

The Teller of Time

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Analog

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Most scientific experiments "fail" — but there's more than one measure of success.

Look to!" bell one's handler called out into the silence of the ringing chamber. "Treble's going."

Dr. Kip Wolverton, his hands on the sally of bell eight's rope, glanced at the other ringers. They stood in a ten-foot-diameter circle, hands on the ropes that hung down from the belfry through holes in the chamber's ceiling. With faces alert, expressions eager and expectant, their eyes were fixed on old Caruthers, the tower captain.

"Treble's gone."

The captain gave a nod and the ringers began in sequence to pull their ropes.

Bell one sounded first. At a mere 500 pounds, this bell, the treble, led the rest of the bells in playing a descending scale. Every two seconds, eight bells rippled down the scale, over and over, pouring a torrent of sound out into the English countryside. Each repetition of the scale ended with a strike from the huge tenor, Great Peter. This was Kip's bell, the lowest-pitched of the ring of eight.

The tower trembled under the motion of the bells in the belfry above. Though Kip couldn't see it, he knew his bell: 22 hundredweight, 52-inch diameter with the inscription *Vigilate et orate*, watch and pray, engraved on its rim.

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But these rounds were just a warm up. The captain gave the signal and the band of ringers began a quarter peal of Stedman Triples, permutations of the ringing order of the first seven bells, with Kip's tenor following each row of changes.

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Like clockwork, they worked their ropes, their faces rapt in concentration. But Kip didn't need to concentrate; his bell, Great Peter, wasn't involved in the permutations so, even through the roaring of the bells, he was able to think and to observe. *Vigilate et orate*.

He hadn't rung a bell in twenty-five years, and he wouldn't be ringing now if one of the band hadn't been sick. Kip looked up the length of his rope and thought of Malvyn, his boyhood best friend. Twenty-five years ago, Kip had seen a trickle of red snaking down from the rope hole, striping the yellow hemp and changing the light blue sally to glistening crimson. Malvyn had been hiding out in the belfry. The bells were set for ringing and something, an accidental kick perhaps, had set the bell in motion. The ton of iron swung down and...

Kip blinked his eyes, trying to blot out the event, trying to expunge the image of the bell's inscription embossed in reverse on Malvyn's crushed flesh. Even through the harmony of a ring of eight in full voice, he remembered the teller with clapper muffled, tolling fifteen strikes, Malvyn's age, at the funeral. For the first and only time, the teller was not Great Peter but the next heaviest bell in the ring.

Poor Malvyn. They'd been a unit: he, Malvyn, and Neville. The Three Musketeers out to conquer the world. One for all and all for one. Kip smiled, sadly. Malvyn had been almost a year older than he, and Neville half a year older than Malvyn. Young, opinionated innocents, we were. More like the Three Blind Mice.

Cocooned in the blanket of sound, Kip reminisced. Malvyn the moderator. With Malvyn gone, the age difference was too large. Kip and Neville had drifted apart—this despite both going on to get doctorates in theoretical physics at the same university.

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Kip looked across the ringing chamber at Audrey. He couldn't help but admire how she handled her bell: grace, efficiency, elegance, beauty—although no longer ravishing beauty; she'd put on some weight in the last quarter century. He used to think of her as his girl back then. In fact, she'd been the reason he'd taken up tower ringing. But he'd been too shy to ever ask her out. That was when he was fourteen. Kip smiled. As he'd done frequently so long ago, he gazed at "his girl" handling a bell, although now perhaps he watched with less lust.

Kip decided that at the end of the peal, he'd make amends for his decades of shyness—meaningless now as the damage had long been done. When he was off on a postdoc in America, the country of his parents' birth, he got the letter saying that she'd married Neville. And Kip, possibly from regret, had chosen to remain single for life.

Now, a full professor of physics at Syracuse University in the States, he was back in England on a grant to do an experiment on the very edge of physics: an experiment that needed bells—three towers of bells. It was too bad Neville thought it was nonsense. It would have been great if two of the Three Musketeers could still conquer the world together—at least the world of physics.

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In the thunder of the bells both heard and felt, Kip turned his mind to the experiment. If it worked, it would relate the structure of time to processes in the human mind. What more appropriate place to run it than among a ring of bells sounding in a church tower?

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About forty-five minutes after it had started, the quarter peal ended with a touch of rounds.

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Old Caruthers motioned that the bells be rung down—ever since Malvyn's death, the bells were not set upside-down between ringings. The full-throated striking grew soft as the bells came to their positions favored by gravity, and finally went silent.

Flushed from the exertion, Kip coiled his bell rope and, when his breathing had slowed to normal, walked over to Audrey. He took a couple of quick swallows to clear his ears, trying to silence the phantom bells he'd always heard after a long session of tower ringing. "Can I perhaps interest you in a milkshake?" he said, his voice sounding hollow and empty in the tower.

As she hung up her rope, Audrey laughed. "No. Not a milkshake. But a cup of tea would be nice."

"How 'bout at Beowulfie's?"

"Wonderful."

Kip followed Audrey down the narrow, circular staircase from the ringing chamber to the chapel, and then outside for the five-minute walk to the coffeehouse. Although it was warm for early November, yellow and gold leaves swirled on the sidewalk and many inhabitants of the old university town were already enshrouded in scarves displaying their college colors.

"I still hear bells," said Audrey as they walked along.

"Not phantom bells, I think," said Kip, looking off into the distance. "Tower West is also rehearsing the experiment today."

Audrey laughed. "Tower West? Still fighting religion, are you?"

Kip answered seriously, even though he knew he was being teased. "Not at all. I have three towers to coordinate. It's much less confusing to call them Tower North, East, and West instead of the Church of the holy whatever, or Saint what's-his-face."

"Dearest Kip," she said, patting him on the arm. "Don't ever change." She glanced sideways and examined him like a specimen. "Actually, you haven't changed. Not really."

Kip returned the glance. "Neither have you," he said, hoping she couldn't tell he was giving a ritual answer in lieu of the truth. She wasn't the bright young thing he'd cherished in his memory.

University towns being what they were, everyone knew everything about everyone else and Kip had heard the talk: Audrey's marriage lacked passion. Neville's first, and apparently only, love was theoretical physics. It showed clearly on Audrey's face.

At Beowulfie's, they found a table near the window and ordered tea.

"You know," said Kip, his hands enveloping a hot fragrant cup of Lapsang Suchong, "when we were teenagers, I always thought of you as my girl."

Audrey looked down at her cup of Darjeeling. "Things might have been very different had you thought to tell me that at the time." She looked up, meeting Kip's eyes. "Your girl? You always took me for granted, never asked me out, never even really talked to me."

Kip averted his eyes. "I can't tell you," he said, "how many times I'd fantasized about asking you to go to a movie with me. But I never could bring myself..." He covered his awkwardness by stirring his tea, even though he drank it black. "I was almost clinically shy," he said softly, as if to himself.

"I'm very glad you're back with us now," she said, cheerfully, clearly trying to redirect his mood. "So tell me. What is this experiment of yours about?"

"You don't know?"

"No. Neville thinks it's..." She bit her lower lip.

"Absolute nonsense," Kip supplied. "Yes. He's expressed his views to me as well. As far as belfries are concerned, he rather thinks I have bats in mine."

"In any case"—Audrey took a sip of her tea—"he's refused to tell me anything about it."

"Well, I'll tell you." Kip gave a mirthless smile. "You'll likely think it nonsense also. And indeed it might well be."

Kip picked up the saltshaker. "First the how, and then the why." Plopping it down at the center of the table, he said, "This is our tower, Tower North." He picked up the peppershaker and then snagged another from an adjacent table.

He set both shakers down, making them into vertices of an equilateral triangle. "And these are Tower West and Tower East."

"Holy whatever and Saint what's-his-face," said Audrey.

"Precisely. And these are not just any towers. All three have a ring of eight bells tuned in D." Kip placed a forefinger at the center of the imaginary triangle. "And Tuesday, I'll be here—in radio contact with the three tower captains." He glanced at Audrey. "You know this much, yes?"

Audrey nodded. "We'll all be ringing a peal of Stedman Triples."

"A synchronized peal," said Kip. "I'll be giving instructions to the individual captains to speed up or slow down—to keep them together."

"I don't think Old Caruthers likes the idea."

"Oh?"

"Even though no one's ever done a multi-tower ring and it will certainly be in the record books"—Audrey picked up the Tower North salt shaker—"he likes being the captain, likes being in control."

"He will be in control." Gently, Kip retrieved the shaker and returned it to the table. "He's still tower captain, but..." Kip laughed. "But, for the day, I'm sort of the tower field marshal." He stared at the Tower North shaker as if he were contemplating Hamlet's Yorick. "Funny," he said. "Old Caruthers. Hard to think of him as old. It's been twenty-five years since I'd seen him last. Back then, he was 'Mister

Caruthers, sir."

"And you were just one of the little tower brats." Smiling, Audrey tapped the top of Tower North. "I never understood why you spent so much time here, considering your opinions on religion. Playing violin at Christmas concerts, playing with the youth hand bell choir, tower ringing."

"I loved the old place," said Kip. "Still do. I really wanted to be an organist, but that would have required more of a church affiliation than I was willing to put up with. So instead, I took up the violin."

Audrey chuckled. "The devil's instrument."

"So I've been told."

"Oh, I'm just teasing you." She smiled, softly. "In fact, if I remember, you almost got a violin scholarship to study at the Royal Conservatory."

"Almost." Kip took a sip of his tea, lukewarm from neglect. "Physics was my default plan. Had I won the scholarship, well...I'd intended to become a concert violinist. But of course, you know that."

"I didn't want you to win it," said Audrey. "I didn't want you to run off to London to study. I would have missed you terribly."

Kip knew he was blushing and sipped at his tea to try to conceal it. "Back to the experiment," he said. "The why of it."

Audrey crossed her hands on the table and gazed expectantly at him. She looked like a little girl at school.

Kip knew it would be tricky—explaining the physics without talking down to her, or at least without her detecting she was being talked down to.

"There are forces in nature," he said. "There's the force of gravity, the electroweak force, the strong nuclear force." Already he could see he was losing her, so he backed up. "The electroweak force, for example, is why an electron and proton attract each other. And the strong force is what keeps an atomic nucleus from ripping apart."

Audrey nodded.

"We think," said Kip, "that there might be another force."

"Who is we?"

"Me."

"Oh." Audrey smiled. "All right, then. What would this other force do?"

"We... I think it keeps the dimensions from ripping apart. It's related to entropy and it determines the arrow of time." Despite the baffled look on her face, he plunged ahead. "And since life seems to violate the law of increasing entropy, it looks like this force is important in living creatures."

"You do know," said Audrey, "that I've not the vaguest clue what you are talking about?"

"Yes, I know." Kip shrugged. "Sorry."

Audrey gave a tight-lipped smile.

"Anyway," said Kip, "an oscillating mass makes gravity waves, and an oscillating charge makes electromagnetic waves—"

"You mean radio waves?"

"Yes, exactly. And I think oscillating extended compressible matter makes dimension waves. D-waves, I call them."

"Oscillating extended compressible matter?" Audrey laughed. "What language is that, please?"

Kip felt himself blush. "I guess I should have just said 'sound waves in air.'"

"I see," said Audrey, smiling. "And you're looking for D-Waves, which is why the bells must be tuned to the key of D."

"No. You don't understand. It has nothing to do with..." Then Kip noticed her smile. "You're teasing me again, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Perhaps." Kip picked up Tower West. "Perhaps we've talked enough science for the day." He returned the shaker to its proper table.

As Kip slid the other shakers together, Audrey put a hand on his. "But you haven't told me," she said, "what bell ringing has to do with all this."

Kip started from her touch and drew back his hand, then extended it and placed it over hers. "Well, here's where it gets strange," he said.

Audrey gave a short chuckle. "Here is where it gets strange?"

"Okay, more strange." He took a breath, and plunged on. "I'm trying to establish a standing D-wave pattern over a small area in the middle of the triangle defined by the towers."

"Using tower bells."

"Unlikely as it seems, yes."

Audrey, gazing down at her tea, tapped the side of her cup and watched wavelets form on the surface of the liquid. She looked up. "Maybe not all that unlikely," she said. "I've always felt that the sound of tower bells in the air creates a kind of collective consciousness in those that hear them." Again, she toyed with the teacup. "If there is such a thing as a collective consciousness, I shouldn't be too surprised if a clever scientist managed to detect it."

"Collective consciousness." Kip played with the words, and then with the idea. "That's wonderful." He gazed in admiration; Audrey had heard his theory for the first time and already had augmented it.

Feeling almost as if he were speaking with a colleague now, Kip went on. "Since the D-waves should make nodes where living creatures are, in some sense, synchronized and a band of ringers engaged in the exercise is about as synchronized as it gets, the ringers should help create a stable resonance pattern." He took a quick breath and concluded, "The tenor ringing D at the end of each row of changes should establish the resonance and the changes themselves, being permutations, should dampen any unwanted harmonics."

"Assuming that I understood all that," said Audrey, "tell me. What does your experiment actually do?"

"At the center of the triangle, I hope to detect a very tiny variation in the flow of time."

"And?"

"And?" Kip laughed. "And nothing. That's the experiment."

Audrey seemed disappointed. "I'd have thought there'd be something more impressive."

"Not strange enough, huh?"

"Well, it's just that... Perhaps I've just seen too many movies of energetic scientists and big machines."

"Ah. That reminds me." Kip glanced at his watch. "Oh dear! I really must apologize, but I've got to run up to the university to check on a not-so-big machine—my time variation meter. I told my technician I'd be there ten minutes ago." He waved for the bill and took out his wallet. "Can I drop you off somewhere?"

"No, thanks. I think I'll just dawdle here over my tea a while." She stared at him for a moment. "But you should go on being the energetic scientist. It suits you."

Kip paid the bill and, looking back as he left Beowulfie's, saw Audrey smiling at him. He felt fifteen again.

In the Physics Department electronics shop late that afternoon, Kip finished calibrating the time variation meter. Housed in an aluminum tube about four feet long by three quarters of an inch thick, the device had a hand grip, an on/off switch, and a small meter calibrated in nanoseconds. Inside were atomic clocks at each end, a solid-state memory module, and a cell-tower triangulation module to give position data. The TVM was designed to measure the difference of time flow between the ends of the device.

Kip lifted the unit at the grip end and, wielding it like a sword, made passes in the air with it.

In mid-pass, the door opened, and Neville ambled into the shop.

"Still a Musketeer, I see," said Neville, a coolness evident in his voice.

"Oh." Kip felt both surprised and sheepish, the way he had when, long ago, Neville had found him playing with a toy he was too old for—in Neville's unalterable opinion. Kip placed the TVM onto a lab bench. "Tuesday," he said, "I'll be using this a lot. I just wanted to get the feel of it."

"Yes, of course you did," said Neville, displaying the characteristic disdain that Malvyn had always managed to keep in check. "Look," he said from the doorway. "I'm glad to see you back in England, of course. But let's try not to give the university a bad name, shall we?"

"In what way?" said Kip, genuinely puzzled. "If the experiment fails, well, it's just an experiment that failed. Most do."

"But they usually don't fail in front of media reporters." Neville whipped off his glasses. "This...this experiment of yours attracts the press like flies to treacle." He looked off toward a window, avoiding Kip's gaze. "Junk science usually does," he added, softly.

Kip worked to keep his voice cheerful. There was nothing to be gained by losing his temper. "Why are you so set against this?" he asked.

"Research money is difficult to come by these days," said Neville. "There is a lot of good science

languishing because more meretricious projects get the funds."

"Such as one of your own projects, perhaps?"

Neville glared.

Kip pointed to the TVM. "This is good science," he said.

"One might differ."

"Why?"

"For one," said Neville, "your extrapolation from the Klein-Gordon equation is little more than speculation. And there is no way to know if this supposed entropy force could couple to the matter field. The effect, if it exists at all, might be localized to a micron or two and, even then, I can't see that the arrow of time would lose meaning in the localized field." With a show of deliberation, Neville put on his glasses. "But principally," he said, glowering behind his thick lenses, "bell ringing, synchronized human minds—that is not physics."

"Well, damn it, who made you the god of physics?" Kip, annoyed he'd allowed himself to be goaded, tried for a veneer of pleasantness. "We differ on this," he said with a forced smile. "But I do thank you for letting me use the resources of your department."

"Thank your National Science Foundation." Neville walked to the door. "They've been very generous." More forcefully than necessary, he closed the door behind him.

Tuesday morning, after visiting each of the three towers, Kip drove as close as roads allowed to the geographic center of the triangle. He parked the car on the side of the road, flipped on his radio transceiver, and popped it into his jacket pocket. Then, carrying the TVM, he stepped out onto the familiar soil—a tree-rich hill that was, coincidentally, a mere five-minute walk to the house he'd grown up in. He'd played here as a boy. All the Musketeers had.

Kip repositioned his hands-free headset from around his neck to over his head, then checked his watch: fifteen minutes to ten. The tower captains had been instructed to turn on their transceivers at ten, precisely.

While waiting for ten o'clock, Kip meandered the gentle woods, the crunch and rustle of the fallen leaves breaking the sylvan silence as he walked. Despite Neville's forewarning, there were no reporters dogging his steps; he was quite alone.

Then, in the overcast but unseasonably warm morning, he heard the bells of Tower North. The bells, left down after use, were being rung up to their start positions. A minute later, there was silence again.

A few seconds before the hour, Kip leaned against a tree—a very familiar landmark, one he'd climbed repeatedly through the years of his childhood. It looked smaller now.

"Tower North," he said. "Are you there?"

"Yes, Kip, my boy," came Caruthers' voice from his headset. "Tower North, ready."

Kip checked the other towers, paused, then said, "Tower North. On my mark, begin rounds...Mark."

"Treble's going," said a voice from the tower. "She's gone."



A second or so later, Kip heard the joyous cascade of rounds—the repeated descending scale, each repetition ending with the rich, mellow D from Great Peter.

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Kip brought in the second tower and spent the next few minutes coordinating the two rings of bells into synchronization.

"Tower East," he said, "try to listen only to the earphones. You're a little ahead of North."

Finally, with North and East ringing in unison, Kip brought in Tower West and talked it into synchrony. Then he listened. The sound was uncanny. With the three towers ringing as one, the chorus of iron came from no discernable direction—the cry of the bells seemed to radiate from everywhere: the hills, the trees, from the ground itself.

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"Tower captains," said Kip. "On my mark, begin the method...Mark."

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The peal of Stedman Triples had begun. If the peal did not break down, Kip would have over three hours to collect data.

Using the tree as ground zero, Kip walked slowly in a widening gyre, sweeping the TVM in horizontal arcs as if he were looking for buried treasure. At first, Kip kept his eyes locked on the meter dial, eager to see the first success of his theory. But after about an hour, with the pointer stubbornly refusing to budge from zero, his mind's eye took over; he imagined Neville, not even trying to disguise his glee at the failed experiment. Kip tried to convince himself that the dial was but a crude indicator. The important data would be recorded in memory. Computer analysis would build a data map of the region showing the true signal strength at any point to three or four significant figures.

Kip continued his spiral until he could just barely hear phase differences between the towers. Then he turned back, repeating the measurements in the eerie shadow of directionless sound. If nothing else, the simultaneous peal would go into the record books and would certainly get a big write-up in *Ringers World*. But that would hardly impress the American National Science Foundation.

After a few minutes where his eyes were locked on the TVM's circular dial, Kip glanced up. Ahead, he saw the vaguest hint of a circle or maybe a sphere—an afterimage of the dial, he supposed. Transparent almost to the point of invisibility, the image had an ill-defined boundary, which appeared to start about nine feet above ground level. Kip moved his head, but the image didn't move. Not an afterimage, but likely a trick of the light.

As he walked toward the ghostly object, he noticed that the ground-zero tree penetrated into it—that is, if there was indeed an it. Immersed in the dense tapestry of sound, Kip observed that the object might be shimmering in synchrony with the tenor bells. He wasn't sure; it took an act of will to even see the sphere at all. And sometimes it seemed more pyramidal than spherical.

Near the base of the tree, Kip, almost by reflex, reached up with the TVM to touch the object. But there was nothing to touch, no resistance, only a near-subliminal change of color. Kip froze as the meter dial caught his eye. The pointer, no longer fixed at zero, vibrated across a quarter of its range. Kip stood on tiptoes and raised the tip of the TVM higher into the object. The meter fluctuated wildly, making soft clicking sounds as the needle pinned itself against the stops. Although uncertain of exactly what was happening, Kip had no doubt that a few feet above his head, something very strange was happening to time. A wave of satisfaction washed over him; his experiment had succeeded. At the same time, he reproached himself for overlooking the third dimension. Of course the effect would be significantly above ground level; the bells were high in towers.

He stuck the TVM in his belt like a sword and examined the tree for hand and foot holds. He'd climbed the tree before; he would climb it again. As he began to clamber upward, he smiled. He was taller now, but perhaps not as lithe. Although pleased with himself at how easily he climbed, he knew that, unlike twenty-five years ago, he would feel the aftereffects the next day.

Breathing heavily from the exertion as he fought for altitude, he reminisced—remembering his previous visits to the tree. He locked his mind onto one particular arboreal excursion—and noticed he was gesticulating and also moving his lips.

Abruptly, Kip realized he wasn't so much reminiscing as reliving the experience—the way one would do in a dream. Finding a familiar cleft between two branches, Kip wedged himself in. He had to think.

It could just be the hypnotic effect of the bells, but it seemed real. He experimented again, this time with his mind and his will.

Like a train on a track, he could will himself to roll back in time and relive any portion of his life. And with effort, he could live it all at once. It was as if all his past, his worldline, happened simultaneously—like photos from an album stacked and pressed together.

He took refuge in physics. Maybe there was a second dimension of time—time as a function of time. Perhaps here in the tree, time was disconnected from space. His theory said it could happen. Maybe he was experiencing the multi-world formalism of quantum mechanics.

Kip shook his head, struck with the thought that one version of the Christian heaven and the multi-world formalism might actually describe the same phenomenon. Maybe he'd been a trifle too uncompromising in his view of religion—his "fight" as Audrey called it; maybe religion was just a subset of physics.

Methodically, in his mind, he moved the lever back—experiencing his life at an ever earlier period—sharing his mind with all those other Kips. He wondered about those others; did they too experience the mind-sharing? Did they think they were perhaps having psychotic episodes? He remembered that as late as age twelve, he talked to himself—another himself.

Kip focused, pulling abruptly back from the brink. He'd felt his forty-year-old identity weaken and his eleven- or twelve-year-old self begin to assert control. He shuddered. It had been close. Yes, it might have been good to go back and relive his life, but he doubted he had the endurance to go through childhood again.

Tentatively, experimentally, he let his mind return to the brink and as he did so, noticed his hands. They were a child's hands—and his clothes were those of a young boy: shorts, tee shirt, sneakers. He inhaled, sharply—and noticed the smells, delicious smells: the pleasantly acrid aroma of tree bark, the tang of the autumn leaves, the sweet fragrance of the grass.

"Kippy," came a voice from below, harmonizing with the ever present bells. "Come down, now. You're

late for dinner."

Kip started. One part of his mind experienced shock while another felt he was in trouble and would really catch it when his father got home from work. He looked down at his mom, wondering what to say. But then he noticed the bells.

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They were ringing rounds! The peal had ended and that meant the detached time effect would soon end. He had to get back to his own time or be trapped here as an eleven-year-old.

"Mom," he called out, his voice a long-forgotten treble. "I love you."

Her face, showing a puzzled expression, faded as he struggled forward in time. But now it felt as if he were running under water; already, the effect was diminishing. As he pushed ahead against an ever increasing drag, he took some comfort in the notion that if he didn't make it, he'd still be able to live at normal speed and eventually get back to where he was. But then, he shuddered with a horrible thought; if he didn't get back, he'd be in an endless time loop: reliving his life to the point of doing the experiment, then going back and living it again—and again and again. But maybe not! Maybe he'd manage to do just one different thing this time. That might be all he needed. Like bobs in a ringing method, it might change everything. He held firm to that hope as memories of the future faded to memories of memories and then to dreams.

He fought his way forward and wondered how old he was. What a stupid thing to wonder. He was fourteen.

"Hey, Kipper!"

Kip looked down, then hooked his legs over the limb and swung over, letting his arms dangle. "One for all," he said, hanging upside down, "and all for pickles."

"Geez," said Malvyn, astride his bicycle. "Last time I heard you say that, you were eleven."

Kip chuckled, then grabbed a limb and vaulted to the ground like a gymnast.

"Glad I found you," said Malvyn. "In honor of your not winning your fiddle scholarship, we decided we'd treat you to some goodies at Beowulfie's."

"Hey, that's really neat," said Kip. "You and Nev?"

"Yeah. His idea." Malvyn pumped his hand brakes, a sign he was anxious to get moving. "He said he'll meet us there at two. And why I'm glad I found you is because if I hadn't, Neville said I'd have to treat him."

Kip raised his bicycle upright from the grass and wheeled it next to Malvyn's. "I'm glad I didn't win it," he said, quietly.

"What?" Malvyn practically squeaked.

"I've decided I don't really want to be a concert violinist."

"Geez." Malvyn shook his head. "You know, Kipper, I don't understand you."

"Yes, I know." Kip shrugged. "Sorry."

"Boy," said Malvyn. "For the last month, you've checked your mailbox ten times a day, and talked us to death about how you wanted that scholarship more than anything in the universe. And now you say you're glad." Malvyn stretched his arms imploringly to the heavens. "Geez."

"I've decided that science is more important to me than playing the violin." Kip mounted his bicycle but kept one foot on the ground. "Anyway, I can play violin as a hobby. And I don't think you can be a scientist as a hobby." He leaned over and glanced at Malvyn's wrist-watch. "We're too early for Wulfie's."

"Okay." Malvyn leaned his weight on a pedal and set off. "Let's go over to the tower."

Kip set off as well. "Yeah. Maybe we can sneak into the belfry and untie a bell rope or something."

Malvyn looked back over his shoulder. "Not bloody likely!" He pedaled slowly, letting Kip roll up along side. "Last time, my dad caught me. He nearly tore my head off." Malvyn scrunched up his shoulders as if he were in pain. "And if he catches me again, I'm toast."

"So you've sworn off belfry visits?"

"Not exactly." Malvyn laughed. "I've just got to be a little sneakier about it."

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"Too late, anyway," said Malvyn. "They've started ringing."

"Only rounds."

"You know," said Malvyn as he pedaled steadily on the road into town. "I'm sort of glad you didn't get the scholarship. Keeps the Musketeers together. And Audrey would have missed you."

"Really? How do you know?"

"She told me."

Kip pressed down on the handbrakes. "Malv," he called out, "stop for a moment, will you?"

Malvyn cycled in a graceful curve and pulled up next to Kip. "What's wrong?"

"Did she really say she'd miss me?"

"Audrey? Yes. She did."

Kip looked down and worked the handbrakes a few times. "You... You know something about girls."

"Yeah, a little. Why?"

Kip continued working the brakes, but didn't say anything.

Malvyn laughed. "I know. You want to ask Audrey out, but you're too shy to ask." He laughed again. "That's it, isn't it?"

Kip felt himself blush. He still didn't say anything, but just listened to the bells.

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"Look, it's not so hard," said Malvyn, sounding now like a helpful older brother. "Just ask her. I bet she's wanted you to ask her for a long time."

"You think so?"

"Yes!"

With a show of resolve, Kip looked up. "I will ask her," he said. "I'll do it today."

Malvyn placed a hand on Kip's shoulder. "Believe me, my boy," he said, mimicking Mr. Caruthers' voice and mannerisms, "it will change your life."

"Change my life." Kip laughed. "Yeah, right."

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