

# INTERVENTION

*Time out.*

BY JOHN GILBEY AND BRIAN MALOW

The marquee outside Building 40 sizzled quietly in the late afternoon Californian sun, a touch of retro flair on a starkly modern building. In front of me in the queue for registration, a famous television cosmologist and a cheerful, bearded philosopher were animatedly comparing their recent flights and the number of time-zones they'd crossed, while the smiling but slightly pressured young organizers dished out name badges, ethically sourced cotton goodie bags and T-shirts emblazoned with the conference logo.

"Hi John! Great to see you again!" Brian, grinning wildly, pumped my hand in welcome. "Bit warmer than London, isn't it? Let's find a drink."

It was cooler inside the building, where the sun was filtered to a murky glow, and as we commandeered a nearby coffee pot I asked Brian if he really thought this was going to work. "Sure it will! You Brits worry way too much. Look, we've narrowed it down to about 20 people — everyone else is too well-known. If there's one here I reckon that these folk have to be our best shot."

I scanned the list. None of the names jumped out as potential conspirators — but I guess that is the whole point. "OK," I sighed resignedly, "I'm game if you are. I suppose if it goes badly wrong we can always say it was a piece of performance art..."

"Good call — you're only 40 miles from San Francisco, remember ... So, heck, anything goes!"

I looked again at the list. "OK, but in that case I get to check out the girls..."

Brian laughed out loud, spilling his coffee, and said something unrepeatable about my lifestyle — then we set out to circulate through the amiable crowd of slightly jet-lagged scientists, philosophers and other vaguely off-beat thinkers.

An hour later, having munched my way along the wonderfully healthy buffet and then quashed any lingering benefits with a couple of artisan beers fresh from the ice bucket, I was no nearer finding whom I was looking for. Everyone was friendly, effusive and seemingly not at all worried by the distinctly odd questioning of a balding, bearded, overweight writer.

Another beer, or two, convinced me that our mission was misdirected, that our premise was flawed and that — in any case — our methodology for delivery was



doomed to ignominy. Most of all, the whole thing suddenly seemed a terrible waste of this beautiful, deep-blue-skied evening in Silicon Valley — surrounded as I was by some of the brightest minds of the age.

It was then that I spotted Brian in animated discussion with a petite, dark-haired girl just next to the ice-cream freezer. Wandering past, I checked her name badge — and was outraged to realize she was on my list.

I have to admit though, that he was very, very good:

"I guess you're here for the same reason I am, yeah?" She smiled at this and made a non-committal move of her head. "Thought so. I mean, the theme of the conference alone is going to attract people like us, am I right? I mean, 'Time as a Flexible Continuum' — there have to be a few of us here, huh...?"

Brian's engaging grin started to thaw her out, and she nodded slowly. "Terrific! I can see we are going to have to swap notes on this. I hadn't realized that they started talking so seriously about temporal stuff this early — I thought it wasn't for another 50 years. I mean, the technical side is way too primitive to bother with — but I'm more into the socio-ethical stuff myself. How about you?

Are you into physics or philosophy?"

She glanced around, spotted me and muttered something

inaudible to Brian. He looked at me, raised one eyebrow a millimetre, offered her his business card and replied casually: "Sure, why not. Oh, when did you say you were from?"

"2158, but I..."

"Quick! Get the net!" he yelled.

Reaching under my jacket, I lurched forward and threw the nylon mist net over the girl. Brian followed up with one of his own and we danced around the crest-fallen, tangled figure, whooping and high-fiving each other in semi-drunken delight.

"Guys! What is this? This is *REALLY* uncool!" A tall, gaunt lady with an organizer's badge stood in front of us with her hands planted firmly on her hips. She did not look happy. From the edge of the growing crowd, two unsmiling security guards started shoulder-walking their way towards us.

"She's from the future! From 2158! She just admitted it!" I yelled at the increasingly restless throng around us. The girl was struggling under the nets, trying to free herself. Some kindly looking folk were attempting to help, with limited success.

"Just think what she knows!" Brian interjected. "With what she tells us we could shortcut maybe a hundred years of research..."

A lean, hard-eyed Californian had joined the organizer lady. "What if she doesn't want to tell you anything?" he asked in a meaningful tone.

"Why, damn it, we'll *MAKE* her!" I yelled across at him.

There was a cry of collective horror — then the people around us became angrily, watchfully quiet. At an unseen signal, the two security staff strode forward and pinioned our arms with professional efficiency.

"Sorry friend, that's not what happens here..."

We were led towards the exit. A knot of familiar, determined-looking science folk moved with us — led by the lean Californian. As this curious circus reached the parking area a van with heavily tinted glass pulled up to the kerb and the side door powered open.

As we were bundled unceremoniously into the van, the Californian turned to us and said quietly: "Did you really think she would risk being here alone?" ■

*John and Brian keep bumping into each other at conferences — the rest is fiction, inspired by an original stand-up comedy routine of Brian's.*

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