just awful.”

“So why come into the past?”

“The government isn’t interested in the past, they just want to know about the future, and there’s too many rules in the past, too many variables to worry about. They won’t allow travel into the past because it frightens them. But because I’m trusted, I can sneak away and do it.”

I smiled. “That’s very sensible. I might not be a genius but I do understand the idea of time travel, I know that you can’t take anything back, and that you mustn’t change anything.”

She waved the tablet in its purple case. “That’s why I had to get this back before anyone found it and realised it was impossible for it to exist now.”

“What was it doing, lying there in the bracken?”

“It was with me, I was ready to shoot you but the machine pulled me back, I left it behind.”

“So you’re here again and what makes you think you can kill me this time?”

She gave me the pitying look again. “Well because I have to stop it, I’m the only one who can. I’ve had six months since I chickened out and ran from your bathroom. Things in my time have got worse. I wish I had never invented it and I can only see one way out.”

I suddenly realised what she meant. “You mean, go back and stop yourself inventing time travel.” She nodded. “But I couldn’t do it.” Here it comes, I thought.

“I wanted to kill my grandfather,” she said, “before he and my grandmother... Well you know.”

“Make your parent,” I suggested.

“That’s right,” she seemed embarrassed, raising the subject with me. “You’re single aren’t you?”

“Yes I am, and no children yet; that I know of.” I laughed, trying to break the tension that was developing as her argument came to its conclusion.

She dropped the bomb. “Well very soon you’re going to meet someone, she told me when I was little that you saved her from an accident and you fell in love.” She paused and I realised.

“You mean that I’m?” she nodded.

“Hello Granddad.”

I wanted to hug her, to hold her and tell her it was alright. But the circumstances made it awkward. I had to be rational.

“So if you kill me,” I said, “you couldn’t exist. You wouldn’t invent time travel.”

“That’s right. I’m glad you understand, I’m so sorry but I can’t face a future that I know I’ve created. I remember you so well; when you were older and I was young. You were so good to me, that’s why I couldn’t do it last time.” Suddenly it was my future that looked bleak.

“But,” I said, “that won’t work. If I didn’t exist then you wouldn’t be able to come back here and kill me, so you can’t.”

She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a pistol, it looked huge in her hands and shook as she gripped it. “I know all that,” she said, with a resigned sigh. “That’s why it’s been six months; I’ve spent it agonizing about whether I can, about what will happen. We’ll see who’s right. But if I don’t try to change things then humanity is in trouble.”

I just looked at her; I’d followed her logic and thought it was flawed. As far as I could understand it I was safe. But she was right; there was only one way to be sure.

She sobbed and a tear ran down her face. “You don’t know what it’s like,” she said. “You think the world is getting better, well once we can travel in time it gets worse, a lot worse. No

one cares anymore, the future is known and to be honest there's no point in it, we can see what's going to happen and apathy has set in. We've let half a dozen people have all the power and because of the technology they have developed they know if anyone is plotting against them, they see the changes and stop them."

I moved towards her and she lifted the gun. "Don't," she said. "One of us is right and we'll find out in a moment." I had to keep her talking till I could try and get the gun.

"But doesn't that knowledge change the future; surely apathy creates a different future."

"Yes, and it's so unattractive that no-one wants it. We all want change, except those at the top. And because they're in love with the power and don't want to lose it they won't allow us to strive to change the future, because they can control a docile population so much better."

I understood that in a way it would be better to kill me, to stop me ultimately creating a future that was so far removed from the utopia that we all hoped for.

"But haven't you thought of something else?" I asked. "What else might result from my demise, what else I might do that killing me would stop. You might have a brother who cures cancer."

"I haven't," she spat out the words. "My brother," she said with heavy irony, "my wonderful brother, who adored his grandfather, he's the leader of the people I told you about. I can remember the happy times we had with you and Gran, of our walks on the cliffs. The beach, ice cream, fish and chips. We don't have anything like that now; we don't even have a cheap cup of tea. He trusts me a little because I'm his sister but he's become a monster. Nobody can get close to him; close enough to finish him off. And it's all my fault."

She pointed the gun at me and pulled the trigger.

A pistol going off in a small room sounds like nothing else, except maybe a power chord from a rock band two feet away; there are waves of sound that echo after the initial blast. I felt the hot breath of the bullet as it passed my face. My eardrums hurt and my vision blurred. Goodness knows what the neighbours must have thought. There was a crash as a large chunk of plaster fell to the floor and dust swirled around the room.

Jayne was shaking; she let the pistol drop to her side. "I can't do it, I just can't, it's too much, it's all useless," she said, her voice faint through the ringing in my ears. "They were right and there really is no hope for our future."

I breathed a sigh of relief, It looked like you couldn't kill your grandfather; something would always stop you. Whether it was the time machine itself, or just plain human emotion, it wasn't possible.

"Stay here then," I suggested, it felt like I was talking through cotton wool. "Live out your life here. We can go to the authorities and warn them, change the future from now."

"Who'd believe me?"

"It doesn't matter who believes you," I said. "All you need to do is make a few ripples, you'd just need to convince enough people that there could be a problem, it will be enough to alter the future. You will know enough history; to us it's our future but to you its history, to convince them that you have to be genuine. And don't take a job inventing things."

For a moment I thought that I had sold her the idea.

"But you still don't understand," she said. "I told you that I got pulled back by the machine. I thought that it was a fault but it's the government, they can pull you back remotely. You can't leave anything behind; remember. As soon as they realise where I am, that I'm not doing what they want they'll pull me back. There's an implant in me, the machine attracts it back to

my time. Anyhow I couldn't live here, knowing what's coming, it's no different to living then, I still know what's coming, it'll just take longer for me to get to it. And killing your grandfather must work both ways, if you know what I mean."

She raised the gun again, there was another shot and I saw her fall to the floor, a red stain spreading on her blouse. Leave nothing behind, she had said, even if it was dead. The implant must have been triggered by her death and the machine called her body back.

By the time the police arrived I had moved the bookcase across the room to hide the damage to the wall. There was no evidence of anything, no gun and no body and after a couple of hours they left, still suspicious but unable to progress. I thought about her last words, 'it must work both ways.' I thought of what she'd said, the happy times with a family in my future I had to look forward to. But as I'd never had them, I couldn't really miss them. At about three in the morning, just before the pills won and I slept, I finally understood.

Next day I booked myself in to see the doctor. He was going to be shocked that I, a twenty-five year old single man would want a vasectomy. I would have to think up a good reason for him. I had the feeling that saving humanity from itself would sound too weird. But as Jayne had reasoned, if I didn't become a parent then she couldn't invent a time machine.

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