

SOCRATIC INSANITY

SOCRATES WAS in surprisingly good spirits, considering he was about to die. Of course, the old man was surrounded by friends and family, and even his executioner was solicitous and kindly toward the great teacher.

Grant was trying and failing to contain his excitement. He'd been on many JAUNTS—Jumping Against the Universal Natural Time Stream—but this was the first in which he had been granted permission to attend an important historical event. Up until now they'd restricted his jaunts in time to daily life or historically insignificant occurrences that didn't risk compromising his sanity.

Jaunting was the coolest thing since über-chimping. It had been tightly controlled by the government since its invention because—you know—paradoxes. Not the kind that resulted in ruptures of the universe or massive splits in the timeline, but the kind that turned time travelers into lunatics. There were several whole institutes filled with the insane remnants of early time travel experiments. Turns out it's impossible to change history. The so-called Grandfather

Paradox was resolved categorically, first by physics, and then by experimentation. There was just no way to go back and change history, for a variety of reasons. But it was possible for a time traveler to perceive that they had changed history, and therein lay the danger.

Perception became subjective reality, so returning time travelers really believed they had altered the time stream, even though everything remained the same objectively. There were several thousand nut-job ex-time travelers who believed they had killed Hitler, for example. They believed they'd killed Hitler during their JAUNTS, and in their subjective reality they had, but objectively they hadn't. It just had never taken place. When confronted with history books, documentary footage and Holocaust monuments, these would-be Adolf assassins invariably went off the deep end. Exactly why the cognitive dissonance between their subjective and objective realities often drove time travelers insane remained a mystery—it had been the subject of many a doctoral thesis—but the fact was it did. This is why a very specific set of rules were put in place, and time travelers ignored those rules at their peril.

So Grant knew that he shouldn't do anything to stop Socrates's execution, or say something that might change the history of philosophy. He was there to observe and remember. Anything sent back in time had to be biodegradable or indistinguishable from something that would have existed in that time period because the traveler would often go insane if it wasn't, so he couldn't even take a notepad, though he could take notes on anything he could scare up in the past.

He'd trained for the mission for quite some time. In addition to doing PhDs in philosophy and history, he'd also learned how to record the minutia of events and the long

passages of speech he perceived. He could compensate for his brain's inherent flaws and biases through a rigorous discipline known—ironically—as Socratio: a combination of critical thinking, cognitive science, and meditation techniques. He could maintain an almost inhuman detachment from emotion and life in general. These qualities made Grant a staggeringly boring dinner companion. But they helped mitigate the cognitive dissonance that turned time travelers into drooling (albeit well-educated) maniacs on their return to 21st-century Earth.

Socrates was being executed by the authorities in Athens for corrupting the minds of young Athenians, primarily by getting them to question the existence of the gods. His students and friends had gathered to be with him as he was put to death via the ingestion of hemlock poison. He'd already bathed, so the women wouldn't have to wash his body later, and he'd said goodbye to his children.

"Let's do this," Socrates said to his friend Crito.

"So soon? It's not even dusk. Many people don't take the poison until after dark. They eat and drink and make love with their wives. You have time still." Crito tried to keep from crying again.

Grant had already watched the conversation upon which Plato had based his *Crito*; Socrates's friend had indeed tried to convince the old philosopher to escape prison. And Socrates had explained why he could not do so. Plato had gotten it mostly right, and Grant had to use all his training to push aside a feeling of exhilaration. He needed to watch it play out in front of him without seeming the least bit out of place.

It was hard not to feel bad for Crito. He really loved the ugly old teacher, and he wasn't ready for him to die.

Socrates was ready, though. “Fair enough, but I’m not most men, and doing those things would make me seem foolish in my own eyes. Let’s get the poison going!”

Grant felt like he was watching a Monty Python sketch. Socrates actually seemed happy about being killed.

The executioner arrived with the hemlock.

“Gimme,” Socrates said, taking the cup from his killer. He lifted the cup and toasted: “To the gods.” Then he drank, deeply, finishing it off in one long swallow.

The men gathered there, Socrates’s friends and students, philosophers all, began to weep.

“What the serious fuck?” Socrates said. “Why are you crying? How can you be crying at a moment like this? If I wanted crying I wouldn’t have sent the women away!”

Despite his training, Grant couldn’t help himself; he laughed.

“At least one of you gets it. Who is that anyway?”

Grant tried to control his laughter. The other men were weeping, and Socrates said, “I’m serious, if you don’t pull your shit together, I’m going to ask you to leave. You too, giggles.

“This is just the end of my body. Surely our time together will live on. If my words did not survive my mortal flesh, then there would be something worth crying about. Not this.” Socrates pinched his own cheek.

Everyone got their emotions under control. The executioner explained that Socrates needed to walk around a bit for the poison to work most effectively. Socrates nodded. He pointed to Grant and said, “Could you help me up?”

Grant looked behind him before realizing that Socrates did indeed want *his* help. That wasn’t anywhere in the accounts. Grant’s amusement turned quickly to terror. This

was dangerous territory. His training helped, but not enough to keep him calm as Socrates threaded his arm through Grant's.

"Let us talk," Socrates said. "I do not know you. Why are you here?"

"To see if the accounts are accurate, sir," Grant found himself saying. It was the stupidest thing he could have said. He should never even hint that he was from the future!

Socrates thought for a moment. "Accounts?" He gazed into Grant's eyes, and the time traveler found himself saying things he shouldn't.

"The written history of your death. We—I—have always wondered. The passages have always been most moving."

"Yet you laughed."

"I didn't expect you to drop the equivalent of the f-bomb," Grant explained.

Socrates looked confused by this idiom, which didn't scan perfectly in Greek. He pondered it for a moment.

"Ah, my profanity."

"Yes. It caught me by surprise."

"They needed to be shaken up. It's important they understand this choice."

"I see."

"Do you? In your world have you conquered the mysteries of death, as you have time?"

"You know I'm not from here?"

"Or you are a madman, but you seem sane, and I don't find it unreasonable that human logic would someday unlock the secrets of the infinite. Can you explain to me why we perceive time as being linear? Is it truly so, or is it the limitations of our senses that make us see time that way?"

“Teacher, why are you talking so long with this stranger whom we have never met and know not?” Plato interrupted.

“Why do you ask questions to answers you know?” Socrates asked Plato.

“So that I may get others to think of the answers, as you have taught.”

“Have I?” asked Socrates. The room was quiet, except for Crito, who was still sniffing a bit.

“I’ve got to be honest,” Grant whispered. “I didn’t do very well in the mathematics of time mechanics, and all the stuff about closed time-like curves. The short answer is that time is both linear and not.”

“This makes me wish I had not taken the hemlock, young man.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t supposed to interfere.”

“A wise policy, but impossible to follow, I think. Human nature renders the idea that you would not interfere, in some way, quite idiotic.”

Plato had joined them. He nodded.

“Still, the idea is worth considering. But what of the other dangers? Surely some of your cohort would be tempted to change time. To prevent terrible events by ending the lives of those who caused them. Ah, but if events are linear in nature, then what if such a traveler went back in time to slay an evil man, only to discover later that he was an ancestor, say a great grandfather. His great grandfather could then never beget his grandfather, and his grandfather a father, and so the traveler himself could never be born...” Socrates trailed off.

“And thus the traveler could never have gone back in the first instance to kill his great grandfather,” Plato finished.

“Exactly.” Socrates smiled. “A paradox.”

“Yes, we call that the Grandfather Paradox, but it turns out it’s not possible to change events in the past. It may seem possible, but when we return to our own presents, the events have never changed. We’ve run many experiments replicating this. We’ve stopped trying because it causes time travelers to lose their minds. That’s why it’s so important that we don’t interfere.”

“Perhaps it is like you are all prisoners, in a cave, and facing a wall,” Socrates said to Grant. “Imagine a torch, lit behind them. They must interpret reality through the shadows cast on the wall. But the travelers have been freed, so they can go outside and see the light. You could see the truth, but all the others, the ones who did not return to the past, are still chained to the wall. They cannot see it.”

Plato looked thoughtful at this description of time travel.

“But we still go insane, relative to the others.”

Socrates smiled. “That’s what many have said of me. Even my own friends, here, don’t understand why I didn’t defend myself. They don’t appreciate why I have taken this poison so willingly, which, as it happens, seems to be working.”

Crito sobbed. Plato and Grant helped Socrates return to his bed. As he lay down again, Socrates said to his friends, “You have much to learn from this man, whom we would call mad. But I’d ask that you do not mention his presence here today so that he can have the pleasure of freeing himself from his delusions another way. I call him brave. And interested in the Good. He pursues truth to the edge of sanity.”

The executioner returned and checked the progress of the hemlock. Socrates’s legs were numb already, and soon his belly was cold. It wouldn’t be long now.

Plato was staring at Grant when Socrates said, “You espe-

cially, Plato. Do not use your writing against this man. It is a pernicious art.

“Now, Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don’t forget.”

Crito said he would take care of it, but there was no response from Socrates, and everyone in the room burst into tears. Even Grant.

But he was due to return. The vortal would open any moment, and he had to go. But Plato pulled him aside and asked, “Is it possible for me to go with you?”

“What?”

“I would see what becomes of his teachings,” Plato said, nodding his head toward the dead Socrates, and all the men mourning him.

Grant didn’t know what to say. It was possible, technically, if they sent him back to the same vortal a moment right after Grant. But if Plato went to Grant’s timeline, and never returned, then he would never write all his great works, and Socrates would be unknown, and Grant would never come back to witness his death. A paradox that Grant couldn’t permit. If he did, then he would go insane.

“No, you can’t go with me,” Grant said. He felt bad lying to Plato, but it was the safest course of action. “But I can tell you that through your writing, his teachings live on.”

“You see, teacher, it is useful!” Plato shouted at Socrates’s corpse over the blubbing of the other men. Plato looked ashamed of himself. “My regrets on that outburst. I promise not to share the knowledge, O’ temporal transient, but what is your name?”

“Uh...” Grant searched his memory for an ancient Greek name, and couldn’t resist saying, “Zeno.”