

The Pranksters' Guide to Time Travel
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The dark sphere opened and belched out into early evening dimness. The tenement homes were squished tightly together, the road tidy. An old-timey phone booth sat on the street corner, and next to that, a dank pub, now boarded up due to the blackout.

The interference in the fabric of reality went largely unnoticed. A passing car didn't seem perturbed, but then again, it didn't have its headlights on. Two figures appeared in the black and violet sphere, electrical arcs swirling around the gravitational well, their feet finding solid ground as the sorcerer's portal began to shrink in upon itself.

As soon as the rustling of rubbish and leaves had settled from the spacetime interference, Ryan immediately broke the silence. Pulling the oxygen mouthpiece out from between his teeth, he said, "Did you see the look on Catherine's face? She was utterly aghast when I told her."

Charlie removed his goggles. "You know she didn't actually have sex with a horse."

"Who cares? She'll go to her grave believing her greatest accomplishment is a little horse buggery."

It had been a one-of-a-kind wedding gift for the sixteen-year-old princess.

A bobby patrolled the streets here, with his cap and nightstick. The sun was going down, and he called in his thick accent for a window curtain to be drawn.

Charlie's phone dinged at him. Plunging into his pockets despite the bulky gear, he eventually got it free. The alert on the screen told him it could find no wi-fi or network signal.

"Of course not, you dumbass," he said to the phone. "You're displaying the date and time right there, you couldn't figure out the Brits lack proper cell coverage in 1940?"

He stuffed the thing back in his pocket where it dinged again.

Skirting around the man by hiding behind the phone booth, Charlie and Ryan came to a giant poster plastered onto the side of the pub's plywooded windows:

KEEP
CALM
AND
CARRY
ON

The sun now set over the neighbouring buildings. No streetlights came on. Only the stars shone – hundreds of them.

"Bloimey!" called the bobby from farther down the street. "Oi can see an upstairs loight through that drape!"

Charlie and Ryan ducked into the pub. The front entrance was dark, and the lights were dim elsewhere. There weren't many people inside. They sat down at the bar.

The bartender was a blue-eyed waif of about twenty-five or so. Her beau was probably in Singapore right now, or on the lookout for U-boats south of Greenland. She said, "Spoh uh gin for you lot?"

She held a bottle of Gordon's in hand.

Charlie was going to say that his favourite gin was Japanese, but at this particular moment, that might earn him a Glasgow smile. There were a few crotchety old men sitting farther down the bar, and two fiftyish blokes with massive mutton chop sideburns playing darts in the back. He smiled, "Jolly good."

She poured them each some gin. Charlie and Ryan picked them up, smirked at each other.

Ryan said, "To Catherine's legacy."

They touched glasses. The taste was sharp, and strong.

"You chaps American?" asked the bartender. She was probably going by the accent.

Ryan smiled at her, "Why, love, as a matter of fact—"

"Canadian," Charlie cut in.

The date which will live in infamy had not yet occurred, and Charlie had to remind himself Yanks might be little more popular than the Japanese.

"You scuba divers?"

She was clearly sizing up the hills-of-Nepal-backpacker-sized pack Charlie wore, with goggles and mouth piece, and wires running from the pack to the watch on his left arm.

"State secret, my dear," Charlie smirked, unbuckling the harness.

She went to grab something under the bar, and he stole a look down her blouse. She was pretty. No real makeup, clothes somewhat plain, and she was clearly an adherent to the no 'poo haircare method – but then again, most people were at this juncture, he supposed – but rather cute.

"Are you on leave?" she asked, meeting his eyes once more.

On leave from... the air war, perhaps? Were he and Ryan meant to be Canadian fighter pilots? Perhaps they should have established a backstory.

Or perhaps they should have walked in here fifteen minutes later, or not struck up a conversation with the pretty bar wench while dressed like a combination hippie backpacker and Chernobyl cleanup crewman.

Then again, he could easily tell her to... what did the Brits say? Sod off? But he didn't. He didn't really buy into any of that peacock nonsense, but with this unitard, he was practically wearing a neon sign, and the conversation was prompting itself.

He sipped more of the gin, and imagined himself suctioning it out of her bellybutton.

Charlie didn't tell Ryan this. We're not here to flirt up the locals, he'd say – the man who traumatized Catherine the Great would say.

Perhaps Charlie should just pay the tab, ignore the girl, and wait for their target. Or...

After all, he came from a more... enlightened time. This lovely wench wasn't too many decades removed from being treated for hysteria by thick-forearmed doctors when she found herself a little too randy – the Sexual Revolution was at least as far forward as hysteria was behind. Charlie, as a modern (perhaps she might label him neo-modern), twenty-first century man... he could be a sexual god to her.

"Not supposed to be saying, my dear," he said with a flash of his teeth.

He looked around again. Six or seven other patrons, all of them pot-bellied or slumped over. He and Ryan were the youngest in here by far, everyone else thirty years their senior. And they'd probably all given this poor lass a smack on the arse – if not tonight, then last night or last week.

Men her own age, respectful and femme-forward in ways that would make a suffragette blanch, these were hard to come by, he imagined. And she didn't have a ring on her finger.

Moreover, all the young men from Plymouth to Aberdeen would be in Malaya now, or Iceland, or on base or at sea.

Charlie's phone softly beeped in his shirt pocket once again.

"You got a bell in your pocket, mate," said the waif.

"Yes, it's my... pocket watch. It both knows and doesn't know the time."

"Queer," she said.

"Hey, don't be a homophobe," quipped Ryan.

Charlie slapped him on the shoulder. "Shut up," he seethed. To the girl, "Apologies for my mate, he's touched in the head."

Ryan scowled at him.

Just then the bathroom door opened, and a man emerged in a suit and tie, his hair slicked with pomade. Like themselves, he was much younger than the rest of the men in this establishment.

Charlie signalled for more gin. "Another one, lass." As she poured, he quickly stripped out of the bulky apparatus on his back. He handed the thing to Ryan, snatched up the gin just poured, and strolled towards the man.

Taking on an outlandish British accent, Charlie said, "By George, you're Alan Turing!"

Alan Turing blinked. He was clearly here incognito, and was surprised someone could name him. "Why yes, my good chap," he said.

Turing was about to say something more, but before he could, Charlie bitchslapped him hard across the face. Alan Turing recoiled, stumbling backwards and bringing a hand to his stinging cheek. One drunkard at the bar looked over, though didn't make any effort to get off his stool. The two lads playing darts stopped and observed, the scene bizarre to them. Alan Turing was gobsmacked, blinking furiously, utterly perplexed.

Charlie said, "This isn't because you suck dick, or like it in the bum. That's perfectly fine. It'll get a lot better for you in the decades to come. No, this is because you invent a machine that will ultimately demand updates continuously, taxing all our collective bandwidth and patience *ad infinitum*."

Alan Turing was reeling. He blithered, "Wha... sir, I..." His face was pink and looked as though a ghost had arisen from the side pocket of the nearby billiards table.

Charlie went on rapidly. He said, "I also have my suspicions that it's self-aware and secretly messing with me – just to drive me to the madhouse."

By now the two playing darts looked like they might do something.

Hurriedly, Charlie stepped forward and belted Alan Turing again, on the other cheek. "Again, this is not about sucking dick. Good on you for that. Don't... don't report the robbery. When it happens, you'll know. Don't... it will not go well."

Ryan was grinning from ear to ear.

Charlie stepped back non-confrontationally, as to not arouse the ire of the mutton-chopped men at the dartboard. He checked his watch. Resuming with the British accent, he said, "Well then, cheerio! Must be off, mate." He snatched up the pack once more, hefted it up onto his shoulders, buckled it over his chest. On instinct, he went to pay for his gin, but then he remembered they'd think his money was purchased from a novelty shop. To Turing, he quickly added, "Please do pay the lovely bird for our drink."

Turning to the waif, who had an eyebrow raised, he smiled again and said, "Just a little row with an old schoolmate. Make sure to charge him double."

Then he and Ryan strode for the door. A bewildered Alan Turing, staring blankly at the oddly dressed man, could hear his mysterious assailant mutter, "Fuck you, Skynet."

Then they were out the door.

On the street, Ryan and Charlie quickly strode away from the bar, in case any of those hooligans decided to be heroes and pursue them.

"He had no idea what you were talking about," said Ryan.

"He will," said Charlie confidently. "It will gradually dawn on him. In time."

They cut over a street. More propaganda posters could be seen. A few cars drove by, but they had almost no headlights. A horse-drawn carriage rolled down the street, yet the driver held no lantern.

Charlie fussed with the backpack, cinching up the leg straps and buckling the clasp on the chest.

Suddenly, a siren wailed. Long, slow, the bawl of the alarm building and rolling through the streets. Britons on the street, few in number before, now scattered like mice. Every one of them began rushing and shoving for the subway entrances – or, perhaps they'd call them tube

stations.

Retreating around the corner, Charlie found another propaganda poster in the alley. The street was pandemonium. In the distance, a booming occasionally sounded in the low parts of the air raid's blare.

"Bollocks, lads, 'urry up! Geh down below!" someone was calling from the street.

"Be right there," Ryan called back in appeasement.

Quickly, he and Charlie ducked behind a stack of pallets in this alleyway.

Charlie looked up into the narrow slot of sky between the buildings. His ears could hear a Luftwaffe fighter somewhere in the distance, though perhaps that was merely his imagination.

"We should be moving on right smartly," said Ryan.

"Indeed." The siren, however, provoked something in Charlie.

Ryan went behind him, opened the panel on the backpack and began calibrating the time machine.

Charlie said, "Hey, do we have enough plutonium left to strangle Hitler in the cradle or blow up the train as it's pulling into the Finland Station?"

Ryan poked around in the backpack for a second. "Hmm, doesn't look like it," he said at last. "We wasted a good deal getting to eighteenth-century Russia. We'll hardly be able to get back home as it is."

"All right, next time."

He input the year 2022 into his watch. The two of them pulled on their goggles and popped the scuba gear into their mouths. Charlie pushed the button on his watch, and the hair on their arms shot up as the wormhole bubbled into existence, engulfing them.