



TIME BUBBLE PROTOCOL

BY GEORGE ATHANASIOU

Jackson Pierce was having his 125th birthday. Even so, he didn't look a day over 30. He hardly ever celebrated birthdays. Didn't believe in them. He skipped many of the Earth traditions his girlfriend Jennifer took for granted. He was, after all, born on another planet. Jennifer always celebrated her birthday and for once she was going to make sure that Jackson celebrated his. After all, he hadn't done so for at least one hundred years. He never seemed to have any time. He was always too busy saving some part of the universe from itself. He had found guns in the stone-age, the last doorway he and Jennifer slipped through. His job was to ensure everything was as it should be. He had a soft spot for Jennifer and he reluctantly agreed to celebrate his birthday with her. The deal was that she would choose the time and he would pick the place.

"OK Jackson. Who should we invite?" she asked.

Jackson was too busy trying to place a time disk on a door in her apartment that would lead them to their next adventure.

"Did you hear me?"

"There! That should do it."

The door began to glow. Jackson turned to Jennifer.

"I'm afraid we can't invite anyone, Jennifer. Don't you realize that if we were to take people out of their respective times, we could do irreparable damage to the time lines?" Jennifer knew Jackson was right. Even if they scooped up each guest from their respective eras, getting them back again would be extremely difficult. The time disks weren't exactly reliable. They never had been. A few days of time differentiation here or there would have a ripple effect and could potentially upset the balance of everything. Still, Jennifer was curious.

"But if you could invite some people, Jack, who would they be?"

"Well... Let's see.... Einstein... Hawking, Curie," Jackson responded.

Then Jennifer got a bright idea.

"I know, let's visit your world for your birthday," she remarked excitedly.

"I don't think my people would allow that," Jackson snapped.

"Since when have you been one to follow the rules. You picked up an Earth-woman in a dingy bar—me—I bet that wasn't in the rule book."

"I bent the rules there—I didn't break them."

"Great! Let's do it then! Let's visit your planet."

"No, we can't—at least not yet. I'm not ready to let you meet the family. We've only been going out a few years."

"So, Jack, am I the only Earth woman you've had? Or have there been others?"

"Jennifer, my dear, you're the one, the only and the best! Are you coming?"

The bathroom door in Jennifer's apartment began to glow and shimmer. Anyone walking through it would find themselves standing somewhere in another city on Earth or on another world, perhaps even in another time.

"So where are we going then?"

"The orders have come in from home world. We're going to negotiate a peace treaty between the Craylons and the Latrians on planet Altair 5. We're going to be off world again and a very long way from Earth."

Travel between places was seamless. Jackson had explained it to Jennifer and she understood the concepts, but the application as far as she was concerned was impossible. She was, after all, a PhD candidate in Particle Physics, studying at Cornell University. She was by most accounts a twenty-first century nerd buried in her books and in her boyfriend, Jackson.

The technology used for their travels worked something like this (Jackson had explained it to her soon after they started dating. He was out to impress her and he certainly did.):

"All manner of matter in the universe is teeming with wormholes at a sub-molecular level. These wormholes work like conduits, linking different times and places together. The disks enlarge the conduits making them large enough to walk through and—'presto'—travel to different times and places become possible."

Jennifer first came across the idea in a paper by Steven Hawking. The theory behind the science was fantastic, but Jackson's technology made everything real and that was exciting for her.

"Looks like we've ended up in some kind of a bunker. The technology's intact. That's fascinating," said Jackson.

"There are emaciated bodies here, Jack. Look! They're everywhere!"

"My God! I think we've arrived too late!"

"What did they die from?"

"Neutron bomb, I think. Kills the living matter, leaves the buildings, ready for the other side to inhabit."

"So what do we do now?"

Jackson removed a tablet-like object from his coat pocket. The object, while scanning the area, gave him critical information about where and when they were.

"One thing is certain, Jennifer. We're in the right place and the right time. The planet Altair 5, half-colonized by the Latrians, half by the Craylons. We're on the Latrian, side I think."

"But they're all dead."

"Genocide," Jackson uttered under his breath.

"We better go back. There's nothing we can do here," Jennifer said.

"That's not the only problem, my dear," Jackson said.

"What is it?"

"Well, according to all the information on my fancy tablet, the Craylons, who, incidentally, look more like you and me, and these poor, unfortunate dead lizard-like bipeds are—or were—at the Bronze Age level of technological advancement, to put it in Earth terms. These guys were playing with neutron bombs and with computer technology that's not supposed to have been invented yet."

"Someone's been playing with time, and you and I are caught up in it. It's like, giving electricity to the Romans," Jennifer said.

"Exactly! Now imagine what something like that would do to the timelines," said Jackson.

"Yeah, but we could just leave and go home."

"Remember the ripples in time I was telling you about when you took your first trip with me? I told you that eventually they spread across all worlds infecting all times, all places and all universes. We have to undo whatever was done here before you and I both cease to exist!"

Jackson fastened a disk to one of the sliding doors of the bunker. He frowned. The door wasn't glowing.

"Why isn't it working?" he muttered.

He removed the disk and replaced it with a spare from his coat pocket.

"Hmmm no change."

"What is it?" asked Jennifer

"I'm afraid we're trapped, Jennifer. We're trapped on an alien planet in the middle of a civil war with no means of escape."

"Can't you do anything?"

"What a way to celebrate your hundred-twenty-fifth birthday." Jackson said.

"So it's actually today? Happy birthday, Darling," said Jennifer.

An attack siren beamed out of the speakers in the bunker warning of impending missile strike. Jackson and Jennifer shut their eyes, held their breath and waited for the end.

At that moment another portal opened in the middle of the room. Jackson and Jennifer leaped through. They appeared in another place surrounded by soldiers.

"Welcome Sir, Madam," said one of the soldiers.

"Primary objectives secured and safe," rang out a voice that seemed to fill the room.

"Where are we? What is the meaning of this?" Jackson asked.

"We just saved your neck, Sir. The future is changing. The past is under threat. You two are our last hope."

"What's happened?"

"The universe we came from no longer exists. You two are all that is left. The last survivors of an alternate timeline that must be erased because you were careless."

"Where are we? What do you mean?" asked Jackson.

"You left what you thought was a faulty time disk behind!" said one of the soldiers who seemed to be a leader of some kind.

"But it wasn't working!"

"It wasn't working because another version of you went back to retrieve it. The two of you met and everything ceased to exist. You don't remember but that's exactly what happened. You created a paradox and here we are."

"But if that's true then how come 'here' exists?" Jennifer asked.

"'Time Bubble Protocol' for this type of emergency. Here we are outside of time and space. Outside of this 'bubble', if you like, the universe has ceased to exist."

"So how do we fix this?" asked Jackson.

"There's only one way. In a few minutes, Sir, you will cease to exist, wiped from the time lines permanently. One life for the lives of an entire universe."

"But we could go back, start again, fix this!" Jennifer pleaded.

Jackson Pierce felt his legs beneath him begin to tremble as a masked soldier stepped forward and brought a standard issue time eraser gun to his head. Jennifer shrieked in terror until Jackson's executioner removed his mask. He was another version of Jackson Pierce.



GEORGE ATHANASIOU

George Athanasiou was born in Melbourne in 1966. He has been creative since childhood. His first poem 'The School' was published in the Maribyrnong High School magazine, in 1980. The wife of the Greek Counsel General gave him an award for the poem. Young George was also obsessed with science, science-fiction and fantasy. These themes would later make their way into his writing.

He put poetry aside during adolescence and young adulthood in favour of pursuing his love of music³/₄performance and song-writing. He was lucky in his teachers, having been tutored by the unforgettable Kostas Tsikaderis. Later he won a scholarship to study singing under Audrey Duggan, who had worked with Engelbert Humperdinck. George was a long-time member of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Choir of Melbourne under Stelios Tsiolas. His involvement with the choir gave him an opportunity to perform before the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, at the time of the Patriarch's visit to Melbourne, in 1996.

George collaborated with musicians, over a long period of time, recording songs. One of his most memorable collaborations was with Polish composer, Joseph Miller, who had composed a musical piece for PolArt, the biggest Polish art festival celebrated outside of Poland, when the festival was held in Melbourne, in 2015. George wrote the lyrics to the 10-minute piece, which was performed to a full house at Deakin Edge, Federation Square, by two outstanding opera singers: soprano, Jolanta Mielczarek, and tenor, Alexander Murer. Both of those singers had had distinguished careers. Alexander Murer had even performed alongside the immortal Luciano Pavarotti.

George has been active in the Greek community from a young age. He was the representative of the Greek Organisation of Young Australians (GOYA) on the board of the Hellenic Youth Federation for many years. He has been a committee member of the Greek Australian Cultural League since 2005.

George has a Master of Education from The University of Melbourne. In a whirlwind of activism, he and fellow student, now Neos Kosmos columnist and renowned lawyer, Dean Kalimniou, attempted to save the department of Greek Studies from closure. During his wild uni days, George also dabbled in acting. He appeared in The Wog Boy as an extra.

His passion for poetry was reignited, after he attended the book launch of Dean Kalimniou's collection of poems, Κήπος 'Εσώκλειστος ("Garden Enclosed"). George had never completely stopped writing, but the excitement of the launch gave him wings. "While out on the town, I observed people, situations and confrontations and went home and wrote about them," he says. This is how his first volume of poetry, An Observer's Tales, published in 2005, came to be. Singer-songwriter, Anthea 'Jewels' Sidiropoulos, wrote music to one of the poems, 'The Lucky Country'.

George set about putting together his second volume of poetry, Tales of Light and Darkness, published in 2008. In 2012 he completed the Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University. Since rekindling his love affair with writing, George has won many awards for his poems and short stories. His work has been published in a number of issues of the Antipodes periodical, as well as in the anthology, Southern Sun, Aegean Light (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011). In 2018 George published the children's book I Think I have Swallowed Butterflies authored by his wife, fellow writer Monika Athanasiou. The book was illustrated by artist Con Constantinou. George has a third collection of poems due out in 2019. He is also working on a chapbook of science-inspired poems and a collection of short stories.