

The Time Portal **Pete Stelling**

The early morning sun streamed through the bedroom curtains. It is early April, migrant birds are arriving, other creatures are abundant. Looking at the time I decided to rise and take advantage of this beautiful day and go for a walk, thinking, 'Yes, let me join the throng and enjoy the day.' The weather is still a little cool so I keep my warm pullover on, pack a couple of apples into my backpack, check my activity tracker on the wrist, smartphone... I'm ready.

My cottage is at the edge of the village in a row of three dating from the 1600s, covered in wisteria that is about to bloom. The lady from the village will arrive about 8.30am and cook me a breakfast, and clean for me. I'm fortunate to have means to pay her.

I set off on the four mile walk that will take me through the village, past the river, on to the 'Centurion Way', where the path reaches the junction with another that will take me over the hill; and I will return the opposite way to my cottage. I follow the river path and on to the Way proper. The electric blue of the kingfisher catches my eye as it flies upstream, truly resplendent. The cacophony of birdsong at this time of day is to be seen and heard, a truly wonderful experience. Checking my fitness tracker I find I'm making good progress. I see a heron perched by a dew pond, still and patient, waiting for his breakfast to appear.

Looking ahead I espy a fellow walker. His dress is strange, a smock of sorts; odd trousers, too. He is some distance ahead. I increase my pace to try and catch up. A bend in the path obscures my sight. Rounding the bend I see no trace of this strange walker; up ahead, the path divides at a ninety degree angle, and he has not gone straight on. Reaching the junction of paths I take the right fork to follow him. But ahead, there's nothing in sight.

There is a small derelict building to the left of the path so I assume my fellow-walker has entered for a bathroom break. I shout "Hey there" to the empty building but receive no response. Curious.

I continue my walk and return home, four miles completed, with Mrs Biggins my housekeeper cooking bacon and eggs, unaware I was out. She was about to knock at my bedroom door to rouse me.

"Thank you, Mrs Biggins, I will breakfast in the kitchen then take my shower and change."

"Very good, Mr Fitzgerald. Upstairs can wait until you're dressed for the day, she adds. "I will clean the lounge first."

I am still intrigued about my fellow-walker and vow to repeat the early walk tomorrow. So the following day I rise with the sun and cook my own breakfast (Mrs Biggins comes on alternate days). Same walk, same paths, checking my smartphone and tracker, backpack with banana, fruit yoghurt and a ham sandwich.

Sure enough, as I step on to the river path and enter the 'Centurion Way', I see the walker. Determined to catch him today I up my pace a gear. However, he still reaches the fork in the path before I do and he has not gone ahead. I run to the fork and discover that he is not on that path either, so the derelict building is now my focus. I enter. I see it was once a cattle shed with stalls. A quick shimmer in the last stall catches my peripheral vision.

"Ah, there you are," I say, but nothing appears or speaks to me.

The corner of the last stall is very dark. I pick up a small pebble and throw it. Just another small shimmer. By now my curiosity is really roused and I approach the darkness. Thrusting my arm forward I meet no resistance at the rear wall. My arm disappears into a void.

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I follow and find myself in a much warmer place. It is not early morning; it is twilight. There is a path through lush verdant vegetation. Up ahead, I make out the stranger descending into a village. Oil lights flicker in the evening gloom. Being a little wary I do not follow too closely, preparing to observe before showing myself.

Then I decide to look at my tracker: big fat zeros. I check the phone: no signal, no time. I become concerned. I conclude I should go back home and prepare for a second visit. I make my way back to the portal where I entered. Finding the slightest shimmer beside a big tree I enter and find myself back in the cattle stall. It's a fair way home so I reflect on what I should pack tomorrow to enhance my trip through this portal. Should I write a note for Mrs Biggins in case I get delayed?

As I turn the corner to my cottage, my neighbour Silas is digging his garden. He is picking potatoes. In April? My door is locked, so I have to root around for the key. Then I notice flowers. They were not blooming when I left.

Opening the door, I see the note from Mrs Biggins, with a stack of mail. She quit in May. The house is dusty and the fridge is empty. I guess Mrs Biggins has thrown the food away. My phone battery is dead and the tracker needs charging. The mush of rotten banana in my backpack has to be consigned to the rubbish bin.

A knock at the door brings me back from my thoughts. Silas from next door has brought me some potatoes.

"You've been gone a while," he says.

"Yes," I answer, "just needed a break."

"Five months is a good break. Where did you go?" he enquires.

"A place just far enough away, somewhere I've never been before."

This seems to satisfy him as he wanders off mumbling, "Nowt so queer as folk."

Needing to replenish my larder and backpack and pay some outstanding bills, I journey to the shops. Then I plan my journey for tomorrow.

I decide to go in the evening; it will be morning when I go through the portal. I pack a compass, a knife, a torch, some matches, clothes, some tinned food and dried food. I'm going to leave a note as well. I also leave a note of apology for Mrs Biggins, having paid her via the bank for the five months I have apparently been away, and asked her to return as my housekeeper until I return; the bank will pay her wage weekly.

It is mid-September now so I leave at four-fifteen to commence my walk. It's a pleasant evening. Passing some fellow-walkers I round the bend to where the path forks and enter the barn. I hear children approaching so I quickly enter the portal and find myself in a different season again. There is a chill in the air. I'm glad I packed warm clothing in my backpack

The day has apparently just begun: activity in the village area is minimal, just a few chimneys with wisps of smoke, no sign of any inhabitants. I find a good vantage point under cover of some bushes, from which I can observe the comings and goings as they happen.

I take stock of my surroundings more thoroughly this time. To my right is a mirror-calm lake, and poking out above the tall fir trees there are castle ramparts. There are tall snow-capped peaks and a valley running away to the left. Could this be utopia?

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The first sign of activity I see is the fellow I'd followed on the first visit. I recognise his smock-like garb and straw hat. I cannot help but wonder: will he pass through the portal later? Then the villagers start to appear and go about their daily business. I can hear conversations, but not in a language I comprehend. It may be a dialect.

I decide to eat whilst I wait for the village to become a little more active. Feeling better with a good meal inside me I notice the villagers are now placing bundles of wood around a post in the square. Then the fellow I recognise is leading a woman whose hands are bound from his house to the square, and all the villagers are gathering, The woman is vocal, cursing the gathered crowd in a language I understand. It's not ladylike.

I must find a way to effect her rescue. It does not take rocket science to know that they are going to burn her at the stake. I rummage in the backpack for the smartphone's battery charger, plug it in to what I know is a dead phone, and wait. It is charging. The sun is well up now and warming the air. I need to buy thirty minutes of time for my phone to work reasonably.

Then I see my opportunity: a lone rider on a horse is approaching the village from the path I descended from the portal. He is dressed in black clothes with a tricorne hat. I show myself and say "Hi." Taken aback, he stops his horse with a "Whoa", then speaks in a dialect I cannot understand.

"I'm not from around here," I say. I point to myself and say, "John", take the torch from my backpack and switch it on. It works. The rider's face is awestruck. I hand the torch to him, demonstrating the on/off procedure. He's impressed. I then show him the smartphone. He is gobsmacked.

With this, and a stick in the dirt path, I negotiate to borrow his horse and instruct him to remain concealed while I do my Knight in Shining Armour rescue. The horse is spirited, but it has a descent temperament. I ride down the path and into the village.

Proceedings here are hotting up. Literally. Smock-fellow has a torch lit. The bound lady emits more curses. Riding close to Smock-fellow, I whip away his torch and throw it into the nearest house. Being of combustible material it soon starts to blaze. This causes a temporary diversion, so I can get near to the bonfire, where the lady is now silent, looking agog. I have my penknife out, dismount holding the reins in one hand, and deftly slash the cloths binding her wrists and legs.

"Get on. Don't talk just do."

She complies. I remount and we leave. The villagers now want to chase us. Reaching the bushes with the mob some way behind, I hand over the horse to the rider and give him my backpack, indicating it is his. I notice he has two pistols. A highwayman? He gets the gist of my gyrating gestures and fires off a shot. This stops the crowd.

"Adieu," I call to him, taking the lady's hand and running towards the portal. Out of breath, we have no time to speak as I push her through and join her on the other side.

"Right," I ask, "what's your name? I'm Michael."

"Gloria," she replies. "I got lost going through the portal. The villagers thought my makeup compact belonged to a witch."

"Let's get to my house and we'll sort things out from there."

The season is apparently the same as it was when I left. It is also daytime, I estimate about mid afternoon. Along the path we indulge in small-talk until we reach the lane where my cottage is.

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Or I should say 'was'.

There is a brand new housing estate in its place.