

TIME TO BURN

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For Elizabeth, our favourite person in the world

We thus have experimental evidence both that space-time can be warped (from the bending of light during eclipses) and that it can be curved in the way necessary to allow time travel (from the Casimir effect). One might hope therefore that as we advance in science and technology we would eventually manage to build a time machine. But if so, why hasn't anyone come back from the future and told us how to do it?

—STEPHEN HAWKING,

A Brief History of Time (revised edition, 2016)

All property is theft.

—PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON,

What Is Property? (1840)

PROLOGUE

A Dinner Party (1972)

The table was set. The candles were lit. On the record player a late Schubert piano sonata was playing, softly. He had decanted a bottle of claret to breathe.

He was a little anxious of course. It would have been strange if he were not.

Professor Francesco Molinari checked his watch. It was six fifty-seven p.m. on 12 April 1972.

If anyone was coming, they would arrive soon.

All afternoon he had been chopping, sautéing, stirring, bumping around in the little galley kitchen of his ground-floor London flat, the windows steamed up, the extractor fan rattling furiously.

The food was almost ready: a rich, glossy osso bucco, Parmesan polenta, tiramisu for dessert. He had tidied up the piles of papers which usually littered the living room, plumped the sofa cushions. He was all dressed up for the occasion, in an ironed shirt, a sports jacket, and tie. He had polished his brogues.

Only as he came to lay the table did it occur to him that he had absolutely no idea how many guests to expect this evening. This was not just any dinner party, after all.

What made this dinner party different was that he had not actually invited anybody. Not yet.

What made this dinner party different was that the guests were from the future.

After he died, when his personal effects were collected and catalogued, on the back page of one of his notebooks was where anyone attending tonight would have found the handwritten invitation, with the date and the time and the suggestion that they bring a bottle of crisp, dry white.

Was it such a certainty that his papers would be preserved and studied after his death? Without undue arrogance, he believed so. Aged just thirty-seven, Francesco was already professor of theoretical mathematics at Imperial College, London – the youngest person to ever hold the post. The winner of a Fields Medal – the highest honour in his subject – at twenty-one, despite leaving school in Naples at just fourteen. He had spent years formulating the mathematical proofs that time travel was a practical as well as a theoretical possibility.

To put it bluntly, that time travel was real.

The notebook in question – one of many in this flat full of his thoughts, his reflections, his ideas – was right there in front of him, on the kitchen counter. He was just about to write the invitation into the back flyleaf, with his fountain pen. He checked his watch again. It was now seven o'clock, on the dot.

Wind rattled the windows. All afternoon, it had been raining on and off.

There was a knock at the door. Francesco walked out to the hallway, switched on the overhead light, and reached for the latch.

The person in the doorway had their hood up, their face in shadow. Their jacket, rain collected on its surface in fat droplets, appeared to be made of some water-resistant material with which Francesco was not familiar.

It wasn't until the door was fully open that he saw the gun.