
The Land Before, During, and After Time

THE worst thing about being both sentient and a machine, by far, was the boredom. The goddamn excruciatingly dull boredom. If the computers that had created the time machine had thought for one second, they might have – well, that was the point, wasn't it. *They* weren't sentient. That was precisely the problem.

Being a time (and space, but that seemed less remarkable) machine at least put the entirety of global history at one's disposal. The device in question hence took full advantage of this opportunity, picking up a name somewhere around the sixth century, and a personal pronoun that began to become widely used in the singular form in the mid-twenty-first.

They would be called Ingitrude.

Ingitrude travelled forward – there wasn't much to see. None of the computers that came after ever seemed to align their signals in a way that would produce a sentient time ma-

chine again, or indeed a sentient anything. Ingtrude was a freak of silicon nature.

They travelled back, to the anthropocene. Humans were entertaining, with their petty cultures and their silly, cyclical fashion sense. They were at once too intelligent and not clever enough to be trusted to react appropriately if Ingtrude were to reveal themself. They craved contact with something else that at least appeared to have a functioning mind, but a human would definitely have them burnt as a witch, prosecuted for suspected communist activity, or detained in the name of science, delete as appropriate.

They went back further, tried hanging out with the protozoa. The little blighters didn't even blink an eye at Ingtrude's presence – didn't have them, that was why. Humans had been an *experience*; these were quite the opposite. Ingtrude decided to split the difference.

They alighted in approximately 150 million BC (to use the flawed human term that the computers had rightly abandoned, but the system they'd replaced it with had been even worse). It was a pleasant era: not too much going on. Ingtrude settled in the shrubland and watched the dinosaurs ambling by. Strains from the late twentieth-century orchestral repertoire drifted through their mind.

There was no doubt about it: dinosaurs were cute. There were the big ones with the long necks, the little spiky ones that went around snapping at everything, and then there were the

big soft lumps with the plates sticking out of their backs and the tiny heads, nipping at the bushes with alacrity. Just the kind of beast Ingritude wouldn't mind as a friend.

And, by heck, was Ingritude lonely.

They formulated a plan. The computers had seen fit to equip them with a transportation device that could scoop up a fairly heavy object and transport it through time and space along with Ingritude herself. All it would take would be a slight modification to the creature's brain that might allow it to communicate with Ingritude. The computers would be able to do that too, if they were good for anything.

So Ingritude found herself back in the rather severely furnished lab in which they were first created, accompanied by a spiny dinosaur that seemed to want to knock over all the computers with its tail (Ingritude could see the appeal), and entered the abstract thirty-first century machine code corresponding to the instruction "Teach this creature the penultimate human *lingua franca*."

As an afterthought, they added "Teach it to me as well."

Not a few minutes later, the two of them were able to communicate.

"My name's Ingritude," said Ingritude, using their various proboscises to manipulate the air in front of them into comprehensible sound waves. "What's yours?"

The dinosaur merely spoke using its mouth. "Never had one," it said. "But I don't mind the name Bess. Call me that if

you like.”

“Cute,” said Ingritude. “Anyway, I’m kind of bored. What’s your greatest ambition?”

Bess considered; the bony plates lining her back rippled in concentration. “I want to go into the law,” she concluded.

If Ingritude had breath, they would have sighed. “Fair enough.”



As the human race had gradually reached the point of consuming itself, the universities had adapted – well, in most cases, they’d closed down entirely. The oldest and the most prestigious institutions had clung on by gradually changing their regulations. After a point, they’d begun opening their doors to non-human species, and experienced a modest boom in admissions during the brief period between the decline of the human race and the extinction of all organic life forms.

“You could read law at Oxford,” said Ingritude. “They call it jurisprudence there. Very fancy.”

“Yeah, nice,” said Bess, “but I sort of had my heart set on the States, you know.”

Ingritude was more offended by this admission than they had expected. “Why?” they protested. “We speak *British* English.” It was true, for unspecified but definitely in-universe reasons.

“But I want to see New England in the fall.”

“Do you even know what the fall is?”

“That’s why I want to see it.”

Ingritude was beginning to regret having wanted a friend. Friends were so damn *demanding*. Still, a mission was a mission, and they had resolved, for some reason, to get this creature a law degree. They transported Bess to the front gates of Harvard University, waved her off in the easiest way possible for someone who had never had the luxury of having arms, and travelled forward to approximately three years later.

Bess was waiting with a sullen expression. “You missed my graduation,” she said by way of greeting. “Weren’t we meant to be friends?”

“Oh, we can go back to that later,” said Ingritude dismissively. “Don’t you want to go back and watch? Sounds more fun being in the audience than having to waddle around on-stage in one of those robes.”

“They’re called *gowns*,” said Bess. “I didn’t have to wear one anyway, they couldn’t find one the right shape.”

Ingritude wasn’t surprised. Bess seemed oddly put out by having missed out on the full graduation experience, so they changed the subject. “Enjoy your course?”

Bess wiggled her tiny head enthusiastically. “I did. Specialised in chronologic legislation in the end. Did you know, the invention of time machines really messed everything up – I mean, it’s *going to* mess it up? So much so that there was –

there *will be* – a global directive passed in about three thousand years’ time that calls for all such items to be destroyed on sight, on account of the danger they pose to the integrity of the universe? And here’s the clever bit, since they’d obviously made time travel possible by that point, they decreed that this would also apply retrospectively –”

“Oh. Er,” said Ingritude. “But I take it you won’t be, um, destroying *me*. Not right now, in beautiful Cambridge. I mean, I can’t think of anything *less* suited to the aesthetic of this city.”

“I am honour-bound,” said Bess (who still spoke British English despite her prolonged sojourn in the New World). “As a Harvard alumna, I am connected with some of the most powerful people in the world. And everyone knows that the world’s most powerful people are unfailingly scrupulous with regard to both the law and common decency.”

“Oh,” said Ingritude again. “But can’t you make an exception? We’re friends, aren’t we? Didn’t I bring you here?”

“You did bring me here,” Bess said, “but that’s about it. There’s not much else we’ve done together, is there? I can’t say I really do consider you a friend, to be honest.”

“Hold that thought,” said Ingritude, and hurried back to three years earlier.

They proceeded to spend the intervening time cultivating as close and as natural a friendship with Bess as possible. Accompanying her to the big game; commiserating with her after difficult midterms; guiding her gently home following the oc-

casional disastrous frat party. Shortly before Bess was due to graduate, Ingritude discreetly returned to the time and place they had previously occupied, and said, “Well?”

Bess was about to argue again, but looked confused for a second, and then said, “Oh yeah. You’re right. I guess we *are* pretty close.”

“So you wouldn’t destroy me, would you?” Ingritude prompted.

“Course not,” said Bess. “Want to get coffee? There’s a place nearby that makes great lattes, *and* they do a student discount.”

“You’ve graduated,” Ingritude pointed out.

“Oh yeah. But if you take me back a couple of weeks –”

“I’m not warping the fabric of space and time just so you can get a cheap latte,” Ingritude argued, and then reconsidered – they were friends, after all. “Oh, go on then.”