THE TIME-THIEF



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CANONGATE

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

canongate.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78689 990 3

Typeset in Horley Old Style MT by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



LEXICO'GRAPHER. *n.s.*
[λεξιχὸυ and γφάφω; *lexicographe*, French.]
A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

– Dr Johnson

Thirty days hath September,
April, June and November.
All the rest have thirty-one,
Excepting February alone,
Which hath twenty-eight days clear
And twenty-nine in each leap year.

– Anon

To Jeremy, for reminding me that history is not what happened but a *story* of what happened.



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Chapter 01:00

STOP, THIEF!

It's summer solstice, the longest day, Monday the 21st of June 2021. The sun rose at 4:43 this morning and won't set till 9:21 this evening. Today, I'm going on a school trip to the Museum of the Past, the Present and the Future. I'm so excited that I got up with the sun and couldn't eat any breakfast even though Grandma woke early to cook it.

I place the mozzarella onto the white flatbread, fold it and squeeze it into my white lunchbox. As I close the lid, Grandma stops my hand.

'Elle, this your cheese sandwich not enough. Pack some fruit-o!'

'There's no time to chop the apple, Grandma. We'll be late.'

I look at my best friend, Big Ben, who is sitting at our table. He's just finished eating MY breakfast, fish fished from the pepper soup with fresh boiled yam, and he didn't cough once! He's already had porridge and two slices of toast at home. He doesn't usually collect me from The Mush-Rooms before school

but today's a special day and demands the special-day routine. We have to leave at 8:25 exactly. I won an annual poetry competition and I'm going to read my poem at the museum. I'm nervous as well as excited but if we stick to the special-day routine, it will help me stay calm.

Grandma does big-eyes.

'Leapling never late.'

I smile. She has a point. Big Ben and I are both Leaplings with The Gift, which means we were born on the 29th of February and have the ability to leap through time to any year, date or hour we want. Only a tiny percentage of Leaplings have The Gift. Those Leaplings and their families all swear the Oath of Secrecy to protect us from exploitation. If bad Annuals found out about our Gift, they might kidnap us and make us commit crimes that the normal police would never detect. We must be discreet when we leap and reserve our talent for when it's absolutely necessary. Leaping takes it out of you.

Grandma pulls a transparent fruit carton out of the fridge.

'White grapes,' she pretends to read.

I smile at her joke. Grandma can't read but she hopes I'll eat them if it SAYS the grapes are white even though, strictly speaking, they're green. Only Grandma can get away with that. I'm autistic and she knows wordplay's one of my favourite things ever. I mainly eat white food, otherwise I get sensory overload from the sight, smell and taste of it. But over the past few months my sensory issues have been less severe and I've been a bit more confident trying new things, so I think maybe I'll let her pack

them today. I nod and she begins washing the grapes under the cold tap.

'My Chronophone says 8:22,' says Big Ben.

He's autistic too and loves to time things. Thank goodness he said that – I almost forgot to pack my own phone. I turn from Grandma to run my hand under the sofa bed where I sleep and there it is, my silver Chronophone. It's just like a mobile phone, but it can send messages across time. Holding it, I remember my leap-birthday celebration at this table last year when Big Ben and I were 3-leap, which is 12, and our friends MC^2 and GMT were 4-leap, 16. That's when MC^2 gave me and Big Ben these special phones. They weren't a birthday present. We helped break up a crime ring working under Le Temps, who took orders from the big bad boss, Millennia. Millennia's old and well-spoken and looks respectable but she's evil incarnate and threatened to DESTROY me. The Chronophones marked our status as Level 1 Infinites.

I LOVE being an Infinite. The Infinites are a youth group who fight crimes on the timeline for a better, greener future. We work for Infinity but no one's ever seen her! Our symbol is the infinity sign: ∞. We each have a code name based on our real name. When you say Elle, it sounds exactly the same as my code name: L. This is all TOP SECRET. Promise you won't tell anyone!

I pack my Chronophone and lunchbox into my rucksack and Big Ben stands up. He's so tall and Grandma's so small, it's like he's twice her size. Grandma hugs me extra tight because she's so proud I won the poetry competition and knows I'm

nervous with excitement about reading my poem. She waves at Big Ben. As the two of us walk down the stairs, I hear her voice behind me.

'Be strong and of a good courage,' she says.

∞

It's the first day of Time-Travel Week when we're off school timetable for five days. We won't LITERALLY travel through time every day; sometimes it's workshops where we think outside time and space. Big Ben and I reach school at 8:55 so we're not late but everyone else attending the trip is already outside on the school field.

We're the only two day-pupils; all the other children are boarders. Jake and Maria wave us over. Jake's brown fringe is longer than ever and his freckles stand out more in the summer. Maria's just had her long black hair cropped short so she doesn't have to tie it up when she high jumps. We sit down with them on the grass, which is already dry. It's going to be a very hot day.

I'm in Eighth Year at Intercalary International now. The whole class and three grown-ups are assembled: Mrs C Eckler, Mr C Eckler and Mrs Grayling. Mrs C Eckler, my form tutor, teaches Past, Present and Future (aka PPF) so she arranged the trip and I can tell she's nervous because she keeps twiddling the flower in her pinned-up ginger hair; Mr C Eckler's coming to help out, wearing his sunglasses as usual but at least it's summer; and Mrs Grayling teaches maths, is tall and strong like a javelin thrower

and loves the year 1752. She's been there so many times she keeps bumping into different versions of herself. Which must hurt!

As we're a large group and it's sunny and dry, Mrs C Eckler says leaping from the school field is better than leaping from Block T. Block T's the only school building you can leap from and to. The rest of the school is coated with Anti-Leap, a special material used for the prison and other important Leapling buildings to stop people breaking in or breaking out. It can be activated or deactivated like an alarm. Here it's supposed to protect pupils from Leapling intruders at all times. It's also supposed to stop pupils leaping away but I managed to do it last year by mistake!

Mrs C Eckler checks we all have a packed lunch then makes us stand to form a Chrono, a circle for leaping.

'It's summer solstice. We can pretend to be the standing stones of Stonehenge.'

Stonehenge is Mrs C Eckler's favourite place ever. She says it's best at winter solstice when it's dark and cold and quiet. At summer solstice there are too many tourists. I check my watch. It's 9:00. My hair is cornrowed tightly against my head and I'm wearing my long-sleeved white tunic and matching trousers to keep me cool. All eighteen of us hold hands in the Chrono. Big Ben's on my right; Mrs C Eckler's on my left. Big Ben sneezes and I feel sorry for him being outside in the field in the middle of summer. His hayfever gets quite bad but thankfully he's OK when he's running or leaping. Mrs C Eckler makes sure I'm wearing my leap band so I don't get leapsickness. It works like a travel-sickness wristband but looks like a gold bangle.

‘Close your eyes, everyone,’ she says, ‘and concentrate on the Museum of the Past, the Present and the Future. Allow us to guide you to the landing spot.’

She means the adults. None of us pupils have been to the museum before. I feel my body go fizzy with energy and squeeze Big Ben’s hand tight. He enjoys the excitement of leaping and so do I, but my sensitivities kick in so I always find it challenging. Hopefully the leap band will work this time. At least it’s only leaping through space, not through space and time. Mrs C Eckler clears her throat.

‘We’ve arrived. That only took a few seconds. Well done, everyone. You may open your eyes but please remain holding hands.’

I slowly open my eyes and blink. Our circle is surrounded by a much larger circle of stones obviously based on Stonehenge, except these stones look like giant ice cubes. Not the clear ice cubes you’d put in a drink, they’re cloudier than that, but not totally white like snow blocks either. They dazzle so brightly, I have to squint to appreciate them. They look like they’re melting in the sun but when I touch one, it’s totally dry. Then I get it. This is an outdoor sculpture to symbolise global warming.

∞

Our visit will begin in the 1752 Gallery, which is in the basement. The museum arranges everything by floor, so when you enter at ground level it’s The Present, which changes annually, then each level you go up, it gets more futuristic. They even have a

Chronophone that an explorer brought back from 2440; it's made of materials no one's invented yet! Big Ben starts to climb the spiral staircase two steps at a time with his long legs because he's excited about the far future artefacts but I pull him back. We have to follow the plan and the tour begins with the past. I look down at page one of the itinerary; I'm on it!

9:15 *The 1752 Gallery Introduction*: Mrs Zhong
9:25 *The Story of an Object*: Anno (Music, Maths and Movement School)
9:30 *1752 Poetry Prize Presentation (2021)*: Elle Ifíè (Intercalary International School)

Big Ben and I jog down the spiral staircase, which is a bit naughty because you're not allowed to run in a museum, but we're athletes so we sometimes forget we're not in training! We slow down before we reach the bottom stair. The 1752 Gallery is circular, its walls lined with objects in glass cases like teapots and snuff boxes and hanging ballads, poems they sang about prisoners to entertain the crowd before they were hung! But the museum assistants don't make us sit in a circle, they make us sit in rows like in school, in case we accidentally hold hands in a Chrono and end up in another time and place! I don't think they trust schoolchildren very much. I'm glad when they leave the room to go back to their offices.

The first session begins. The curator, Mrs Zhong, is small, wearing a black skirt suit and heavy black-rimmed glasses. She looks stern and has a slight accent.

'Welcome to the 1752 Gallery. As you may know, 1752 was a very special leap year. Raise your hands if you know why.'

'The 11-day leap,' says Jake, without putting his hand up.

Mrs Zhong frowns at his disobedience. 'Could anyone tell me the significance of the 11-day leap?'

I know the answer. On Wednesday September the 2nd 1752, EVERYONE in England leapt 11 days into the future! That night, Leaplings and Annuals went to bed and when they woke up, it was Thursday September the 14th! Leaplings didn't hold hands in a Chrono and transport all the Annuals in the middle like luggage. This was a leap by law. The government changed from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar and to make it work, they cut 11 days in time!

But I don't put my hand up to say this out loud because I'm so nervous about doing my reading. If I speak, the words will come out in the wrong order or jammedtogetherinonelongword-likeGerman.

I zone out of the discussion until Mrs Zhong says something about 1752 being the favourite holiday destination for Leaplings with The Gift and notices Big Ben has raised his hand.

'Is that why Mrs Grayling goes there 23 times in 10 years?'

I look at Mrs Grayling. She's gone bright pink but she's smiling, knowing Big Ben didn't mean to be unkind. Everyone knows she's been to 1752 a lot but Big Ben's the only one who's kept tabs whenever she's spoken about it. He must be feeling relaxed to ask a question in a place he's never visited before. Mrs C Eckler twiddles her hair flower.

'Perhaps, Mrs Grayling, you could tell the children about the Carnival of the Calendar.'

Mrs Grayling is a paler shade of pink now. 'Very well, since my secret's out. I visit 1752 to attend an event on the eve of the 2nd of September called the Carnival of the Calendar. It's an outdoor festival of music, poetry and dance to celebrate the 11-day leap. Mostly Leaplings attend but a few local Annuals help organise it. It's hidden from the 1752 population but, to be honest, most of them were a bit cross about losing out on the 11 days so the last thing they'd want to do is celebrate.

'It's almost impossible to obtain a ticket and impossible to sneak in. I've only managed to attend twice; maybe I'll never be able to attend again.' Mrs Grayling sighs. 'Leaplings come from all over the timeline so they had the wisdom to severely limit the numbers. Remember, the past is fixed. You can't change it. If a thousand people attended that night, that's what happened.'

Mrs Zhong raises her eyebrows ever so slightly like she disapproves of the Carnival. But I LOVE the sound of it. When I listen to music, I feel like I've gone back in time to the place it was made; poetry's like spells that only work if you say them out loud; and dance is what MC^2 and Kwesi do when they're signing together. Kwesi's an Infinite too who speaks with his hands. I can't imagine Mrs Grayling dancing but I like her a bit more now I've seen her other side. Thinking about that helps me relax. Mrs Zhong continues her talk.

'Leaplings, there are plenty more important historical reasons to visit 1752. Many tourists wish to see their favourite museum artefacts when they were new. We get lots of donations.' She smiles.

'I work with a very specialised time-travel team to authenticate them. Every object has a story; we have to make sure the story is true. And check the objects haven't been stolen. Any questions?'

Several hands go up but I find myself on my feet. I didn't mean to stand up; it's just habit. Mrs C Eckler has been helping me break it. We always had to stand in primary school but we don't in secondary. I sit down, embarrassed. But Mrs Zhong smiles at me.

'You must be Elle. I've read your poem; it's unique. Please ask your question.'

'Do you get lots of stolen goods?'

'Rarely stolen. We get lots of 1752 artefacts that are of no use to us. A time-tourist might purchase a rag doll in 1752 for their child back home in the present but their child rejects it. They donate it to us. The problem is, the item's brand new. It hasn't aged 269 years, so we reject it too. Whereas if someone discovers or inherits an object passed down through generations, my experts check out its history.'

Big Ben is shuffling in his seat. I can tell he's desperate to ask another question. He raises his hand and I'm pleased Mrs Zhong chooses him again.

'Do people steal from the museum?'

'A very good question. Thefts are very rare. Rarer than Leaplings with The Gift! We've only ever had two burglaries, both from this gallery, many, many years ago.'

'What did they steal?' Jake, and he didn't put his hand up. Again!

'Sorry, we're not allowed to disclose the details to the general

public.' Mrs Zhong purses her lips like she's stopping the words coming out by mistake. As she says this, I'm aware someone just leapt into the corner of the room. She's tall and tanned with long black hair wound up on her head in an elaborate sculpture of the Eiffel Tower that reminds me of Season, our friend from 2048, but this woman is younger. She could be the same age as Mrs C Eckler, which is 37. Her mid-blue jeans and jacket are made of a shimmering fabric that hasn't been invented yet. I watch closely in case they change colour. She walks into the centre of the room like she owns it and holds out her hand to Mrs Zhong.

'Anno. And you must be Mrs Zhong. Sorry I'm early, something cropped up. I need to speak NOW so I can attend an important meeting.'

Mrs Zhong lowers her eyebrows for a split second. I don't blame her. It's only 9:17 and Anno has interrupted her introduction. Being early is as bad as being late. Then Mrs Zhong smiles with her mouth but not her eyes.

'Please welcome Mrs Anno, Director of Movement, co-founder of the Music, Maths and Movement School, who has come to talk about a recent acquisition in our 1752 collection.'

'Anno will suffice.' She taps her phone like she's timing her speech. 'Anno means year or in the year of in Latin. In addition to my other roles, I'm a sculptor who works with artefacts from leap years.'

I narrow my eyes at her as I start to feel panic surge up inside me. I find sudden changes in plan difficult, especially as my presentation is taking place straight afterwards, where I have to

read my poem out loud and take questions from the audience. Now I don't know exactly what time I'll have to stand up. Will it be in five minutes' time at 9:22, which is a messy, in-between number, or will Anno shorten her speech because she has to rush off to her meeting? I was already anxious about the reading but that was manageable. Now, my anxiety has gone into overdrive. Many more possibilities start buzzing round my head until I feel dizzy and overwhelmed.

Mrs C Eckler comes over to me and whispers, 'Do you need time-out?'

I shake my head. I need to remain in the room. If I leave, it will be even more stressful to enter again. I must try to get into the zone. The zone in athletics is when you don't feel like you're making any effort at all, and the world is completely shut out. It's wonderful! I breathe slowly and focus on the first line of my poem:

Is infinity ingrained in 11 missing days?

But at the same time, I can hear Anno begin her talk and I jump when I hear 'Infinity-Glass'. Mrs Zhong has placed a large hourglass on a small centre table to the right of Anno. I do what-big-eyes; on the museum website there was no photo, just an entry saying: 'Recently acquired, 1752 maritime sandglass with engraved infinity symbols, oak, black sand. To mark the 11 missing days.' That's what I based my poem on. I've always loved the symmetry of an hourglass and I was excited by the infinity symbols, but had no idea it would be so beautiful.

It's the same height as a relay baton and made of dark wood

that's very worn and blackened in places. The bases at each end and the three connecting columns are engraved with infinity signs: ∞ ∞ ∞! The sand inside the glass bulbs is black and grainy and looks like glitter, exactly how I imagined it. As Mrs Zhong turns the hourglass upside down, for a split second, I see the infinity symbol in the shape of the glass, too: ∞. Then it looks like a number 8 as the sand begins to pour through and I focus on Anno's voice.

'Imagine it's 1752. Time changes on your ship when you sail around the earth so you leave your traditional clock at home. Marine sandglasses tell the time on board a ship; accurate mechanical timepieces that can cope with the conditions at sea are yet to be invented.'

Excitement takes over from anxiety. I can't focus on all of Anno's talk but some words come through like '1752' and 'engravings' and 'maritime' which, like marine, means of the sea. I'm staring at the Infinity-Glass with a strong sense of déjà vu: the ∞ symbol is the sign of The Infinites. But I must try to focus on the here and now. Anno's voice has gone lower and slower; her speech will soon end:

'Leaplings, the Infinity-Glass has only recently been donated, anonymously, to this museum. History is a story we are continually rewriting.' She pauses for a split second. 'We don't yet know who made it; or who engraved the infinity signs. In this age of synthetic materials, we can admire this practical sculpture of wood and glass and sand. But we DO know this: the Infinity-Glass was made in 1752, before the 2nd of September. We Leaplings value 1752 artefacts above all others but this one's

extra special. It was purchased by Dr Johnson, the famous lexicographer, writer of dictionaries, and given as a present to his young black servant, Francis Barber. It's referred to in a letter Francis wrote years later as "the Glass you bestowed upon me prior to the 11-day leap". History adds value: celebrity multiplies it. The Infinity-Glass is priceless.'

The gallery is quiet like everyone's stopped breathing and all focus is on the Infinity-Glass. Anno nods her head as if taking a bow and I notice Mrs Zhong taking a photo of Anno with her elaborate Eiffel Tower hairstyle standing next to the Infinity-Glass. Mrs C Eckler begins to clap, which means we have to clap too.

Anno waits for it to go quiet again. Then she says, 'Every year, this museum runs a 1752 Poetry Prize. The winner for 2021 is Elle Ifiè from Intercalary International School. We are especially pleased to welcome Elle since she'll be participating in our Music, Maths and Movement Activity Day this Wednesday. Elle, please take the stage to read your poem.' Anno walks to the left-hand side of the room and waits for me to take her place.

I instantly feel sick with over-excitement as Big Ben starts filming on his Chronophone. I remember to take more slow, deep breaths to calm myself down. Somehow, my legs begin to walk to the front of the room.

But before I get there, something happens.

A figure, dressed head to toe in a black catsuit, appears out of thin air, grabs the Infinity-Glass, tilts their head to the right, and disappears. A split second later, an identical figure appears, stares at me, and disappears instantly!

It happens so quickly, I stop in my tracks, not sure what to do next. My heart is thumping in my chest like I just ran the 100 metres. Did I imagine it, or did the second figure look me straight in the eye before they disappeared? I couldn't SEE their eyes but I felt their gaze. I stared back. I feel sick. I don't know what to do. I'm tongue-tied. Not from anxiety, from surprise.

Some pupils are shouting, some have left their seats and museum assistants appear out of nowhere, trying to create some kind of order, but everything feels like it's happening behind a glass screen. I can only focus on what just happened.

Someone just stole the Infinity-Glass!

Someone else tried to stop them but they were too late. Or maybe they wanted to steal it for themselves and were too late because it had already been stolen.

Or the first person came back by mistake. Or deliberately. But why?

I don't know what just happened but I know one thing for sure: this is a job for The Infinites!