

Time & Tide

An original Yarn Fiction by Anj Medhurst

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The tide turned. In that moment, in that single breath, the thread pulling the waves looped back on itself, the swell momentarily suspended, inanimate. Captured, as oil on canvas, silver halide on paper. Then the moon blinked, the spell broke, and from that moment everything was different.

A technician raised the alarm at 07:00 PST. She'd let herself into the lab at this ungodly hour of the morning to catch up with the data entry backlog and found the pile of neatly folded clothes; keys; wallet; cell phone, next to the exit platform. Not sure quite what to make of it, she'd called her immediate supervisor, who had not been altogether pleased to hear from her two hours before he needed to be at his desk.

'It's a bit strange... just a pile of folded clothes next to the platform with a cell phone and key fob on top. What should I do?'

Phil Sorrows sighed wearily. 'Well, Andrea, I guess that will depend on who they belong to?'

'I don't know, do you think I should look in the wallet?' Andrea stepped closer to the pile. 'I mean, how did they get here? I locked up the lab yesterday evening. Who else has a key? Who else would be here overnight?'

'Just have a look in the wallet and once we know who it belongs to we can kick some butt. I mean, jeez, there are going to be repercussions if someone has been messing with that

platform out of office hours.’

Andrea briefly contemplated her supervisor’s cute notion of ‘office hours’ as she picked up the wallet and flipped it open. ‘There’s not much in it. A blank access card for the building. That’s odd, isn’t it? Why would it be blank, no photo or name? Hang on, there’s a driver’s license tucked away.’

‘Goddammit Andrea, whose clothes are they?’ Phil’s voice was terse now. He didn’t have time for this sort of nonsense, I mean he’d not even had a coffee yet for Christ’s sake.

‘Holy shit!’ Andrea’s voice had gone up an octave and a few decibels.

‘What? What now?’ Phil patience was ebbing away.

‘It’s *his* wallet! It’s Richard’s wallet.’ Andrea’s mind raced as the implications started to become apparent.

‘Richard, who? What are you talking about, Andrea?’ Phil wasn’t quite on the same wavelength at this point in the conversation but as Andrea spoke again, the penny dropped.

‘Richard Branson. It’s Richard Branson’s wallet.’

‘It was, I’m telling you. It was him, the Virgin bloke. Y’know, Branson, that millionaire beardy geezer.’ Diggs tipped his head back and poured cider from the can straight into the back of his throat, his cracked lips spared the acidic liquid and the keen edge of the can’s opening.

‘What have you got in that tin, eh? You’re off your face, mate. What would Branson be doing here, in this hole? Jesus man, you’re seeing things.’ Mal levered himself up from where they were sitting, on a slightly damp piece of cardboard, on the pavement, between the metal grill of the King’s Street pawn shop and the green BT cabinet. ‘If it *was* him you should’ve tapped him for a few quid. I’m off mate, need some scran. Sees you later, nutter.’

Mal set off towards Alma Road, slightly unsteady on his pin-thin legs, head down,

clutching his can. Diggs' head dropped forward between his bent knees then he grunted, looked up at his pal's receding outline and muttered, 'I don't think he had any cash on him.'

Richard was still rooted to the spot, exactly where Diggs had seen him some twenty minutes earlier. He felt slightly unsteady, a little nauseous, not sure he was in control of the limbs he could see were his own; and he was cold, very cold. It hadn't been at all like he'd imagined. There had been no bright light, no pixelating vision, no whooshing sound. He'd not felt himself come apart. It hadn't hurt at all.

He'd been slightly worried about it hurting. All the testers; the apples, ants, mice, rats, even the ones fitted with internal GPS trackers and tiny cameras, hadn't been able to tell them if it hurt. Certainly, the ones that hadn't made it in one piece couldn't relay what it felt like. He slowly looked around, recognising in that moment that he could move his head. As he took in his surroundings, he was aware that passers-by were giving him sideways glances. Not that there were many of them. The team had already established that the regeneration site was a quiet side street in Great Yarmouth.

The software engineers had been at a loss to explain why the settings kept reverting to this location, no matter how many patches and updates they implemented. It was a glitch, but a minor one at this stage of the development as far as the engineers were concerned. In other departments it was raising a few eyebrows; the PR team were certainly struggling to see how they could sell Great Yarmouth as the singular destination.

You see, it just isn't the sort of place that anyone wants to be. The pubs and pound shops are full of people desperate to leave; wishing on a star and a lotto ticket that they'll end up somewhere else. Nobody would choose to teleport into Great Yarmouth. Out of it, now that's a different story.

Back in the Nevada desert things were hotting up.

‘I just can’t believe he’d actually do it. I mean, for goodness sake, aside from the fact that the research is top secret, we’re not even through phase 3 testing. I mean anything could have happened to him. How do we even know where he is? *If* he is...’ Phil was struggling to comprehend the enormity of the situation. ‘I just can’t– I mean– WHAT THE HELL HAS HE DONE!’

Andrea had never witnessed Phil raise his voice before and she stepped back nervously, not least to avoid the flying spittle and flailing arms. ‘Well, Phil... if you don’t mind me... I think we’ve got a pretty good idea where he is. Maybe we should try to get in touch?’

‘How? How exactly are we supposed to “get in touch”? His phone is here, his wallet is here, his clothes are here, I’m pretty sure his chauffeur is still in bed and I doubt his house keeper has even noticed he isn’t there yet. He is completely incommunicado. Assuming, of course, that he’s actually still in one piece.’ Phil’s face was contorting into strange shapes as he repeatedly ran his hands through his hair.

‘Phil, try not to... look, we’re in one of the most technologically advanced facilities in the world, in the twenty-first century. We’re surrounded by communications devices, linked to satellites, blue-toothed up to our ears. And we know exactly where he was headed, it *must* be possible to make contact.’ Andrea prepared herself for Phil’s next incomprehensible outburst, proffering a clean white tissue in his direction, both by way of assistance and surrender.

As they stood looking at each other, a junior team member approached, somewhat cautiously. ‘We’ve got the phone number of the museum, should I call it?’

‘What museum, what are you talking about?’ Phil is close to some kind of seizure now.

‘You know, the coordinates, the site is outside a local history museum, called ‘Time & Tide’. If he has arrived anywhere, that’s where he’ll be, or at least has been, at some point. Shall I call the museum?’

‘Give me that phone. NOW!’ Phil hit the dial button and paced with the handset to his right ear, his left hand still raking through his hair, now in a state of complete disarray. ‘It’s a goddamn answer machine. Not open on a Tuesday, staffed by volunteers, donations to... leave a message...’ Phil’s emotions finally got the better of him and he launched the handset across the room screeching, ‘WHO THE GODDAMM HELL CLOSES ON A TUESDAY?’

The phone, having narrowly missed a lab technician’s head, skidded across the floor and came to rest at the feet of a man in a dark suit, also holding a phone to his ear. Mike Bennifer looked up startled and lowered the phone. ‘Everything OK in here folks? I can’t seem to get hold of Richard this morning and we were supposed to be meeting early, before the stakeholders come in at 11. Have you seen him?’

The room fell silent as the occupants looked anywhere but at the COO of Virgin Zap.

‘I think maybe you should come with me?’ Sue leaned closer to the shivering man, gesturing with her arm towards his shoulder in a vain attempt to shield him from the gawping bystanders, but being careful not to touch him. The crowd was growing and a particularly vociferous, scruffy, young man, waving a can of cheap cider, was being quite rude.

‘Come this way, just over here. Let’s get you inside and warmed up, shall we?’

Sue led Richard across the road and through the museum door. ‘You don’t want to be hanging around out there in this state, things could get a bit nasty, you know? You’re lucky, I shouldn’t be here today but I’ve got some fund-raising material to mail out and it’s easier when we’re closed. Here, have a sit down while I pop the kettle on and see what I can find for you to wear.’

Sue walked across the room towards a door marked ‘staff only’ as Richard sat gingerly down on the bench seat. Things were still quite fuzzy but he was starting to comprehend what he’d achieved. The temptation had just been too great. Every time he’d watched a tester disappear from the exit platform he’d felt irresistibly drawn to it. The rest of the world might be obsessed with the commercial space travel programme but for him it had always been about this. Teleportation was the technology that was going to revolutionise the planet, change the way humans lived; and that night, alone in the lab, he’d been unable to resist. Gone for it, in true ‘Richard’ style; Carpe Diem.

As he sat waiting, he looked at the artefacts and interactive displays around him; the depictions of Victorian seaside splendour, the fishing heritage, the landscape. He could feel this place, these people, he knew why he was here.

Sue came back into the room carrying a cup of tea, clothes draped over her arm. ‘Here we go, love. Get these on and drink this. Then we can have a little chat.’

Half an hour later, Richard found himself standing outside the museum entrance, wearing janitor’s trousers and an ‘I Heart Great Yarmouth’ t-shirt. Around him, a small group of local journalists proffered their microphones and a growing number of bystanders held up smart phones, recording the strange scene. The inevitable convoy of satellite OB vans, carrying coiffured TV reporters, was still battling its way up the A12 from London.

‘So, Mr. Branson... Richard, what was it that made you choose Great Yarmouth as the launch destination for err, what was it, Virgin Zap, did you say?’ asked an Eastern Daily Press freelancer, while her colleague busied herself taking photos.

Richard cleared his throat, still slightly out of kilter and finding himself struck by unfamiliar nerves. ‘Well, we’ve been thinking long and hard about how to share our dream, our vision, with the world.’ As he spoke, Richard warmed to his audience. ‘And frankly,

where better to start our global regeneration programme than here, a place with a rich history and infinite potential.’ Richard could feel that he was getting back on track, the fog was lifting, the vision was clear now. This was the way forward. ‘From this day on, this town will be the centre of the universe. Everyone will want to come to Great Yarmouth.’

Back in the lab, the phones were ringing off the hook as the team stood glued to the TV newsfeed, eyes wide, hands over mouths.

‘What, exactly, am I supposed to tell the stakeholders?’ Mike shook his head in disbelief.

Andrea beamed, wide-eyed. ‘Tell them, tell them the tide has turned, tell them the moon blinked, tell them... tell them everything is different.’

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