

IT'S ABOUT TIME

"It's about time," began Professor Pendergast, "that I want to speak this afternoon. Before the last century, time was regarded as a universal constant. It was thought to be independent of motion and of the observer. It was always there, always had been there and would always continue to tick on, so to speak, at the same constant rate. But, as you know, Einstein changed all that. We now know that time cannot be separated from the three familiar dimensions of space. The rate at which time passes depends on an object's velocity relative to the speed of light. We also know that strong, intense gravitational fields can bend space and time."

It was a warm afternoon. Young Zack was finding it difficult to concentrate. Maybe he should not have had that second pint at lunch time; and Professor Pendergast had such a monotonous voice.

"What's he droning on about?" pondered Zack. "Bending time?"

He looked up at the clock in the lecture hall. "Another 50 minutes!" he groaned. But as he looked, the clock started to bend like one of those melting clocks in Salvador Dali paintings.

Indeed, as Zack watched, the clock did start to melt; the bottom part was badly distorted and started to drip. Strangely, Zack saw nothing odd in this.

"This, I guess, is what old Pendergast is on about. There's some intense gravitational field distorting time and space," he thought. Nor did it occur to him that an intense gravitational field might be something he should be worried about.

He watched fascinated as Professor Pendergast began to elongate and his feet started dripping away. Even better, it seemed to Zack, his voice was fading away too.

Then, as he drowsily looked around, he noticed that the lecture room and all his fellow students were becoming distorted. This disconcerted him somewhat. He was quite happy to see Professor Pendergast distort and start to melt, but he was not happy at the thought of his fellow students melting; after all, most were not that bad.

The distortions were getting more pronounced; everything seemed long and thin and started slowly to rotate. Zack felt a little queasy. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his brain. When he opened his eyes he could hardly believe what he saw. There was the lecture room all right. But where was Professor Pendergast? Where were all his fellow students? The room was empty.

After he got over his surprise, he assumed he must have actually dozed off in that boring lecture and his fellows had gone off at the end, leaving him there. They must have thought it a great joke. He could just imagine their sniggers. Just wait till he caught up with them!

Well, he'd better go, he thought. He decided to go across to the Union Bar first to see if any of his so-called mates were about.

He was a bit puzzled as he walked over; the afternoon seemed to be

brighter than he expected. He thought it would be later. Maybe he had not slept so long as he thought. Maybe old Pendergast had cut the lecture short. All the more reason his mates should have woken him when they left!

Then he saw one of them coming towards him. "Yes, that's Jake, isn't it?" he thought. It was surely Jake, or was it? As he got closer, Zack could see he looked too old to be Jake. But the figure Zack had thought was Jake, suddenly stopped with a start.

"Excuse my surprise," he said, "But you remind me of a friend of mine who disappeared suddenly and rather mysteriously nine years ago. You look so much like he did then."

Now it was Zack's turn to be surprised, but before he could say anything, Jake (for indeed it was he) continued:

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Jacob Grant, known to my friends as Jake. I used to be an undergrad here when Zack Zimmerman was also an undergrad. Since getting my Master's I've come back here to do my doctorate. I guess you must be related to Zack. I've always wondered what happened to him."

Zack did not know quite what to answer. "Nine years ago," he thought. "That certainly explains why Jake looks older! But what's happened to me? He's not going to believe it."

"Well, yes, we're distantly related," said Zack, thinking 'by a distance of nine years.' "I'm, er, Matt – Matt Housman. But what's this about Zack Zimmerman? We sort of lost touch with that branch of the family."

"As I said," replied Jake, "he and I were undergrads here nine years ago. Then one day when we were not long into a lecture by Prof Pendergast – it was about time, I remember that very well – we'd not got far into the lecture, as I was saying, when Zack just shook his head and disappeared."

"What do you mean, 'disappeared'," asked Zack. "You mean he just walked out?"

"No," said Jake. "That's it – he didn't walk out. He just *disappeared*. One moment he was there, the next there was nothing. It caused quite a stir at the time. Old Pendergast got quite annoyed. He thought we were mucking about and that it was some student prank."

"Was it?" asked Zack.

"I don't know," answered Jake. "Zack was a practical joker – we assumed this was another of his silly pranks. We were a bit annoyed that we got into trouble and that he hadn't let us in on it. But the odd thing was that none of us ever saw him again."

"I guess he must have pulled out of the course and been too embarrassed to let you know," suggested Zack.

"That's what we thought also," replied Jake. "I always thought Zack was on the wrong course. His maths were a bit weak; I think he was finding a lot of the stuff a bit beyond him – but we would have helped him out. But, there we are. He pulled out. I've often wonder, though, how he managed that disappearing stunt and what he's done since."

"I guess we'll never know how he did it," said Zack. "If I find out what he's been up to, I'll let you know."

"Thanks," said Jake. "Nice meeting you – and let me know if you find out anything. You can contact me via the faculty."

"OK", said Zack. "Cheers."

Off went Zack, feeling very puzzled. He was not sure what he should do now. He decided first to browse in the University bookshop.

He looked at the newspapers there. Yes, there was no doubt that it was nine years since that lecture about time. For some reason, he had, so to speak, slowed up in time; he must have slipped out of the space-time of his contemporaries and now come back in after they had passed nine years of their time. It was all very confusing. Why couldn't time be a universal constant!

"Bother Einstein," he muttered to himself, as though Einstein had actually changed the way the universe worked.

"What shall I do?" he thought to himself. "I can't go back to my digs. Someone else will be there now. I've got *nothing*, except the clothes I'm wearing!"

He could think of nothing else than to call on Zelda, his girlfriend of nine years ago. "If anyone is going to believe me, it'll be Zelda," he thought to himself.

It never occurred to him that Zelda might no longer be living where she had been nine years ago.

There was the flat. It looked much the same as he remembered it. He rang the bell.

As he waited, he began to wonder if this was such a sensible idea after all. "This is daft," he thought. "Zelda must have moved on by now. Good grief! She might be married with kids!"

Just then the door opened. There was a girl about his own age. She was quite attractive, but she was no one he recognized. He was just about to apologize, when she smiled.

"Matt Housman!" she exclaimed. "It's about time! It's been quite a wait – but I knew you'd come."