

## Section 5T

It didn't really matter if Colin MacDonald scraped the flaking paintwork with his wheelchair. He knew that the Department of Education, Science and Research had only employed him to help them meet their quota of disabled staff; but it meant that his job was safe. He had a licence to damage.

He worked as a Unit Supervisor on the admin floor, but Steel House was mostly occupied by academics, theoreticians and researchers. The majority of them pursued dull-but-worthy areas of enquiry but two of the projects were the subject of much gossip and speculation. There was Section 5T, a rather despised group that occupied a dingy basement lab; they were working on *time travel*, if water cooler conversations were to be believed. Then there was the STS, the Social Targeting Section, the best-funded unit in the building, which worked from a well-equipped ground-floor suite.

The STS had a lofty if sinister-sounding ambition; the efficient reordering of British society. A succession of right-wing governments had determined to reduce the welfare and health budgets and so British subjects were no longer free to breed indiscriminately; instead birth output was targeted to match the projected needs of society. In an ideal scenario this policy should result in zero unemployment and the entire population working in jobs which intellectually and physically suited them. So the STS tried to estimate the country's future manpower needs, adopting ever more elaborate formulae to break down these needs by region,

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social class and parental IQ. An army of Social Targeting Operatives issued Preventative Non-breeding Orders, identified non-permitted pregnancies and ordered terminations. STOs also made sure to issue abortion orders for every foetus showing signs of physical or mental abnormality, thus easing the future burden on taxpayers.

Government propaganda TV broadcasts always emphasised the compassion inherent in preventing the birth of a 'helpless' disabled child: the average viewer nodded and thought that this was a good thing. It looked different to Colin MacDonald, though; his legs hadn't worked when he was born and they still didn't. Under the present regime, he would have been denied the right to life.

And then one morning Colin received a phone call asking him to visit Section 5T, colleagues he'd had no previous dealings with. He trundled thoughtfully into the staff lift, punched the basement button, and watched as the doors sluggishly closed; after a brief descent, they creaked open again, and Colin was greeted by a tall man in a white coat, his pale face topped by wayward greying hair. 'Colin McDonald?' asked the man, smiling uneasily, 'Dr Wynn Roberts, head of Section 5T. Thank you for coming down so quickly - will you come this way? Can I, er, help you with the chair?'

'No thanks, I can easily manage myself. What is it you want to talk to me about?'

'Oh, it's just routine. Purely administrative stuff. In this office here - can you manage the doorway in the chair?'

Colin found himself in a large untidy office in which some seats had been arranged in a semicircle. These were occupied by Roberts and five other Section 5T scientists.

'Please make yourself comfortable, Colin,' said Roberts, 'We're just going to ask you a few simple questions. When were you born?'

‘Twenty-seven years ago this Saturday, as it happens.’ said Colin.

‘Well, there’s a coincidence!’ said one of the scientists, a young man with sandy hair and a freckled face, ‘we share a birthday!’

Roberts turned and looked disapprovingly at the man, and then looked again at Colin. For some time, Colin underwent a detailed questioning about his place and exact time of birth, the names of his parents, and his early home life.

‘Your parents are dead now, aren’t they?’

‘Yes. They were killed in a car crash when I was two. I was at home with the babysitter and...’

‘And where were you brought up?’

‘In a home.’

‘And so,’ said Roberts, ‘you have no family.’

‘I don’t. No other relatives, as far as I’m aware.’

A few questions later, Colin was thanked and returned to his department; as he approached the lift the sandy-haired man detained him. ‘Name’s Richard Keyes,’ he said, ‘bit of a coincidence, eh? And I’m an orphan as well. We’ve a lot in common.’

Colin shook hands feebly. Back in the section, his staff were excited about his summons and asked him what had gone on. Colin told them about the questions he had faced. ‘How about that,’ said Kevin, a data processor, ‘our boss is going to be the first ever time-traveller!’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked someone.

‘Well, we all know that’s what they’re working on,’ Kevin went on, ‘they’ll be checking out Col’s suitability. But he won’t get anywhere. It’s all rubbish. It won’t work.’

‘You think?’ said someone else. ‘I heard they’d already had a go at time travel, but lost the guy they sent.’

Colin did not listen to the chatter; he was thinking about Richard Keyes, and about his own twin brother, who had been adopted shortly after the fatal car crash. The adoptive parents hadn’t wanted the responsibility of looking after a cripple, so the twins had been separated. Great care had been taken to ensure that the twins could not easily find each other again, though the staff at the home did later tell Colin about his brother. No wonder he had forgotten to mention the brother when Section 5T had questioned him. If Keyes *was* that brother, he may well not know that he was a twin. Why hadn’t Section 5T checked the birth certificates? Then again, they were scientists, not historians; they had different truths, differently arrived at.

Some weeks later, 5T were preparing to summon Colin again. The atmosphere was tense. Roberts gathered his team together and addressed them; there was a strange fire in his eyes.

‘The STOs are ready to travel back to the time just before the subject’s birth, and one of the department’s doctors will be going with them. The foetus will be aborted, and we are convening here to observe the dissolution of the adult subject; it will also be recorded from four angles on hidden digital video cameras. He has no family and will not be missed. Our theorists advise us that if the project is successful, we will find someone else working in his post, the person who was appointed instead of him. What is also certain is that the nation will be spared the expense of nursing and caring for the subject. In Social Targeting we already use abortion as a tool in freeing society from the financial burden of those who have no right to life. If this experiment is successful we will be able to combine Social Targeting and time travel and so retrospectively save our nation money and rid it of inefficient operatives. Remember this, any of

you who have a sense of guilt about what we are doing. It is compassion; it is for society's good and society's happiness. Wilson, please fetch the subject.' Wilson left for the lift, and Roberts phoned the laboratory from which the STOs were embarking on their journey. 'You may go now,' was all he said to them.

Again the seating was arranged in a semicircle, and Colin placed in the centre; he noticed that everyone watched him with a particular intentness this time around. He felt a responsibility to break the ice. 'There's something I forgot to tell you last week.'

'What was that?' asked Roberts.

'I had a twin brother. Not identical, of course; his legs were all right. He was adopted shortly after our parents were killed.' He watched Keyes carefully; the young scientist's face looked blank and disbelieving. Others, too, looked worried. 'There were *twins*?' said Roberts.

'So both will be aborted...' someone said, and another added, as if Colin were not there, 'We haven't worked through the implications of a *twin* termination. Who knows who or where this man is now...' He was silenced by a cry from Roberts; all looked to see Colin grow pale and fade. In seconds, both he and his wheelchair had vanished.

'Well,' said a relieved Roberts, 'That much worked, anyway. The subject has gone, has never existed outside the womb.'

'Yet our memories of him are still there,' said someone on the edge of the group.

Roberts looked irritated. 'We have changed history, not eradicated it. Our memories are real. More importantly, the experiment has been successful, and the world will never be the same.'

Someone said 'Where's Richard?'

There was a vacant seat in the semicircle.

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For some time the people from Section 5T remained in their department, afraid to go outside, fearing what else might have changed.