

PAUL CARNAHAN

HOW
SOON IS
NOW?



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TIME TIDIES up after itself better than most of us realise, so I'll be brief. I want to get everything down while I can still remember how it happened.

It started with a note: Blue ink on a slip of paper you might mistake for a Christmas cracker joke, with these words written in a plain and precise hand: 'We know. We can help. Come to the Thrawn Laddie, Edinburgh, 7.30pm Wednesday.'

I was at the off-licence, digging for change in the outside pocket of my suit jacket, when I found the note. I was down to one suit that still fitted and wore it most days - I was, more or less, still keeping up appearances - so the note might have been curled up there for hours, days or even months. I glanced at it without really reading it and stuffed it back into my pocket, where it stayed until I made it back to the flat with the evening's beer supply.

Once the bottles were safely in the fridge, I emptied my pockets, throwing a fistful of old train tickets and crumpled till receipts into the bin. The note nearly joined them, but something about the neatness of the script caught my eye, and I read it properly for the first time. 'We can help'. Who could help? How could they help? Where had it come from? I left it

on the kitchen table for the rest of the week; a minor mystery pinned under a beer bottle.

It was a long week. Alison still wasn't talking to me after The Incident at our college reunion, and even Malcolm wouldn't return my calls. I eyed the note every time I passed the kitchen table on my way to the fridge and, by Wednesday evening, had convinced myself a minor mystery might be just the distraction I needed. One Glasgow-to-Edinburgh train and a 20-minute cab ride later - an extravagance, considering I was trying to make my redundancy money last - I was standing on Morningside Road, outside the Thrawn Laddie.

That October night was cold and crisp, and a wall of heat hit me as I opened the door. The pub - a dusty jumble of antique clutter and old-world charm - had changed so little in the 30-plus years since it had been one of our preferred student haunts that I half-expected to spot the old gang huddled in our favourite corner, but the place was now a near-empty refuge for elderly locals and a few wine-sipping post-work professionals. The students had moved on.

I checked the clock above the bar: 7.10pm. I could fit in a couple of pints, if I was quick. I ordered a Guinness and settled at a single table with a clear view of the door. By 7.30, the only new arrivals had been a pair of old gents who went straight to their friends at the end of the bar without looking in my direction. I finished my drink, ordered another and took it to my table. My second glass was nearly empty when the bored young barman, a skinny youth labouring under a misjudged haircut, loomed over me.

'Mind if I give your table a wipe?' he said. I lifted my pint glass and drained the remnants.

He ran a damp cloth over the table, gathered my empties and asked: 'Another Guinness?'

'No, thanks.' I slipped my hand into my pocket, and my thumb and forefinger pinched the little note. 'Maybe you can help me with something, though. Has anyone been asking for me? I'm supposed to be meeting someone.'

He stared at me, waiting for something. He cocked an eyebrow - the one pierced by a silver stud - and I added: 'Seymour. My name's Luke Seymour.'

He shook his head. 'No one's been looking for you, as far as I know,' he said. 'Who are you meeting?'

'I'm not sure.' He looked puzzled, so I added: 'It might not be a person. It could be a group.'

The barman stuffed the cloth into his back pocket. 'Might be the crowd back in the function suite, then. Are you one of them?'

'One of them?'

'The good old days mob,' he said. 'They rent the back room on a Wednesday night. Had an early start this week for some reason. You could try giving them a knock.'

'I might,' I said. 'Who are they?'

'The Nostalgia Club, they call themselves. They might be who you're after. Past the toilets and turn right. You can't miss it. Follow your nose.' He pointed towards a corridor leading off the end of the bar.

I thanked him, left my table and followed my nose. As I turned the corner, the barman gave a discrete cough.

'Word of advice,' he said. 'I'd knock first. Good luck.'

After a brief stop at the gents, I followed the corridor off to the right. At the end was a dark oak door bearing a brass plaque: 'Function Suite'. Below that, stuck to the door with a strip of sticky tape, was a sheet of A4 on which was written, in the same precise hand as the note in my pocket: 'NOSTALGIA CLUB. PRIVATE.'

There was muffled conversation on the other side of the door, submerged under the thin, scratchy strains of a wartime ballad. With my ear to the door, I could just about hear the voices, one male, one female, over the music.

'—try again,' said the woman. 'What if he doesn't —'

The man spoke over her in an even tone with traces of an accent I couldn't place. 'He will. We have to be—'

The ballad hit a crescendo of horns, strings and syrupy vocals, drowning out the voices.

I raised my hand, about to rap on the door, then let it fall to my side again, struck by sudden self-consciousness. What kind of help was I expecting to find in the back room of a Morningside pub? Things hadn't been quite right for a while and the fits, as I thought of them, seemed to be increasing in frequency and intensity, but I hadn't mentioned them to anyone - not even Alison. Especially not Alison. I suddenly felt foolish for travelling all that way hoping to solve a problem I couldn't even admit existed, and was about to turn and leave when my fingers tightened into a fist. I rapped on the door, surprising myself with four sharp, firm knocks.

Before I could retreat, the music behind the door stopped. Voices - the man and woman now joined by others - overlapped. There was a thud, the sound of wood scraping on wood, then approaching footsteps. The door opened just

enough for the long nose of a short, bald man to protrude into the hall. The nose's owner peered up at me through jam-jar-thick spectacles and, with practised politeness, said: 'This is a private gathering. You'll find the toilets back along the corridor. Enjoy your evening.'

A faint smell of liquorice snaked through the gap and into the corridor. The bald man stretched his mouth into a tight smile and began to close the door. 'Goodbye,' he said. I grabbed the handle and pushed back. 'No, sorry,' I said. 'I think I'm meant to be here. I found this note.'

I pressed my shoulder against the door while I reached into my pocket with my free hand, fished the note from my pocket and waved it in front of his nose. 'Seven-thirty, Wednesday. That's today.'

'It is,' he said, with a sniff. An expression of uncertainty passed across his face, and he looked over his shoulder.

'Who is it, Marcus?' the husky voice of the woman I'd heard from the other side of the door grew louder. Her head bobbed into view above his, her curious hazel eyes fixed on me. She placed her hands on the small man's shoulders and steered him away from the door. 'No need to be rude to our guest, Marcus,' she said, pushing a tangle of hair, rich copper with a streak of grey, from her eyes. She had one of those faces - handsome and strong-jawed - that seemed immediately familiar, though I was sure we had never met. She opened the door wide, stepped aside to give me a clear view of the room, and there they were: The Nostalgia Club.

There were six of them in the function suite - a grand title for a spartan, parquet-floored room no bigger than 20 feet square and decorated in that queasy colour which can pass for either

burnt ochre or decades of gathered nicotine. Marcus adjusted his spectacles and retreated to a small table, on which neat rows of glass vials, oil burners, incense sticks and tealight candles waited in front of a cardboard cigar box. A candle guttered, sending a ribbon of smoke across the room as he settled into his seat.

At another table to his left, a ginger-haired and heavily-bearded young man dressed in camouflage trousers and a black T-shirt winked at Marcus from behind an outsized laptop connected to a pair of speakers. 'Thought you said he wasn't coming?' said the younger man.

'I said he might not,' grumbled Marcus.

A tiny, owlish old woman perched on one of the chairs lined up against the wall lifted the grizzled Cairn Terrier resting in her lap, took the dog's paw in her hand and wagged it at me in a welcoming wave. 'We knew he was coming, didn't we, Biscuit?' she said, bending to kiss the dog's head.

Beside her, an impassive woman in her early 50s, smartly dressed, immaculately made-up and without a single blonde hair out of place, surveyed me silently.

At the centre of the room, hands gripping the metal frame of an incongruous sun lounger in an eye-watering floral pattern, stood an elegant man of about 35, slim and dapper in jeans, tweed jacket and herringbone waistcoat. His close-cropped hair and neat goatee framed a face dominated by large, inquisitive brown eyes that flicked between me and the woman who had opened the door. 'Now, Ruth, aren't you going to invite our guest in?' he said. His voice was musical, lightly accented and tinged with a touch of World Service RP.

The red-haired woman held out a hand in welcome. 'Of course. Come in, please,' she said. 'I'm Ruth. Welcome to the Nostalgia Club. Would you like to join us?'

As I hesitated in the doorway, Ruth placed a hand on my waist and guided me into the room, nudging the door shut with her foot. She was tall and walked with a slight stoop, as if trying to disguise her height. Spotting the slip of paper in my hand, she said: 'I'm glad you got our note. We were starting to worry you weren't going to find it.'

'Or wouldn't be mental enough to come all this way even if you did,' grinned the man with the ginger beard.

I dropped the note back into my pocket. 'I'm in the right place, then?'

The man with the goatee almost danced towards me, arms outstretched. 'You most certainly are,' he said, shaking my hand vigorously. 'We're delighted to see you at last. You must have a lot of questions.'

'A few,' I said.

'Excellent! We'll answer as many as we can, as soon as you're settled.'

Ruth patted my arm, took a spare chair from the row along the wall and placed it beside the gaudy sun lounger to face the group. 'Please,' she said. 'Make yourself comfortable. Can I take your jacket?'

I shook my head, but I sat. The goateed man studied me with undisguised delight while Ruth stood at his side. 'This is Mahdi,' she said. 'He can probably explain better than any of us what this is all about.'

‘I wouldn’t go as far as that, but I’ll do my best,’ said Mahdi. ‘How can we help you?’

That was a bigger question than he knew, but I kept my voice steady and restricted myself, for the time being, to the basics. ‘You could tell me who you are and what this note means,’ I said. ‘And if you can let me know how it ended up in my pocket, that’d be great, too.’

Mahdi laughed and clapped his hands. ‘That should give us enough to begin with, Mr Seymour.’

‘You know who I am, then?’

‘To an extent,’ said Mahdi.

‘Why don’t we start with the note?’ said Ruth. ‘It ended up in your pocket because we put it there.’

‘You could’ve just handed it to me - or introduced yourselves and said whatever you wanted to say, like normal people.’

Mahdi and Ruth exchanged a glance, and Mahdi said: ‘That didn’t seem like a good idea at the time.’

‘Why not?’

‘You didn’t seem to be in the mood for introductions,’ said Ruth.

‘Or for standing upright or walking in a straight line,’ said Mahdi. Ruth gave his hand a sharp tap and said: ‘We decided, under the circumstances, it might be better to leave the note with you and hope to meet you properly when you were in a better frame of mind.’

‘When was this, exactly?’ I asked.

‘Three weeks ago,’ said Ruth.

The reunion was the last time I'd been in Edinburgh.
'Benson's?'

'Bingo,' she said.

The few clear memories I had of that night were enough to leave me cringing over whatever other horrors I might have forgotten. No wonder Alison and Malcolm weren't talking to me.

'You weren't there the whole night, were you?' I asked, my cheeks reddening.

'Oh, no,' said Mahdi, shaking his head. 'Just long enough to deliver our message.'

My fingers reached to toy with the note in my pocket. 'How many of these notes did you hand out?'

'Only one,' said Mahdi. 'We're very careful about who we invite.'

'You can't be that picky if you invited me.'

'No need to be modest,' said Mahdi. 'We've been waiting for you.'

'Why?' I said. The room was uncomfortably warm, their attention made me uneasy, and my voice rose in irritation and discomfort. 'You still haven't told me who you are.'

'We're the Nostalgia Club.'

'Then you've been waiting for the wrong guy. Nostalgia's not my thing.'

Mahdi bent forward, hands on his calves, his eyes fixed on mine. 'Are you sure, Mr Seymour? We're all partial to an occasional wander down memory lane, aren't we?'

'I try to avoid it.'

'You do?' he said, sounding surprised. Ruth stepped in front of him and said: 'We'll explain everything, I promise, but perhaps you should meet everyone first.'

I checked my watch. 'And then you'll tell me what this is all about?'

'We will,' said Ruth. 'You've come this far. Hear us out?'

I folded my arms and leaned back in the chair. 'I'll try.'

'Splendid,' said Mahdi, stepping away and raising his arm with a flourish, like a ringmaster about to present the next incredible act. 'Allow me to introduce you to our little group. The charming gentleman you met at the door is Marcus Millar, doyen of the olfactory arts, and beside him is our master of music and sound, Mr Duncan Creighton.'

Marcus harumphed from behind his spectacles, while Duncan gave me a salute.

Mahdi dodged around the sun lounger to the two women seated against the wall. 'No meeting of the Nostalgia Club would be complete without Margaret Boyle and her charming friend Biscuit,' he said, tickling the terrier's chin. 'And beside them, we have Miss Barbara Kinsella.'

Barbara gave a curt nod, while Margaret offered a puckish smile: 'Nice to meet you, son,' she said. 'We hope you'll stay a while.'

'Finally,' said Mahdi, 'we have Ruth Temple and myself, Mahdi Azmeh. We are the Nostalgia Club.'

'Hello,' I said, crossing my legs. 'Nice to meet you all. Why am I here?'

Mahdi sat in the spare seat beside Barbara and, for a moment, stared at me in silence. 'You really don't know?'

‘I really, genuinely and absolutely don’t have a clue. I’m not even sure why I came.’ I stopped and waited for his response, but he continued to stare at me. ‘Maybe I was just bored,’ I said.

‘Maybe,’ mused Mahdi. ‘Or perhaps something compelled you. An impulse, possibly? An idea that seemed to arrive from out of nowhere?’

He was closer to the truth than I was ready to admit. ‘The note says you can help me.’

‘I certainly hope we can.’

‘With what?’

His foot tapped against the hard floor. ‘How would you like us to help you?’

Duncan sighed loudly and stretched out his long legs. ‘Cut the cryptic shite, Mahdi,’ he said. ‘You can see the guy’s not into it.’

Mahdi turned to him and dipped his head in lieu of a bow. ‘Thank you, Mr Creighton. Direct as always.’ To me, he added: ‘What if I said we can help you make sense of a few things and set you on an interesting new path? Would that clarify matters?’

‘Not much,’ I said. ‘I’m quite happy with the path I’m on, thanks.’

‘Are you, though?’

That was enough to ignite the irritation that had been building since I had entered the room. I pushed back my chair, rose and marched to the door. I was reaching for the handle when Ruth called out behind me: ‘We can help you. We really can.’

I turned the handle.

'You feel like your life isn't quite your own, don't you?' she said. 'That you've ended up somewhere you're not supposed to be.'

I kept my fingers on the handle, my back to her.

'Sometimes you feel like you're not really here at all. And sometimes you go back, don't you?'

'We can help,' the note had said. Perhaps they could.

I turned to face her. 'I haven't been feeling right lately. There's been a lot going on.' My hand clasped and unclasped the door handle. 'I shouldn't have come.'

In just a few paces, Mahdi was at my side. 'You did the right thing. We're here to help.' He gently eased my fingers from the handle and ushered me back into the room. 'Please, sit.'

I sat, and he settled into the chair opposite. 'Forgive me - we seem to have been talking at cross purposes. I assumed you were at least somewhat familiar with our activities. I'll try to explain.'

'Properly,' said Ruth.

'Of course,' said Mahdi. 'A few things first.'

Marcus took off his glasses, laid them on the table and rubbed his eyes: 'Can we do it without the theatrics?' he said. 'He'll stay, or he won't stay. Just tell him, and we'll find out which it's to be.'

'I'm with Marcus on that one,' said Duncan. 'Just this once.'

Mahdi ignored them. 'Some people are born with talents,' he said. 'Some are gifted artists, some have a beautiful voice, some are extraordinary athletes. Others might have a gift for

persuasion, for mimicry, for knitting, for mathematics, or poetry, or—'

Ruth stood behind my chair and leaned to half-whisper in my ear, loud enough for Mahdi to hear: 'He's going to get to the point any minute now.'

'Of course I am,' said Mahdi. 'Many gifted individuals discover their talents early. Others bloom later in life, thanks to a chance encounter or a helping hand. Some talents are so rare, so specialised that, without careful nurturing, a person might never even realise—'

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' said Duncan. 'This could take all night. Cut to the chase: We're time travellers. That's what this is. We're time travellers.'

I laughed, but no one else did. 'Time travellers?'

'Yes,' said Mahdi with more than a hint of pride. 'We travel —'

'—in time,' I interrupted. 'I get it.' I waited for the laugh, the wink, the smirk, but it never came. They stared at me in rapt expectation. 'Like some kind of role-playing game?' I said.

'No. It's not a game,' said Mahdi.

'Definitely not,' said Ruth.

'A joke, then?' I demanded.

'It's no joke, son,' said Margaret. 'That's what we do.'

I looked from face to face and, in as neutral a tone as I could summon, said: 'You're time travellers? All of you?'

They all nodded.

'Even the dog?'

Margaret giggled and bounced Biscuit on her lap. 'Don't be daft. He's just a dog.'

'Okay,' I said, contemplating the safest and fastest way to exit a room full of lunatics and retreat to a safe pub and a steadying drink. 'You're time travellers from the year three million who like to hang about in the back room of an Edinburgh pub every Wednesday night?'

'We're not from the future,' said Mahdi.

'Outer space?'

'No,' said Ruth. 'We're all very much from here, now. We're not spacemen from the future or anything like that. We're just normal people, who—'

She paused, looked at the ceiling, and then swallowed hard. 'Travel in time,' she concluded, clearly aware how ridiculous it sounded. 'That's why we're all here.'

'All right,' I said. 'Let's have a look at it, then.'

'At what?' said Ruth, baffled.

'Your time machine. Where is it?' Besides Duncan's laptop and speakers, the only equipment in the room was a whirring mobile air purifier close to Marcus's table.

'We don't have a time machine,' chuckled Mahdi. 'Popular fiction has misled you on the mechanics of time travel, Mr Seymour. You won't find any elaborate Victorian devices or bigger-on-the-inside phone booths here.'

Duncan frowned and muttered: 'Police box. It's a police box.'

'Or police boxes,' continued Mahdi. 'Nothing of that sort. You're already travelling in the most efficient time machine of all.'

I looked down at my belly straining against my slightly-too-tight trousers.

‘The human body,’ said Marcus, helpfully.

‘Yes, I get that,’ I said, opting - for the moment - to humour them. Now that I was in the middle of it, it might at least make a funny story to help break the ice with Alison and Malcolm. ‘How’s it done, then? You just make a wish and go flying off into the middle of next week?’

‘Not next week,’ said Marcus. ‘Or the week after. Not even as far as tomorrow.’

‘So you’re time travellers, but you don’t even go into the future?’ I scoffed.

‘Sadly not, other than by the usual means,’ said Mahdi. ‘We’re obliged to move forward a second at a time, just like everyone else.’ I opened my mouth to speak, but he carried on: ‘Think of it this way: We’ve already created our path from the past to now, so we can follow it back. None of us has been to the future, so there is no path to follow.’

It made as much sense as anything else I’d heard so far. ‘Fine,’ I said. ‘So you only travel into the past. Are you going to tell me how you think you do it?’

‘We don’t think we do it,’ said Marcus. ‘We do it.’

I pointed towards the sun lounger at the centre of the room. ‘If you time travel in your own bodies, I assume that’s got something to do with it. What is it, hypnotism?’

‘It’s not hypnotism,’ said Ruth. ‘It really happens. You’re still looking for reasons not to believe it.’

‘I’ve got plenty of reasons not to believe it. It’s ludicrous. Isn’t it?’

'You think so?' said Duncan, looking up from his laptop. 'Why?'

'Because time travel's impossible. Even if it wasn't impossible, it's hardly likely to have been discovered by a bunch of oddballs in the back room of a pub.'

'We didn't discover it,' said Duncan. 'We just use it. None taken, by the way.'

'None what?'

'Offence. For the "oddballs" thing.'

'Oh, right. Sorry. Anyway - time travel? It's impossible.'

'It's not impossible,' said Duncan. 'You're doing it right now.'

I thought for a moment. 'Because I'm moving forward into the future? That's not time travel. That's just living. Everyone does that.'

'But not everyone can do what we do,' said Mahdi. 'We aren't constrained by the same laws as everyone else.'

Ruth crouched at the side of my chair. 'What I said earlier - about feeling like you're not quite here ... it made sense, didn't it?'

'No.' I stifled a shiver and struggled, again, to evade thoughts I'd been avoiding for months. 'You think I can do this time travel thing as well, don't you? That's why you wanted me to come here.'

'Yes,' said Ruth.

'I think I'd know if I was a time traveller,' I said, forcing a laugh.

Mahdi looked at me with discomfiting intensity. 'Would you? Perhaps you just haven't found the right conditions so far.'

That's what our little club is for - together, we nurture and amplify our talents. We can do that for you, if you'll let us help you. And, if you find you like it, well—'

He stopped and exchanged a glance with Ruth. 'Perhaps you might be able to help us with a little problem of our own.' He walked to the sun lounger and sat on it, bouncing gently. 'You're sceptical, I can see that. Try it for yourself, and I promise everything will become clear. Your past is waiting to be explored, Mr Seymour. All of it.'

I could have left, right then. I could have walked out, closed the door behind me and never seen any of them again. But I didn't. Instead, I asked: 'All of it? What if I don't want all of it?'

'I understand,' said Ruth, 'but don't worry. You choose where you want to go. No nasty surprises, I promise.'

'You'll love it,' said Margaret. 'Just take a wee lie down. It's easy.'

The orange-and-purple floral pattern on the lounger was a migraine waiting to happen. 'On that thing? You think I can just lie on that and pop off to Culloden, or the Stone Age or ... wherever?'

Mahdi stood, motioning for me to lie down. 'Nothing as dramatic as that. Our travels have their limits. For now, we could try something simple. You were asking earlier how we managed to pass you our little invitation. Would you like to take a look?'

The last train home was still hours away - and lying down on the lounger might make a good punchline for my story. 'Why not?' I said, rising from the chair. 'What do I have to do?'

'Just lie back, and we'll guide you through the rest,' said Ruth, switching off the air purifier.

‘Does the sun lounger go back in time as well?’

Mahdi patted its frame. ‘No, no. The lounger stays here. Now, please. Lie down. Relax.’

I settled into the lounger, which proved unexpectedly comfortable. Duncan’s fingers flew over the keys and trackpad of his laptop. At the same time, Marcus took two vials of liquid from his collection, mixing drops from each into a slim tube, which he plugged with a plastic stopper, shook and held up to the light before adding another drop from each of the vials.

‘Please place your arms at your sides and close your eyes,’ said Mahdi.

‘Am I going to concentrate on your voice and then feel very, very sleepy?’ I asked, closing my eyes.

‘If you wish,’ said Mahdi. ‘The main thing is to let your mind detach from the here and now, to slip loose while focusing on your destination. Benson’s, three weeks ago.’

He paced around the sun lounger. ‘I’ll do my best to guide you along the first steps, but you’ll be doing most of the work, such as it is.’

‘Okay. What can I expect on the other side?’

‘You’ll arrive within yourself as you were three weeks ago. Inside, looking out. The best seat in the house, you might say. But first, Mr Millar and Mr Creighton will create the appropriate conditions to help guide your trip. Are you ready, gentlemen?’

I opened one eye to watch as Marcus poured four drops of liquid from the tube he had just prepared onto one of his oil burners, then lit a tealight beneath it. Duncan pressed a key on his laptop, and sound erupted from the speakers. He winced

and lowered the volume, reducing the burst of noise to something more recognisable: A hum of conversation, laughter, the clink of glasses and the occasional chime of a till. Bar room sounds.

‘Close both eyes, please, Mr Seymour,’ chided Mahdi. ‘You’ll find the whole experience more rewarding if you follow my instructions.’

‘Sorry. Instruct away.’

‘And try to take it seriously.’ He lowered his voice, and I focused on his soft footsteps as he padded around the lounge. ‘Listen to my words, but focus on the sounds and smells we’ve provided for you. Use them to draw yourself to your destination. Visualise it. Envelope yourself in it.’

I couldn’t help myself. ‘That’s just remembering. Memory isn’t time travel.’

‘Concentrate, Mr Seymour,’ said Mahdi. His footsteps stopped, and I could feel his breath on my ear. ‘Memory is where time travel begins,’ he said. ‘It’s the fuel for what we do. Tell me, Mr Seymour, do you ever go to the gym?’

I kept my eyes closed. ‘Look at me. What do you think?’

‘Perhaps not. But the principles are the same - this is like exercising a muscle. It may be a struggle at first, but you will gain in ability and strength each time the exercise is repeated. Short hops will be enough of a challenge at the start, but you’ll quickly manage - crave, even? - more.’

The smell of the room was changing. The liquorice scent was gone, replaced by warm aromas of hops, whisky and hot breath. A question came to me - a ridiculous one, but I asked it anyway. ‘How do I get back?’

‘So you believe you might actually go somewhere?’ Even with my eyes closed, I could sense the smile on his face. ‘We’re making progress.’

‘I didn’t say I believed it,’ I said, sitting up and opening my eyes. ‘But if I did, how would I get back?’

‘Don’t worry. It takes only a slight effort of will to return to your starting point. In any case, I’ll be here to guide you back, if required. Lie back and close your eyes, please.’

I shuffled in the sun lounger, closed my eyes and turned my attention to the filigree of sound flowing from Duncan’s speakers. With enough concentration, I could pick out individual strands and found myself switching, as though using a TV remote to change channels, from the chiming of the till to the chatter of the drinkers and then the noise of feet on creaking boards. New sounds emerged: particular voices, a distinctive laugh, the clunk and swish of the door opening. The smells became richer and more complex, too, with new notes drifting to the fore: a hint of aftershave, rain drying on an old coat, stale smoke on a passing stranger’s breath. There was something else - a savoury scent I could almost taste. Light and shadow flickered across my closed eyelids.

‘Something’s cooking,’ I said, and my voice sounded faint and far away.

‘Is it really?’ said Mahdi. ‘What do you think it is, Mr Seymour? Can you tell? Smell it. It’s close, isn’t it?’

I chased the scent past wisps of furniture polish and sliced lemon until I pinned it down. Bread, butter and cheese heating together. ‘Cheese toastie,’ I said - or thought I said. A drowsy weightlessness was spreading up and down my spine, rippling across my limbs and into my hands and feet.

Mahdi's voice had taken on a peculiar echo. 'You're nearly there. Keep going. Further.'

My entire body was tingling, filled with a familiar and not-unpleasant sensation of simultaneously floating forward and sinking back, swaddled in swarms of humming static. 'Breathe in,' said Mahdi, from an impossible distance away. 'What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you see? Where are you?'

Footsteps circled me. 'Take a deep breath and hold it for as long as you can.'

There was a chill to the air as it hit my lungs. I held it there, warming it in my chest for what felt like hours, until Mahdi spoke again. 'And ... breathe ... out...'

I exhaled slowly through my mouth, drifting further from the lounge, the function suite and the ties of the present. When I breathed in through my nose, the tang of bubbling cheese made my nostrils twitch. That toastie was close to burning. The floating feeling spread across my chest, out to my arms, down my legs and across my scalp in tingling waves. Cold air prickled at the back of my neck and blew past my ears, becoming a rising wind which drowned out the sounds of the bar and bloomed into a howling rush of pummelling energy which threatened to whirl me around and knock the air out of my lungs. Then, as quickly as it had arrived, the roaring tumult whipped across me and was gone.

And I'm here.

We hope you have enjoyed this free sample chapter of 'How Soon Is Now?' by Paul Carnahan.

The book is available to pre-order from all major e-book platforms now, and will be released worldwide on June 10, 2024.

For more details, visit www.paulcarnahan.com