

Lost Time Is Never Found

Philadelphia. God, I hate this town. Ruined buildings, narrow streets, the homeless roaming around using any open pit as a toilet. It used to be decent 'til the redcoats returned and started parading around the State House. They wanted their pay for our little uprising nearly two centuries ago, they say we still haven't earned our keep. They savagely raid and torch our homes, our businesses, our civic buildings, our jobs. Seems the only decent person in the God forsaken place is Ol' Benny. And he's a nutcase. He always thinks someone is after him. At one point he was convinced the Freemasons were after him, the next day he thought the mailman was stalking him. He also sometimes forgets important things: names, streets, stuff like that. Other than that, he's a great guy who just seems to be down on his luck like myself.

As I'm walking down Market Street this morning, Ol' Benny runs up to me with an expression I have only come to know so well from him: terror.

"Mickey! You've got to help me, Mickey! The redcoats are after me, Mickey! The redcoats!" he says to me.

"For Christ's sake, Benny, my name's Walt!"

"Oh, that's right. Terribly sorry, Mickey."

I can't help but let out a long, frustrated sigh.

"Benny, you're imagining this. The redcoats wouldn't be after you unless you were made of gold bullion."

"Then why would two of them be chasing me?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Benny! It's all in your..."

As I was explaining to Benny that he was a nut for the twenty-fifth time, I couldn't help but notice two redcoats were running this way with guns at the ready.

"Holy shit, Benny! You were right, the redcoats are after you!"

Benny's eyes widen.

"The redcoats are after me?!"

No time for explanations. I grab his arm and make a mad dash.

"I'll take you to my office. You should be safe there."

We run off of Market Street, into the narrow alleys of the Old City. We run past Christ Church onto Cuthbert. I decide to confuse the bastards even more by running into Elfreth's Alley. It was a risk, some of these redcoats are local boys, but it paid off in the end. The morons ran right past us.

As Benny and I make our way back to my office on Front and Arch, it starts to rain. Even the cold November rainfall couldn't put out the fire inside me. I couldn't

help but wonder what those damn limeys would have against an old homeless man like Benny. It was then that I knew I had to find out. We enter my office. Opening the creaking door floods my senses with the smell of mildew, cigarettes, and bourbon. The place looks like it's ready for condemnation. Water seeps through the roof and into the carefully placed buckets strewn across the floor. A small stack of papers sits on my desk to make myself look busy but all they are is bills. Whenever I look at 'em, I can't help but think how close I am to becoming like Ol' Benny. But that's in the long term, I must focus on what's going on now, on those redcoats. We take off our coats and hats. Benny lets a long, happy sigh as he lies down on my threadbare couch. Poor guy probably hasn't been on anything softer than stacked newspapers for longer than I've known him. I sit down behind my desk and pull out a cigarette from my carton of Chesterfields and frown. Yesterday I read in the newspaper the Virginians were being overworked by the redcoats to produce this stuff for them. They didn't even have enough farmland left to produce food to feed their people anymore. I put away my cigarette and get down to business.

"Benny, why were the redcoats after you?"

"I have no idea."

"Ya tend to forget things, Benny. Maybe ya forgot what you did."

Benny looks up to the leaking corner of my office. His eyes grow distant and then he bolts upright. He looks at me with his dull brown eyes and says:

"Truth will be truth though it sometimes proves mortifying and distasteful."

I couldn't help but be taken aback. In the three years I'd known Benny, I had never heard the guy say something like this. It was poetic.

"That... that was beautiful, Benny," I said. "What's it from?"

"Huh?"

"The thing you just said, Benny."

"I don't... remember."

I give him another long sigh.

"Benny, do you still remember the redcoats?"

"Of course I do!" he said matter-of-factly.

I can't help but wear a big, old grin.

"Do ya know why they were after you?"

Once again, Benny stares at that corner. I'm thinking this is going to be some sort of loop and we will be sitting here talking like this for days while Benny speaks a riddle

he can't remember. To my instant relief, he says something different:

"...No, sorry Mickey. I have absolutely no idea why they would be after me but... but I know someone who might."

Finally we're getting somewhere!

"Who would that be?"

"Professor Bill near the University. I see him with redcoats all the time."

Great, just what I needed.

"Bill's a damn loon, Benny! He only speaks in Shakespeare quotes, he wouldn't be able to tell us anything."

"Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead. Who's not to say a crazy man could be considered dead to the redcoats?"

I'm not sure Benny fully grasped the irony of his statement but he did raise a good point.

"All right, Benny. We'll see if Bill knows anything."

I take my hat and coat. The creak in the door becomes a scream. Before I leave I take my pistol. I get the feeling I'm not gonna like what Bill has to say.

The rain is coming down hard and fast. I pull down on the front of my hat to shadow my eyes. Wouldn't want those redcoats to ID me now. We decide to check the Old College

on Fourth and Arch first. We pass by the slab of granite on the corner near the university. The words are barely visible after two centuries of neglect. It reads: *"The Body of B. Franklin Scientist, Provost, Printer; Like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stript of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and Amended By the Author. He was born on January 17, 1706. Died 46."*

Benny looked at the stone forlornly.

"I didn't know they would use that one." Benny said.

"What are you talking about?"

Benny looks at me and attempts a smile.

"It's nothing. You go ahead I need some time here."

I head for the New Building, an ironic name considering it was around when this place was called the Academy. A man is curled up on the steps. I make my way over to him. The man looks up at me and scowls. He adjusts the hat covering the large bald area on the top of his head. When he recognizes me his mouth contorts into a smile.

"Hello Bill." I said to him.

Bill looks away and says nothing.

"I need to ask you something."

Bill picks lice out of his once well-groomed beard.

"It's about Benny."

Bill stops. He looks at me again. Benny walks up to us.

"It's the redcoats, Bill! They're after me and I don't know why!" Benny says.

"Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! Thou talk'st of nothing," Bill replies.

"I'm telling you the truth this time Bill! There really are redcoats after me!"

"He's right, Bill. There are redcoats after him, I saw them trying to catch Benny myself!"

Bill looks away again. This time though he appeared to be contemplating something.

"To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand," Bill says.

Bill gets up and brushes himself off. He is much shorter than me and only slighter shorter than Benny.

"I take thee at thy word."

"Then can you help us?" I say.

Bill looks at me and then starts to walk.

"Come, let's away," He says.

I brush my face with my hand. Gonna be a long day.

"I think we should follow him." Benny says.

"Perhaps you're right."

Bill hasn't shown any signs of betraying us yet. Even if he tried to turn us in, the redcoats would probably have a hard time understanding him anyhow. We follow Bill. As we head further south it becomes apparent where he's leading us. I can see the statues of the monarchs that have ruled over the Dominion of America including the current bastard on the throne: King George V. They call it Imperial Square on the map but in my heart it will always be State House Square. The center of the redcoat occupation. I'm beginning to think Bill is leading us to prison. Bill stops. He looks at the building beside him. It's an old building, from the 18th Century most likely. Over the doorway the marquee states: "LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA." I may have passed by it a hundred times before but to Bill it seems to hold some sort of affinity. Bill enters the building. Nothing fishy so far. The library is as busy as it always is, being the best one in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A receptionist sits on a desk beside an automated gate. The receptionist smiles at Bill.

"Good afternoon, Professor." She says.

Bill smiles and nods at the receptionist. He walks on through. The receptionist closes the gate.

"I'm sorry but I need to see some identification, please."

Great, just what I needed. If there's an arrest warrant out for Benny or me, we're dead. Bill turns around without delay.

"Friends!" he says.

"Sorry Professor, I had no idea these were your guests."

The receptionist opens the gate.

"You may enter. Have a nice day."

I attempt to form a smile in front of the receptionist as I enter the gate. That was too close. Bill leads us into the main hall. The place has grown on me. I see the flaws, the cracked bookcases, the once majestic frescoes, but anyone else who visited would find it beautiful. These are the last remnants of a nation that never was. Bill opens a door and lets us in. It's an office, modestly sized with everything neatly arranged. There is a bed on my left. It seems the professor sleeps in his office too. I can only wonder what the redcoats have done to someone like him. They might have even been the cause of his madness. Bill shuts the door and takes off his hat.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen for deceiving you for so long but I wasn't entirely sure you could be trusted," he says.

"Christ! So you're not—" I say.

"Crazy? No, I'm not crazy."

"Then why feign madness?" Benny says.

"Before I answer that, let me first say that nothing we speak of leaves this room, understand?"

"Yes, yes we understand." I say.

"Very well, I'll keep you at your word."

Bill sits behind his desk. He gestures for us to be seated and folds his hands.

"For the past three years, I have been a spy for the Patriots."

"The resistance movement? I thought they were wiped out by Edward VII." I say.

"You are incorrect, Mick—"

"Walt! It's Walt!"

"Sorry, Walt. As I was saying you are incorrect. The Patriots have been dormant but they never went away, but now is the perfect time to strike."

"Why wait until now? Why strike now?" Benny says.

"Britain is losing its grip on the New World. It has become a lion without teeth. Why do you think they have sent more troops and declared martial law? They're afraid, Ben."

"This is all well and good, Bill, but this has nothing to do with the redcoats after Benny."

"There is no reason for the redcoats to be after Benny! Don't you see? They're making random arrests all the time, Walt!"

"Don't play smart with me, Bill! The redcoats still follow common law. They wouldn't be able to make an arrest without a warrant. You talk with the redcoats all the time, if you know why they want Benny tell me now!"

"I don't know why they would be after him, Walt! I don't know!"

"Just what I thought, a dead end. Come on, Benny."
I make for the door.

"Wait! Stop!" Bill yells, "I know someone who might be able to help!"

"I'm listening," I say.

"The Patriots have a mole inside the Royal Army. He'll be at our meeting at midnight in the Adams Tavern at Galloway Square."

"If this is a trap..."

"This isn't a trap, Walt. You have my word."

"Why should I trust you?"

"You want to find answers, Walt. The Patriots are the only ones who can supply any answers."

Damn him!

"Alright, Bill. I'll meet your man tonight at midnight. But if I suspect anything, I will not hesitate to shoot. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly."

"OK then. Come on Benny, let's get out of here."

Benny and I enter Galloway Square at 11:45 PM. The place is deserted, not even the redcoats are here. The perfect place and time for a resistance movement to meet. I walk up to the statue of Joseph Galloway in the square. It's a large bronze statue with Galloway on horseback. The plaque on the bottom reads: "*JOSEPH GALLOWAY: AMERICAN LOYALIST AND VISIONARY.*" I strike a match on the bottom of Galloway's shoe and light a cigarette. Starving Virginians aren't going to keep me away from my smokes tonight.

"This feels like a trap," I say.

"He that can have patience, can have what he will," Benny says.

"You don't seem to be worried, Benny."

"You cannot pluck roses without fear of thorns."

"You're usually worried at times like this."

"Walt, if there is one thing I have learned it is that nothing in life is certain except death and taxes. Why worry?"

"It's just a bit concerning to me that's all, Benny. I mean you just called me Walt! You've always called me Mickey! You're not acting like yourself."

"No, Walt. For the first time in years, I am myself again."

The State House bell strikes.

"We'd better go inside, Benny."

I open the door to the Adams Tavern. We are greeted by untrusting glances as we make our way to Bill. Bill greets us with that familiar smile.

"Hello, Walt, Benny."

Bill pulls out a small black rectangular device. Before I have a chance to react Bill fires. I feel this surge of pain from my chest to my extremities. I lose strength in my legs and fall. Everything goes orange then black.

I wake up on a chair. I try to get up but find I'm unable to. I'm trapped. I look around. I appear to be in some sort of concrete bunker. A low hum permeates the entire room. I hear a crackling noise in the dark. Then a voice.

"I'm terribly sorry about having to stun you, Walt. You threatened violence earlier and I had to protect myself," the voice says.

No, not just any voice. I recognize it. It's Bill's voice!

"You son of a bitch!" I yell, "What's going on? What have you done with Benny?"

"We haven't hurt Benny if that's what you are wondering."

"Then what the hell is going on?"

"Tell me, Walt. Have you ever heard of Benjamin Franklin?"

"You mean B. Franklin? The founder of the University?"

"Yes, that's right. Do you know how he died?"

"I'm not a history professor, Bill!"

"Benjamin Franklin died from a lightning strike in 1752. It is the only lightning death ever recorded where the body completely vaporized. Isn't that fascinating?"

"I don't see where this is going."

"That's because you don't have the whole picture, Walt! Now imagine this, Walt! What if Ben Franklin didn't die, hmm? What if Ol' Benny found himself at one end of a cosmic drain, and what if that cosmic drain ended here?"

"This is pointless!"

"No, Walt it's not pointless! For you see if Ol' Benny had stayed in his timeline like he was supposed to none of this would have happened!"

"What do you mean 'none of this would have happened?'"

"The Reestablishment, Walt! The successful invasion and conquest of our thirteen little nation-states in 1812!"

"How is that possible?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Walt! Without Ben Franklin at the Albany Congress, we didn't have the idea of Union! Without Ben Franklin at the Second Continental Congress, we didn't have a strong Declaration of Independence! Without Ben Franklin, we didn't have one nation, we had thirteen."

"Where are you getting this from?"

"Let me show you."

A light turns on. Redcoats! Not just any redcoats, the two who were after Benny! They must have been captured like me.

"These two gentlemen are not who they appear to be."

"Who are they then?"

"They call themselves Dreamwalkers. They're from another universe!"

One of the redcoats looks at me.

"Don't listen to him! He's crazy!" he says.

"Yes, that's what they want you to think that I'm crazy, well I'm not crazy Walt! I'm not crazy!"

The speaker crackles. Bill must be catching his breath.

"Listen, look in your shirt pocket! One of their ID cards is in there!"

I look in my shirt pocket. I pull out a thin hard sheet with a glossy front. On the left side there is a picture of one of the redcoats... but it's moving! The head rotates from front view to profile! The text to the right reads: "Lt. Madden Vasquez - Dreamwalker."

Over the speaker system I can hear Bill laughing.

"See! See! I told you I'm not crazy!" he says.

I ignore Bill's insane blabbering and focus on Vasquez.

"Why were you after Benny?" I ask him.

"Your friend is right. Benny is the Ben Franklin from our timeline. We monitor our timeline, you see, to make sure no one interferes with it." Vasquez replies.

"Or no thing," the other redcoat interjects, "In Ben Franklin's case, a natural phenomenon. Unfortunately for Mr. Franklin, the natural phenomena he encountered often scrambles the victim's brain during transit and then it takes years for the brain to re-assemble itself. "

"And so on and so forth. All that matters is that the man who saved the colonies is here right now!" Bill says, "Don't you see, Walt? With Benny's ideas we can win the war! We can beat the redcoats once and for all!"

"You'll also be endangering the timeline!" Vasquez yells.

"We need his help!"

"No, Bill, you don't need my help," another voice chimes in.

Benny. He sounds so calm, so collected. He's truly become another person.

"What do you mean? We're still under oppression, Mr. Franklin!" Bill says.

"This is not my world, Bill. No matter how much you wish it to be."

"But you can't go! We need your help!"

"If you need my help, Bill then let me suggest this. Lost time is never found again and sloth makes all things difficult. Your resistance movement has been languishing for two centuries. It's time to get active."

"We're already making changes!"

"If that is so, then I am not needed. Only you can fight for your freedoms not I. Now, release my friends!" For a while, we hear nothing but the low hum. Then the low hum dies. A door opens releasing mid-morning sunlight into the room. I realize that I am able to get up and walk around again. Bill and Ol' Benny stand at the doorway.

"Walt, the Patriots need every man they can afford. If you would join us I would be honored." Bill says.

"Thanks, I might take you up on that." I say.

The two Dreamwalkers collect all of their equipment Bill had used. I gave Madden his ID card back. Madden smiles.

"I probably would never be able to return home without this," he said, "Otherwise, they'd think it was a mirror universe me."

"Good to know." I say.

I head over to shake hands with Benny.

"It was certainly an interesting time we had together, Mr. Franklin."

"It certainly was, Mr. Disney."

Madden and the other Dreamwalker laugh good and long. I'm not sure I understand what's so amusing.

I head back to the doorway. Madden points an object at the wall and fires. The wall rips apart revealing stars and streams of light through a cloudy mass consistently changing from blue to white to red. It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Madden jumps in first. A point of light flies toward one of the streams, which I now realize are timelines. The other Dreamwalker jumps in as well. Ol' Ben turns around and gives us a last nod of farewell before jumping in himself. The rip closes soon after. I look over and see Bill sketching stars and stripes. I like it, we might have to use that in something.