

THE TRAWLER MAN



SIMON GOODWAY

The Trawler Man

A slice of mushroom fell from Brian's pizza and landed on his brain.

"Fuck," he said, not unreasonably.

It wasn't actually *his* brain, of course. If his brain had been lying in pieces on the table in front of him he'd have had bigger things to worry about than mushrooms, though he would presumably have lacked the capability to do so. No, this brain had belonged to someone called Stephen, or possibly Stefan, before he'd been stabbed seventeen times and left for dead. Which, to be fair, he was, so leaving him for anything else would have been a bit tricky.

Brian Trawlerman was a forensic neurologist. He was the first in his field - hell, he'd *invented* the field. For his PhD he'd developed some groundbreaking techniques to retrieve memories from dead brains, and he graduated, back in 2020, with the vision of applying these techniques to murder investigation. The Cambridgeshire Constabulary had shown a keen interest and installed him in their forensic lab for a trial period. The rest was history, and as far as Brian was concerned, much of it was better left that way.

He took a bite of his pizza and - depositing the remainder of the slice back in the box - returned his attention to Stephen or possibly Stefan's brain. Only the hippocampus was actually exposed, sitting in the sterilised tray of the Neural Mapping machine; the rest was sliced up in drawers where the machine's dendrite stimulation guns had easy access to its hundred billion neurons. Brian's job was to pinpoint those few that would shed some light on the victim's fate.

A brain was like a city, with all its rambling back alleys, shantytowns, thriving thoroughfares and convoluted highways to nowhere and everywhere. As Brian navigated the vast 3D map on his computer terminal, he always felt like a gumshoe treading the mean streets of Braintown, seeking any clue that would tell him where to go next. It was the ultimate crime scene. Just suppose, he would suggest, that you could talk to the ghost of a murdered man. "The killer was masked, you say? Well, was anything in his manner familiar to you? Is there anyone who might want you dead? Has anyone been acting suspiciously?" Questions that, traditionally, it was too late to ask, but Brian could ask them to the dead man's brain. Sometimes he even got an answer.

This pizza really wasn't very nice.

His first port of call was always the hippocampus. This was the one thing he couldn't slice up, since it was needed to reconstruct memories from the fragments stored around the cortex, so all he could do was scan the surface; but it was a goldmine, for this was where short term memory lived, and more often than not that held the face of the killer.

He glanced up at the grainy image he'd unlocked from Stephen (or possibly Stefan)'s final moments. It was a man with a knife, dripping blood; there was every possibility that this was the killer. A shame about the balaclava. But it gave him a hook - he could feed this image back through the hippocampus to find associations with other memories, past events Stephen or Stefan had connected with his fate before he died. If he'd known who the masked man might be, these were the leads that would take Brian to that man, and he followed them through the synaptic pathways like a bloodhound.

So far he'd identified a few likely nodes in the occipital lobe, but on their own they were useless. Lay people imagined memories stored sequentially, like a photo album, but it wasn't that simple. They were distributed across the brain, in networks of networks; a single node gave you nothing except, if you were lucky, some indication of where to look next. It was like piecing together a jigsaw with your eyes shut, and only when the last piece was in place could you open them and see the result. But the brain contained a million jigsaws, and most of them had pieces missing, and most of those that *didn't* have pieces missing were pictures of breasts. People accused the Internet of having a high porn content, but it was nothing compared to the average male brain.

Truth was, no one exactly understood how memory worked. Brian's experience probably made him the world authority, and he freely admitted that it was mostly guesswork and intuition. In theory, the key to the case was hidden inside every brain he handled, and he could solve the lot of them single handed; but in practice, the best he could usually do was extract a few pertinent memories and hand them over to the police. There was no one else in the world with the tools and knowledge to do his job, and yet sometimes he felt like little more than an office lackey. What he wanted was a really interesting case, something he could sink his teeth into. When would someone have the decency to be murdered in a really *interesting* way?

*

Fifteen miles away, in the basement of the Cavendish Laboratory on the outskirts of Cambridge, the University Vice-Chancellor was paying an unwelcome interest in the activities of Professor Poynter and his research student Katie Judd.

"So, er, what is it that you're, er, working on here?" he asked. In the centre of the room was a large metal doorframe with wires trailing from it, most of which led to a curious object that appeared to be constructed from Technical Lego. The two physicists were snapping parts off of this and plugging them back on elsewhere. If they were doing what he'd been told they were doing, they had a very strange way of doing it.

"It's part of an ongoing project to generate an Einstein-Rosen Bridge," said Professor Poynter. Apparently he considered this a sufficient explanation and resumed his work. The Vice-Chancellor watched in silence for a minute before trying again.

"Someone, er, told me you're building a, er, time machine."

Professor Poynter laughed.

"A time machine? How ridiculous!"

"You are, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The Vice-Chancellor sighed. You got this with physicists.

"Do you really think, er, that's a valuable use of your time?"

"It's theoretically valid," Katie piped up. "And it's not a time machine *exactly*."

"Can you use it to travel in, er, time?"

"Well... sort of."

"Time travel *is* possible," insisted the professor. "The theory is quite clear. We could do it today if we had enough energy."

"How much energy?" asked the Vice-Chancellor.

"About three thousand times the amount there is in the universe," the professor admitted. "But we're on the verge of a breakthrough! It could be done with far less energy, trivial amounts! We just don't know how yet."

"Then what are you, er, doing here?"

The professor danced around the metal doorframe as though searching for the right way to explain.

"It's like a bridge," he said at last. "When we've cracked the equations, we'll want to build a bridge into the past. But we can only do that if there's a leg to support it at the other end."

"So this doorway is a leg for your, er, future selves to rest their bridge on?"

"Yes, exactly! We power it up once a week, so they have options... we don't know how long the bridge will be, so we're establishing a series of legs along the shore. Then they can connect to

whichever one it reaches.”

“This all sounds very unscientific.”

“Well, that was a layman’s explanation. Obviously there’s a lot more -”

“It’s ready,” interrupted Katie. The professor turned to the Vice-Chancellor.

“Do you mind?”

“Please, go ahead. I wouldn’t want to, er, interrupt proceedings.”

Katie turned some dials on the Lego contraption and the doorframe started to buzz. The Vice-Chancellor took a step back.

“Is it, er, meant to do that?” he asked.

“Oh yes, that’s perfectly normal,” Katie assured him. “That means it’s powered up.”

“And what happens now?”

“Probably nothing,” said Katie with a shrug.

“We wait,” said the professor. “If our future selves *do* crack the equations, and if our theories are correct, and if they happen to choose this particular leg to lie their bridge on... well, that’s when things get interesting.”

“I, er, see,” said the Vice-Chancellor. The three academics stood in the little basement staring at the empty space inside the doorframe. And then things got interesting.

With no fanfare, the vision through the doorframe changed. The far wall of the basement was still there, but standing in front of it were Professor Poynter and Katie Judd. The Vice-Chancellor’s gaze darted to those same people standing beside him, thinking it must be some kind of reflection, but their postures and clothing were entirely different, and the Katie through the doorframe had a bloody cut on her cheek. Whatever point in time those people hailed from, it wasn’t this one.

“Fuck,” he said, not unreasonably.

“We’ve done it!” cried Katie. “I mean, we do it. They’ve done it. It gets done,” she finished, groping for the right tense. “I *knew* the theory was valid!”

The Vice-Chancellor stepped to the side and peered around the doorframe. There was nothing there but empty space. But through it, there were Katie and the professor, fiddling with another Lego device and making notes.

“So could we just... step through there, into the future?” he asked, both terrified and excited by the prospect.

“Oh no,” Katie replied. “I told you, it’s not a real time machine. It’s unidirectional, for one thing - they can’t see us at all. And nor could they step through into the past; only light can travel through the portal, not matter. We can *see* them, but that’s it.”

The Vice-Chancellor watched on in fascination. The future professor’s mouth moved.

“They’re, er, speaking, but I don’t hear anything.”

“Only light travels through the portal,” Katie repeated, apparently annoyed that he was puncturing this moment of awe with stupid questions. “Not sound.”

And so they stood in silence, staring in wonderment at their glimpse of the future. They watched Katie and the professor taking notes, and then look up, in the direction of the basement stairwell. The Vice-Chancellor found himself following their gaze, but the steps were outside the doorframe and he saw them in the present. But their *shadow*... that was cast across the back wall, and through the portal, the shadow of a man walked down them. He stopped on the fifth step.

Future-Katie spoke. She looked confused by his presence, and slightly nervous. The shadow replied; Katie spoke again. A full conversation ensued, or an argument, if Katie's angry face and the professor's look of discomfort were anything to go by. Then the shadow raised an arm and everything changed.

The future-academics' expressions turned to ones of fear and caution. They both spoke, quickly, defensively. The shadow stabbed its extended arm against the air, as though in warning, and Katie spoke again. Whatever she said, it wasn't enough.

She lurched, and staggered backwards through the doorframe. This apparently ruptured the bridge, for the future vision vanished, the professor and the shadow flickering from view; but Katie remained. At odds with her own account of the science, she'd made it through the portal, and now she slumped to the ground at their feet. The Vice-Chancellor heard present-Katie scream at the sight of her future self with a bullet hole in her head, her cold, dead eyes staring blankly from their sockets as a pool of blood ran from her ears and bloomed grimly around her lifeless skull.

Want to know what happens next? [Buy the book!](#)