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Opening extract from
The Reluctant Time Traveller

Written by
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To Ian
with love and gratitude

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‘Help!’ I try to shout, but ‘Help!’ is stuck in my mouth!
A loud buzzing is ringing in my head. I can’t see a
thing. I shut my eyes, open my eyes; both ways it’s
black. The buzzing keeps on. Maybe I’ve landed in a
wasp’s nest? My head feels like it’s going to burst. I
stick my hands out and hit something hard. What?
Where am I? I fumble behind, to the side. I’m hemmed
in, trapped in a tiny space – a box, or a cupboard. I try
again to shout for help but my voice won’t work, like it
hasn’t caught up with me. I push my elbows out, trying
to break open this box. Ow! My funny bones throb.
Maybe I’m in a coffin? Maybe the time travel hasn’t
worked and I’m buried alive? I always knew this was
a bad idea.

“Help!” A tiny squeal comes out. That’s my voice. It’s
catching up with me.

Ok. I’m standing, so I can’t be in a coffin, which is
a relief. But where am I? I listen for clues but all I can
hear is my heart drumming like mad and more squeaks
coming out of my mouth. I thrash out and grab hold
of what feels like a pole. I pat it all the way down. At
the bottom it feels scratchy, like a broom. Even though
I am in the worst-ever nightmare, I laugh. I, Saul

Martin, not exactly famous for cleaning the house, am trapped in some box with a beloved broom. The laugh comes out squeaky. But when you're in a tight corner any kind of laugh works wonders. I stop panicking and force myself to get a grip and think.

I don't feel dead. Maybe this is some kind of cleaning cupboard? I take a deep breath. Bad idea: a bleachy smell clings to my throat. With one hand clamped over my mouth, I reach out again. Behind me is what feels like a mop. Next to my feet is a tin bucket, I think. But where is Agnes Brown, my companion in time travel? Because one thing is pretty clear – she's not in the cupboard. Off to explore history by herself, probably, with her kit bag and her total dedication. Agnes has gone and left me behind. We'd had our hands pressed against the bark of the yew tree, preparing to zoom back through time, and I'd said to her, "You've got to really want it, remember." But really I'd been talking to myself. Agnes had no doubts. She did want it. Thousand per cent. She really, really wanted to travel back in time. She wasn't scared.

I was. I mean, have you ever stopped to think what you'd do if you were time travelling and something went wrong? You can't exactly phone your mum and say, "Hey Mum, can you pick me up from 1914? Pleeeeeeease?" I gulp, hoping this is 1914. I don't know where I am. I don't know when. I don't know anything.

Agnes and I are separated and I am in serious time-travel trouble.

I bang my fist on the door of the cleaning-cupboard-box. "Help!" I shout, and this time it sounds like me

– freaked, but at least not squeaking. My voice has caught up. "HELP ME!" I roar and bang again, not caring who might discover me. I have to get out.

I can hear footsteps. Little feet, short steps. They're coming closer. Then they stop.

"Whit the heck's that, eh?" It's a girl, but not Agnes. Her voice sounds as snappy as her footsteps.

"Hello!" I call out desperately, my face pressing up against the wooden door. It smells like tar. "Could you let me out?" Whoever is out there takes a step closer. Phew.

"Somebody playing a trick on me, eh? We all get a laugh out of scaring poor wee Elsie to death, eh? Well, let me tell you for nothing, Elsie here is sick of it."

"No!" I yell, banging on the wood. "It's not a trick. Please, let me out of here."

"Are you a ghostie? Eh?"

"No, I'm a... a boy." I try to sound friendly but my voice comes out whiny. I probably sound like a ghost. "Please, Elsie," I plead, "just let me out."

"Whit kind of boy? One whit's up to no good, I'll bet. A boy whit's a scoundrel, a thief, a rascal, eh? Bet you pinched a sugar lump from the maister's sugar bowl. He'd whip you and lock you up for that."

"No, honest," I whine, "I didn't pinch anything. I'm just a normal boy. My name's Saul."

I can hear her rattle something. Keys, I hope. "Come on, hurry up," I cry out, banging frantically, "open the door. It stinks in here."

"Huld yer horses," she snaps. "Gaunt doesn't like varmints. Not one bit." She's whispering now. I pictured

a little old-fashioned face pressed up close to the other side of the door. "Yer lucky he didn't shove you in the cupboard that's got the hares dripping blood. Yea think the mop cupboard reeks? Ha! Wait till he locks you in the hanging cupboard." I can hear the key half turn then stop. "Yer probably one of they spies. It's all they talk about in town. War this, war that. It's coming, that's whit they're saying. Spies creeping everywhere. Yer one of the enemies, I bet."

"Listen," I hiss, not knowing what she means by 'Gaunt' or 'varmint', but knowing a bit about spies and enemies. I try to sound chilled. "Elsie, it's ok, I'm not going to hurt you. Nobody locked me up. This looks worse than it is. I just... got lost. It happens, and I'm not a spy. I'm... from here. Let me out. I'm not the enemy, honest."

"So you never did nothing bad?"

"No!" I wail, except right now I am feeling guilty. I feel everything would have been ok if I'd been more up for this time travel, all bold and certain like Agnes. At least then I wouldn't have to deal with this on my own. I pressed my cheek against the smelly wood and groaned. I had never really wanted this. I wanted to stay at home. We were [we are?] going on the school trip to Paris in two weeks and I am seriously looking forward to that. That's travel. Hurtling back in time is not what you see in travel programmes, not what you see pictures of in a travel agent's, and not the travel I need. I didn't think that to learn about the First World War, we actually had to pay it a visit. Though Agnes thinks it's a great idea. And she also wants to find out

who really owns the land our den is on now. Our den is about to be bulldozed, and she is dead keen on saving it. Which I get. I want to save it too. But still, I should have put my foot down. I should have said: 'time travel is a totally dangerous, mad idea. N.O. NO!'

"No," I whimper again, "let me out, Elsie, please." Why had I not said no to Agnes? If I had, I'd be lounging in my beanbag in my room, sending messages to Will and Robbie like usual, or playing my Xbox, not locked in some old smelly cupboard wondering if I'll ever get out. I'd said "Yes, alright then," – but I'd said it reluctantly. That's what Agnes calls my swithering, my doubts: *reluctance*. Whatever you call it, she had none of it. And, like I said, she vanished and I was left standing alone at the yew tree. Where is she now? And where am I? This Elsie person speaks funny. *Is it 1914?* I can hardly ask. "Please, Elsie," I beg, "just open the door. I'm all confused. It's pitch dark in here. I don't know if it's day or night." This silly laugh bursts out of me. "I don't even know what year it is."

"You're daft as a brush. I'm not telling the enemy nothing. We've been told: keep mum."

"I'm not the enemy, ok?"

"Whit? You talk like the enemy."

It's hard to keep my voice calm when I feel like kicking the door down and yelling at her. "I'm just a normal boy," I plead.

"Normal boys don't go getting themselves locked in the broom cupboard. It's not worth my bacon to let you out. Whit did you do if you didn't pinch something, eh?" She stops ranting to having a little coughing fit.

When the coughing stops, the ranting starts again. "Begging at the gates, eh? Gaunt can't abide they dirty beggars. Not one bit."

And I can't abide this one bit. I kick the door and hear something clatter. My foot throbs.

"Whit you doing with my mop bucket, eh?" She sounds angry now. "You kick a dent in that bucket and it'll be me, poor Elsie Noble, whit will forfeit her shilling. Now stop it, you hear?" Which gives me an idea. I lash out again and the tin bucket clangs. Result! "You dirty little sneak," she yells, pulling back the door. I blink at the sudden light. "You leave my good bucket alone!"

I see this small face peer in topped by a frilly white cap. She's only about ten. She looks like a maid – a very wee pale one. I jump over the bucket, dart round her and speed down a corridor.

"Halt, you!" she shouts.

I pelt along the corridor, taking bleach-free breaths, but can't hear her chasing me. There are loads of doors. Where am I? Maybe I have got something right and this is the big house. The big house that's a ruin with a big old garden no one's using, and where we have our den. Maybe I really have managed to travel back one hundred years and Agnes Brown is somewhere close. I seriously hope so.

Behind me I can hear little Elsie fumbling with her bucket and calling out. "I'm off to report you to Mrs Buchan! Lucky for you Gaunt's awa' from home. But the housekeeper will send you packing, so she will, and give you a thick ear while she's at it. I might be

half-pint size, but not Mrs Buchan. You scared the living daylights out o' me. I thought you wis the Hun."

What does she mean, 'the Hun'? Am I a Hun? Who's Gaunt? Who's Mrs Buchan? And *where* is my time-travelling buddy, Agnes Brown?



1

The sun streamed through the classroom window. It was so bright I couldn't even see the Smart board. The teacher was talking about wind energy, I think: giant turbines, people protesting about having them on the hills here in the Borders, that kind of thing. But all I could think about was the school trip to France. It was going to be great.

Except, before I go on the French trip, I went somewhere else. Actually, I went *sometime* else.

To explain how I ended up running away from a wee maid called Elsie I need to go back a few days... or, maybe that should be forward a hundred years? When you're a time traveller, talking about time gets a bit confusing. Let's just say, in June 2014, I wasn't concentrating on wind energy. Instead I was gazing up at this fly on the classroom ceiling thinking about being up the Eiffel Tower with all my pals. Next thing a paper plane flew in an impressive arc from the back of the room and landed right on my lap. Just in time, because the teacher turned round from the Smart board, sniffing, like she smelt nonsense going on. A message. When the teacher turned back, I unfolded the wings of the plane without rustling

it, and opened out the sleek paper body. There were just two words followed by a huge curly question mark:

Time Travel?

I scrunched up the paper plane. I'd always known she would suggest this, sooner or later. I would have been fine just living in the ordinary present. I mean, that was enough, what with the twins – loudest one year olds ever – and high school (our first year was just finishing) and the gang and the summer holidays coming up. But having Agnes Brown in my gang was never going to be ordinary. Or easy.

"Just once, Saul," she said, tipping her head sideways so her long dark hair swung down.

"Nah, I don't know," I said. We were in the overgrown garden in front of our gang hut, just me and her, after school. We were trying to remember how the time traveller, our friend Agatha Black, had made fire, but rubbing stones together wasn't working. Agnes had a packet of marshmallows with her for toasting. Good thing I had matches.

"But you know the formula. Come on Saul, you can't just pass up the opportunity of the century."

She straightened her head and gave me the 'I dare you' look. I'd climbed right to the top of the oak tree because of that look. I'd skipped school because of that look. I'd swum in the freezing River Tweed in March because of that look. I pulled the scrunched-up paper

plane from my pocket, hunched down and stuffed it under our spire of twigs. Then I struck a match and lit the plane. Orange flames shot up, licked onto the twigs, and soon the fire was roaring. The stones we'd been madly rubbing together lay at the side of our bonfire, all scratched and useless.

"It's dangerous and you don't know what you're asking." I tossed a twig onto the fire.

"Don't you think Agatha would want us to carry on the tradition?"

"What tradition?"

Agnes was stabbing a marshmallow onto the end of a sharp twig. "The time traveller tradition, of course."

"Oh, that." I laughed, like it was no big deal. "I thought you meant the ride-a-bike off-a-cliff tradition."

"Yeah, now *that* would be dangerous." Nibbling a pink gooey marshmallow, she pulled her diary from the back pocket of her jeans. She propped her toasting twig on one of the stones and flicked through the pages. Agnes was always writing in that diary, or reading it, or drawing little diagrams. "Time traveller formula," she announced, then flashed me her 'Are -you -paying -attention?' look. She read:

'Earth
Fire
Swirling water
Rainbow vapours
Yew tree

Gold and, last but not least,
An antique song.

When elements are vibrating in harmony, in
tune with planets, it is possible to slip through
the doors of time.

She winked at me. "It'll be an adventure!"

"Might be, might not be, and anyway, you forgot the most important bit." I got busy with my marshmallow and squatted down beside her, and she moved her diary away, like I might spy or something. "But I'm not going to tell you what it is. I can have secrets too."

Agnes shrugged. "I write seriously bad poetry, Saul," she said, turning pink. "That's all."

I believed her. Agnes was the type to write poetry, probably seriously good. We sat not speaking for a while, toasting marshmallows, watching the flames, feeling the sun and the fire warm on our faces, and I bet we were both thinking about Agatha Black. I know I was. We both agreed she was the most adventurous person we had ever met. Agatha Black had travelled two centuries, just to see what the future was like! She had slept in our gang hut on her own. That was the winter before last when the whole overgrown garden had been covered in snow. Now it was summer. It was warm. The garden was a green wild mess with weeds galore. It was light until late at night but there's still no way you'd get me spending the night in our gang hut. Agatha was brave.

"Don't you want to see what it's like, Saul?"

I stared into the flames. I did want to see the past, and I knew how to do it. But so much could go wrong. Not that Agnes thought about that. Agnes Brown wasn't scared of anything. She'd had a lifetime of being different. I mean, she lived in a caravan at the back of the garage and her dad was this bearded grungy guy that played the fiddle on the street corner to make money. Compared with Agnes, I was pretty normal.

"I've got gold," Agnes said, holding up her hand and turning her fingers round. Her ring flashed in the sunlight. She inherited it from her grandma and her mother. "Tell me what the other thing is? The thing from the time travel formula that I forgot. Come on," she nudged me. "Saul?"

I made her wait till I'd scoffed my marshmallow.

"It is, you have to really, really, really want it," I told her, eventually, "and you have to totally believe it will happen. Faith," I said, feeling my heart skip a beat, "is the most important thing." The fire crackled. I did want to time travel. I just didn't know if I *really* wanted to. Like really, really! I did believe it could happen, but so much could go wrong. I guess I didn't have faith. A gust of wind blew suddenly, which was weird because it was a still day.

"Well, I have faith," Agnes boasted. "Do you?"

I didn't answer.

"Oh, come on, Saul. Let's!"

"I don't think Agatha would appreciate us just dropping in. She said it herself, didn't she? She kept saying she had her life to live. Well, we've got ours." I

said all this to the fire. I didn't exactly feel great being scared, especially seeing as I was the gang leader. But I was. Scared, that is. The thought of hurtling back through time was freaking me out.

"I'm not thinking of us going back to see Agatha." And then she came out with it; the real reason for all this. "It's the den and this old ruined house, and the garden. We could save it. My gran says if the title deeds of this house could be found, the property developers could be stopped. Saul – " Agnes was practically shouting by now; her eyes were shiny and her face was red – "this is our childhood we're talking about. The gang. The trees. Freedom. Everything. My gran said she wouldn't be surprised if bulldozers came in any day. No one has claimed this land for one hundred years, so the council are selling it. And my gran, she says..." Agnes lowered her voice (her gran is famous for saying pretty weird things) "...she says, by rights, this land should belong to *my family*. She says it was wrongfully taken out of our hands, that it was lost after my great-great-great grandfather died in about 1914." She stared at me across the flames. "Might be total rubbish. Probably is, but we have to do something. We can't just lie back and watch our den being pulped and the garden being dug up and fancy big houses being built for rich folks. It's not fair. Come on, Saul. We could travel back to 1914. See what we can find." Like I said, Agnes isn't scared of anything. I looked at her through the crackling fire and she smiled at me, like this was some little day trip to North Berwick she was suggesting.

I felt sorry for Agnes's gran. If I lived in a caravan

I would make up stories too. I'd be telling the world how my other house was a castle. "What's 'title deeds' anyway?" I mumbled, poking the fire with a stick.

"Something like a scroll of paper," she said, all excited. "It says on it who owns the house, and land and this den. You know, official documents. And if we want to save this den, we need to find them. Somebody has to own this place."

"Dunno," I muttered. 1914! Jeez! We could land in the muddy trenches of the First World War, then get gassed. We could materialise right in front of a charging horse. We could get a bayonet stuck in our hands and be ordered to fight on the front line. Or we could get the time thing all wrong and end up in ancient history. We could get taken away by the body snatchers. Or get locked in the stocks with rotten eggs flung in our faces. We could catch the plague. We might hurtle back centuries and end up in some gladiator ring. Or get trampled by a dinosaur. Even worse, we could get stuck in in-between time and never get back.

A pine cone flew above my head and landed in the fire, which snapped me out of my morbid thoughts. I could hear Agnes behind me.

"Oh well," she said, breezily, "if you're so reluctant, Saul, maybe I'll go by myself. I've got the formula too, don't forget. And I am related to Agatha's dad, the great time traveller Albert Black."

I swung round just in time to see her disappear through the hole in the hedge. "He wasn't great," I shouted after her. "Actually he got quite a lot of things wrong."

"Well, maybe he did. It doesn't mean we will. And I

care about this place," she shouted from behind the old garden wall. "I want to save the den!"

"So do I!" I yelled to the wall.

"Well, let's do it then," she yelled back. "Let's go to 1914!"