

THE TIME GENE

Vol. 1 – The Elect

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Chapter One: A minute or two to two

Broughty Ferry, Dundee, 18th July 1994

One hazy summer afternoon, Roxanne watched her six-year-old brother plunge forty feet to his death. Five minutes later, he ran off to play football with Ben next door.

She was lying in the long grass with her classmate Fionnula Aitcheson, a sly but pretty girl with long golden hair, playing Miss World. Her brother Fraser, meanwhile, crawled along a thinning top branch of the gnarled old oak, and slithered on some sap. "Championies, championies, away, away, away!" he yelled, arms in the air.

"Fraser, what the hell are you doin'? Get down NOW!" screamed his sister Roxanne.

"Oh, chill, Cubby, he'll no' fall, honest!" whined Fionnula. "You should see our Rhys. By the way, you're so not my best friend anymore, 'cos you don't admit that Home and Away is better than Neighbours." Roxanne thought this rather rich, as Fionnula unashamedly looked down on the McCubbins, and had only called for her because her own gang were on holiday.

"We're no' best friends anyway," said Roxanne in a languid voice. "And I told you not tae call me Cubby!" She heard a crack as the branch began to buckle, and turned her head in alarm. "FRASER McCUBBIN, IF YOU FALL, I'LL KILL YOU!"

"You were my best friend, but Kirsty's my bestest friend, Heather's my bestest, bestest friend, Claire's my bestest, bestest, bestest friend, and Ryan's my boyfriend." Fionnula rabbited. "We're..." She stopped short. Her companion was tearing around the tree in panic and paying her no attention whatsoever. She grew more petulant. "Cubby, come here now or you're no' even in the top ten!" she bleated.

Roxy could have sworn she saw something moving on the treetop. Momentarily, she discerned its form....but that was impossible. A split second later, Fraser gave a yelp, as though in sudden fright. He lost his balance and crashed forty feet downward onto the gravelly drive. A sickening thud broke his scream.

Fionnula stared at the motionless boy on the gravel, her sky blue eyes frozen in terror, and began to squeal a series of high-pitched squeals, like a demented goose. Roxanne turned away. She wanted to scream, retch, vomit...but it was vital that she collect her thoughts. Compose herself. If she didn't look, perhaps it never happened! Perhaps it wasn't real...not permanent. She felt the habitual nauseous ache in the pit of her stomach; she heard her heart racing, but she stood dead still and stared at her Dennis the Menace digital watch. 14:00.

The house door sprang open. A large, shaggy, unkempt dog bounded outside, panting. A cheerful unshaven figure followed, clad in a stained, shapeless old dinner jacket and with an ill-buttoned shirt hanging out of his trousers. Brandishing a cigarette in one hand and a sherry glass in the other, he was whistling The Red Flag. "Bye, folks, I'll be aff the n..." The figure stopped in its tracks. The dog was yelping around the boy's listless body.

14:01: She must concentrate intensely: it didn't happen; it couldn't happen.

“Oh my GODFAITHERS!” yelled a terrible voice, broken like an animal in agony. The man’s arms flailed around in torment. Roxy, though, paid no heed...her concentration could not break, not for one second. Her body was wracked with pain, but she had to coerce the thin digits. Will them....command then...to read again a minute or two to two. The dog circled Fraser’s body, bellowing and growling. She stared imploringly at the digits. 13:58. Her muscles relaxed; the pain subsided – was it done?

“You know, Cubby, you’d get to play with the in girls if you supported Dundee United,” she heard a smug voice say. Ignoring Fionnula, she risked gazing upwards. Fraser was charging towards the top of the tree in reckless abandon. “Roxy cannae catch me, ‘cos Roxy’s a scaredy-cat.”

“Fraser, FOR GOD’S SAKE stay on the fat branch...that one’s gonna crack, you pillock!”

Fraser winced, garbled a torrent of swear words, but finally edged his way down. Roxanne breathed deeply. The danger was passed, but he could still fall again. She screamed at Fraser that he would be banned for life from using her computer if he did not at once descend.

“Cubby, what’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost! Mind you, you’re weird anyway. You like Meatloaf,” sniffed Fionnula.

The same cheery, whistling figure strolled past. The dog, sensing danger, barked madly and leapt up at his side, but the man was oblivious to the perils of Fraser’s expedition. “I’ll be aff the noo. Got a kiss for your auld pop, Roxy, my wee roguey-poguey?”

“Dad, Fraser’s...” faltered Roxanne as he caught her and spun her in the air, but her father wasn’t listening.

“Mum’ll be hame about faive. If you need anythin’, your big sis’ll look after you! Listen...I’ve got a surprise for youz all soon, folks. Cannae tell you about it yet, but it’s beyon’ your wildest dreams!”

“Dad, Fraser’s up the oak tree!”

“BEYON’ YOUR WILDEST DREAMS!”

He sauntered into his dented Mercedes and drove jauntily off. Roxanne chased after it in desperation, and finally burst into tears. “Fraser, GET DOWN or I’ll make Mum clout you!”

“Mum would never clout me, ‘cos I’m her favourite!” he retorted.

“Fraser McCubbin, get your butt down here or I’m tellin’ Mr. Cannon you flooded the boys’ bogs!”

“That was him?” smirked Fionnula, savouring this new blackmail potential.

Fraser reddened and capitulated. “I wasn’t gonna go all the way up anyway!”

Unabashed, he climbed down as dextrously as a fireman sliding down a pole. An irate screech seared through the cool stillness, accompanied by the venomous stab of stiletto heels. The banshee was Roxanne’s teenage half-sister, Chantelle, who had been partying upstairs with her death metal-crazed friends Chloë and Siobhan.

“What the blazes is goin’ on here? God, I lead a dog’s life! One, Fergie’s gone tae sign some dodgy deal wi’ some IRA bloke, two, Mum’s havin’ her hair blue-rinsed, three, I’ve got tae babysit two squawking brats...an’ now that numpty of a kid’s hangin’ off a tree when I’m tryin’ tae put my mascara on! You lot are all so damn selfish!” she wailed.

Chantelle's enraged face was pinker than the bubblegum she was chewing; indeed almost competing with her pillar-box red hair. The scent of pungent perfume immersed her like a cloud. Her lipstick was purple and her eyelids a glittery turquoise. Roxanne thought she looked rather like the fairy at the top of a bawdy Christmas tree.

"I saved him," said Roxanne in a breathless whisper. "Did you see? He fell and landed splat on the ground, an' then I..."

"Oh, aye, I forgot, you've got a personal time machine, eh? Well, when you've finished savin' me from bein' molested by King Kong – last week – you can..."

"I wouldnae bother," Roxy snapped back.

"Oh for God's sake, Roxanne, give it a rest, eh! You're too old for this freakin' playactin'. Not only am I still livin' in this dump, gettin' blackmailed into lookin' after suicidal kids hangin' off trees, I cannae find my curlin' tongs an' my boyfriend's comin' in five hours, but..." (her tone leaving no doubt this was the pinnacle of her woes) "...my sister thinks she's Doctor Blinkin' Who! It does my head in!" She gave a splendiferous eye-roll and flounced back inside, leaving the three children choking on the fumes from her hairspray.

"Cubby, you can't seriously want to make that doll Miss World," said a scathing voice. "She's not a proper blonde, and her hair's all fuzzy and tangly...like yours! I think your Miss World should be this Sindy...she suits you as Sindys are cheap and tacky; and..."

Roxanne had good reason to cut Fionnula a bit of slack, but this was the last straw. She flung her "lower middle-class" Sindy straight into her yuppie classmate's pert face, and stormed into the house, up to her room and slammed the door. The house shook with her sister's stereo pounding at full throttle, while Chloë and Siobhan embarked on such an excruciating attempt at karaoke such that Roxanne thought someone was being strangled. She was too angry to care. She had tried a hundred times to tell her family what she could do, but no-one ever believed her. No-one ever acknowledged the supreme effort it cost her again and again, almost always to help others. If they only knew the violent cramps...the crushing pain...the unimpeachable concentration required of her. Yet who should thank her? Who ever knew? No-one recalled the tragic prelude, only the serene hereafter. No-one supposed she had just averted an unthinkable alternative. She threw her face down on her bed and cried. Her sister's stereo thumped on; Chloë and Siobhan squealed, and she heard Ben-across-the-road shout across to ask Fraser if he wanted to play football. Did he realise he might have been facing Fraser's bloodied corpse?

It was always the same. There had been no plaudits when she'd stopped a football from smashing the headmaster's window, and no kudos for saving Mrs Meehan's dog from being run over by a lorry. The final straw had been the obliviousness to her heroics on the way back from Glasgow airport the previous year...

The Kingsway, Dundee, eleven months earlier

Blossom McGaeoghan was driving home from an animal rights protest march. She had passed her test only two weeks ago. She was travelling at 80 miles per hour in a rickety old Citroën, and neither she nor Cassius was wearing a seatbelt. Watching the road was not high on their list of priorities. It was far more of a thrill to stare besottedly into each other's eyes. In perfect unison, they swayed to All You Need Is Love, blaring out of the car stereo. Moments later, in the blurred shimmer ahead, Cassius thought he saw a figure and bawled "WATCH OUT, BLOSSOM!" His girlfriend screamed. By the time she veered frantically to the left, there was no-one there save for two disconsolate grey

squirrels munching crisp crumbs by the barrier. They hurled at breakneck speed into a tractor on the next lane, both smashing through the windscreen. Another car rammed into the back of them, then another. It was a six-car pile-up. Not that they ever knew this as it was instant oblivion.

As Blossom drifted awake, she became aware that she was sitting on a train hurtling through a tunnel, entwined in Cassius' arms. It was strangely misty for indoors, and yet she recognised it from her childhood holidays as being a London Underground train. "Cassius...I think we're on the tube," she murmured. "But I don't remember...weren't we in the car...?" He patted her and assured her everything would be all right. He was a tall, gangly and awkward boy at the best of times; today he looked pinched and pale under the harsh lighting. His spectacles eerily reflected the dusty floor, the checked seats and their gaunt fellow travellers. A glance around her showed that the carriage was full with standing room only and that most of the passengers were elderly, pallid, and sluggish in movement as though anaesthetized. Blossom's own waist-length blancmange-pink hair clashed with their companions' sallow complexions. She wondered whether she ought to give her seat to a shrivelled old lady who stood in front of her with a cane, but when Blossom gestured the offer, the elderly woman cut across her. "Me old bones don't 'urt no more, child."

Blossom did not understand. "But still...you should sit down," she said.

"Why? I ain't tired. I'm dead. So are you."

The train jerked to a halt. The old lady fell forward, but floated gently downward instead of keeling over. Blossom gawped at her. The doors hissed open. Blossom and Cassius supposed the train might have reached a station, but they couldn't see for sure as the light from outside was blinding. A man entered, huge and menacing; and Blossom envisaged a burly ticket collector, and panicked as she couldn't find a ticket. Closer inspection revealed him to be only a shabby busker, whose bulk was mostly the result of his enormous coat and the unwieldy old guitar case he carried. His hair was unkempt, he was ill-shaven, his clothes were worn, the guitar strapped around him looked battered, and he smoked a long, wooden pipe.

"I've received orders," said the unkempt musician to the throng, "that the following people are to go back via the Your Idiocy Lift." (At least, it sounded something like that, Blossom was too dazed to tell.) He took from his oversized pocket a crumpled piece of notepaper. She placed the accent as North of England; Liverpudlian. "I repeat: the following people are to go back. Blossom McGaeoghan, Cassius Harper, Quentin Giles..." He proceeded to read out six or seven additional names, and Blossom thought she had seen some of the people before, through her rear-view mirror when they had been on the motorway.

The Kingsway, 5 minutes earlier

Roxanne was curled in the back of her parents' car, wondering how far she was from home, and trying to ignore the thump from Chantelle's Walkman. Fraser was complaining that it was twenty past five and he'd missed Children's BBC. Chantelle was pretending to write her English essay, but Roxanne knew she was writing to Carlos, an eighteen-year-old bar attendant she had met in Ibiza.

"You're no' tae contact that wee thug again, do you hear?" said Roxanne's father menacingly to Chantelle.

"But you don't understand," protested Chantelle. "He told me last night that I was the one. An' he was cryin'."

"If I'd kenned about it sooner I'd have gied him somethin' tae cry about!" Fergie bellowed.

Roxanne was wishing they would all shut up when she saw a small figure, perhaps a boy, trying to overtake traffic on the opposite side of the road, as a tractor ambled along the outside lane. Her last lucid memory was an old car swerving. The next moments were a ghastly blur and no-one knew what happened first. It was as though an electric storm had struck so fast it had sent the clouds crashing down. Flashes of light...screaming of brakes that burned the air like grenades...a woman's scream...the foul wrench of metal bodywork tearing like old lino. Vehicles slammed into each other like in some warped game of dominoes. At least two cars were ablaze, wafting flames that lunged upwards like the tentacles of a voracious flesh-eating plant. The McCubbins' windscreen was shattered by a chunk of flying debris. A fragment of hot, twisted metal scraped across the roof, then fizzled out. Shell-shocked, her father swerved dangerously and they stumbled onto the hard-shoulder. With the engine off, he gasped and wheezed for a moment, unable to grasp the horrors he had witnessed.

"Don't just sit there, do somethin', Fergie," whimpered Roxanne's mother. Fergie's face was pale, his jaw sunken and his teeth were chattering.

"Now, listen, youz!" he grated to his offspring. "If any of youz move an inch...one bleedin' inch...I'll skin you alive!" Chantelle looked up from her love letter to complain that the battery on her Walkman was flat.

A motorbike rider had called the emergency services from a telephone on the lay-by. Roxanne's parents hastened to the scene to see if they could assist. As soon as they were out of sight, Roxy jumped out of the car and flew wildly at the wrecked tractor, hell bent on finding the source of the collision. The heat from the burning vehicles seared her skin, and the acrid stench of petrol and smoke pummelled her nostrils, but she was resolute. The motorcyclist who had dialled 999 tried to drag her away, covering her eyes, but she squirmed away with such ferocity that he let go in shock as she rambled some ludicrous tale about a boy in the middle of the road.

No-one had noticed the grey squirrels squatting by the central barrier. Roxy stared. Had that been what she had seen? Had it been they that fatally distracted the driver of the old Citroën? Roxy didn't think so, but it was worth a try. As sirens howled in the distance, Roxy knelt down, and buried her head in her hands. Fergie, distraught, was haring towards her like a tormented bull. White-hot pain ravaged her body, but she gave her unrelenting focus to that infinitesimal moment, twenty past five, when she had been in her parents' car listening to her siblings' respective moans.

"Dad, I'll so throw a tantrum if I don't see Neighbours."

They were back! Roxy could have collapsed with exhaustion, but it was now or never...

"Stop the car, Dad."

"We're no' stoppin' the noo, pal. I need tae get tae the bookies before they shut."

"Dad..."

There was such an urgency to Roxy's plea that he relented and passed into the lay-by. Her erratic behaviour was not altogether unexpected, as Roxanne never walked anywhere she could run; never used a stair if she could slide down the banisters and never strode on the pavement if she could walk along a wall. Yet there was an unhinged terror in her wild blue eyes that made him quake. She bolted out like a caged animal freed, ran into the road and ducked perilously between the cars to reach the opposite side of the motorway. She was entirely deaf to her father's tempestuous entreaties to return.

“I’ll flay you, I swear I’ll flay you!”

The road was clear for now, but she had only seconds. She saw the squirrels. The tractor rumbled sluggishly on the outside lane. On the horizon were Blossom’s noisy Citroën and the other ill-fated cars behind it, their drivers all bemoaning the tractor’s slowness. Fearing her heart might burst, or her legs fail her, she made one final sprint and grabbed the squirrels, one of which bit her for her trouble, and dragged them to the other side, narrowly avoiding the wheels of the tractor. The farmer, who had been reading a newspaper whilst driving, shook his fists in protest.

Several hundred meters further on, Blossom scratched her head.

“Funny, I thought I saw a wee girl just then. Did you see anythin’, Cassius?”

“Nope,” he said dully.

Roxanne was watching the squirrels scurry into a field when she felt herself being flung upwards.

“You’re a disgrace tae society; a belligerent brat; a juvenile delinquent” was the screech in her ear as her father slung her across his shoulders like a sack of potatoes.

“You’ve got tae understand, Dad,” begged Roxanne, “I had tae stop the accident. I had tae go back. If you don’t understand, nobody will!” She had tried on numerous occasions to explain her gift to her father, incurring only a mixture of exasperation and bewilderment. “You’re grounded till kingdom come, you are,” he muttered as she blurted out everything that happened both sides of the loop. It was a poor reward for saving ten lives, and dozens more from terrible injuries. Fergie McCubbin’s temper was not improved when, on arrival back at the car, they found Chantelle using the telephone in the lay-by to call Carlos. McCubbin wrenched her bodily from the telephone and dumped her unceremoniously in the back seat.

“You cannae do that. You’re no’ my real dad!”

“I can have youz a’ shot by firin’ squad if I take the notion. Now, not another peep oot of anyone till we’re hame!”

Broughty Ferry, 18th July 1994

Roxanne lay face down on the bed for several hours. She remembered hearing her mother coming home, and heard the sounds of cooking from downstairs. She was shaken from her reverie when the door flew open, hitting the dressing table with a crash, and a miniature bandit stood in the doorway, brandishing what she supposed to be their dad’s painting rollers: “HANDS UP! SURRENDER OR DIE! THIS GUN IS LOADED!”

Roxanne rubbed her still smarting eyes. “Fraser, have you ever heard of knocking?”

His sheer ingratitude irked her, but then why should he feel grateful when he knew nothing of events prior to a minute or two to two? The sting of injustice throbbed. No, she, Roxy, never got appreciated for anything. The teachers fawned over that Fionnula Aitcheson, especially since she’d won that national art competition. Yet what was a poxy drawing compared to almost a dozen lives saved? Niall McAree had been lauded by all the teachers for becoming a Judo black belt. By what yardstick was learning to kick and punch others better than sparing them a violent death? She was still sour about that punishment exercise the other week for running out of the classroom when she had in fact been stopping a dinner lady from accidentally burning down the school. Still, Roxy treasured her gift; it was her joy as she had never been good at anything else. Every day she dreamed of using it to make the world a better place; of saving sinking ships and stricken

aeroplanes; of averting wars. Yet it was also a terrible burden of responsibility, even guilt. She had turned on the television, and there was little on save for a few cartoons even Fraser would have rejected on grounds of juvenility, some black-and-white films, a quiz show and the news. She often avoided the news as she loathed hearing about bombs or plane crashes. Might she have prevented that helicopter from crashing on the Mull of Kintyre, killing 20 people? Should she have gone to Rwanda, and averted the massacre of 3000 people in a church? Today, thank heaven, there wasn't much – the Labour leadership contest...trade unions wrangling over a railway strike...two ex-IRA prisoners who had been released early from a Glasgow jail; and a Government minister spending more time with his family. Yet, recent tragedies had made her realise how privileged she was. Her parents rarely restrained her; she had an unbound freedom to run wild through her jungle of a home. She had her own television, video recorder and hifi stereo in her huge bedroom with its cracked panelled doors and lofty ceiling. Her friends envied her the possession of the likes of a Nintendo Entertainment System and Game Boy as Fergie bought virtually every new gadget on the market and gave them all to her when he tired of them. Yet every time someone got wounded, bombed or hurt in the news, she could not stop the pervasive sense of guilt that she ought to have stopped it. It haunted her morning, noon and night, seven days a week. Yet how could she coax soldiers into laying down their arms? How could she dissuade terrorists from slaughtering the innocent? And, still more crucially, for what purpose had she been given this gift, and did anyone else share it?

“O wisnae ‘e a roguey, a ro-o-guey, a ro-o-guey, o wisnae ‘e a roguey, the piper o’ Dundee,” sang a gruff bass voice from the hallway.

Roxanne tore down the stairs, her eyes still red and tearstained, but her heart overflowing with happiness, and leapt, from at least the fifth stair, into Fergie McCubbin’s arms. He caught her, but staggered backwards under her weight, wheezing.

“Roxy, you cannae do tha’ no more. You’re a big lass now an’ your pop’s no’ as young as he used to be!” Roxy grinned and said that he always caught her and he always would. He stroked her head. “Roxy, my wee roguey-poguey!”

“How’d the business meetin’ go, love,” called Roxanne’s mother from the doorway, clutching a steaming casserole dish.

“Aw, Mamie, it was pure dead brill!” He grabbed her and swung her round as if she’d been a willowy seventeen-year-old. “La crème de la crème, le fang du fang,” he added, with an excruciating attempt at the French nasal sound. “Cesar Ritz, eat your heart oot – you are lookin’ at Scotland’s latest hotel tycoon!”

Mary McCubbin looked flummoxed.

“Aye...hotel tycoon!” he reiterated. “This time next year, we’ll have oor own tropical villa in the Bahamas, an’ you’ll be sippin’ tequilas all summer lang!”