

Maybe Next Time

By Michael Marshall Smith

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Michael Marshall Smith lives in North London and Brighton with his wife Paula and two cats. His first novel, *Only Forward*, won the August Derleth and Philip K. Dick Awards; his second, *Spare*, was optioned by Steven Spielberg and translated in seventeen countries worldwide; his third, *One of Us*, was optioned by Warner Brothers.

His most recent novels, *The Straw Men* and *The Lonely Dead* (a.k.a. *The Upright Man*), published under the name "Michael Marshall", have been international best-sellers, and he is currently working on a third volume in the series.

Smith's short fiction has won the British Fantasy Award three times, and is collected in *What You Make It* and the International Horror Guild Award-winning *More Tomorrow & Other Stories*. Six of his tales are currently under option for television.

About the following story, the author reveals: "Every now and then the reality of time hits you: the fact that it really is passing, and that there will come a point where the seemingly random things that happen every day will reach a conclusion, and stop, and then they will be all that ever happened.

"The act structure of one's life will then finally become evident - but only when it is too late to do anything about it: too late to punch up the action in the middle section, or spread some more laughs throughout, to take it all just a bit more seriously - or perhaps less seriously. This story came from one of those realizations, and wonders what it might be like if the universe worked otherwise."

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AT first, when David began to consider the problem, he wondered if it was related to the start of a new year. January in London is not an exciting time. You'd hardly contend the month showed any part of the country at its best, but there were places - the far reaches of Scotland, perhaps, or the stunned emptiness of the midland fens - where you could at least tell it was winter, a season with some kind of character and point. In London, the period was merely still-grey and no-longer-New Year and Spring-not-even-over-the-horizon. A pot of negatives, a non-time of non-events in which you trudged back to jobs that the festive break had drunkenly blessed with purpose, but which now felt like putting on the same old overcoat again. But still, however much David unthinkingly lived a year that began in the Autumn - as did most who had soldiered their way through school and college, where promise and

new beginnings came with the term after the summer - he could see that January was the real start of things. He thought at first that might be it, but he was wrong. The feelings were not coming after something, but point-ing the way forward. To May, when he would have his birthday. To May, when he would be forty years old.

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The episodes came on quietly. The first he remembered happened one Thursday afternoon when he was at his desk in Soho, pen hovering over a list of things to do. The list was short. David was good at his job, and believed that a list of things to do generally comprised of a list of things that should already have been done.

His list said he had to (1) have a quick and informal chat with the other participants in the next day's new-business meeting (2) have a third and superfluous scan through the document explain-ing why said potential clients would be insane not to hand their design needs over to Artful Bodgers Ltd (3) make sure the meeting room had been tidied up and (4) . . .

David couldn't think what (4) might be. He moved his pen back, efficiently preparing to cross out the numeral and its businesslike brackets, but didn't. He dimly believed that his list was incomplete, in the same way you know, when wandering around the kitchen periodically nibbling a biscuit, whether you finished it in the last bite or if there's a portion still lying around.

There was something he was supposed to do . . . nope, it had gone.

He went home, leaving the list behind. When he covertly glanced at it towards the end of the meeting the following morning, his sense of mild satisfaction (the pitch was going well, the new clients in the bag) was briefly muted by the sight of that (4), still there, still unfilled. The list now had a (5), a (6) and a (7), all ticked, but still no (4).

For a moment he was reminded of the old routine—

Item 1: do the shopping

Item 2: mow the lawn

Item 4: where's item 3?

Item 3: ah, there it is . . .

—and smiled. He was disconcerted to realize that the most senior of the clients, a man with a head which looked carved out of a potato, was looking at him, but the smile was easily converted into one of general commercial warmth. The deal was done. By lunchtime he was on to other things, and the list was forgotten.

This, or something like it, happened a couple more times that month. David would find himself in the kitchen, wiping his hands after clearing away the dinner that Amanda had cooked, thinking that he could sit down in front of the television just as soon as he had . . . and realize there was nothing else he had to do. Or he would take five minutes longer doing the weekly shop in Wait-rose, walking the aisles, not looking for anything in particular but yet not quite ready to go and take his position in the checkout line. In the end he would go and pay, and find himself bagging only the things he had come out looking for, the things on his and Amanda's list.

February started with a blaze of sunshine, as if the gods had been saving it for weeks and suddenly lost patience with clouds and grey. But it turned out that they hadn't stocked as much as they thought, and soon London was muted and fitful again. David worked, put up some shelves in the spare bedroom, and went out once a week to a restaurant with his wife. They talked of things in the paper and on the news, and Amanda had two glasses of wine while he drank four. But plenty of mineral water too, and so the walk home was steady, his arm around her shoulders for part of the way. Artful Bodgers continued to make money, in a quiet, unassuming fashion. The company's job was to take other companies' corporate identities and make them better. Spruce up or rethink the logo, make typeface decisions, provide a range of stationery to cater for all contingencies: business cards, letter-heads, following-page sheets (just the logo, no address), document folders, fax sheets, envelope labels, cassette boxes for the video companies. They had the latest Macs and some decent young designers. Their accounts department was neither mendacious nor incompetent. Everyone did their job, well enough to weather the periodicity of corporate confidence and wavering discretionary spend. His company was a success, but sometimes David thought the only interesting thing about it was the name. He'd chosen it personally, on start-up, seven years before. Everyone else - including Amanda - had thought it a bad idea. All too easy to take the second word and run with it. Who wants to hire bodgers, even if you know it's a little joke? David fought, arguing that it showed a confident expectation that clients would never feel the need to make the association. He won, and it worked, and there were other times when David thought that the name was probably the most boring thing about the company, too.

One evening in February he found himself in Blockbuster, looking for a film he couldn't name. He was twice becalmed at pub bars, both times with clients, having remembered what he wanted to drink, but then forgotten it again. On both occasions he bought a glass of Chardonnay, which was what he always drank.

Once again, too, David found himself hesitating in the midst of jotting a note at work: apparently unsure not so much of what he was going to write as of the precise physical nature of the act. He hadn't forgotten how to use a pen, of course. It was more a question of choice, like recalling whether one played a tennis backhand with one or two hands on the racket. When he eventually started writing, his handwriting looked odd for a while.

But it was not until the next month that he could honestly say that he started to think about any of these things.

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On 4 March David dreamed. This was not in itself unusual. He dreamed as much as the next man, the usual intermittent cocktail of machine-like anxiety or amusing but forgettable trivia. On the fourth of March he dreamed of something different. He didn't know what it was; could not, when he awoke, remember. But he was distracted as he sat with his first cup of the day, feeling as if some recollection was hidden just behind a fold in his brain. He stood, stared out of the window, and did not move even after Amanda had come down after her shower.

She rummaged in the cupboard, looking for a new box of her current brand of herbal tea. "What are you thinking about?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Why have we got so many olives?"

"Hmm?" He turned to look at her. The memory felt neither closer nor further away. She held up a jar of green olives.

"There's three of these in there."

"You didn't buy them?"

"No." She held the jar so he could see the label: Waitrose own-brand. He always did the Waitrose shop, and did it alone. Supermarkets made Amanda irritable.

"Then I must have bought them."

"You don't like olives."

"I know."

Ten minutes later she was gone, off to work. David was still in the kitchen, sitting now with a second cup of tea, no closer to remembering his dream. All he could recall was an atmosphere of affectionate melancholy. It reminded him of another dream from five or six years before. This had been of his college, of returning there alone and walking the halls and corridors which had shaped three years of his life, back when the future seemed deliciously malleable. In the dream he'd met none of his friends from that period, and had notably not encountered the girl with whom he'd spent most of that time. The dream hadn't been about them, but about him. It was about absence. About some distance he had travelled, or perhaps

had failed to come, since those days: a period now backlit by its passing, at the time merely the day-to-day. The dream he could not now remember had something of this about it too, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't about college. It wasn't about anything he could recall.

It was enough to nudge him into awareness, however, and at the end of the day he sat in the living room, after Amanda had gone upstairs, and thought back over the previous couple of months. He considered the missing (4), the drinks without a name, remembered also standing one afternoon in Soho Square and gazing at the shapes of the buildings that surrounded it, as if they should mean something more to him than they did. At the time each of these non-incidences, these failures to mean, had seemed distinct from each other, distinct from anything at all. Now they did not. Once gathered together, they referred to a whole. There was something on his mind, that was clear. He just didn't know what it was.

It was then that he tried connecting them with the start of the year, with the feeling of something beginning. Though in general a level-headed man, David was sometimes surprised to find himself prey to rather New Age notions. Perhaps this year, this 2004, was trying to tell him something. Maybe some celestial timepiece, some combination of shadow and planetary sphere, had reached its predetermined mark. Perhaps 2004 was the year of...

He couldn't make the thought go anywhere, and soon zoned out into watching the television screen. It showed a crazy-haired old gent tramping around an undistinguished patch of country-side. He couldn't remember selecting the channel, and with the sound off it really wasn't very interesting. Was it worth turning the sound up? Probably not. It increasingly seemed to him that television was being created for someone else. He was welcome to watch it, of course, but it was not he whom the creators had in mind.

As David left the room he passed one of the bookcases, and paused a moment when a book caught his eye. He took it down, opened it. It was a first edition of *Conjuring and Magic* by Robert Houdin, published in 1878, bought some months before at a stall in Covent Garden. He'd told himself it was merely an investment - at fifty pounds for a vg+ copy, it was certainly a bargain - but actually he'd bought it in the hope that going back to the classics might help. In fact, it had yielded no better results than the small handful of cheap paperbacks he'd desultorily acquired over the last few years, since he'd realized that a little magic was some-thing he'd very much like to be able to do. The problem with magic, he'd discovered, was that there was no trick to it. There was practice, and hard work - and the will to put these things into practice. Even buying the little gewgaws of the trade didn't help. All but the most banal still required sleight of hand, which had to be acquired the old-fashioned way. If you learned how a trick worked, all you actually gained was confirmation that it required a skill you didn't have and lacked the time and energy to acquire. Learning how a trick worked was the same as being told you couldn't do it. You gained nothing, and lost everything.

He flicked through the book for a few moments, admiring the old illustrations of palming techniques, and then put the volume back on the shelf. It wasn't worth even trying tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

Instead he went into the kitchen and ate half a jar of olives while he waited for the kettle to boil.

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David dreamed a few more times in March, but remained unable to take anything from them. All he was left with the next morning was absence and the unnameable smell of open water. An absence, too, was what he felt during most of the last weekend of the month, which they spent down in Cornwall. It was the third time they'd taken a romantic mini-break in Padstow. Both previous occasions had been great successes. They'd walked along the craggy coast, bought a couple of little paintings which now graced the bathroom, enjoyed a superlative dinner in Rick Stein's restaurant (having taken efficient care to book ahead). Good, clean, adult fun. This time David couldn't seem to get into it. They did the same things, but it wasn't the same, and it wasn't merely the repetition which made the difference. Amanda was in good form, braced by the wind and the sky. To him they seemed merely there. In some way it all reminded him of an experience he'd had a couple of weeks previously, during a meeting at work. A creative powwow, with, as it happened, the clients with the potato-headed boss. There had come a point when David had found himself talking. He had been talking for a little while, he realized, and knew that he could keep going for as long as he wanted. The other people around the table were either his employees or clients gathered to take advantage of his keen design brain, his proven insights into the deep mysteries of corporate identity. Their gazes were all on him. This didn't frighten him, merely made him wonder if they were in fact listening, or rather staring at him and wondering who he was, and what he was talking about. They were all nodding in the right places, so this seemed unlikely. Presumably it was only David, therefore, who was wondering these things. And wondering too whether it was ever worth speaking, if no one wanted you to stop.

On the second evening in Padstow they paid their tribute to the god of seafood. Amanda seemed happy, perky in a new Karen Millen and smelling faintly of expensively complimentary sham-poops and unguents. David knew that it was remarkable that a woman of thirty-seven should look so good in fashion tailored for the young and slim, and was glad. Not delighted - because, to be honest, he had grown accustomed to Amanda looking good - but glad. The food was predictably excellent. David ate it. Amanda ate it. They talked of things in the news and in the papers. They were benignly tolerant of the next table, which featured two well-behaved but voluble children. Neither had anything against children. They didn't have any because it had been discussed, seven or eight years before, when David was launching the business and Amanda had just switched companies and

em-barked on the route to her current exalted position in publishing. At the time it would have been a mistake to complicate their lives, or might have been a mistake. It was then still more or less appropriate, too, for Amanda to make that amusing joke about not needing children just yet, because she was married to one. David did little to sustain this idea now bar an occasional hangover and a once-in-a-while good-humoured boisterousness, but having children wasn't something they discussed at the moment. Maybe later.

They went back to their room after dinner and made love. This was nice, if a little self-conscious and laden with implicit self-congratulation. They'd still got it, still knew how to have a good time. That much was clear.

In the middle of the night David awoke. Amanda was sound asleep beside him, and remained so for the two hours he spent lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. This time he'd brought something more back with him than an atmosphere. An image of long grasses near somewhere watery. Of somewhere not close, but not far away.

A sense that this was not the beginning of something after all.

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By the second week of April David was waking almost once a night to find himself lying in a strange bed. Familiarity closed in rapidly, but for a moment there was a sense of inexplicability, like moving on from the missing (4) to the comfort of the present (5). He could remember things about the dreams now. Very small things. The long grasses, often, though sometimes they seemed more like reeds. The sense of water: not moving fast, not a river or stream, but present nonetheless.

Finally, a building, or the remains of one.

He knew it was a building, and that it was ruined, though in the dream his point of view was too close up to make out anything more than lichened stone and clouded blue sky above. As if he was crouched down low, and glancing up.

That morning Amanda look at him over her cup of mint tea. "Where did all those olives go?"

"I ate them," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you sleeping okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You don't seem to be. You look tired. And sometimes you thrash about The other night I thought I heard you say 'Goodbye, love' in your sleep."

“‘Goodbye, love’? That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Quite.”

David shrugged. He knew that he should tell her about what was happening. He hated films in which a character keeps secrets from the very people or person who should be on his side: a source of cheap tension that had more to do with padding the plot than representing real life. But he didn’t tell her, all the same. It didn’t seem relevant. Or she didn’t, perhaps.

He went to work, and came home, and went to work again. He went to the gym, as usual: moving weights nowhere, running the same rolling yard, strutting and fretting his half-hour on the elliptical trainer. Artful Bodgers won more business, and he gave everyone a little bonus. He considered taking over one of their suppliers, then shelved the decision for another day. He came home, he went to work again. He dreamed of the building once more, this time from a little further away. The fact that it was ruined was clearly apparent. And that it was somewhere in England. There was nothing about it that proved that. David simply knew it.

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“You spoke in your sleep again,” Amanda said, at another breakfast. “You said, ‘I can’t hear what you’re saying.’”

He looked at her. “But what does that mean?”

She turned a page in this morning’s manuscript. “You tell me,” she said. “God, this novel’s shite.”

He started visiting bookstores in his lunch breaks, and stopping off at Borders on his way home from work. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, so he just browsed. He looked in the travel sections (domestic); he looked at books on the English country-side. Nothing seemed to help. He didn’t have enough to work with, and there was a sense, when he looked at pictures, that he shouldn’t need to. Whatever this was, it wasn’t a puzzle. It wasn’t supposed to be hard.

In the last week of April, now only a week from his birthday, Amanda sometimes worked in her study with her door shut. He knew that she would be wrapping little presents for him. David knew that they would be nice. He had no desire to know what they were yet. He liked surprises. They came along seldom enough.

Amanda surprised him in another way, before the day. She asked if he was going to visit his mother. He realized both that he should, and that he should do it on the day itself. Without her, after all, there wouldn’t be forty years to mark. He called

her, and arranged it. She said she'd put on a little lunch.

He was dreaming now, almost constantly, but through a veil. He felt sick some mornings, as if he had failed to digest some-thing. Nothing he looked at seemed to be what he should be seeing. None of his lists had anything on them except numerals in brackets.

He finally mentioned this to Amanda. She kissed him, and put her arms around him. She was his wife. She understood, or thought she did.

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David got up at the usual time on the fourth of May, though he had taken the day off work. He had breakfast in bed, then came down in a dressing gown to a kitchen table on which his presents had been laid. They were all very nice, and Amanda left for work fifteen minutes later than usual. She sat with him, and had an extra cup of tea, and they smiled and laughed.

After she'd gone he showered and dressed and then went out and got in his car. He forged a route out of London and onto the M11, taking it up past Cambridge and into the countryside. He tried to find something on the radio to listen to, some CD in the glove compartment, but none of them sounded right. He could remember buying them, but none of them seemed to be his.

He reached Willingham a little before midday, on time. His mother was standing at the door to her house, steel-haired, compact and smiling. Once the land on which she stood had been part of a farm, a larger holding belonging to one of her ancestors. Like everything else, it had been made smaller by time.

His mother had made sandwiches and cake. While she laid them out he wandered around the house where he had grown up, trying to remember how long it had been since he'd visited. A couple of years, certainly. She occasionally made it down to London, and that tended to be where they met. Tea at the Ritz, sometimes. An overnight or two in the house he owned with Amanda, tucked up safe in the spare bed. Not so very often, for the person who had been his mother, but that tended to be the way it went. You moved further from the start, and towards something else: eyes turned always forward, the past something you only remembered once in a while, generally through some-thing heard. Things weren't about beginnings any more. They were about persistence, and endings, for the most part. Persis-tence, above all.

He found himself drawn to one room in particular. His parents' old room; his mother's still. He stood in the centre, unsure of what he was doing there. He looked up at the ceiling. Off-white, as it always had been. If you allowed your eyes to fall out of focus then the imperfections blurred away, and its colour became all you could see.

His mother's voice floated upstairs.

After lunch he asked her about her bedroom. Had something changed? She said no. Nothing had changed for her in several years.

David shrugged, took a risk: told her how he'd felt compelled to stand in there. She was a woman. She'd understand.

She did, and perhaps more than he'd expected. More than he did. "Well," she said, "it's your birthday."

He shook his head, not comprehending. She smiled, as if it were self-evident. "That's where it happened, up there in that room. That's where you were born," she said, and then winked. "You can live down in that London all you like," she added. "But this is where you're from."

He barely heard anything else she said, and left twenty minutes later. When he reached the end of the village, he did not take the left turn which would lead to the A-road and later back to the M11. Instead he turned right, and kept driving.

He drove for an hour, out into the countryside, out beyond the villages and into the country proper, to where the fens began. To the place where water became as much a part of the world as earth, to where grass and reeds and flatness were all the land had to say.

After a while he turned again, not back on himself, but at an angle, and headed in a different direction. A little later, he did so once more.

He could have driven for hours, for days. He could have looked for weeks and never found it, were it not for the church. That, presumably, had been the point. It had worked, in the end.

It was half-ruined, and stood by itself in the middle of a field. David knew enough to understand this meant it most likely represented the last lingering sign of a lost village. Seen from above, from a low-flying plane, there would have been crop marks to show where domestic buildings had once been, a previous lay of the land. But that had been long, long ago.

When he saw the two remaining walls, the jagged half-steeple, it took his breath away and every unremembered dream came back at once.

He lurched the car over to the side of the road and parked chaotically on the verge. Then he got out, stepped gingerly over the low barbed-wire fence, and started to walk towards the ruin. It was probably private land. He didn't care. Twice he disappeared up to one knee in the boggy ground. He didn't care about that either.

His mobile phone went once. He didn't even hear it.

He walked slowly around the church. He knew it only meant one thing to him, that he had only been here once before. He approached it, finally, and stood close up against the wall. The sky was blue above, flecked with cloud. It looked the same wherever you stood, whether inside the remains of the structure or without, and at any point along the walls. But again, he had planned well, and eventually he found the heavy stone.

He went down on one knee and prised his fingers around the sides. Gym savvy told him to protect his back, and he took his time to pull the big flat stone out of place. Underneath was a small metal box.

He lifted it out, and sat down on the grass.

Inside the box was a small old sack, stained with time and wrapped over itself. David waited for a while, wishing for a cigarette, though he had never smoked. He thought about the ceiling in his mother's bedroom, knowing it not to be the first thing he had ever seen. Finally he opened the bag, and pulled out the envelope inside.

He recognized the handwriting, from a list he had written back in February. The letter said:

To whoever I might be—

I hope this time it has worked, and I'm young, that I've caught me in time. Better still I hope I will find this and smile, knowing it was unnecessary, knowing I can palm anything, make coins appear out of people's ears, and that I have not come here alone. But just in case:

- 1) Do things. Do everything. Learn, explore, open the world's boxes while you're young and time stretches out infinitely far.
- 2) Make mistakes, and make them early, not late. Too soon can be undone. Too late cannot.
- 3) Marry the one who could break your heart.
- 4) There is no (4). The first three will be enough.

Good luck, Yourself.

Ten minutes later David put the letter back in the bag. He wished he had known to bring the Houdin book with him. He could have put it in there as well, for next time. But if he remembered this late then too, there would be little point. He might as well sell it, hope it would find, someone who would use it in time.

When the stone was back in place he spent a while standing close to the wall of the ruined church, memorizing the shape of the road, the pattern of the water inlets in the distance: anything he might reasonably hope would be here next time. Finally he walked back over to the car, climbed in, and sat for a while looking out at the flat fens.

Then he started the drive back to London, where he knew a surprise party was waiting for him.