

The Complete History of the World

“Uncle Fred?” John Trumbull’s voice was tentative, as he knocked on the hospital room door. He never felt comfortable in hospitals, even as a visitor. The door was open, but he hated to just barge in, even though his uncle was expecting him. He waited for a moment to see if there was a reply, but his wife Katie brushed her way past him and strode into the room. She was one of those people who never seemed to be uncertain about anything, and certainly not one to wait. He followed her into the room.

“He’s asleep,” she pronounced. The tone in her voice made it clear that she did not entirely approve of anyone sleeping at this hour of the day, even in a hospital.

“Do you think we should wake him?” John asked.

“Of course we should wake him.” Katie replied. “He invited us here, didn’t he? Wasn’t he the one who said to make sure we got here before three? It’s two o’clock now. The last time I checked that was before three.”

John stepped a little closer to the sleeping figure in the bed. “Uncle Fred? It’s us. John and Katie.” There was no response. He reached out and gently touched the old man’s arm. “Uncle Fred?”

Fred opened his eyes and then squinted against the light streaming in from the window. He reached for his glasses on the tray beside his bed and put them on. John noticed they were the kind that automatically darkened in bright light. Fred gave him a perplexed look for a moment and then smiled. “Oh. John.” He said. “How nice of you to come.” He looked at Katie a bit disapprovingly. “Who’s this?” he asked.

“This is Katie. My wife.” John replied. “You’ve met her before.”

“Yes, yes. I know that.” Fred said absently. “I was just surprised to see her here. I asked you to come alone. What I have to tell you is very confidential.”

“We have no secrets from each other.” John said, putting his arm around Katie’s waist. Katie showed no reaction.

“Oh I didn’t mean it like that.” Fred replied. “I wasn’t trying to keep anything from her. It’s just, well, what I have to say is going to be hard to believe and I wasn’t certain you’d want to tell her. But if you want her to be here I can tell my story to both of you.” He glanced at the clock on the wall behind John and Katie. “I don’t have time to quibble about details anyway.”

He paused, as though not quite certain where to begin. He took off his glasses and folded them, but kept them in his hand. “Did your father ever tell you I squandered several years of my life prospecting?”

“He told me you used to work for a mining company.” John replied.

“Your father was very kind.” Fred continued. “The mining company was nothing more than a grand title I created for the company I intended to form once I struck it rich. ‘Denali Mining and Manufacturing.’ I never had a clear idea what I was going to manufacture, but I knew what I was going to mine. Gold. I spent three years wandering through the Alaskan wilderness, convinced that I could succeed in finding a fortune where every other prospector had failed. I also spent several thousand dollars of your father’s money, money that he could ill afford to spare at that point in his life. And I begged, borrowed, or swindled money from every other friend or acquaintance I could corner. I spent spring, summer, and fall digging empty holes in the Alaskan dirt, and I spent the long Alaskan winters trying to raise enough money for the next summer’s quest. It’s a funny how a golden dream can cloud a man’s vision.”

He paused for a moment and took a sip of water from a glass on the tray. “The third year we had an early snowfall. I was still out on a tributary of the Chandalar River, miles from civilization, when a blizzard set in. I had built myself a lean-to, but it was damn cold unless I kept a fire burning in front of it. It was mostly just scrub brush around there, with a stunted tree here and there, so I had to scour a pretty big area to find enough wood to feed the fire. I was carrying a load of wood into the wind, squinting my eyes against the blowing snow, when I tripped over what I thought was a rotten log. But the log groaned. It turned out to be a man, nearly frozen to death. It was the first human being I’d seen in months. There aren’t many people in Alaska anyway, and I deliberately steered away from the populated areas trying to search areas no other miner had been to.”

“I left my wood on the ground and carried the man back to my lean-to. He didn’t weigh much. Mostly just skin and bones. I wrapped him in my blanket and stoked the fire with the little bit of wood I’d stockpiled. He managed to sip a little leftover coffee but he didn’t want any beans or jerky. He just wanted to talk. He was shivering so hard it was hard for him to get the words out and I had trouble understanding him. He was speaking English, but he wasn’t American and I couldn’t place the accent. He never told me who he was or how he came to be way out there in the wilderness. He was trying to tell me about a book which was obviously very important to him. He had a satchel slung round his shoulder and he pulled a package out of it and gave it to me. It was very carefully wrapped in oilskin to keep it dry and tied with a leather cord. ‘My time has come’ he said as he placed it in my hands. It took me a little while to unwrap it because my fingers were numb with the cold. There was a book inside. It just looked like the kind of book you might find in an old bookstore. I looked up to ask him about it, but he was dead.”

“The next day the weather cleared and I knew I had to head back to civilization before winter set in for good. I buried him as best I could and set off for Venetie, where I begged a ride on a supply boat and eventually worked my way back to Fairbanks.”

“You just left him there?” Katie asked in amazement. “What about his family?”

“Wasn’t much else I could do.” Fred replied. “I couldn’t carry him out on my back. There are no roads in that part of Alaska, and no boats that far up the river. Besides,” he hesitated a moment before he continued, “I decided there wasn’t any point in telling the authorities about him. I didn’t know who he was, where he was from, or what he died of. If I spoke up there’d just be a lot of fool questions I couldn’t answer and I might find myself in trouble for no reason at all. Or it might mean bring a crowd of people to the place I’d been prospecting, with helicopters and cameras and who knows what else. They might find the gold I’d been looking for. Prospecting makes you suspicious like that. If I kept my mouth shut, no one would ever know anything about him. All in all, it seemed like the best choice. I’m not saying I’m proud of it. I’m just saying that at the time it seemed like the thing to do.”

“I had stuck the book in my backpack, and I pretty much forgot about it until I finally got back to Fairbanks. There’s not much to do during an Alaskan winter, and even though it didn’t look very interesting I decided to read it. Only it wasn’t exactly the kind of book you just sit down and read. Damnedest book I ever saw. More like a curse and a blessing, all wrapped up together. It’s caused me a lot of trouble over the years, but it also made my fortune.”

“What was the book called?” John asked.

“It’s time for you to see for yourself,” Fred answered. “That’s why I asked you to come. There’s a briefcase under my bed. Please pick it up and open it.” As John bent down to get the briefcase Fred continued talking, almost to himself. “I wanted to keep it under my pillow but the damn nurses wouldn’t let me. I don’t like letting that book so far out of my sight.”

John opened the briefcase and was surprised to see a package wrapped in oilskin and tied with a leather cord.

“Well, open it,” his uncle demanded. He untied the cord and carefully unwrapped the oilskin. Inside was a fairly small book, bound in black pebble-grained leather. Gold letters on the cover proclaimed it was “The Complete History of the World.” Underneath, in smaller letters, it said “Current Edition.”

“It’s a history book,” John said, without much interest.

“It’s not a history book,” his uncle corrected. “It’s the history book. Every word in that book is 100% correct, including the title.”

“It seems kind of disjointed,” John said as he leafed through the pages. “One paragraph doesn’t seem to connect to the next.”

“That’s because it’s not a book for reading. It’s a book for looking things up. Try looking something up in the index, but you need to decide what you’re looking for before you look it up.”

“OK.” John answered. “Who shot President Lincoln?” He skimmed through the index and then said “Page 346.” He turned to that page in the book and read aloud. “President Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth. That’s all it says about it.”

“That’s all you asked,” Fred replied. “Try something else. You can look up anything.”

“What did I have for breakfast?” Katie suggested.

“Don’t be a smart alec, Katie.” John answered. “This is a history book. It’s not going to have. . .” but his uncle interrupted him.

“Look it up,” his uncle insisted.

John rolled his eyes and then turned back to the index. “Let’s see,” he said with mock seriousness. “Katie Trumbull, breakfast. . .” He stopped and stared at the book. “Page 257” he said quietly.

“That’s before the page about President Lincoln.” Katie said suspiciously. “I know he was shot before I ate breakfast.”

“It doesn’t matter what page it’s on.” Fred said quietly. “Just look it up.”

John flipped through the pages until he got to page 257. “For breakfast Katie Trumbull had $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup of frosted oat flakes, a slice of buttered toast, and a cup of coffee. As she was leaving the kitchen, she slipped her hand into the cookie jar and took two oatmeal raisin cookies to eat upstairs.” He turned and gave his wife a questioning look.

“It doesn’t say that!” Katie insisted. “Let me see it.” She pulled the book toward her and ran her finger down the page. “My God it does!” she gasped.

“That is the complete history of the world.” Fred said with authority. Anything you might ever want to know, and a lot of things you don’t want to know. And not just things in the past. It’s a complete history book. It includes future history.”

“We could make a killing on the stock market!” Katie said excitedly.

“That’s what I thought, too,” said Fred. “I found a small, penny stock. The book said the price was going to shoot up dramatically, so I bought all I could. I leveraged everything I owned just to pay the margin. I already knew what the high price was going to be, so I set that as the sell price for my stock. My broker thought I was out of my mind. Then I just sat back and waited for history to make me rich.”

“And that’s how you made your money?” Katie asked.

“Nope.” Fred said with a chuckle. “I lost my ass on that investment. The trouble is, I bought too much. I cornered the market without meaning to. The price started to go up all right, but then the market dried up. I had so much of the stock tied up that there wasn’t any more on the market. Without a series of sales, each one higher than the last, there was no excitement. No irrational rush to buy in before it was priced out of reach. Speculators lost interest and looked for something else to buy. They left me so deep in debt it took me years to pay it off.”

“So the book lied?” Katie asked.

“It didn’t lie.” Fred explained. “It told me the correct history of that stock as it existed at the time I read the book. That’s why it’s called the *current* edition. History can be changed. By buying so much stock and taking it off the market, I changed history. If I’d looked up that stock after I’d bought it, I would have read a different history. The chapters that deal with the future are constantly being rewritten.”

“So what good is it?” John asked.

“Oh it’s a very good book.” Fred insisted. “Knowing what will probably happen gives you a tremendous advantage. You just need to understand that people can and do change history. Earthquakes, floods, hurricanes – those are pretty dependable. Events that are controlled by man are not so dependable, and the fewer number of people who control the event, the more likely it is that it will change.”

“It’s not always good to know the future,” Fred added. “Or the past. I saved my mother from being killed in an airplane crash, only to watch her die slowly and painfully of cancer less than a year later. I suspected my wife was cheating on me so I used the book to check up on her. She wasn’t cheating, but she was doing things she didn’t tell me about. Everybody does. There aren’t enough hours in the day to tell people everything you do. Only I didn’t realize it back then. If she didn’t tell me about something I knew she’d done, I thought she was deliberately keeping it from me. Sometimes she told me a condensed version of something that had happened to her, and I thought she was lying. Eventually my suspicions and accusations drove her away from me. Once I learned how to interpret the book’s predictions I made a lot of money off of that book, but I spent so much time reading about what was and what might be that I had no time to focus on what is. I became what you see today – a rich old man with no family, no friends, and not much of a life to look back upon.”

“Why are you telling all this to us?” John asked.

“You’re the only family I have.” Fred replied. “I’ve earned a small fortune with this book and I want you to have it. But I also want you to have the book.”

“I’m not certain I want it,” John replied. “There’s something creepy about that book. Like we’re not supposed to have it. Like it’s evil.”

“Please,” Fred pleaded. “You must take it. It’s neither good nor evil. It just is. I can’t tell you how I know this, because I don’t know myself. I’ve spent my life studying this book. There is still much I don’t know about it. I don’t know where it came from or why it came to me, but I do know it’s more than just a book. I think it’s history itself. If anything were ever to destroy this book, I think it would be the end of history. The end of the world.”

John and Katie stood in embarrassed silence. It was pretty hard to believe the small black book John was holding was history itself. Clearly John’s uncle was losing his grip on reality. Still, they had no other explanation for the few things they had already read.

“I know this sounds crazy,” Fred continued, “but I’m trying to tell you what it’s taken me a lifetime to learn. You need to protect the book. Don’t tell anyone about it. I made the mistake of showing it to a Greek millionaire once, trying to get him to fund one of my investment schemes. He wanted the book for himself. When I wouldn’t sell it, he tried to steal it. He was willing to murder me if necessary to get this book. It took many years and a small fortune to throw him off my trail.”

“The most important thing,” Fred said, “is don’t read the book. I know that will be difficult. Almost impossible. There will be so many times when you think you *have* to know what’s going to happen, or you *have* to know the truth about something that happened in the past, but trust me. You’re better off not knowing. The book will consume you. You think you’ll read just one thing. And then there will be something else. And before you know it, you’ve wasted your life. Like I have. I’m leaving you enough money so you don’t ever have to be tempted to use the book to get more. And the rest of life? Enjoy it as it comes. Don’t try to control it.”

John and Katie looked at each other. Katie nodded almost imperceptibly. “All right” John said quietly. “We’ll protect the book.”

“There is just one thing I want you to look up.” Fred added. “Just so you’ll know I’m telling the truth. Look to see when I die.”

John was taken aback by this request, but there was no mistaking the look on his uncle’s face. He was dead serious. Trembling slightly, John ran his finger down the index and then turned to the indicated page. “It says here you’ll die of a massive heart attack at 3:17 PM on . . . Oh my God it’s today!” He looked at his uncle in horror.

“I know,” his uncle said with a slight smile. “I’ve read the book. Don’t be shocked. I’ve known about it for a long time. I would have died almost ten years ago if I hadn’t quit smoking. And I would have checked out with colon cancer a few years ago if I hadn’t known to insist my doctor run some tests. But a heart attack. . . I’ve pretty much done everything I can to push this back. My time has come.”

“There must be something we can do” Katie insisted. “Maybe call a doctor?”

“I’m already in the hospital.” Fred answered. “I see doctors every day.”

“We can’t just stand here and do nothing!” John insisted. “I’m going to get a nurse.” As he turned toward the door his uncle inhaled sharply and stiffened, then with a long sigh he slumped forward. John looked at the clock. It was 3:17.

It was dark out by the time John and Katie left the hospital. John’s uncle had died instantly, but the hospital still insisted on trying to revive him. Then there was a mountain of paperwork, funeral arrangements, well-intentioned offers of grief counseling, and long periods of sitting in waiting rooms while somebody was called or somebody else was preparing paperwork that would just take a minute. They were exhausted and still stunned by the events of the day as they climbed into their car and headed for home, the book lying on the seat between them. They drove in silence for several minutes before Katie spoke.

“We can’t not look at the book, you know. It wouldn’t be fair to Billie.”

“Billie?” John asked in surprise. “Before he was born you didn’t even want the doctor to tell you whether he would be a boy or a girl!”

“That didn’t matter.” Katie answered. “This does. What if we can prevent an accident? What if he’s got some disease that we can avoid with early treatment? What if one of us has a problem that could lead to an early death? That would traumatize him for life, and we can prevent it. Your uncle would have died years earlier if he hadn’t looked in the book. He said so himself.”

“He also said the book would consume us.” John cautioned. “He told us never to read it.”

“You worry more about your dead uncle than you do about your son!” Katie answered sharply. “I’m looking at the book, even if you won’t.”

Katie didn’t say a word during the flight back from Moscow. Her face was set in a grim expression as she silently leafed through the pages of her magazines. It had taken John six months to come up with a plan to safeguard the book, and another four months to make the arrangements. Katie had never liked the plan, but he’d eventually worn her down to the point where she didn’t actively oppose it. They had all the money they could ever possibly want, even after they’d paid exorbitant sums to the Russians. Billie’s health and safety was as sure as they could make it, barring an unforeseeable action by another human being. Yet Katie still wanted to hang onto that book. She’d also been coming up with more and more reasons why she had to look something up. John was

worried that she was becoming consumed by the book, just as his uncle had predicted. Deep space was indeed the best place for it. It was safe from any earthly danger, safe from the prying eyes of those who would use it for evil, and safe from his wife's ever growing curiosity. You couldn't buy a payload slot for an "undisclosed research instrument" on an American spacecraft, but the Russians were more open to free enterprise. It wasn't cheap, but it was possible. They'd flown to Russia to watch the launch themselves, just to make certain. The secret payload was now on its way to a Jupiter fly-by, and after that it would eventually leave the solar system and spend the rest of eternity drifting through space.

Dmitry Blokov stared at the titanium box on the passenger seat and wondered why the Greek wanted it so badly. It was obviously very valuable or the American wouldn't have paid so much to launch it into space. It was even more valuable to the Greek, however, as he hadn't even blinked at the money it had cost to bribe the Roscosmos officials into switching the payload. Dmitry had tried to open the box to see for himself what kind of treasures were within, but the American lock was very clever. No matter. He was being paid to deliver the box unopened, and the Greek would find a way to open it.

John sat alone in his den and sipped a glass of single malt Scotch. He felt good about the way things had worked out. It could easily have been a disaster. If he hadn't had a bad feeling about the arrangements, if he hadn't decided to look in the book to see how his plan would unfold, he never would have known about the Greek's plan to steal it. Using the book to protect the book. He smiled as he thought about the elegant simplicity of this approach. For all his experience with the book, his uncle had never thought of that. His uncle was convinced he'd outfoxed the Greek, but the Greek was simply biding his time. Waiting for an opportunity. Well, he'd get his opportunity soon enough. He'd open the box and trigger the incendiary device that would destroy the book before his very eyes. Then, and only then, would he cease his lifelong quest to steal the book. The book would finally be safe from the Greek.

That book was finally safe from his wife, too. John was disappointed at how quickly she'd become addicted to the book. It took a really strong will to be able to use the book responsibly. To know when to look and when to resist the temptation. Fortunately he had such a will, and now that Katie thought the book was floating in space she didn't need will power to leave it alone. Things would get back to normal. At least he hoped they would. She seemed to be giving him the cold shoulder a lot lately. Was she still mad at him for getting rid of the book? Or was it something deeper? Did she suspect he hadn't really gotten rid of it? Was she having an affair? John set down his Scotch and walked over to his desk, the one with the secret compartment behind the top drawer. He'd soon get to the bottom of this mystery!