

They

by Todd Maupin

They were coming for him. It did not and could not happen the other way. They were not within his reach. They were always the catalyst, the actor, the doer, the speaker... They were nowhere, and they were everywhere.

They had been part of the world for as long as he knew, but they were still an enigma to Timothy. They had an origin but he did not know what it was or what they were. They were both the source and the outcome. They generated the information. They spread the information. They never stopped talking.

Throughout his life, Timothy had listened as others spoke. "They are saying that the winter will be bad this year. They say it will rain tomorrow. They say that you can die by eating apple seeds." And even more ominous was when not even they, the enigma, had the answer. "They don't know what causes this. They don't know why so many bees are dying. They don't have a cure for that disease yet. They don't sell these anymore." This was when Timothy was most concerned. That they were perplexed about something did not bode well for him. They were supposed to have all of the answers. They were the question and they were the answer.

On multiple occasions, Timothy had asked his parents, "What are they?" After being corrected that the proper phrasing of the question was "Who are they?," Timothy would ask again, but his parents never answered, ignoring his question or perhaps fearful of answering. Instead, his parents would point out something obvious, or try to distract him with some extraneous information.

"Those are construction workers. These are Jehovah's witnesses. This is Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins, our new neighbors. Those are Girl

Scouts.” These were some of his parents' evasive answers. If these even qualified as answers.

Timothy reasoned that his parents might be scared too. He recalled a recent dinner conversation when his parents were engrossed in a boring grownup talk about history, how New York was once called New Amsterdam, and someplace called Istanbul used to be named Constantinople. Timothy's mother made a random, chilling statement that had suddenly captured Timothy's attention. “They might be giants,” she said. Timothy's father laughed, but Timothy was mortified.

Until recently, Timothy had been enjoying his summer. Nursery school had ended and kindergarten was not set to begin until September. Timothy had all summer ahead of him to play on his own or with his friends. His parents had even planned a late July vacation to Disney World. Not even the Mouse House could escape the great influence that they seemed to have upon everything. “They are going to increase ticket prices in the fall so we are going this year,” his mother had told Timothy. The summer itself promised to be a good one. “They are saying that it is going to be a hot summer,” Timothy's mother had announced another day.

They were pulling strings. They were a constant influence in life around Timothy, but as long as he was not directly affected, he was content. And yet, one day, Timothy's father was talking to Timothy's mother in the kitchen while Timothy was playing with his toy cars on the floor in the dining room. “I talked to my mom and dad today. They will be coming in two weeks. They want to take Timothy camping.”

“Oh, good,” Timothy's mother replied. “They are having a sale on camping equipment at the sporting goods store.”

Timothy was horrified. They were coming for him! They! Just an hour earlier, when Timothy had asked his mother about dinner, she had listed the menu du jour. He thought she was finished but then something else must have come to mind "Oh! They also had fresh asparagus." That they could make him eat their fresh, evil vegetables was no longer a dilemma for Timothy. Now, they wanted him too.

Timothy's sullen mood at dinner did not go unnoticed by his parents. His appetite had been more robust lately, but he shunned the asparagus, which was typically one of his favorites. "What's wrong, Timothy? I thought you liked asparagus," Timothy's mother remarked.

"They say that it will make you big and strong," Timothy father added, flexing his meaty arm. Timothy smiled weakly, his mind racing. They were trying to fatten him up, but for what?! He continued to poke at the food on his plate.

Timothy's mother changed the subject, "How was work today, dear?"

"Oh, all right. They say we might have another reorganization. What about you?"

Timothy's mother was a teacher. "It was good. I worked a half day. They want us to have our rooms cleaned out by the end of the week."

Now Timothy was really starting to get worried. They were closing in on him! They had already started to interfere with his parents' jobs and even his dinner. He just wanted to go play and forget about things for a while. "Can I be excused?" He asked, preemptively putting his feet in position to scoot back his chair.

“You did not eat very much tonight, sport,” Timothy's father said.
“Are you sure you cannot eat another few bites?”

“No, thank you. I'm not hungry,” Timothy attested, and looked at his parents expectantly.

“Okay, but no snack for you later. They talk about all of those starving children in Eritrea. They would love to have your asparagus,” Timothy's mother tried to sound disappointed and make him feel guilty, but he was already pushing in his chair and on his way to find his toy cars. Furthermore, he was confused. They had their own asparagus, why did they need his to give to Eritrea?

The days passed. They continued to be involved in various aspects of Timothy's life. The neighborhood itself was not left unscathed. “They are building a new bank on Mulberry Street,” he heard his mother tell one of her friends over the phone. And later, she informed his father about another development. “They are tearing down the Foster's old house.”

“Did you see that they cut down the big oak tree on the corner?” Timothy's father asked. Timothy almost ran to hide. They had been on the corner! They were that close! If they cut down the oak tree, what would they do him?

Timothy would normally have been excited about his grandparents' upcoming visit, but maybe he would not even be around to see them because they were coming at the same time as his grandparents. Seemingly without a care in the world about what they might do to him out in the wilderness, Timothy's mother had nonchalantly bought him a down sleeping bag and a small tent. “They said that I could return it if you did not like it,” she told him. Was this a test? What did they expect him to do? Would they punish him for being ungrateful? Or worse, were they only anticipating a grisly end for him and that he would only need the tent for a short time? He did

not know what the stakes were and he did not know what the stakes were.

Timothy used to enjoy riding in the car with his parents on trips to the store and for errands, but he had been anxious ever since he overheard them talking. "They had changed the oil in both cars, and they rotated the tires on the Honda." And "They say that the Mazda needs new brakes," Timothy's mother said.

Even something as simple and joyful as walking with his parents to the Dari-Freeze created some anxiety for Timothy. He and his mother stayed back and claimed one of the picnic tables while Timothy's father placed the order. It was apparent that something was amiss when he returned too soon without ice cream. "They are out of Cookies 'n' Cream. They want to know if Cookie Dough is okay?" Timothy's mother always ordered a Cookies 'n' Cream waffle cone.

She thought for a moment. "Ask if they have Rocky Road. If not, Cookie Dough is fine." Timothy's father nodded, rubbed Timothy's head affectionately and returned to the counter. They were here! Timothy stood up and tried to glimpse inside the Dari-Freeze, but he was too short, and the angle was not conducive to his line of sight. He wanted to look but he did not want to see. He loved the Dari-Freeze in the summer. They would not ruin this for him.

Timothy's father returned with their treats. "They had Rocky Road," he told them. Timothy eyed his mother's waffle cone suspiciously, but was relieved that they were focused on her not him. For one night at least. "They gave us extra napkins." Gulp.

Finally, it was the day that Timothy's grandparents were scheduled to arrive and he had been tasked to straighten up his room and put away his toys. These tasks kept his mind occupied, and he had felt more at ease since his father had told his mother earlier in the day

that “they got a late start so they might be a little late.” Maybe Timothy's grandparents would arrive before they would! If they showed up and saw that Timothy's grandparents were visiting, maybe they would not take him away.

And it seemed to play out that way. The arrival of Timothy's grandparents was heralded by the honking horn of their huge car. “Timothy, Grands and Gramma are here!” Timothy's mother told him from the doorway to the den. Timothy ran to greet them and scrutinized the street and driveway. Seeing no sign of anyone else, Timothy hugged his grandparents tighter than ever before.

At dinner that night, Timothy learned that not even his grandparents were immune. “They are tearing up I-70 around Indianapolis again,” Timothy's grandfather said.

“I swear that they put out orange barrels there every summer,” Timothy's grandmother lamented.

“I thought they might pull me over for speeding in the construction zone, but they got someone else instead,” Grands stated proudly.

“It was quite exciting. They flew right past us!” Gramma added, beaming.

They did not come. Not that night, or even the next day. And when Timothy's grandparents asked him if he wanted to go camping, he was hesitant. “They will not be there?” Timothy asked warily.

Grands and Gramma assumed that Timothy was referring to his parents. “No, they will be working. It will just be us,” Gramma promised.

Timothy was overjoyed, and camping was a delight. Apparently, they had given Timothy's grandparents a full blessing. “They upgraded us

to a deluxe campsite," Grands announced as he returned from the check-in lodge. "And they say that you can play on the playground and use the pool whenever you like, Timothy." The lure of the playground and the pool was too strong for Timothy to dwell on the power that they had even there at the campground.

Camping was pleasant. They never interfered, but they were on the fringes. Grands taught Timothy how to fish and Timothy caught one his first try. "They told me that the trout were plentiful this year," Grands told Grandma when Timothy showed her his fish.

The summer season persisted and they continued to linger in the shadows of Timothy's life. His parents took him to see the July 4th fireworks. "They say that this is the best viewing spot," Timothy's mother explained as she spread out the blanket.

Later in the month, Disney World was an unforgettable experience for Timothy. They maintained a ubiquitous presence throughout the trip but given that Timothy was experiencing sensory overload so often, he mostly ignored what they did.

At the airport: "They said it is going to be a full flight."

At the rental car kiosk: "They upgraded us to an SUV."

At the hotel: "They said that breakfast starts at 8."

At the park: "They said that if we exchange our 3 day voucher for a 5 day voucher, we can skip the lines and actually see more." And "They told me that there are long lines for Space Mountain." And "They are renovating this entire area of the park, but they are saying that it will be ready next year."

The summer trickled away, day by day. Timothy knew that they had not gone away, that they were still around him, but he just tried not to think about what they were doing.

The final revelation, sort of, came later, but a mini-revelation happened one afternoon when Timothy's father was listening to the radio while he was cleaning the garage and Timothy was playing outside. According to the words of an old song, "the times, they are a changin'." When Timothy heard this, he felt a wave of reassurance come over him. They had been changing things for a while, and if so, he probably should not worry so much about what they might do to him. Timothy was about to ask his father about that song, when his father muttered, "I cannot believe they gave that guy a Pulitzer Prize." This was a clincher for Timmy. If they gave a prize to that guy for that song, they must not have been upset to be in his song, having it known how they were changing times.

And just like that, the summer was over, and Timothy was in school. Real school, kindergarten, the show. He knew some of his classmates from the neighborhood or nursery school but not all of them. The first few weeks passed, and Timothy thought less and less about what they were doing, as he only heard things in passing. One teacher complaining to another, "Now they want us to come in early and wipe down all of the desks and tables." Or "They told me not to wear that blouse anymore." Stuff like that.

And then, during week three, Timothy finally had an answer about who they were. Sort of. While the class was at lunch and recess, Timothy's teacher had placed laptop computers at all of the desks. Timothy was excited. His parents had computers but did not allow him to play with their laptops. "These are only for work," Timothy's father had told him, but Timothy had seen him playing games on multiple occasions. Now Timothy had a laptop computer at his desk! It was all for him and he did not even have to share it. He followed his teacher's instructions on how to open the lid, turn it on, type in

his name, use a drawing program, and watch a video about dinosaurs. Timothy's teacher had just guided them to an online math tutorial when the assistant principal knocked on the classroom door and entered. "They want to see you in the office," the assistant principal informed Timothy's teacher.

Timothy's teacher instructed the class to continue using the tutorial while he went to the office to see what they wanted. The assistant principal would stay in the classroom with the students. After the teacher left, the assistant principal wandered around for a few minutes and then sat at the teacher's desk to play with her phone. Timothy had heard that the internet was full of answers and temptation to search was too strong to resist. "What are they" he typed, but then remembered that "who are they" is better. He hit the enter key and clicked on one of the results.

By the time that Timothy's teacher had returned from the office ten minutes later, Timothy had long since given up his search and returned to the math tutorial. He was more confused than ever about who they were. He did not understand what non-binary or gender neutral meant, but he had learned that "they" was just what they wanted to be called, and, beyond that, they just wanted to be treated like everyone else. Timothy reasoned that he would not like it if people did not call him Timothy. He decided that whoever they were, wherever they were, they were probably okay.

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