

# A SLITCH IN TIME



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# A Stitch in Time

WENDY MILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY PATRICK HAWKINS



# ONE

Autumn was on the brink of winter. It was four o'clock and the sun was casting long shadows across the roadway at Sycamore Close, a cul-de-sac in the outer suburb of Middlesfield. The shadows crept onto the neatly manicured lawns and appeared to reach out to the brick-and-tile houses as if to remind those living there that time was fleeting.

But the swiftness of time wasn't a concern for the residents of Sycamore Close, for whom day-to-day life conveyed a comforting air of permanence. All the houses in the street were neat and well maintained . . . except one. Residents had complained to the council that the house at number twenty was a disgrace. With its turrets, towers and rusted, wrought-iron balconies, it sat darkly in the suburban landscape. Light rarely spilled from its windows. Its grounds were tangled and overgrown, and spiders had festooned with cobwebs every nook and cranny of its decaying exterior.

There was no letterbox, because its sole occupant didn't receive mail.

Our story begins late on a warm, Friday afternoon when there came a blinding flash in the back yard of this house-that-time-forgot: a white light lasting nanoseconds, as if a giant photographer had snapped a photograph. In the overgrown back yard, half hidden by vegetation, was a box-like structure from which shuffled a bent, white-haired old man. The old man looked around, stretched contentedly and held up his hands and face to the afternoon sun. Then he glanced next door at the upstairs window of number twenty-two.

Behind the upstairs window of number twenty-two, eleven-year-old Sam Pendlebury was staring at his computer screen. His mother entered and shook her head. 'You'll have to stop now, because we'll be leaving soon.'

'Do I *have* to go, Mum? I hate going to Aunt Pam's. I can't eat what she cooks and she'll expect me to clean up after Bowser. Pleeeease . . . couldn't you say I'm sick?'

'No, I could not say that you're sick. Aunt Pam loves you, and we're the only family she's got. It's only once a week. Now you'd better get ready. You know how your father hates to be kept waiting.'

Sam knew his father's temper only too well. He logged out of the article on time travel he'd been reading; 'relativistic velocities' and 'geometries of spacetime' and 'time dilation' meant nothing to him.

Part of Sam didn't believe in time travel, but not believing and *wanting* to believe are two different things. He'd discussed the possibility of time travel with Emily, a dark-haired girl who sat at the desk next to his. He'd half expected her to say, 'Don't be ridiculous,' but instead she'd weighed up the possibility with her usual logic. 'Well, the idea of time travel is popular with science fiction writers, but that's just fantasy . . . Isn't it? No one has ever invented a time machine, and if someone in the future *has* invented a time machine, why hasn't that person come back to visit us?'

Sam glanced at his mother. 'Can people go back in time, Mum?'

'Not to my knowledge, Sam.'

'I wish *I* could go back in time.'

'You and lots of other people. Why would you want to go back in time, anyway?'

'To change things.'

His mother became serious. 'You're not unhappy, are you?'

'No,' Sam lied. But he *was* unhappy. His father was always angry, and if he could go back in time, he could find out *why*.

'You'd tell me, Sam, if there was something wrong, wouldn't you? You can ask me anything. Is there something you want to ask?'

Sam hesitated. 'Am I adopted?'

His mother gasped. 'Adopted! No, Sam. What on earth made you think you were adopted?'

'Because I don't look like Dad.'

Sam's father was a strongly built man with reddish hair, dark-brown eyes, and bushy eyebrows that drew together when he was angry. Sam was small and finely built, with fair hair and blue eyes. Sam's father had normal-sized ears, but Sam's ears were enormous. 'You'll just have to grow into them,' his mother would say.

'Sons don't have to look like their fathers, Sam. Sometimes they can look like an uncle or a cousin or . . . some other relative.'

'So who do *I* look like?'

A shadow crossed his mother's face, making Sam realise there was something she wasn't telling him. 'You *said* I could ask you anything!'

'You look like your grandfather on your father's side. His name was Sam, but why your father named you after him, I'll never know.'

'Why shouldn't Dad name me after him?'

'Because he and your father had . . . a falling out.'

'There aren't any photos of him. There are photos of Grandma Pendlebury, so why aren't there any photographs of Grandfather Pendlebury?'

His mother lowered her voice. 'Because your father burned them, but you mustn't let him know I've told you that.'

'Why did he . . .?'



An angry voice from downstairs made Sam and his mother jump. ‘*Will you hurry up, Gwendolyn!*’ Sam’s mother was called Gwen, but Sam’s father used her full name when he was angry. ‘Where’s Sam? Sam? Get yourself down here, Sam! *Do you hear me?*’

‘I’ll tell you about your grandfather later,’ whispered his mother. She kissed the top of her son’s head and hurried out of the room.

Downstairs, Sam’s father was standing at the open front door, allowing the afternoon shadows entry. His eyebrows were drawn together and he was toe-tapping. There were only two stages beyond toe-tapping, and Sam didn’t want to be around when his father reached either of them.

Mercifully, his father’s attention was diverted by a pulsating panel van. The music from Ziggy Doubleday’s van was a constant source of irritation to him. ‘That boy will be deaf before he’s twenty,’ he snarled. Then his eye was drawn to the front gate of number twenty, where a white-haired old man had his face upturned and arms outstretched to the afternoon sun. ‘It’s that crazy professor. Has he been away again?’

‘I’ll ask him.’ Sam shot off before his father could complain that it would make them even later.

The professor had a habit of disappearing for weeks or months at a time, but where he went was a complete mystery. Even more mysterious was the fact that he hadn’t changed in the whole time Sam had known him.

He looked really old, but then he’d *always* looked really old. Sam could remember asking his mother, when he was small, why the professor’s skin didn’t fit.

‘I haven’t seen you for *ages*, Professor.’

The professor chuckled. ‘Ages indeed, Sam – ages indeed!’

‘Where did you go?’

‘Oh, here and there. You can pop in for a cup of tea, if you like.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got to go to my aunt’s place, but I’d rather stay and talk to you. I’ve been reading about time travel and I can’t understand it.’

‘Time travel, eh? Bless my soul!’ The professor’s crinkly blue eyes sparkled. ‘That’s a difficult subject to get one’s head around, but it’s not impossible.’

Did he mean time travel wasn’t impossible?

‘*Sam!*’ shouted Mr Pendlebury.

Sam hesitated. ‘Did you ever meet my grandfather, Professor – my dad’s father?’

‘I did indeed, Sam. I knew your grandfather very well.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘I suggest you look in a mirror.’

‘*Sam!*’

‘Gotta go. See you, Professor.’ Sam sped off.

Mr Pendlebury growled as his son climbed into the back seat. ‘I don’t know why you spend so much time with that geriatric nutcase.’

'He's *not* a nutcase,' said Sam. He wasn't sure what a geriatric was.

'Don't answer me in that tone!

'The professor knows *everything*.'

Mr Pendlebury snorted. '*No one* knows everything. You tell me something you think that fruitcake knows that *I* don't.'

'He knows about time travel.'

'According to Einstein,' said Sam's mother, 'time travel isn't impossible, Henry. I think he said that if we zoomed away from Earth really fast, when we came back it would be hundreds or even millions of years later.<sup>1</sup> I don't think I'd like turning up hundreds of years into the future. Imagine coming back to a world where all the people you loved were . . .'

'*Rubbish, Gwen!*' exploded Mr Pendlebury. 'I don't want you and Finglestein filling Sam's head full of scientific drivel. There's something odd about Finglestein. People who keep pigeons are always peculiar. Pigeons are stupid, smelly, lice-ridden things! And what about that metal monstrosity he keeps in his back yard? Do normal people spend months renovating a back-yard loo?'

'Maybe the professor can't afford inside plumbing.'

'Weeks he banged away at it,' snorted Mr Pendlebury,

who wasn't listening. 'If there's a nuclear explosion, that blasted lavatory will be the only thing left standing. I don't want Sam spending time with that weirdo. It's bad enough that you let him watch that thing on TV where they flit through time and space in a telephone box.'

'Sam likes *Dr Who*, don't you, Sam?' Sam nodded. 'Scientists can't say for sure that time travel is impossible, Henry . . . not since Einstein.' She hesitated. 'If *I* could travel back in time, I'd change *lots* of things.'

'What sort of things, Mum?'

Mrs Pendlebury glanced fondly at her son and her cheeks were very pink. 'Nothing, Sam. When I look at you, I know I wouldn't change a thing.'

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs Pendlebury is referring to Einstein's special theory of relativity.