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PATIENCE AGBABI



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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

canongate.co.uk

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Chapter opener Infinity symbol © Shutterstock

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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 83885 579 6

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.



To the memory of my mum, Helen, for her mouth-watering vegan feasts, quotes from the King James Bible and passion for classical music.

Prose = words in their best order;
– Poetry = the *best* words in the best order.
– Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Unlike a great many painters who want to be musicians, musicians who want to be painters, and barristers who want to be journalists, I want to be nothing in the world except what I am – a musician.
– Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

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Chapter 01:00

THE GHOST TRAIN

Halloween 2022 is fun but Halloween 2050 will be fantastic. There's a not-to-be-missed event at E-College-E, with a funfair and disco billed the best of the century. I've been conjuring it in my head to such fine detail I've barely slept all week. I don't do fancy dress so I'm wearing my favourite off-white retro tracksuit with a cotton skinsuit underneath so it doesn't itch at all. Under the right lights it will glow in the dark. 2050, here I come.

It's Monday the 31st of October 2022, 7.30 p.m., and The Infinites are in Room 4D at my school. It's a perfect cube; the walls, floor and ceiling the same pale cream. I'm a chameleon, blending in with the decor. We just finished youth club, run by Mrs C Eckler, where we watched a black-and-white film about time-travel made by a Leapling film-maker. When I first joined the school they used the room exclusively for leaping, but they changed the rules at the beginning of my Tenth Year to allow us to use it for extracurricular activities too. Room 4D is named

after the fourth dimension, space–time. The first three dimensions are height, breadth and depth.

The Infinites are standing in a Chrono, a circle for leaping, in order of rank: MC^2, GMT, me, Big Ben and Portia. We're meeting Kwesi and Ama in 2050, the year they're based. Portia and Ama had their Infinite ceremonies last month so now we're seven strong.

'Does anyone have a spare leap band?' I say. 'I left— Oh, my phone!'

It's the deep buzztone that means another Chronophone is calling, not a regular mobile. I grab my silver Chronophone from my bag in time to see the name GRANDMA. She must be calling from work. I press the green button and her face fills the screen, all big-eyes and blue-green zigzag headtie.

'Elle, it is me, Grandma. Enjoy the party. Have a dance for me-o!'

I smile. Grandma has trouble walking, let alone dancing, but she still likes to have a go.

'Thank you, Grandma. Have you taken your tablets?'

She gives me a twisted smile which means no. Grandma has to take tablets for high blood pressure but she often 'forgets' to take them.

'Don't turn into a toad,' she says, which means be back by midnight.

'Grandma, I'll be back by 10.'

I mean it. Some days I don't like leaving Grandma alone for too long. She's become a bit confused about conversations she thinks we've had. I'm worried her memory's playing tricks on her.

'Greet that your friend, GT.'

Grandma has a soft spot for GMT because she's vegetarian, but always says her name wrong.

'I will, Grandma. She's here, right next to me. She can see and hear you!'

GMT leans over. 'Greetings, Mrs Ifiè.'

'Know thine enemy to defeat him. Godspeed!'

I say, 'Yes, Grandma!'

and GMT says, 'We sure will,'

at exactly the same time.

As soon as she's gone, MC^2 frowns at me.

'What's your gran on about? An' since when did she keep a Chronophone?'

'Nothing, really. Typical Grandma. She's always quoting stuff from the Bible about good conquering evil.' I pause. 'When I promised to get her a Chronophone so we could stay in touch when I'm on a mission, it turned out she's had one for years. She'd been hiding it in her room.'

'What colour?'

'Gold.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Respect to Grandma. The gold came out in 2050; most reliable for a century. Your gran's a dark horse, Elle.'

Big Ben's frowning now. 'What's that mean?'

'Means,' says MC^2, 'she got talents she's keeping under wraps. Like us Leaps. Time to fast-forward.'

We hold hands. Big Ben is on my left; GMT on my right. I squeeze their hands and they squeeze mine back. We close our

eyes, concentrate on the Fantastic Forest, E-College-E, the 31st of October 2050, 8 p.m. My fingers, toes, whole body fizz with energy as tiny white numbers begin to spin in the black vortex. I try to focus only on 2050 to stop myself feeling so nauseous. Grandma's call distracted me from borrowing a leap band to prevent it. Finally, the numbers slow down and stop.

I feel the mild, still air on my cheeks, smell pine and smoke, hear the rhythmic bass, howls and growls of beast beats in the background before I open my eyes. It's dark. The sky is dotted with what look like fluorescent giant bees but are actually people arriving via eco-jet. We're at the edge of the forest and ahead of us is a large field full of light and life, spiky marquees and bright white rides spinning so fast, they're almost invisible: the futuristic funfair. I can't wait!

∞

'Everything's powered by sun, wind or rain,' says Martin Aston aka Aston Martin, Big Ben's Annual friend who attends E-College-E and arranged tickets for us all. His wild straggly dark brown hair looks like it's been powered by sun, wind and rain too. I haven't seen him since our school trip to 2048 and he's grown 6 inches since. He's still not as tall as Big Ben, though, who's already managed to find the only meat stall in the whole field and has his mouth full of triple-decker burger. I don't have the heart to tell him it's not real meat. In the future, meat substitutes are so good you can't tell the difference. That's what our friend Season said and she's a supertaster cook, which means she has extra-sensitive tastebuds.

Talking of which, rumour has it Season's running a food stall here. Before leaving the house I made Grandma rice and fish stew which made my mouth water, but I wanted to save my appetite for Season's delicious vegan snacks. Her specialities are bread and coconut cake. She's autistic like me and Big Ben and loves cooking and eco-supercars.

'Fancy some food, sis?' says a familiar voice from behind me.

'Ama!'

She must have heard my stomach rumbling at the thought of food. My light-skinned, ginger afro'd friend comes into view, gives me a gap-toothed smile and the perfect bearhug. I find hugging difficult unless it's a firm squeeze. I smile back and bump fists with Kwesi standing next to her, a whole head taller but his ginger afro half the length of Ama's, his skin a tone darker. The family likeness is strong. It's great seeing all seven Infinites together. Of course, Aston Martin doesn't know we're a secret time-travelling crime-fighting group, but he DOES know all of us are Leaplings with The Gift of time-travel, except Ama, who's an Annual.

Then I notice a light-skinned black teen standing next to Kwesi, with an untidy afro, wearing a black hoodie and jeans that look too big to be making a fashion statement. If it weren't for his black hair, he could pass for Kwesi, a similar age (18), and build (athletic), but unlike Kwesi he looks at the ground all the time, avoiding our gaze. Ama sees me looking.

'Everyone. This is Samuel Coleridge-Taylor aka Coleridge, friend of Kwesi's from way back, staying at ours. Music maestro!'

Coleridge gives a small bow. I guess way back must mean another century rather than when they were young. Bowing is

retro. And he must have borrowed Kwesi's clothes. I realise I'm still staring at him because something's niggling me.

'Are you named after the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge but the other way round?'

'I am,' replies Coleridge. 'I like poetry and music equally.'

He stares at the ground and I smile; we have something special in common.

Ama clears her throat theatrically. 'Are we going to stand here all night, or get something to eat?'

'Definitely food,' I reply. 'Have you seen Season's stall?'

'Follow me.' She begins walking into the crowds of teens wearing glow-in-the-dark bleeding heart or skeleton hoodies, pumpkin or monster helmets.

'Slow down, Leaps,' MC^2 calls after us. 'The Squared an' Kwesi wanna soundcheck with Coleridge for the Beat Battle later.'

'Portia and I got business to attend to,' says GMT.

Big Ben nods. 'Me and Aston Martin are going on Cars on Mars.'

'OK,' says Ama, 'how about we all meet in front of the Ghost Train at 9? The disco doesn't start till 9.30.'

∞

'What are you two doing here?' I say.

It's Jake and Maria, our friends from school. They're a couple now, though it's a bit on-off. Ama and I are queuing in front of Season's stall, which has a large sign outside saying SandWitches and Scream Cakes. There's such a big line, and Season's been so busy she hasn't seen us yet, but we can see her. She's still wearing

her black and silver hair in a knot on top of her head but she's added glitter for the occasion. Her nose piercing sparkles a midnight blue. The smell of smoky vegan food mixed with fresh bread is making my stomach rumble so much it sounds louder to me than the new background track of wind and waves.

'We're vegan now, you know,' says Maria, swishing back her head like she used to when she had long hair.

'Really?' I say, remembering Jake smuggling meat into a meat-free zone on our school trip to 2048.

'Since just now,' he grins, 'when we saw Season's stall.'

Suddenly, the teens ahead of us speed off like they're late for something; now we're at the front of the queue.

'Why, it's Elle!' says Season. 'And Ama and Jake and Maria. Where's . . . Big Ben?'

Sometimes it takes time for Season to find the right words. She calls it meaningful pausing and says it's her age but it might also be because she's autistic and takes a bit longer to process things. Lots of us have challenges with verbal language.

'He's at Cars on Mars with Aston Martin,' I say.

'Of course. Car-mad like me!' Season smiles. 'What would you like?' She lowers her voice. 'It's on the house for my favourite Leaplings.'

'A Full Moon SandWitch with your special white bread and a coconut cake for me,' I say.

'A Dark Moon SandWitch for me,' says Ama.

'Umm . . .' says Jake, 'you choose. It all looks great!'

'Two Vampire Bites and two Scream Cakes,' says Maria. 'Bet you'll love the cake, Jake.'

Season has everything ready in lightning speed like she leapt back in time a little to keep on top of the orders. As she hands us our food, she nods at the next people in the queue and smiles at us.

'Come and see me later if you get a chance.'

'OK,' we say, in unison.

As we walk off, I bite into my Full Moon SandWitch. The crust is crispy, the bread is light and airy, the cheese is creamy-crumbly. As delicious as I expected.

∞

The four of us are standing in front of Cars on Mars. There's a huge rust-red orb in the middle which must be Mars, and high in the sky multicoloured cars flying like satellites around it so slowly it's like they're floating in space. Then suddenly there's a hooting sound and they accelerate to breakneck speed, moving like they're weaving in and out of air traffic then diving over massive invisible speed bumps. Just watching them makes me feel dizzy and sick. But worst of all, there appears to be nothing connecting the cars to Mars; no chains or arms to be seen!

Jake and Maria have already joined the long queue, still devouring their Scream Cakes.

'You'll be sick,' I say from the sidelines.

'Who cares?' Jake takes the last mouthful of cake and begins to chew. 'You only live once.'

'The Carousel would be better,' says Maria. 'It has more style.'

'It wouldn't. The Carousel's retro: Cars on Mars is the future.' He pauses. 'Look who just got off!'

Big Ben and Aston Martin come into view. They're walking a bit funny and Big Ben's hair is even spikier than usual but their eyes are shining with excitement and they're talking to no one in particular, slightly too loud.

'Absolutely brilliant!' says Big Ben.

'Magnets,' says Aston Martin, slightly out of breath.

'Magnets from Mars.' Big Ben smiles at his wordplay.

So that's what connects the cars to the central orb. I watch as the two of them rejoin the queue and bump fists with Jake and Maria. Then Big Ben notices me and Ama.

'Come on Elle, it's like leaping.'

'No way! It would be hell for me.'

Occasionally, in his enthusiasm to include me, Big Ben forgets about my sensory sensitivities. I'm hypersensitive but he's hypo-sensitive, the exact opposite. He seeks out spicy food like pepper soup and loud sudden noises like fireworks, which make him feel great. He especially loves dangerous, thrilling rides – the faster the better.

'Don't forget the Ghost Train at 9,' I say.

'Elle,' says Ama, 'Maria's right. Fancy a ride on the Carousel?'

We walk through the crowds further across the field, in the opposite direction of the food stalls until we reach the retro rides area. I look at the gleaming silver-white merry-go-round slowing down in front of us and gasp. It's awesome, grotesque but magnificent at the same time. Two layers of red-flecked animals, with stairs between the floors, the smaller circle of creatures upstairs

hidden in darkness. The lower-deck creatures are larger than life: a horse with a blood-red saddle; a goat with jagged curly horns; a grimacing monkey that reminds me of someone but I can't think who; a ferocious cockerel with rubies for eyes; a dog baring its silver teeth; a pig that looks like it just swallowed a small child whole. They're so lifelike, the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

I want to go on it; it would be fun and maybe as it's so retro it wouldn't go too fast and make me sick. But I still feel dizzy from watching Cars on Mars and on top of that, something else is stopping me. This circle of twisted animals reminds me of another circle, The Vicious Circle, Millennia's clock-inspired criminal gang.

'What's the verdict?' says Ama.

'Not now.' I pause. 'Can we do something with no spinning or bright lights? I'm a bit overloaded.'

'OK, sis. How about the Crystal Ball? We don't even have to queue.'

And without waiting for me to agree or disagree, Ama's striding towards the far end of the field until we find ourselves in a much more ambient space. You might think it's weird I'm checking out my future when I can leap to find out what it might be. But Ama made a good choice; it's just what I need at the moment, gentle lights and peace. The Crystal Ball is a large white dome tent with a massive mounted clear crystal in the middle that reminds me of a giant eyeball. All around the edge of the mount are seats, computer screens, controllers and what look like headphones. Ama drags me towards two free seats.

'Come on, sis! I want to see if I ever get to date MC^2.'

We both smile. Ama has liked MC^2 for years but now she's a fellow Infinite, she thinks it would spoil the group dynamic if they became a couple.

'How does it work?' I say, putting each pad onto my temples like Ama. They stick immediately and there's a gentle vibration that's quite pleasant but I have the strange feeling of someone listening to my innermost thoughts.

'Thought control, except the Ball's in charge, not you. They say it taps into your mind, like old-fashioned fortune tellers used to, and makes a prediction based on that. You get a printed card to take away. Since it's Halloween, most people get pumpkins, which they say means good luck but probably means you're having pumpkin pie for pudding.'

'So, if I think about running, it won't tell me what my PB will be next season?'

I've been trying to get my 100 metres time down to 12.52 seconds and have started training with the pentathletes to build up my strength. They do throwing and jumping as well as running.

'I doubt it will be accurate down to a hundredth of a second, Elle,' Ama grins to let me know she's joking – as if a machine could be THAT accurate – 'but it might tell you what you're running FROM. Ready?'

We both press the green START button on our controllers and I try to imagine it's the start of the 100-metre sprint, my hands behind the thick white line, my feet in the blocks. But instead, I find myself wondering whether Grandma has taken her tablets and, weirdly, remembering the grimacing monkey from the Carousel. I must be thinking hard because my mind

begins to fizz like I'm leaping and I have to concentrate hard on the here and now to STOP myself from doing so. It would be disastrous for someone to see me disappear into thin air. Very few people know about The Gift. It has to remain top secret.

Then, just as quickly, the fizzy feeling goes and I breathe a sigh of relief. Ama already has her printout, a cartoon-style black cat, and she rolls her eyes anticlockwise. But nothing comes out of my machine. Maybe it's broken. Then I hear a strange whirring sound and a card flies out, followed by another. What can that mean? I pick them up off the floor. One's a grinning skeleton in a top hat; the other's a spider spinning a web. The pictures don't frighten me as they're silly cartoons, but TWO cards; I wasn't expecting that.

'It doesn't mean Death,' says Ama, misjudging my face. 'Skeleton means the end of one thing, start of another.'

'Why did I get two?' I frown as I zip the two cards safely into my tracksuit trouser pocket. I don't like the spooky feeling that the machine knows something I don't. I feel as if everyone knows what's happened and is staring at us, but none of the teens at the screens are paying us any attention. Ama shrugs.

'It probably malfunctioned. Maybe you were thinking about the Beat Battle. You can't trust technology, even in 2050. Come on, let's find the boys.' She drags me out of the tent before I can respond.

∞

The Ghost Train is the most atmospheric attraction of all. Its black front is embossed with glowing white ghosts, and the ride

itself is a glossy-black real miniature steam train with roofed, enclosed carriages. We arrive dead on 9 o'clock. Big Ben and Aston Martin are already standing in front of it eating BLACK candy floss. It looks like my hair when I comb it out into an afro.

'It'll rot your teeth,' I say but they ignore me.

'The Portal was brilliant!' Big Ben's mouth is full of sugar. 'You wear a thought-control helmet and make your own world.'

'We twinned up,' says Aston Martin. 'Never seen so many Lambos in my life.'

'So you didn't spend the whole time on Cars on Mars.' I smile.

Big Ben nods. 'Last queue was 30 minutes long. The Portal had no queue so we went there instead.'

'Glad you had fun,' says Ama. 'Crystal Ball botched.'

'Hey guys.' It's GMT, slightly breathless. 'Portia's busy as a bee, she'll meet us in the discotheque. Seen any ghosts yet?'

'No such thing,' says Big Ben between bites.

'Just cos you never saw one.' GMT frowns. 'Ghosts don't have to be dead folks; living folks can haunt you too.'

'Zombies,' says Aston Martin, doing monster-eyes. 'The living dead.'

'Watch out,' says GMT. 'We Leaplings often come back after we're dead and buried!'

'How's that, then?'

'If we leaped into the future when we were alive, beyond the date we died.'

Aston Martin raises his eyebrows. I don't blame him. If you don't hang out with Leaplings often, you forget what we can do.

There's a rush of air, three outlines in the dark, then Kwesi,

MC² and Coleridge appear close beside us. GMT jumps and looks cross.

'Too lazy to trek across a field. Want the world to see you leap?'

'The trio was running late.' MC² shrugs.

We look across at the Ghost Train. It doesn't look like there are any other passengers for the ride. A short teen dressed as Dracula complete with death-white face, fangs, long dark cloak and black gloves stands on the platform.

'Leaving in one minute,' he says. 'Best ride outside London.'

Maybe it's the fangs distorting his voice that make me shudder. And something about his face reminds me of the monkey from earlier. He's putting me off riding the Ghost Train.

'Doesn't the disco start soon?' I say.

'In half an hour,' says MC². 'We got stacks of time. Come on, Leaps!'

'You all go, I'll wait here.'

I can feel the two cards in my tracksuit pocket. What do they mean? Maybe that's why I suddenly feel so anxious. The cards, the Carousel, Cars on Mars. It's all too much for my system. I need some quiet time alone.

'Scared?' says Aston Martin.

Big Ben shakes his head. 'Elle's not scared. She's brave!'

Big Ben always sticks up for me, I love that about him. But I AM scared, scared I'll go into shutdown and miss the Beat Battle and the disco. I'm extra sensitive and often pick up on things other people don't. No one else seems bothered. Big Ben continues.

'Elle, we should stay together. Safer on the Ghost Train than out here alone.'

'30 seconds,' says Dracula.

I make up my mind. I feel almost sick with fear but The Infinites should definitely stick together, look out for each other like we always do. I take a very deep breath and nod as we get into the ride. I sit down in a carriage with Big Ben beside me, Aston Martin and Ama opposite; MC^2, Kwesi, Coleridge and GMT are in the carriage behind us. The seats are comfy, luxurious red velvet, not what I expected at all. I thought they'd be black and peeling, with fake rats or something coming out of them. We hear a shrill whistle, the train judders forwards – we're off!

I've been on ghost trains before. Usually, the carriages are open so I feel cobwebs on my face and hear screams and see skeletons and witches trying to grab at me. They're not scary because they're all the same. But this is totally different. It's scary because I DON'T see, feel or hear those things. This is a real train and, for some reason, I sense real danger. My heart is pumping hard in my chest. I'm only afraid of the unknown, and this is a trip into the unknown.

I hold Big Ben's hand tight, like we're leaping. I close my eyes and take deep breaths to calm myself down. None of it works. My body begins to go fizzy and I freeze, scared for the second time tonight that I'm going to leap by mistake. And now behind my eyelids I see the numbers; dates going back in time, fuzzy white on black. Big Ben squeezes my hand even tighter. I open my mouth to tell Ama and Aston Martin what's happening but

no sound comes out. No one says anything but I hear one of them take a sharp breath in; I open my eyes in time to see their eyes widen in horror. They know what's happening, too, even though they're Annuals.

We're leaping back in time.

This is no ordinary ghost train. This is a trap and there's nothing we can do but sit here and wait for it to stop.

It stops.

I open my eyes.

It's still dark outside.

'Leaps,' shouts MC^2 from the carriage behind us. 'Out! Now!'

We fumble for the doors and spill out into the night. We're on the edge of the forest like before but there's no funfair in the field ahead. Just the cold night air. I look around at my friends to see that even Kwesi, the calmest of us all, looks shaken. We instinctively huddle together, waiting to see what happens next.

What happens turns my heart to ice.

'Welcome to 1880,' says the driver of the Ghost Train.

Fear and anger rise up in me. I should have trusted my instincts; I shouldn't have listened to Big Ben. Because now I know who the monkey reminded me of.

The Ghost Train driver has removed his fangs and put on a tall top hat but he looks more sinister than ever. His deathly white skin glows in the dark; he looks at us with his slate-grey eyes. Oh my Chrono! It can't be; it is. The evil teen, the malevolent Ancient, Millennia's right-hand man, number Eleven of The Vicious Circle: The Grandfather.