

The Reluctant Time Traveller

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Dr Haque did not have the appearance of a mad scientist, and his announcement that he intended to go into hibernation for the indefinite future surprised those who knew him. In appearance, he was about fifty with flecks of white creeping into his thick-set hair. He wore half-moon glasses which would slide down his nose and force him to tip his head back as he was reading, until the tilt of his head gave him a benign but superior look, which strangers took to be normal for an intelligent man. His friends knew him to be quite the contrary: a shy, self-questioning man, lacking assurance and purpose outside his work.

He had devoted his life to the study of sleep mechanisms and animal hibernation, being funded initially by a grant to his hospital from NASA, who had held a vague hope of sending cocooned men into deep space, but withdrew their enthusiasm as their own resources dwindled. The European Space Organisation then took on the project for a couple of years, until that group too had reduced its ambitions.

Dr Haque continued his work, initially using such animals as the dormouse and bat. Within three years he had induced hibernation for as long as three months in cats and monkeys, until the Animal Rights League learned of his work and camped on his doorstep and daubed red paint on his walls and car, and threatened to bomb his hospital unless he stopped.

Feeling that he had nothing more to lose, he persuaded his technician to continue the research using himself as subject, and he hibernated for three days initially. Suspended Animation (or S.A. as it was colloquially known) was a pleasant experience; indeed, Dr Haque felt more rested than he had done for years, and insisted on a second experiment of two weeks. The technique seemed to work perfectly, and he had no qualms about a further test of one month. When he emerged from this test, his wife had left him.

The animal rights people no longer cared about his work, but their nuisance was replaced by a fundamentalist religious group who objected to the violation of the 'human natural state'. It was then that Dr Haque decided to go into S.A. for a prolonged period, in the hope that he might emerge at a time in the future when his work and his life might be more appreciated. His two boys were grown up, though still living at home, and his decision would free the house off for

their use. In ninety nine years he would revive and emerge into a changed world - a world where he knew no-one - but he was not frightened of change, and he thought he would have the power to take up his life again even among strangers.

Dr Haque approached the problem of officially disappearing with the same thoroughness and vigour that had advanced his career in medical research. His solicitor, Mr Heywood Senior of Heywood, Benson and Heywood, gave him good legal council, and said he would miss him and suggested that their fee be settled in advance of the proposed project. His firm would continue to supervise the estate as executors of what became known as his living will.

Mr Heywood drew up a verbose document setting aside a large part of the estate as a trust fund, with interest payable to a small, neglected, local church which was desperate for income, and which had a disused crypt which Dr Haque leased on a 99 year term. The electricity to run his machine was to be guaranteed from this rental. His house was made over for his boys' use in their lifetime, at a peppercorn rent.

Dr Haque was more nervous than he would admit, when he entered the crypt for the last time. He had few doubts about the safety of the experiment - after all, he had done all the theoretical work himself. The machinery was relatively foolproof. The church crypt had survived for nearly nine-hundred years, and statistically it should last easily for a further mere ninety-nine years. Even if the worst scenario occurred and there was total loss of power, he should automatically revive as his body slowly warmed from its S.A. temperature of four degrees. No, he supposed what really frightened him was the thought that he was passing through a blind door into an unknown and alien world from which there could be no return - ever. For a moment he hesitated, then remembered his pledge to himself. He had always found change stimulating and thought he could cope psychologically. It would be like being born again to a new life: he would be magically both young and old.

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Knowing that their father was still present in a physical sense, and never having much cared for him in any other sense, his two boys enjoyed the use of the house, feeling more like rich inheritors than orphans. They paid a dutiful call to the crypt once a week, and felt that their father had not so much left them as gone on an extended visit abroad somewhere. There had been a lot of initial publicity, but this quickly died down as the situation remained unchanged; news

people thrive on drama which the best hack in the world could not sustain from a comatose figure in a glass fronted coffin.

When the boys married, their visits decreased to once a month. The two families continued to share the house, but with the arrival of a baby the inevitable tensions erupted into outright warfare, and the youngest boy wanted to buy out his brother's share.

The living will had stipulated that the house was not to be divided or sold in whole or part, but by the time the two families called in independent legal advice, the old Mr Heywood had died. His young partner examined the legal definition of death in minute detail and decreed that, as there was no detectable pulse, and as there had been no response or movement from the body for the last ten years, Dr Haque was officially dead and the house could be disposed of on the basis of his actual will, prepared for just such an eventuality. So the living relatives and descendants of the late Dr Haque were accorded his property. The covenant to the church, being an absolute gift in his lifetime, was no longer part of the estate, and the church would continue to receive benefits but was obliged in turn to keep its part of the contract.

It was a further ten years before the visits of his relatives ceased. The oldest boy had moved away with his wife and child, and the youngest died in a road accident. The house was re-sold to buyers who knew nothing of its previous history.

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Some ten years further on still, a new vicar took up his appointment to the ancient parish church of St. Jude. His initial intention was to clear out the old crypt, but was informed that the body lying in solitary isolation in its peculiar mechanical coffin was not to be disturbed. He shrugged and turned away, though he often slipped down to the crypt for a quiet moment of contemplation before what appeared to be a perfect man, without decomposition, lying at peace from the terrible traumas of the world outside.

News of these visits to Dr Haque began percolating through the community, and he began to take on a saint-like quality as people looked at his clean, contented face, and dreamt of days past when the world was younger and better, and wished they could wake him up and talk to him. Young women fell in love with his ideal and vowed to wait for him until he awoke -

though the realisation that they would then be in their seventies was usually enough to jolt them from their idle reveries.

The outer political world underwent tumultuous upheavals at about this time, with the world dividing into three great factions. The Barren straits were crossed by a great causeway, and the Russian-American Pact was complete; they were politically and economically one unit, with Japan and most of Europe affiliated dependencies to the United Soviet and American States, or U.S.A.S. The African nations formed a loose faction of non-aligned states, with India, China and some South American countries.

But the biggest single political problem was the central block of Muslim Brotherhood, with Israel increasingly isolated and surrounded by a vigorous region of militant fundamentalism, dedicated to take on both Zionism and the U.S.A.S. block. After a furious debacle at the beginning of the millennium, when they had fought against each other and divided their strength, they had finally come together as a cohesive unit, a single Arabian parliament to which the president was appointed on a rotating basis from each state in turn.

In his little crypt in the depths of England, Dr Haque remained blissfully ignorant of the shaping of world events. The nearest he came to a rude awakening was when oil supplies from the Middle East were totally curtailed - but by then, research by the U.S.A.S. had finally solved the fusion problem, and his little trickle of electricity was assured for the foreseeable future.

For the most part of the close of the century, the little crypt was no more than a mention on a tourist scan-out. The smaller churches had ceased to function as independent units of Anglican worship, and St. Jude's had been given to the European Trust for the preservation of ancient monuments. This was run on a commercial basis, with the body of the church rented out for *ad hoc* worship to disparate groups at staggered times on Sundays, and for occasional concerts during the week. The rest of the time, it was open to the public and had a small but steady stream of visitors, mostly students reading courses on religious architecture.

Very few came now just to see the crypt and its silent content, though one small group remained consistent in its admiration of the sleeping figure. These few people retained the ideal of their founders: that Dr Haque represented a pure persona, who was too good for this world and had placed himself beyond its corruptive influence, seeking a higher ideal.

Then, as the time approached for his awakening, there began a sudden new flurry of interest and people began to flock to the crypt from around the world. Most had the casual tourist interest in the unusual or the bizarre, and paid their dollars for a quick peek, and laid bets about whether he would wake sane or mentally blacked-out. Others used his image as poetic form, and wrote quatrains or sonnets to the bliss of sleeping through the troubles of the world. Some groups lionised the sleeping figure, and held him up to be an ideal hope for the future, and suggested that when he awoke, he would bring some forgotten knowledge that might help the world's governments through impending crisis. But all agreed it would be an important event, and vied with each other to welcome him and protect him from the 'Fundies'.

The philosophies of the world had polarised dramatically in the last century. The majority of Westerners and citizens of the U.S.A.S. were cynical 'Rationalists': agnostics for whom the grave was the ultimate end of all, and the only fruits of this life were earthly achievements. They lived to boast of their salaries and their possessions, and measured progress by its quotation on the World Stock Exchange. Such Rationalists held no place for art or beauty, except where it could be quantified and sold.

The other major grouping believed that all life was but a pointer to eternity; and this view they held with such conviction that they used continual violent struggle to promote their views in the belief that, unless they clearly distanced themselves from Rationalists, their God might think they were tacitly accepting the heretical opinions of their spiritual enemies, and punish them accordingly. The thought that their God ought to punish the non-believers rather than the true faithful was not an argument to be considered, for such thoughts were surely sent to tempt the faithful into doubt, and were therefore the thoughts of the enemy. And every true believer knew that the thoughts of the enemy were automatically assigned to the kingdom of heretical belief and therefore to be despised.

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It was into this divided atmosphere that Dr Haque awoke slowly as his machine followed its prescribed protocols. He felt a little stiff and somewhat thirsty, but otherwise his mind was clear, and the clock before him confirmed he had moved exactly one hundred years further into the future as he re-emerged to observe, to understand and, if possible, to integrate into the exciting society of which he was the newest member. He pressed the door release button, and the

seals hissed as the pressure adjusted, and he stepped out into his crypt, blinking at the bright lights that greeted him, and an overwhelming noise of applause as he realised he was sharing his space with a great crowd that was already pressing in upon him. Their language was a little clipped and fragmented compared to his own, but he could generally make out their welcome and greetings well enough.

They led him up the steps to the fresh air and more huge crowds, then he turned sharply as the sound of gunfire cut through the general cheers and shouted questions. In the distance, he could see the crowd was ringed by a heavy guard of armed men, whose uniform and demeanour stated they were police, even over the space of a century. The distressing thing to his mind was that they were seemingly firing indiscriminately into another crowd external to his inner circle, and this second crowd, far from fleeing, was itself armed with shields and guns and seemed intent on returning the fire of the police cordon. So vigorously did they fight, there appeared to be a pile of bodies between them, mingling civilians and police, and they looked as though they might press the fight right up to the church itself had not a fourth group appeared riding toward them in armoured vehicles, and shooting into the rear of the outer ring. At this, the crowd disappeared as though by magic, leaving the immediate group round him cheering loudly and the police moved out to begin tending their own dead and injured as a fleet of ambulances arrived to support them in the clear up. Finally from the melee around him emerged one figure who appeared to have some authority over the others; the hubbub subsided, and the crowd moved back a little to give her space. She was about thirty, wore a dark, well cut trouser suit with a short matching skirt flowing from beneath the jacket, and a white shirt with a colourful flowery collar. Her hair was trimmed in neat waves, and she was accompanied by a younger man who appeared to be either a servant or a make-up artist of some kind, for he was constantly hovering and brushing dust from her jacket, applying a brush to her hair, or touching her face with what looked like a powder-puff on a long stick. She herself carried what was evidently a large microphone emblazoned with the letters W.B.C., and this she thrust into the face of the new arrival.

“Dr Haque,” she said, “I’m Wallace. We welcome you on behalf of the civilized world. How was your journey?”

She seemed so indifferent to the slaughter that had occurred, so insensitive to the piles of bodies being removed even now from the periphery, that he could only answer with a bland reply in a semi-automatic fashion, as though he had done no more than taken a bus across town. Wallace, meanwhile was summoning a car towards them which drew through the press of people, until the chauffeur could get out and open the doors to usher them inside. The car moved quietly and was well sound proofed, but he was disappointed to note that, to all outward appearances, cars had not developed much more in the last one hundred years than they had in the first hundred. It moved off swiftly then through a corridor in the carnage, and sped down a wide but quiet road to the accompaniment of a police outrider escort, before drawing up at a heavily fortified building, also emblazoned with the same W.B.C. logo and the explanatory name, World Broadcasting Corporation.

“Welcome to our headquarters,” Wallace announced proudly. “We are the foremost broadcaster in the country. Our programmes are relayed round the world, so you could say we set the world’s agenda from this building.”

Dr Haque’s evident puzzlement brought her suddenly back to his ignorance, and made her realise that perhaps he did not understand fully all that had been achieved in the past one hundred years. “Of course,” she conceded, “we are looking forward to hearing your recollections of how journalism was beginning to influence politics even in your day. But I guess we need to fill you in with a bit of information too. It is important for you to know that journalism is now the undisputed queen of politics, so you mustn’t be over-critical of how we handle news here.

“For instance, that disturbance you just witnessed,” she continued, “might have got a mention in your day. But we’re more enlightened now, and aim for the common good. To report these things is to encourage violence, so we strive to protect lives and property by not giving any publicity to such rebellions. We simply shut them out from our consciousness, so no-one outside the immediate circle knows about them, and therefore they never happened. After all, news is truth and truth is news, and we make the news.”

Seeing his uncertainty, she expanded further. “You must know that, even in your day, the political agenda was set by what was chosen to be reported. Changes could only be brought about by getting the press on board, so politicians did their best to feed the press – or to buy them, if they could. But in the same way, the press fed politics with the agenda it wanted.

Gradually, people mistrusted politicians so much that they only believed what they saw on T.V. or read about on their news feeds. Naturally, this brought great power to our journalists, but also great responsibility. The press began to select candidates for government whom they trusted to act in the interests of truth. Of course, people ended up only knowing about the candidates we selected, so opposition was effectively shut out of any debate. But this meant that governments could run smoothly, because it was all done by consensus rather than by confrontation. Eventually, people trusted our candidates so completely we were able to run the country from our own television centres, and skip the elections altogether. It seemed to make things run smoother, somehow.”

Dr Haque had no time to question her further, before they were whisked into a reception area, where a proliferation of food and drink was made available to him. People pressed in on all sides, eager to question him about the minutiae of life as it was lived a century ago, and he was equally eager to describe it. He quickly realised, however, that his memory was no match for the tons of archive footage that was so readily available to a big and powerful media centre. Every time he referred to some event of the day, or some place he remembered, images and newsreel flashed up on a giant screen in the room, as his words were captured by the hidden microphones, and immediately interpreted by what was evidently a very sophisticated voice recognition algorithm, hidden in the depths of the building. The trouble was, he quickly discovered, that if his memory deviated from the slightest degree from the old footage, it made him appear to be a doddering fool who couldn't remember properly, or worse as a deliberate liar trying to exaggerate the past from a sense of his own self-aggrandisement.

His sense of unease increased considerably when he mentioned the fall of the Berlin wall, which he knew he had been alive to witness, even if only at second hand via the television images. He distinctly remembered the thrill and excitement of seeing the wide-eyed mob taking sledge hammers to the concrete, and being cheered as they swarmed across to freedom. But the images flashing on the screen as he recalled the story seemed to show the complete opposite: a rampaging mob was being quelled by armed police, to be replaced by a uniformed militia carefully and gently dismantling the wall as though it were a building site, and replacing it with memorial rose gardens as a respectful citizenry moved about their peaceful business. It made no sense, until he realised that somehow the news was being manipulated to portray all images of

rebellion as automatically bad, and therefore to be discouraged. Even the heroism of the East German people was being subjugated to the propaganda of being an unacceptable insurgence.

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Dr Haque stayed in that time era for some months before deciding to move on. As a minor celebrity, he was well cared for; lodging was provided, new clothing in the flamboyant style of the day, and funds for food. Medically, he appeared fit, but was given a thorough inspection by a full university team, the whole proceedings being filmed in intimate detail for the benefit of a historical documentary. He even found solace in a brief romance with a strikingly attractive clapper-board girl called Beverley, who followed him resolutely and made her adulation plain to all. Although much younger than he, and not short of attentive young men, she determined to show him the best the city had to offer in entertainment and restaurants. She had a tremendous sense of fun, delighting in taking him to historical museums and looking at old photos, to tease him that he was “that person there”, while pointing to a young boy, or some old country codger. She was forever questioning him about life in the past, and why he wanted to leave it for the political anarchy they seemed to have developed, and loved to hear his take on how things were developing in the wider world. But the relentless advertising, the endless political propaganda, the constant debasing of religious groups who were portrayed as brutal anarchists, terrorists and warmongers, and the indiscriminate slaughter of such groups as tried to oppose the ruling teleocracy, began to jar against his respect for freedom. To his evident disgust, even the courts had been taken over by the unremittingly intrusive media. That all court cases were now televised live was an inevitable development from his own day; but now, juries had been replaced by the live audience voting for guilt or acquittal, and the advocates on either side were the best showmen, playing unashamedly to the cameras and bringing in expert witnesses who were skilled actors before all else. He even suspected that some of the witnesses had only chosen to testify for the chance of a cameo television role, with its hope of a reality contract to follow. Even his brief fling with Beverley was seized on by another crew and filmed in excruciating and embarrassing detail, until he suspected that her motivation had really been self-publicity rather than genuine interest in himself, for certainly, her affection did no harm to her career advancement. Finally, and with the agreement of the television executives who realised that his rating value was falling, he opted to return to his hibernator in the hope of finding a more peaceful climate.

The teams they sent to film his departure were without fault. They selected a deep vault beneath television headquarters as the safest and most secluded spot, protected by W.B.C.'s own security force. They checked and serviced the mechanism, and added an independent nuclear-powered fuel cell. They practically guaranteed him unlimited sanctuary in his new spot, free from preying sirens and rival television crews. Their only demand was the right to film him from time to time through the porthole of his device, and to grant them first filming rights whenever he chose to re-emerge. Beverley, after pleading with him to stay with him for a little longer, became withdrawn and would not attend his departure, leaving him with a little guilt that perhaps he had misjudged her. He finally re-entered the machine to a great fanfare of lights and music, and the attendance of a top flight presenter who introduced the team that was managing his reinternment. The program planners had suggested a time pause of ten years as a suitable interval to build up audience expectation. Dr Haque had concurred with this for the sake of peace, but once inside and the door had closed, he suddenly reset the dials on a whim to a full five hundred years. After all, it made no difference to him – the sensation of timeless coma was identical whether it be one minute or one hundred years. The engineers had assured him of the robustness of the machine and the longevity of its new power source, so he trusted himself to fate, and hoped to discover some evidence of a more utopian lifestyle in humanity's future.

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Unconscious inside his shell, Dr Haque remained oblivious to external changes and dangers, as the continents tore themselves apart with a series of ever more barbaric and vindictive attacks and counter strikes. Although they could never find any vestige of mutual respect or tolerance, for one critical time in history the many religious extremist factions became briefly united in hatred against their common foes of reason and enlightenment, and amassed sufficient weaponry between them to bring about the annihilation of the great cities and their temples of entertainment, manufacture and commerce. Many millions died in the great slaughters, but ultimately the victories went to those groups that most firmly dedicated, and freely gave, their lives for their beliefs. Then, with the citadels of the infidel destroyed, the many factions could turn their hatred to the mission they most enjoyed: the task of proving the superiority of their own faith against all others by relentless killing, brutality and barbarism. Often, their only common ground was the subjugation of women and the conviction that the one true faith was the only truth worth holding. Unfortunately, as every male was convinced that his

beliefs were the only one true faith, and as all women of mettle who showed any resistance were branded heretics and unbelievers, to be punished accordingly, the civilised world slid inexorably into a twilight era of turbulent anarchy, the consequences of which may easily be imagined. In China, the director of the National Influenza Research Laboratory, Professor Hualan Chen, developed an experimental hybrid of the highly lethal H5N1 bird flu virus with a highly infectious strain of H1N1. She had emphasised that her laboratory was secure, with no chance of it escaping. Unfortunately, the Chinese government decided otherwise, and chose to use it as a biological weapon of choice against a United Korea, when the wind changed with all too foreseeable consequences for the rest of humanity.

When he finally emerged from his cocoon, it was into a world devastated with the consequences of many wars. What had been spared by onslaught, the greater armies of pestilence and famine had destroyed; and those few buildings left unscathed by bombs and fire were caught in the relentless attrition of unchecked decay, for the skills of architect and engineer, of designer and machinist, of builder and craftsman, were gone. Scarcity of manpower, lack of materials, and the failure of a basic stability in life to permit teaching and education had all combined to leave a bare savagery, destitute of any vestige of civilisation or glory. True, a few isolated groups had formed, desperate to retain from the wreckage what they might of knowledge, but each time such groups began to flower into primitive but productive farmsteads, they were invariably raided by wild elements greedy for the fruits of their labour, and bent on destruction and mayhem to prove their own superiority in the world they had created, and the old knowledge was snuffed out as effectively as had been the extinction of the elephants and rhinos in the centuries before.

Oblivious to this, Dr Haque stepped out of his capsule into a cavern deep in dust and decay. Parts of the ceiling and walls had collapsed about him, blocking the doorway with dirt and rubble. There was no light, and he was deeply disorientated as he groped about, falling and clambering over junk and shifting mortar and broken timbers to try and find the stairway. The door had gone, but the way was blocked with twisted blackened girders through which a hint of daylight peered. By wriggling through gaps and scrambling over the rubble, he finally got free enough to see the deserted devastation that had once been a great city, and a great wave of depression and isolation swept him, even driving out for the moment the great thirst and hunger that were a consequence of his hibernation. A light rain began to fall as he fought to climb some of the wreckage, and looked about him. Nothing moved as far as he could see, save a few lone

birds circling some distance away. The only signs of life were the weeds and rootless shrubs struggling for survival in the dirt-filled crevices, and everywhere as far as he could see were windowless, broken ruins, most with gaping holes blasted in their sides. He managed to reach some rusting girders, wedged under which were skeletal remains, the bones gnawed and broken, and he shivered. The quiet solitude was overwhelming, for even the rain made no noise, serving merely to add a damp gloss to the rubble, and the birds were too far away to add their song to the silence. In his desperation, he found a dirty puddle and cupped it up with his hand, but he knew that he would find no food, and was too fearful to go far, knowing he would soon be lost in the tangled iron and debris that surrounded him. Reluctantly, he turned back to the only sanctuary he knew: his cursed machine that had carried him to this hell on earth.

With his remaining strength, he pulled aside some more of the masonry blocking the stairway, enough to allow a slight glimmer to enter his cell, and allowed his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Most of the room was filled with rubble, and he realised how fortunate he had been that the area round his machine was still clear, and that it had missed blockading the hatch, for the rest of the room was quite choked. He was about to step through the hatch when a soft glint caught his eye, enough to rouse his curiosity, and he guessed it would be the remains of the cameras and monitoring equipment the television crews had been using so long ago. Knowing this might be the only sign of civilisation he would find, and desperate to be reminded of that lost time, he began pulling back some of the rubble blocking the corner. But to his astonishment, it was not an old camera, or any other equipment from that era. In his eagerness, as recognition dawned, he tore back the slabs of concrete and brickwork with bleeding hands and was astonished to see another hibernator, clearly similar to his own, but somewhat smaller and more sophisticated. This version also had a window in the hatch, but in the gloom he could not see who – or what – was inside. His own machine was sealed from the inside, to prevent premature de-hibernation from anyone opening the door, but this alternative appeared to have an emergency button hidden beneath a protecting flap. He hesitated awhile, then pushed the button. Immediately, a low light illumined the inner cockpit, and a hum began, which he recognised as the start of the process to return its occupant to conscious life. He stared through the porthole, desperately brushing away the dust and dirt of centuries in an attempt to see the occupant, but the face was turned from him and half-covered by the equipment that had acted to send its passenger into hibernation, and he could only wait for the process to complete. Slowly, over what seemed

an age but was probably barely an hour or so, he sensed the monitors inside registering the return of a heartbeat and circulation, the sudden start of nervous impulses within the brain, registering as a return to consciousness with the flooding warmth as body temperature rose. The body inside stirred and turned as the door finally slid open, and for the first time he saw a figure he could remember and recognise; it was Beverley.

Slowly, stiffly, she reached out to pull herself free from the capsule, and weak though he was he reached in to give support and help her to her feet. She looked much older than he remembered her as she staggered out, then sagged with the unaccustomed weight of her body, as though she had been in zero gravity. He half carried her across to sit on some of the rubble, which formed the only seating in the room. She seemed unable to speak, but pointed to the capsule, inside of which he found some small sealed bottles of water. He opened one to wet her lips, and took a welcome draught himself, and slowly she began to speak. She explained that she had begged the engineers at W.B.C. to construct a copy of his device, so she might follow him in time. The executives had been persuaded to fund the plan, thinking that filming the two of them could have entertainment value, and they syndicated copies of his machine to other countries for their own entertainment. She had duly woken after the ten years, but to both her and the company's disappointment, he had not woken. She arranged with the company to reawaken every five years, or sooner if he woke before then, and that was when they fitted the external button, but it was never pressed and she had duly revived only every five years. At first they had welcomed her, filming her astonishment at world changes, and joking about her Rip Van Winkle partner; but then, the wars had pressed ever closer, and eventually there was no one to greet her when she awoke. Frightened then, she finally found someone in archiving who could explain the great changes that had come into all their lives, even over the preceding five years, but she already felt alienated from the world she had known, and no one was interested in her anymore for she was old news. She was also old in body, for the constant stress of changes, and the cumulative time she spent in conscious living had taken their toll. Seeing the devastation that had already hit some other cities, she loaded the pod with sterile bottled water and some dehydrated food pills, and returned to her machine to wait for Dr Haque to re-emerge, setting the timer initially to every ten years, then every twenty, and finally to every fifty years. But for the past three hundred years, since the fall of the city under a hail of artillery and missiles, nothing had seemed to change, and she could get no more news as both civilisation and communication

collapsed. On each awakening, she had cleared the debris from round the capsules, until some new slippage had finally blocked off her own capsule. She had used her supplies sparingly, but now had very little left, though she was more than willing to share them, glad indeed to have his company at last.

Dr Haque, or Christopher as she now called him, was on the verge of hysteria, convinced that they were going to be buried alive if they stayed, but fearful of finding nothing but famine and disease if they did escape the ruined city. It was Beverley who brought strength and calmness to their debate, and with her taking the lead they discussed how best to handle this new situation. They finally decided that it would be madness to try to escape by foot; nothing could move out there, and if they did get clear, the country might still be devastated, or filled with hostile remnants scavenging for what they could get. Reluctantly, they agreed to share the remaining provisions before re-entering their machines to move in the only direction that might be safe; forward in time for another five hundred years. At Beverley's insistence, he helped her to lift some girders across the stair head, to camouflage the entrance and hopefully to seal the chamber to prevent further rubble entering. They checked their timers one more time, then each stepped inside to risk oblivion for possible salvation.

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In the world outside, of people nothing stirred. The very wealthy had formed protective enclaves when first the troubles began to spread, and these had lasted for some considerable time. But without access to new materials to replenish their machinery, they had ultimately been forced to leave their fortresses for wider supplies; but generally their timing had been too early to escape the roaming vigilantes, or they had left it too late, and all remnants of external civilisation had collapsed, and with it the means of working mines, furnaces and refineries for even the most basic materials, until these remaining citadels also had succumbed to anarchy and decay as their citizenry were reduced to infighting for survival.

For Christopher, when he finally awoke and his door slid open, everything was in darkness, and the silence was that of the tomb. As memory returned, he could only find Beverley's capsule by touch. He felt for the release button, and was thankful to hear the pumps and machinery start up when he pressed it. A faint light glowed from the control panel within, and he watched it earnestly until at last he saw her stir. He sipped a little of his water, and waited

patiently, for after five hundred years, a few moments more would make little difference. Finally he was rewarded as she too revived and was able to stand again. He helped her out, and offered the water which she took greedily. The air was stale and stifling, with no hint of circulation as they crept on hands and knees searching the floor for the old steps and their exit. The passageway was blocked by what felt to be a root system, and earth showered down as they scabbled at the roof over their exit. Christopher, frightened and exhausted, wanted only to collapse and give up, but Beverley again seemed to gain strength from the challenge, and bullied and cajoled him to help her scratch away at the sealed entrance. The old girders had rusted like paper, and bent easily inwards as more soil fell on them. They clawed away weakly at the dirt that cascaded past them, but finally broke through into daylight and gasped the fresh air, looking with astonishment at the scene they faced.

Over the intervening centuries, accumulated dust sprouted plants, dead leaves fell to humus, and a rich soil had begun to accrue, sufficient to support a dense canopy of trees. They emerged to a forest. Some trees were still small and stunted on ground uneven from the weathered heaps of rubble beneath, but every so often in places where deep roots could penetrate to waken the old soil, giant king trees poked through the general cover to tower high over the others as a promise of time to come. Birds were singing above them, and far off they could hear the plashing of a stream. The old buildings had rotted down to little more than undulating vegetation-covered knolls, with only an occasional ugly shape now to spoil the fresh skyline, and the only bar to their progress was a close tangle of undergrowth, but even this appeared to have tracks through it, perhaps caused by animals other than human. As they moved instinctively towards the sound of water, they climbed some grass-covered wreckage higher and more open than its surroundings, and could look across the tops of the nearby trees. In the far distance, rising slowly above the greenery of their newly discovered Eden, came a wisp of smoke. They looked at each other in wonder and apprehension; it was the one sign they longed for yet dreaded: they were not alone.