

# HOW TO STOP TIME

Jangal Publication



Also by Matt Haig

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# How to Stop Time

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VIKING

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Set in Minion

For Andrea

Jangal Publication



I often think of what Hendrich said to me, over a century ago, in his New York apartment.

‘The first rule is that you don’t fall in love,’ he said. ‘There are other rules too, but that is the main one. No falling in love. No staying in love. No daydreaming of love. If you stick to this you will just about be okay.’

I stared through the curving smoke of his cigar, out over Central Park where trees lay uprooted from the hurricane.

‘I doubt I will ever love again,’ I said.

Hendrich smiled, like the devil he could be. ‘Good. You are, of course, allowed to love food and music and champagne and rare sunny afternoons in October. You can love the sight of waterfalls and the smell of old books, but the love of people is off limits. Do you hear me? Don’t attach yourself to people, and try to feel as little as you possibly can for those you do meet. Because otherwise you will slowly lose your mind . . .’



## **PART ONE**

### **Life Among the Mayflies**

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I am old.

That is the first thing to tell you. The thing you are least likely to believe. If you saw me you would probably think I was about forty, but you would be very wrong.

I am *old* – old in the way that a tree, or a quahog clam, or a Renaissance painting is old.

To give you an idea: I was born well over four hundred years ago on the third of March 1581, in my parents' room, on the third floor of a small French château that used to be my home. It was a warm day, apparently, for the time of year, and my mother had asked her nurse to open all the windows.

'God smiled on you,' my mother said. Though I think she might have added that – should He exist – the smile had been a frown ever since.

My mother died a very long time ago. I, on the other hand, did not.

You see, I have a condition.

I thought of it as an illness for quite a while, but illness isn't really the right word. Illness suggests sickness, and wasting away. Better to say I have a condition. A rare one, but not unique. One that no one knows about until they have it.

It is not in any official medical journals. Nor does it go by an official name. The first respected doctor to give it one, back in the 1890s, called it 'anageria' with a soft 'g', but, for reasons that will become clear, that never became public knowledge.

\*

The condition develops around puberty. What happens after that is, well, not much. Initially the 'sufferer' of the condition won't notice they have it. After all, every day people wake up and see the same face they saw in the mirror yesterday. Day by day, week by week, even month by month, people don't change in very perceptible ways.

But as time goes by, at birthdays or other annual markers, people begin to notice you aren't getting any older.

The truth is, though, that the individual hasn't stopped ageing. They age exactly the same way. Just much slower. The speed of ageing among those with anageria fluctuates a little, but generally it is a 1:15 ratio. Sometimes it is a year every thirteen or fourteen years but with me it is closer to fifteen.

So, we are not immortal. Our minds and bodies aren't in stasis. It's just that, according to the latest, ever-changing science, various aspects of our ageing process – the molecular degeneration, the cross-linking between cells in a tissue, the cellular and molecular mutations (including, most significantly, to the nuclear DNA) – happen on another timeframe.

My hair will go grey. I may go bald. Osteoarthritis and hearing loss are probable. My eyes are just as likely to suffer with age-related presbyopia. I will eventually lose muscle mass and mobility.

A quirk of anageria is that it does tend to give you a heightened immune system, protecting you from many (not all) viral and bacterial infections, but ultimately even this begins to fade. Not to bore you with the science, but it seems our bone marrow produces more hematopoietic stem cells – the ones that lead to white blood cells – during our peak years, though it is important to note that this doesn't protect us from injury or malnutrition, and it doesn't last.

So, don't think of me as a sexy vampire, stuck for ever at peak virility. Though I have to say it can feel like you are stuck for ever when, according to your appearance, only a decade passes between the death of Napoleon and the first man on the moon.

One of the reasons people don't know about us is that most people aren't prepared to believe it.

Human beings, as a rule, simply don't accept things that don't fit their worldview. So you could say 'I am four hundred and thirty-nine years old' easily enough, but the response would generally be 'are you mad?'. 'Or, alternatively, death.'

Another reason people don't know about us is that we're protected. By a kind of organisation. Anyone who does discover our secret, and believes it, tends to find their short lives are cut even shorter. So the danger isn't just from ordinary humans.

It's also from within.

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## *Sri Lanka, three weeks ago*

Chandrika Seneviratne was lying under a tree, in the shade, a hundred metres or so behind the temple. Ants crawled over her wrinkled face. Her eyes were closed. I heard a rustling in the leaves above and looked up to see a monkey staring down at me with judging eyes.

I had asked the tuk-tuk driver to take me monkey spotting at the temple. He'd told me this red-brown type with the near bald face was a rilewa monkey.

'Very endangered,' the driver had said. 'There aren't many left. This is their place.'

The monkey darted away. Disappeared among leaves.

I felt the woman's hand. It was cold. I imagined she had been lying here, unfound, for about a day. I kept hold of her hand and found myself weeping. The emotions were hard to pin down. A rising wave of regret, relief, sorrow and fear. I was sad that Chandrika wasn't here to answer my questions. But I was also relieved I didn't have to kill her. I knew she'd have had to die.

This relief became something else. It might have been the stress or the sun or it might have been the egg hoppas I'd had for breakfast, but I was now vomiting. It was in that moment that it became clear to me. *I can't do this any more.*

There was no phone reception at the temple, so I waited till I was back in my hotel room in the old fort town of Galle tucked inside my mosquito net sticky with heat, staring up at the pointlessly slow ceiling fan, before I phoned Hendrich.

‘You did what you were supposed to do?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said, which was halfway to being true. After all, the outcome had been the one he’d asked for. ‘She is dead.’ Then I asked what I always asked. ‘Have you found her?’

‘No,’ he said, as always. ‘We haven’t. Not yet.’

*Yet.* That word could trap you for decades. But this time, I had a new confidence.

‘Now, Hendrich, please. I want an ordinary life. I don’t want to do this.’

He sighed wearily. ‘I need to see you. It’s been too long.’

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## *Los Angeles, two weeks ago*

Hendrich was back in Los Angeles. He hadn't lived there since the 1920s so he assumed it was pretty safe to do so and that no one was alive who would remember him from before. He had a large house in Brentwood that served as the headquarters for the Albatross Society. Brentwood was perfect for him. A geranium-scented land of large houses tucked behind high fences and walls and hedges, where the streets were free from pedestrians and everything, even the trees, looked perfect to the point of sterile.

I was quite shocked, on seeing Hendrich, sitting beside his large pool on a sun-lounger, laptop on knee. Normally, Hendrich looked pretty much the same, but I couldn't help notice the change. He looked *younger*. Still old and arthritic, but, well, better than he'd done in a century.

'Hi, Hendrich,' I said, 'you look good.'

He nodded, as if this wasn't new information. 'Botox. And a brow lift.'

He wasn't even joking. In this life he was a former plastic surgeon. The back story was that after retiring he had moved from Miami to Los Angeles. That way he could avoid the issue of not having any former local clients. His name here was Harry Silverman. ('Silverman. Don't you like it? It sounds like an ageing superhero. Which I kind of am.')

I sat on the spare lounge. His maid, Rosella, came over with two sunset-coloured smoothies. I noticed his hands. They looked old. Liver spots and baggy skin and indigo veins. Faces could lie easier than hands could.

‘Sea buckthorn. It’s crazy. It tastes like shit. Try it.’

The amazing thing about Hendrich was that he kept thoroughly of the times. He always had done, I think. He certainly had been since the 1890s. Centuries ago, selling tulips, he’d probably been the same. It was strange. He was older than any of us but he was always very much in the current of whatever zeitgeist was flowing around.

‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘in California, the only way to look like you are getting older is to look like you are getting younger. If you can move your forehead over the age of forty then people become very suspicious.’

He told me that he had been in Santa Barbara for a couple of years but he got a bit bored. ‘Santa Barbara is pleasant. It’s heaven, with a bit more traffic. But nothing ever happens in heaven. I had a place up in the hills. Drank the local wine every night. But I was going mad. I kept getting these panic attacks. I have lived for over seven centuries and never had a single panic attack. I’ve witnessed wars and revolutions. Fine. But I get to Santa Barbara and there I was waking up in my comfortable villa with my heart going crazy and feeling like I was trapped inside myself. Los Angeles, though, is something else. Los Angeles calmed me right down, I can tell you . . .’

‘Feeling calm. That must be nice.’

He studied me for a while, as if I was an artwork with a hidden meaning. ‘What’s the matter, Tom? Have you been missing me?’

‘Something like that.’

‘What is it? Was Iceland that bad?’

I’d been living in Iceland for eight years before my brief assignment in Sri Lanka.

‘It was lonely.’

‘But I thought you wanted lonely, after your time in Toronto. You said the real loneliness was being surrounded by people. And, besides, that’s what we are, Tom. We’re loners.’

I inhaled, as if the next sentence was something to swim under. 'I don't want to be that any more. I want out.'

There was no grand reaction. He didn't bat an eye. I looked at his gnarled hands and swollen knuckles. 'There is no *out*, Tom. You know that. You are an albatross. You are not a mayfly. You are an albatross.'

The idea behind the names was simple: albatrosses, back in the day, were thought to be very long-living creatures. Reality is, they only live to about sixty or so; far less than, say, the Greenland sharks that live to four hundred, or the quahog clam scientists called 'Ming' because it was born at the time of the Ming dynasty, over five hundred years ago. But anyway, we were albatrosses. Or albas, for short. And every other human on earth was dismissed as a mayfly. So called, because of the short-lived aquatic insects who go through an entire life cycle in a day or – in the case of one sub-species – five minutes.

Hendrich never talked of other, ordinary human beings as anything other than mayflies. I was finding his terminology – terminology I had ingrained into me – increasingly ridiculous.

Albatrosses. Mayflies. The silliness of it.

For all his age and intelligence, Hendrich was fundamentally immature. He was a child. An incredibly ancient child.

That was the depressing thing about knowing other albas. You realised that we weren't special. We weren't superheroes. We were just *old*. And that, in cases such as Hendrich, it didn't really matter how many years or decades or centuries had passed, because you were always living within the parameters of your personality. No expanse of time or place could change that. You could never escape yourself.

'I find it disrespectful, to be honest with you,' he told me. 'After all I've done for you.'

'I appreciate what you've done for me . . .' I hesitated. What exactly had he done for me? The thing he had promised to do hadn't happened.

‘Do you realise what the modern world is *like*, Tom? It’s not like the old days. You can’t just move address and add your name to the parish register. Do you know how much I have had to *pay* to keep you and the other members safe?’

‘Well then, I could save you some money.’

‘I was always very clear: this is a one-way street—’

‘A one-way street I never asked to be sent down.’

He sucked on his straw, winced at the taste of his smoothie. ‘Which is life itself, isn’t it? Listen, kid—’

‘I’m hardly that.’

‘You made a choice. It was your choice to see Dr Hutchinson—’

‘And I would never have made that choice if I’d have known what would happen to him.’

He made circles with the straw, then placed the glass on the small table beside him in order to take a glucosamine supplement for his arthritis.

‘Then I would have to have you killed.’ He laughed that croak of his, to imply it was a joke. But it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. ‘I’ll make a deal, a compromise. I will give you the exact life you want – any life at all – but every eight years, as usual, you’ll get a call and, before you choose your next identity, I’ll ask you to do something.’

I had heard all this before, of course. Although ‘any life you want’ never really meant that. He would give me a handful of suggestions and I’d pick one of them. And my response, too, was more than familiar to his ears.

‘Is there any news of her?’ It was a question I had asked a hundred times before, but it had never sounded as pathetic, as hopeless, as it did now.

He looked at his drink. ‘No.’

I noticed he said it a little quicker than he normally would. ‘Hendrich?’

‘No. No, I haven’t. But, listen, we are finding new people at an

incredible rate. Over seventy last year. Can you remember when we started? A good year was five. If you still want to find her you'd be mad to want out now.'

I heard a small splashing sound from the swimming pool. I stood up, went to the edge of the pool, and saw a small mouse, hopelessly swimming along past a water filter. I knelt down and scooped the creature out. It scuttled away towards the perfectly manicured grass.

He had me, and he knew it. There was no way out alive. And even if there was, it was easier to stay. There was a comfort to it – like insurance.

'Any life I want?'

'Any life you want.'

I am pretty sure, Hendrich being Hendrich, he was assuming that I was going to demand something extravagant and expensive. That I would want to live in a yacht off the Amalfi Coast, or in a penthouse in Dubai. But I had been thinking about this, and I knew what to say. 'I want to go back to London.'

'London? She probably isn't there, you know.'

'I know. I just want to be back there. To feel like I'm home again. And I want to be a teacher. A history teacher.'

He laughed. 'A history teacher. What, like in a high school?'

'They say "secondary school" in England. But, yes, a history teacher in a high school. I think that would be a good thing to do.'

And Hendrich smiled and looked at me with mild confusion, as if I had ordered the chicken instead of the lobster. 'That's perfect. Yes. Well, we'll just need to get a few things in place and . . .'

And as Hendrich kept talking I watched the mouse disappear under the hedge, and into dark shadows, into freedom.