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The Hundred-Towered City

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Published by Atom

Extract

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PROLOGUE

Jack's dad was a wacky inventor, his mother was a dotty professor of economics, his sister was too snooty and clever for her own good, and his younger brother was a constant pain in the neck. Jack was convinced he was the only reasonable `normal person in the house. He was at the moment helping Roger, his father, in their basement, which served as Roger's workshop. Jack wasn't assisting his dad out of any sense of duty, but because he knew if he was anywhere within the call of his sister, he would have to give her a hand with vacuuming the bedrooms of their Victorian house. Jack hated housework.

'Hand me the small torque wrench,' said Roger, from underneath the veteran motorcycle he was rebuilding. 'It's the shiny one with the black grip.'

Jack did as he was told, saying conversationally, 'I might join the army when I leave school. Or the navy.'

If he was expecting an argument from his dad, he got it typically in the form of mild sarcasm.

'Why not the Royal Air Force? You can kill more people with bombs dropped from a jet plane.'

'It's not all about killing people. You learn to do a trade.'

'And what trade would you like to excel at?'

Jack had recently been impressed by a television advertisement, aimed at young men who liked action and adventure.

'I dunno – telecommunications?'

Roger nodded and banged his head on the exhaust pipe.

'Ouch!' He sat up and rubbed his temple, then looked at his son. 'All right. Go ahead. Join the army and communicate. Then perhaps we'll get some communication out of you when they let you come home on leave. Your mother says all you do these days is grunt at her when she asks you a question.'

Jack shrugged. 'She always asks such daft things.'

'Like what?'

'Like "How did your football kit get so dirty?" What am I supposed to say to that? "Well, Mum, I don't know. We played in this enclosed white dome, with a sparkling clean floor and white walls. I'm mystified by how mud got on my shirt."'

'There's no need for sarcasm. You don't hear me using it.'

'Ha!'

'What's that supposed to mean? Pass me the flathead screwdriver. No, that's a Phillips. The flathead's the one with the straight tip. Thanks. So you think I'm sarcastic?'

'Only all the time.'

'OI! YOU TWO! DAD? CAN I HAVE A BIT OF TOAST?'

The yell came down from above, from the mouth of Davey, Jack's younger brother.

Roger sighed and said, 'I swear that young man was born with the voice of an elephant. Go and tell him all right.' He rose from the floor, covered in grease. 'Your sister's probably finished the housework by now, so you needn't worry about coming back.'

Jack gave his father a hurt look. 'Dad, whatever do you mean?'

'You know what I mean, mister.'

As well as being a brilliant inventor, Jack's dad Roger Kettle was a motorcycle enthusiast. Being British, he especially liked those bikes of old – the Vincent Black Lightning, the Ariel Arrow and most of the BSA models – which his own father had ridden in his youth. So naturally, having invented a time-travelling device, Roger chose to attach it to a veteran motorcycle in order to disguise its true purpose from prying eyes.

Roger was a brilliant man. He was one of those people who locked themselves into their workroom and had to be bullied or coaxed out for meals. When he was in the middle of an invention, he slept on a sofa bed in the basement. This time he had surpassed himself. Having read all there was to read about the feasibility and theory of time travel (which many scientists thought impossible), he went off and followed a line of discovery all his own. That was what he always did. He listened to what others had written, so he knew what the laws of science said, then thought his way along a completely different path.

His reward here had been to discover that time did not travel in a straight line, but was a spiral groove, as on an old-fashioned vinyl record. To travel in time all you had to do was jump from one groove to the next, if a device could be made in order to accomplish this feat. He couldn't help himself once he had come across this amazing discovery and simply had to tell his family, who all thought it was fantastically mind-boggling, even

Mum, who occasionally became impatient with these strange scientific explorations of her husband, which it had to be said very often produced quite extraordinary but valueless inventions.

Roger's mind blazed with triumph when he made this discovery. Feverishly, he worked for two whole years on a device which enabled the user to hop across the grooves. The device was quite small, about the size of a mobile phone, and fitted easily into Roger's favourite machine. The motorcycle could still be used as an ordinary motorbike as well as a time machine.

A sidecar was added for the use of extra passengers.

'You understand what we're doing here, Jack?' Roger said to him, as Jack climbed the stairs. 'I'm building a *time machine*.'

Jack smiled inwardly at his father's attempt at a drama.

'Sure, Pop. A time machine. Brilliant. I've read heaps of stories about time machines. Read a new one only the other day.'

Roger went a bit sniffy. 'H.G. Wells was the original,' he said, rather predictably. 'All the others are copies as far as I'm concerned. Oh, here's your sister. Coming to help, Annie?'

Annie, one year younger than Jack, had poked her face around the doorway above. She screwed up her nose.

'As if,' she replied. 'I'm off out, Dad. OK? Going to the cinema with Josie.'

Even before Roger replied she was back to texting on her mobile.

'You might learn something,' he suggested.

'I already know everything.' She flounced away.

'Women!' muttered Roger. 'Thank the Lord there's only two of 'em in this house.'

Jack grinned. 'We outnumber them.'

After Jack had sorted out Davey, he went back to the serious business of helping with the time machine, which was nearing completion. He did little more than hand spanners and calipers to his father, but he loved the fact that he was in on a new and great invention. Time machines had been talked about for a very long while and now his father – *his* father – was close to producing one. Roger had often said that science fiction hardware was fantasy one day and fact the next. 'Witness the geo-stationary satellite,' he had told Jack, 'first fictionalised by Arthur C. Clarke and later becoming fact. Now there are satellites up there for television and telephones and you name it.'

'Where are we going first?' asked Jack, handing his dad a set of Allen keys and marvelling at the shiny machine under construction. 'Or should I say *when*?' He spoke as if it were to be a Sunday outing, a picnic in the country or a trip to the beach.

'We? You're going nowhere, young man. Much too dangerous. We might have the machine but we know nothing about the travel or what might happen when we arrive. There are all sorts of unknown hazards, from ending up in a terrible situation – the middle of a battle, for instance – to catching the plague on landing. No, we have to proceed with caution, Jack. I will do some short-hop experiments and we'll see where things lead us from there . . .' Both Jack and Roger looked up at a sound from the doorway.

Ten-year-old Davey stood there, eating toast and covered from head to foot in foul-smelling slime.

'Hi!' said Davey brightly. 'I fell in the compost pit. That's dangerous, that is. You should have a cover on it, Dad. People could get killed.'

'The compost pit is behind the garden shed. You can't fall in it unless you climb over the fence. Were you climbing on the fence?'

Davey made no reply, crunching his burnt toast.

'If your mother sees you up here like that,' said Roger, '*you'll* be toast. Get to the bathroom, chuck those clothes in the basket and shower before she comes in. Uh-uh, there's the door now. Quick.'

Davey scuttled away. A female voice floated down the stairs. It was Kate, Jack's mum.

'Anybody in? Someone come and help me get the shopping out of the car. It's heavy.'

'I'll go,' said Jack. 'If Davey goes, he's dead.'

Roger nodded, absorbed by his task once more.

After dinner that night, Kate settled down in front of the family computer, researching the family tree. She had been doing this for months now, but complained that she was stuck for a branch of the family that had lived in Prague at the turn of the last century. When she learned that her husband's latest invention was a time machine, she said in a surprised voice, 'Really? You're kidding.'

'No,' he replied seriously, 'a time machine.'

'Good heavens.'

Kate reflected on this amazing news, but was so used

to her husband's inventive genius she soon got over her shock.

'All right then,' she told him firmly. 'You can take me back to the early 1900s. I need to get to the Prague Record Office before it was burnt down in 1904. There are some documents that no longer exist which were lost in that fire.'

Roger raised his eyebrows at this.

'I'm not sure, dear. I'll need to test the time machine before we all go traipsing off on our own particular jaunts.'

'Of course you will, darling, but once you have . . .'

By the end of the following month, Roger had already done several short-hop experiments, with wonderful success. He'd even taken each of the children, one at a time, on a short trips. Then he had tried some longer leaps back into the past. He had taken on board the idea that his machine could also be made to change its geographic position on the planet, as well as go back in time. He spent long hours working out the physics on paper, then modified the device.

Now he could travel back to nineteenth-century India, or pre-First World War Germany, to gather the feel of the real history of those periods and places.

Roger had discovered that going much more than a hundred and fifty years into the past was not good for his body's constitution. Something biological happened when he tried to go too far back: he became dizzy and disorientated, was physically sick, and it took over a week to get over the bad effects. He was happy with the machine's limitations for the time being. He would leave further adventures to the developers of his invention. No doubt those

brilliant innovators the Japanese would one day produce a pocket-sized time machine which would take travellers all the way to prehistory and the dinosaur age.

But they were a long way from that yet. Roger's time machine was at the same stage as the first jet engine, or the first hovercraft. It was simply a prototype, to be endlessly tested. On leaving the present, the rider needed to reach a speed of exactly 47.22 (recurring) mph and hold it for ten seconds. This was in order to create a personal time hole through which the bike could pass. Roger said this might explain the fact of disappearances. People vanished every day, without a trace. Maybe, he told his kids, they were in a vehicle that reached the right speed, held it by accident for too long, and were shot back into the past, never to return to the present day.

Arriving at the other end, or back from a trip, was different: the Matchless motorcycle could stop within a few metres.

For the moment it had to remain a secret: Roger felt the world was not yet ready for an invention like this.

1. A RUDE AWAKENING

The roar of the motorbike coming down the road outside the house woke Jack with a start. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and went to the window. Peering into the darkness, he yelled, 'Mum? Dad? Is that you?'

Jack was a no-nonsense fourteen. He'd been away at a school camp with his younger brother Davey and his sister Annie, both of whom were asleep in their own bedrooms. The coach had dropped them off outside the house, but when they opened the front door and went in, Dad and Mum were out. There was a note on the fridge that said, *Making a quick trip to 1903 Prague. Be back in a few minutes. If we're not in when you get home, help yourself to supper. Any problems, call Nana and Grandpa.* The children were disappointed they hadn't been greeted with enthusiasm after a week away, but they knew Prague was important at the moment. As the evening wore on, though, and Mum and Dad still didn't arrive, they realised something more serious was going on.

At ten o'clock Annie had rung their grandparents, but there was no answer from them either. It was only when they'd all tramped up the stairs exhausted to bed that Jack remembered his grandparents were on a cruise. His parents must have forgotten that too. The other set lived in Australia. They'd have to call their Aunt Julia in the morning. He fell into a troubled sleep, only to be jerked awake by the revving of the 1947 Matchless 500cc motorcycle.

Jack wondered why his mother or father hadn't answered his call from the window, even though it was late at night. When he looked down into the street outside, though, he could see a large man climbing off the motorcycle. The man ambled towards the front door of the house, just as Jack remembered he'd forgotten to lock it. Jack crossed the dark room quickly and tripped over his drum kit in the dark. The cymbals dropped to the floor with

a crash. A pair of drumsticks went flying across the carpet.

Now someone was coming up the stairs: a heavy-footed person by the sound of it.

'Who is that?' cried Jack, now thoroughly scared. 'What do you want?'

No one answered.

Jack's heart was racing as the footsteps paused outside his bedroom door – and then the door opened.

'Say something!' Jack ordered, terrified, as footsteps entered the blackness of his room. 'Anything!'

'*Guten abend*,' came back a husky voice. '*Wie ist das?*'

German. A strange accent too. Jack was a fluent German speaker, as were his sister and brother. Their mother Kate was of Austrian extraction and had taught them all from birth. Who was this? Jack broke into a cold sweat. Then the light went on and the immediate brilliance made him wince and close his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them, Annie was standing in the doorway, staring at the stranger. She too looked a little frightened, but true to her nature was trying not to show it. It was like her to go on the attack when she was scared.

'Why are you wearing Dad's watch?' she said in an accusing tone.

The man was indeed wearing the octagonal watch which doubled as the starter key to the motorcycle time machine. He was swarthy and bearded, and his eyes glittered in the light. He was dressed in odd clothes. But Jack got the impression the man was as frightened by this experience as Jack was himself.

'What were you doing on Dad's bike?' demanded Annie,

with not a trace of fear. Her hands went to her hips. 'You stole it.'

'German,' Jack told her. 'He speaks German.'

Annie repeated her question in that tongue.

'No, no,' replied the man quickly in his own language. 'I am here to help . . .' He looked around wildly. 'Wherever this is. Your father showed me this infernal device. He gave me the watch so that I could use the machine. I am no thief.'

Jack and Annie knew that Roger did not always leave the machine ready for a quick getaway when he went back in time. He thought it was dangerous to leave the machine ready to shoot back to his own time and place, and did so only when he thoroughly trusted those who guarded it for him This man must have simply sat in the saddle and turned the key..

'Where's Dad?' asked Annie in German, still firmly rooted but now with folded arms. 'What have you done with him?'

'I? If you are speaking of Roger Kettle, I have done nothing with him. I fear he is arrested. He was taken by the secret police for questioning and his wife went to find him . . .'

'Mum?' cried Annie. 'Mum was there too?'

The man hung his head. 'Your mother? Then you are my distant relatives, from Britain. My name is Blazek. I live in Prague.' He looked around him again. 'This does not look like a house in Prague. Any house. Where are we?'

'You're in London,' replied Jack. 'Er, what year is this?'

'Year?' Blazek looked startled. 'Why?'

'Can you just answer, please?' asked Annie in a much more conciliatory tone. 'It would help us.'

'Why, 1903. How did I get to Great Britain?' Blazek stared at the ceiling as if the answer might be there.

Jack looked at Annie and said, 'Nineteen oh three. Of course it is.'

Jack decided not to confuse Blazek with the time difference. Then the significance of Blazek's words sunk in. Their father and mother had been arrested in 1903 Prague. Heck! What were they going to do? Wait until Roger and Kate were freed and came back? But how could they return without the time machine? He'd have to send this Blazek bloke back to where he came from and tell him to watch over the bike like a hawk until Dad and Mum came for it. What a mess! What a terrible mess. What if they never let them go? Who knew what prison was like in those times in the Czech Republic? Was it even the Czech Republic then? Probably not. Probably . . . what?

He asked Annie, who was better at history than him.

'Probably Bohemia,' she said, looking as worried as he felt. 'Is that right, Blazek? Do you come from Bohemia?'

'Yes, this is true. This is Bohemia. Some call it Czechy.'

'Who rules it – Bohemia?'

'Why, it is part of the Austrian Empire,' replied Blazek, looking as if he were a schoolboy at an exam. We are ruled by Austria. I am of a mixed Austrian-Czech family myself, as is your mother, though we have lived here for two generations. Prague is the capital of Bohemia.'

'We know that,' sniffed Annie.

'Good. Well, your mother came looking for her relatives.

It is a bad time to be looking. Prague is full of suspicion and intrigue at this time. There is an international meeting of alchemists and the government is very concerned by such a gathering of foreigners. They are worried it might be political.'

'Alchemists?' questioned Jack.

'A worldwide society of sorcerers – they seek the black art of turning base metal into gold. The authorities don't want them in Prague, simply because they gather in secret, which is in the nature of alchemists. The authorities fear plots and conspiracies. I think the alchemists are magicians, but their magic is harmless. It is their love of secrecy which makes them untrusted and suspicious.'

'Good old Mum,' muttered Jack bitterly. 'She couldn't be satisfied with Ancestor Find on the internet, could she? She had to go back and shake hands with them all.'

'Never mind that now,' Annie said. 'What are we going to do?'

'Conference – in the kitchen.' Jack switched back and forth from English to German with ease. 'Blazek. Will you wait here, please?'

'Why does he have to wait here?' asked Annie.

'Because,' Jack explained, 'he'll freak out if he sees something that's way out of kilter with his time. Look how he's staring at my computer. If he sees the fridge and the microwave he's going to go bananas.'

'Didn't they have fridges in 1903? Ice boxes?'

Jack shrugged. 'I'm just saying the less he sees, the better. Come on.'

Out on the landing, Davey was standing rubbing his eyes.

'What's all the noise? What's up?'

'Nothing, Davey,' said Jack. 'Go back to bed.'

'Go back to bed yourself.' The ten-year-old glared belligerently at his siblings. 'Somethin's up. I want in.' His face brightened. 'Are we raidin' the fridge? I heard you say fridge.'

Annie was always honest. 'Mum and Dad are trapped in 1903,' she said bluntly. 'We have to figure a way of getting them back again.'

'Where's Nineteenothree?'

'It's a year, not a place, dope,' said his brother. 'Come on, we'll talk it out in the kitchen.'

Annie looked back nervously at Jack's bedroom.

'He – he won't go back again on the bike without us, will he?' She nodded towards the doorway, indicating Blazek.

Jack replied, 'Nah. I quietly pulled a plug without him seeing. Besides, it's not set for anywhere yet. Come on, let's get a sandwich and some lemonade and discuss this properly.'

Once the sandwiches were in their hands and the drinks distributed amongst them, Jack spoke.

'There's only one thing for it. I have to go back and rescue them.'

Annie looked worried. 'That's crazy. You could get lost too. We must both go. If one of us always stays by the machine, ready for a quick getaway, it's much better.'

'I'm not stayin' here on my own!' stated Davey spraying crumbs all over the kitchen table. 'You can't make me.'

'He's right,' Annie said. 'We can't leave him on his own. And we can't send him anywhere either. He will have to come too.'

Jack set his jaw. 'I say I go alone. I don't want to be responsible for you two. I'll have enough to think about, looking after myself.'

'You're not the boss of the world,' shouted Davey, spilling his drink and soaking Jack's tomato sandwich. 'Who made you the boss?'

'I'm in charge when Mum and Dad are not here,' replied Jack stiffly. 'I'm the eldest.'

'Poooph! By one year,' said Annie. 'This situation has not arisen before now and Davey and I have an equal say. We live in a democracy here, not a dictatorship.'

'Yeah, flippin' dictator,' cried Davey.

Jack knew he was not going to win. He had been thinking hard, ever since leaving Blazek in the bedroom. There was no way they could give Blazek instructions to go back and seek out their parents because he wouldn't be able to get back to the present again. Jack could set the time machine to go back to 1903 Prague, but he wouldn't be there to set it to return home. If Blazek never managed to get their parents released he would not be able to get word back to Jack, Annie and Davey. Either Jack had to go with Blazek, or Annie, who could also work the machine – or all three of them. If the other two wouldn't let him go alone, then he'd have to take them.

'All right,' said Jack. 'We've all been on a short trip back with Dad so we know what to expect. But I want you two to promise me that once we get there you'll both stay by the machine and use it if you have to get away quick. I'm in charge here, don't forget. You have to do as you're told.'

They said nothing, simply staring at him with expressions of mild contempt.

'Look,' he continued desperately, 'someone's got to be the leader here. It's an expedition. Expeditions aren't democracies. That doesn't work. It's been proved. You have to have someone in charge. That's why the army has officers. That's why you get people like – like . . .'

'Scott of the Antarctic?' offered Annie.

'Yes – yes, that sort of bloke. Scott of the Antarctic. You understand, Annie. He was a leader of men.'

'No chance,' Davey announced, standing up. 'You're not leaving me behind. I'm going to get out of my jarmies. What shall we wear? Tracksuit?'

'Nineteen oh three,' Annie said, also getting up and automatically taking their plates to the draining board. 'Tracksuits are too modern. Wear trousers, shirt and jacket. School clothes. That's nearest, I think. We'll probably still be stared at, but school clothes won't be too weird.'

'You'll have to wear a skirt,' said Jack. He had lost the battle for sole supremacy and wanted to go away with some sort of victory. 'You hate wearing skirts.'

'I'll wear a skirt,' she replied loftily.

Jack returned to the bedroom, where he found Blazek smoking a foul-smelling pipe. Jack waved the smoke away from his face and said, 'We're coming to Prague.'

'Who is *we*?' asked Blazek, with more confidence than he'd shown until now.

'Me and my sister – and my younger brother.'

Jack put on some slacks, a shirt and a jacket, and his school shoes.

'Do I look OK?' he asked.

'What is this "OK"?'

'All right. Normal. What I mean is, do these clothes look weird – I mean unusual to you?'

'They look a little strange – but if you are coming with me I can get you some clothes.'

'And my brother and sister?'

'Clothes for them too. What will you do? Seek your father and mother? Is that it?'

'That's the idea, yes.'

'It will be very dangerous. Prague is full of intrigue, full of suspicion. The secret police are everywhere. It is like . . .' Blazek seemed to search his mind before continuing with, 'like the Italian *sgraffito* on our buildings.'

The children looked puzzled.

'Ah well – *sgraffito* is two layers of plaster, one dark, the other light. The pale layer is etched to show the dark layer underneath. That is what my city is like: a beautiful city of light, with a dark underbelly.'

'I see,' said Jack, trying to look intelligent.

'The police believe there are conspirators and rebels who want to break from the empire. And anarchists who want to blow up everybody, no matter what for. Really it is only the alchemists, and also those who choose to follow a similar path. Thaumaturgists and theurgists.' Blazek paused as he was presented with Jack's blank expression after these long words. 'People who believe they can use the spirit world, or the world of angels, to make wonderful things happen. Prague festers with half-magic at the moment. Secrets prosper. Intrigue rules.'

'Sounds just the sort of place for a holiday,' said a voice from the doorway, and Annie stood there looking down at herself in disgust. 'Is this grey skirt *grey* enough?'

'Who cares?' muttered Jack, absorbed by worries. 'Yeah, looks all right. Where's Davey?'

'Here, boss!' cried the youngest sibling from behind Annie. 'And may the Force be with us.'

'This is no joke, Davey,' said Jack. 'It's going to be very dangerous.'

'That's why we need the Force with us,' replied his unsquashable brother.

'German, please,' Annie said to Davey. 'Otherwise it's impolite to our friend, who doesn't speak English.'

Davey shrugged and nodded, staring hard at the thickset man with his haggard looks and dark clothes.

When they were finally ready to leave, they went downstairs and wheeled the bike out into the road, lined by terraced houses. Fortunately this late at night there was no traffic. The black strip of tarmac stretched out before them like a long shiny runway. It was from here that they would take off into another time, another city. The time hole that would be created by their father's invention, the secret device he had installed in the motorbike, would carry them back to 27 November 1903, to the city of Prague in Bohemia: the city of a hundred towers.

Blazek sat on the rider's seat with Jack on the pillion behind him. Annie and Davey squeezed into the sidecar.

'Hold on to your wigs!' Jack cried 'Here we go!'

When they reached 47.22 (recurring) mph, they were almost level with Mr Singh's corner shop at the end of the

street, travelling through a blur of gritty light and darkness. Jack likened it to being in a sandstorm (although he'd never been in one), the visibility being almost zero. Travelling through time caused a sensation of whirring through dust and cobwebs, as if they had to pass through a thousand attics full of clocks before reaching their destination. This was accompanied by a slight difficulty in breathing, though nothing to be worried about. He decided to talk to his dad about wearing goggles in future. Those old-fashioned things they used to wear on motorbikes before helmets had clear visors. And earplugs too, to block out that whirring, whooshing sound.

When they came to rest they were at the end of the street – but not the street they had taken off from. The terraced houses were not so very different from the grand Victorian ones that lined the London street they had left behind, but the children could see horse dung on the road and in the gutters. At Blazek's insistence they wheeled the bike to the top of some basement stairs, then bumped it down those stairs to the well at the bottom. Blazek then used a large key to open the door to the basement beyond.

In the basement was a tiny window letting in grey light. Feet belonging to passers-by could be seen outside. There was junk scattered around the floor, a rack of what looked like bottles of beer in one corner, potatoes spilling out of a sack, and a pile of damp-smelling books. Here were cobwebs and spiders and probably rats. The place was dreary and messy, but obviously visited. A set of wooden stairs led up to a door above. The door was open. Someone stirred in a corner.

Jack peered. There was a man standing there. He had a

lean and haunted look. In his right hand was a bottle, from which he had obviously been sipping. This now fell from his fingers and smashed on the flagstones, splashing his shoes with beer. Clearly he had been shocked by the sudden arrival of four people in his basement.

2. IN FRANZ KAFKA'S BASEMENT

In German the man said, 'You startled me.'

Jack replied in the same language. 'Sorry, we didn't mean to.' He felt he ought to explain about the time machine. 'This isn't magic, you know – this is science.'

The young man nodded slowly. 'I know about the motorcycle.'

Blazek explained. 'You are in the house of my employer – the Jewish merchant Hermann Kafka. This is his son, Franz. He will help us all he can.'

'Have you met my dad?' Jack asked Franz. 'What did he tell you about the, er, machine?'

Franz's voice had a sort of hollow tone to it. 'I know that it moves through time.'

Annie said, 'And that doesn't bother you?'

'It delights me,' he replied, sounding anything but delighted. 'It lifts my spirit.'

Blazek took a brush and began sweeping up the glass on the floor, saying, 'Franz, perhaps we should take our guests upstairs, to the house?'

Jack went to the time machine and set the controls for automatic return to the twenty-first century. Then he put the safety switch on. Once that was done, he announced himself ready to ascend the stairs. They followed Franz up to the ground floor of the house. Franz took them past a study or library room. Jack peeked in. There were papers scattered over a desk. Franz saw him looking and said, 'I write a little.'

Once in the living room, they all settled into chairs. Annie stared at their host. He was not exactly what she would call a great looker: he had awkward sticky-out ears, though the rest of his features were pleasant enough. What struck her most were his eyes. They were so dark they were almost black, and they were certainly strange. There was no malice in them, but somewhere behind them lay thoughts that she knew would be quite weird.

She knew who he was. Just three months ago a children's author had visited her school and given a talk to her class. She had said to them, 'Now any one of you can be a writer when you leave school. Really. You're probably writers now, some of you. You don't need to be published to call yourself a writer. There's a very famous author – famous now, but not when he was alive – called Franz Kafka, who was hardly published during his lifetime. He wrote at least three really brilliant novels, which they found in his sock drawer after he died . . .'

Annie had not read any of the novels. She hadn't even tried them. She knew nothing about Franz Kafka except for that one mention of him by the visiting author. But she had not forgotten the reverence in the author's voice

when she spoke his name. Clearly he was someone really important in the literature world. Or would be, once he was dead.

Funny, thought Annie, *I* know who he is, but *he* doesn't know who he is.

Suddenly, she realised that Franz was staring back at her and she looked away, embarrassed.

Jack was saying, '. . . what you can tell us about our father and mother.'

Franz said, 'Your mother was asking too many questions on the street – the secret police don't like foreigners, not at the moment. She was arrested in Old Town Square as a suspected alchemist. Your father went looking for her. We haven't seen him since. Tell me, though – you are from England?'

'Great Britain – yes,' replied Jack, cautiously.

'What is it like there?'

Jack shrugged. 'I dunno. Not sure how it's different from here. I haven't seen Prague yet.'

'You have cities, towns, villages?'

'Yep – we've got those all right.'

'Does every village have its own church?'

'Most of 'em, I suppose. Some have more than one. And pubs, where they sell beer.' Jack used the English word for 'pubs' and he saw Franz take out a little notebook and scribble in it.

There were more questions, about life in Britain, famous buildings, the countryside, the people, the royal family, until Jack began to get a bit exasperated. It was he who should be asking the questions, since he was here to find

his parents. But Franz was quietly relentless, digging away at Jack and Annie for at least an hour. Both the children deliberately steered clear of really modern inventions, like the mobile phone and the iPod, knowing these would be deep water.

Franz continued to probe until he finally realised his guests were growing tired of the interrogation, and called a halt.

'Actually,' he said, 'questions that don't answer themselves at the moment of asking are never really answered.' A bit later on he said, 'God gives us nuts but leaves it to us to crack them open.'

'He's not really right in the head, is he?' Jack whispered to Annie.

Davey had fallen asleep on the overstuffed sofa, amongst the lace-covered cushions. Jack and Annie were also beginning to feel tired. Jack asked Franz, 'Are your parents coming home in the morning?'

'No, they've taken my sisters to the south – they're visiting cousins. You can stay here for the time being. You,' he nodded at Annie, 'can have Ottla's bedroom. Jack and Davey can use Valli's room. My sisters won't mind, especially if they never know. We'll talk some more in the morning.'

Jack realised Blazek was no longer around. He asked Franz if he would be back.

'Oh yes – in the morning.'