



TIME BROUGHT TO TOWN IN A BIG BROWN BAG Richard Bird

It was Harry who brought back Time. For an indeterminate period, the town had been frozen in a state of near suspension — had slowed to a deathly crawl — until Harry limped, pale and shivering, into the marketplace, his brown bag betraying the discernible shapes of a body. Everything began to move forward again after that. Life raced on in speedy new gears whilst old moments receded like figures retreating over the horizon.

No one asked Time why he left. No one accused him of desertion. No one said a word to him, in fact, but instead just left him to get on with business, thanking Harry, with varying degrees of sincerity, for delivering him to his rightful place.

Exhausted and forlorn, Time had been hiding in a library somewhere in the remote north, Harry said; hiding on one of the uppermost shelves like a forbidden first edition. Harry climbed up the old oak ladder, peered over the shelf, and looked directly at him.

He was curled and asleep. Dust had gathered on his cheeks like chapped makeup, whilst his wiry hair — parted in the centre — hung by his eyes like tatty old theatre curtains. Harry moved closer. Although it was difficult to see in the decrepit light, Time seemed impossibly still. A thick, stagnant smell clung to the air around him like an invisible mist, and Harry thought for a moment that he might even be playing dead: waiting, malevolently, for an opportunity to shove him off the ladder and send him hurling down to the hard stone floor. Mindful of his famed eccentricity, but conscious too of his frailty, Harry reached for him as one might extend towards a lifeless animal on a dark roadside: carefully, and with a fearful suspicion that it might spring violently back to life.

After a few measured pulls and tugs, Harry finally hauled the sleeping creature off the shelf and into his bag. Immediately, he felt his own body buckle under the weight of age.

Decades struck with unexpected force, nearly sweeping his feet away. His back seemed to hunch behind him like a saddle. His eyes shrank in their sockets like sucked pastilles, and he could hardly climb down the stairs, so suddenly brittle were his bones.

Two musty librarians, previously camouflaged by the ancient shelves, heard his pleading whispers in the adjacent aisle. It took both of them to relieve Harry of the man-sized bag and help him down the steps.

‘He looks like Death,’ one of them said as they watched Harry stumble out the door, towing the bag with Time inside behind him. ‘I hope he makes it home.’

For a warped, unknowable duration, Harry had been impervious to the process of ageing: without Time to open the door, Age had been locked outside, her knuckles bruised with knocking, her face flushed and peaky, tears stuck to her icy cheeks.

It had been the same all over town. With Time gone, nothing happened any more. Nothing at all. No one did anything. Moments were interminable, stretching out like deep fogs across town. There was movement, but no real motion. Everything was heavy and dulled, without purpose or intent. Everything was process.

For most of the townsfolk, it had been a monumental inconvenience. Mottled teenagers cursed the disappearance of that developer of men, tearing at their pimpled faces with their fingernails, trying in vain to claw their way out of adolescence. Mothers clutched new-borns with paralysed terror as their first wails rang out ceaselessly. No child could grow up, no youth could mature, and no hopeless elder could pass serenely into the night. How dreadful it was to know that, in this hell of leaden progression, tomorrow might never come.

Understandably, most of us were elated when Harry turned up, his face cracked and wrinkled and his joints creaking painfully as he dragged the momentous bag to the bottom of the town hall steps. We all presumed that, with Time restored, things would quickly get back to normal, and so, as news of his return gradually spread, we all gathered in the square, waiting for the breakthrough.

Inside the huge brown bag, however, the creature remained quite motionless and inactive. Even when Harry gingerly untied the string, heaved out his body, and propped his back up against the steps, Time just hunched in silence, watching everyone watch him, absorbing each awed expression, occasionally responding with a blank and disinterested yawn.

Then, after more agonous waiting, sections of the crowd suddenly started convulsing wildly, shouting and falling about the cobbles. As if Time had flicked a switch, dramatic transformations began to occur all over the square. It soon became clear that, in spite of his apparent

languor, Time had returned to work with purpose and relish, and was making up for his prolonged absence by hurtling everyone through the abrasive tunnels of age in quick succession. Within seconds, infants morphed into mature men, as swaddling clothes exploded from them like pale balloons, leaving them indecently exposed. Teenagers blinked and became miserable veterans, bypassing middle age — denied the chance to father their own families. Even beautiful young girls, hitherto caught in some eternal moment of flirtation with nameless beaus, burst into malodorous grimalkins on the brink of expiry.

After a hectic half hour in which fifty years were distilled into thirty minutes, Time picked himself up from the cobblestones, strode across the marketplace, headed down a side alley — the screams of misery and delight echoing all around — and entered his old shop, closing the door quickly and firmly behind him.

Those residents who had cause to celebrate his return — those upon whom he had bestowed new wisdom, new maturity, or new beauty — huddled in the tavern later that night. There had been no such evening for what seemed like a lifetime. For many, it was the first time they were officially old enough to drink.

During the whole period of Time's absence, the liquor had remained untouched, though it continued to wizen and ferment. Naturally, everyone went slightly crazy with the spirits, and Harry was the toast of the tables. Everyone raised their glasses to the old man. Everyone bought him a drink. He even emptied his own pockets, spending the reward the young mayor — now in his eighties — had earlier conferred upon him for successfully recapturing his most important resident.

Drunk, newly-ancient, and infinitely tired, Harry staggered out of the tavern in the early hours of the morning to a stumbling ovation.

On his way home, he paused outside Time's recently reopened shop and gazed in through the window. Even at that late hour, the strange creature was hard at work, scribbling furiously onto yellow parchment, ripping up certain sheets whilst filing others. Swaying gently back and forth, Harry thought to himself what a good job he had done in bringing Time back, before lumbering home and falling into bed.

The moon seemed smaller that night, as if it too had been eroded by the sudden acceleration. Before it were to disappear completely, however, giving way to the rise of an even smaller sun, and with Time still hard at work, Harry would slip out of a rather wonderful dream and spin headlong into oblivion, dying of extreme old age.

No one knew exactly how old he had become. Some of the townsfolk claimed that a reliable approximation could be made by counting the wrinkles on his forehead as one might count the circles of a tree trunk. Others maintained that it was only possible to obtain an exact enumeration from the lines on his hand.

Whatever the truth of it, and in spite of our obvious dismay at his passing, most of us agreed that Harry definitely had it coming.

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