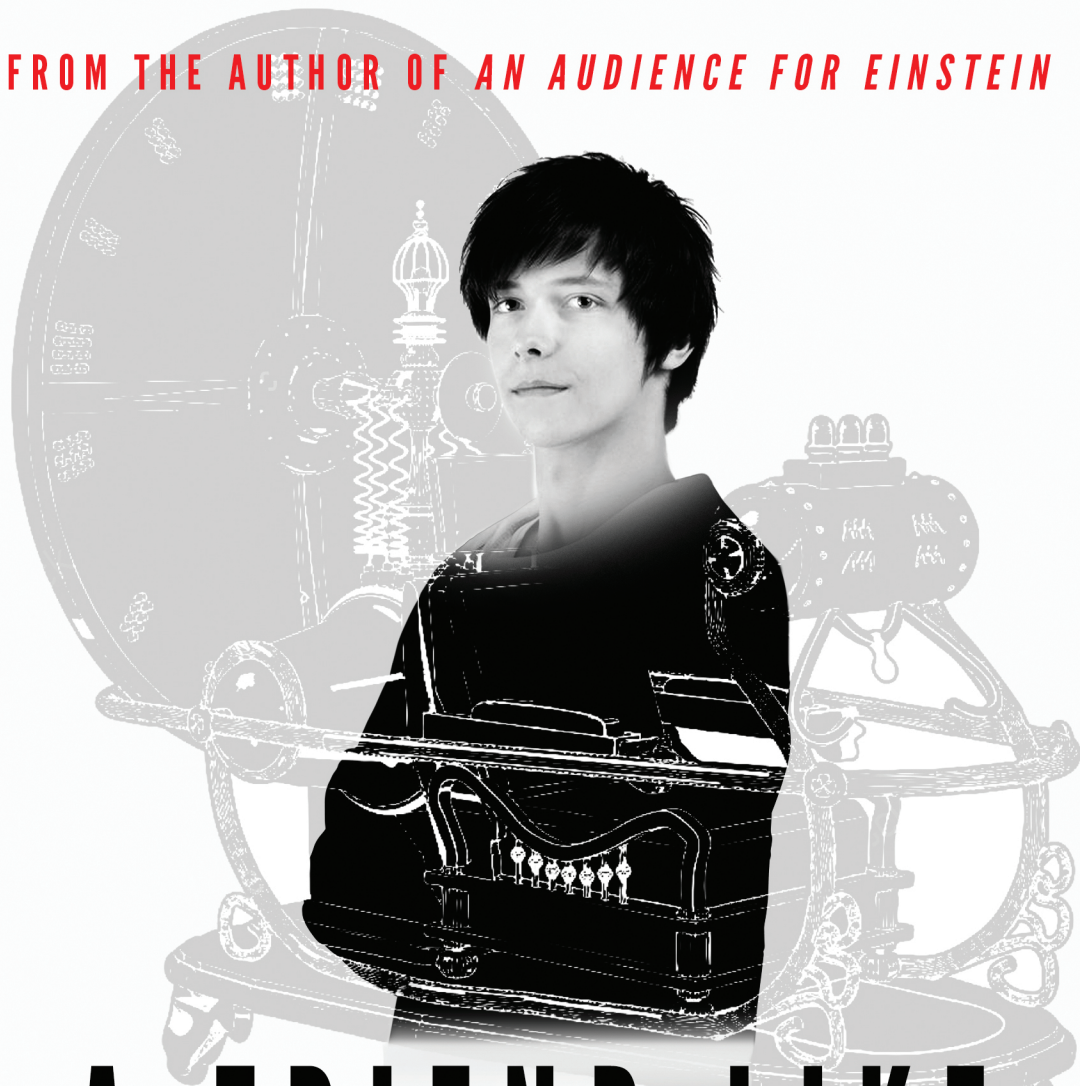


FROM THE AUTHOR OF *AN AUDIENCE FOR EINSTEIN*



A FRIEND LIKE FILBY

M A R K W A K E L Y



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MARK WAKELY

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-953910-89-9 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-953910-90-5 (ebook)

4697 Main Street

Manchester Center, VT 05255

Canoe Tree Press is a division of DartFrog Books.

ADVANCE PRAISE

A FRIEND LIKE FILBY

“Mark Wakely weaves an unusual tale with characters that are both emotionally and psychologically rich... The story is told from George’s perspective and in a first-person narrative voice that is as clear as it is compelling. The prose is beautiful and evocative at times and I enjoyed the author’s peculiar turn of phrase, the humor, and his knack for vivid descriptions... It is a delightful read.”

—*Readers’ Favorite*

“A compelling, down-to-earth exploration of the challenges and fun of being a senior in high school, of being a son, a brother, and a friend. George’s is an authentic voice and Wakely has an ear clearly attuned to teenage speech. The story flows from page to page describing ordinary, and some not-so-ordinary events, in a low-key style that carries the reader along effortlessly.”

— *Semi-finalist, 2021 BookLife Prize by Publishers Weekly*

CHAPTER ONE

SO IT BEGINS

It was early. *Real* early. Dave and I were the first ones to arrive. It was as quiet as a morgue, with most of the hallway lights still off. With no one else around, I was surprised the doors were open since the place was usually locked down like the prison it vaguely resembled.

Dave picked me up right at dawn. Since he had a car and I didn't, I reluctantly agreed to roll out of bed way ahead of my regular schedule. Real early was still better than a terrifying, barely-in-control school bus ride later on, like the ones I had to take when a ride from Dave wasn't possible. He'd said he had "something to do," and now I knew what it was. Dave was standing on a classroom chair, yelling into a security camera. Never mind that it didn't record sound; I guess his expression and unfriendly gestures were enough to get his message across. The chair seat was flexing and groaning under his weight, and I was standing by apprehensively, waiting for the seat to splinter and for Dave to come tumbling down like Humpty Dumpty, cradle and all and whatnot.

He was still angry about some decision the school administration announced the day before regarding student organization budgets or benefits or something. Not that Dave really cared about any of that—he just loved any opportunity to act offended at anything the administration did. I guess putting it all on tape for some

unsuspecting security guard or secretary to see was his way of making his displeasure known.

The second week of our senior year and already Dave was in rare form. He was screeching now in full rant, his face just inches away from the camera lens. It was a beautiful performance: gloriously obscene, a marvel of four-letter words strung together like a true maestro.

When he was finished, he gave the camera a lewd gesture with both hands. Spent and out of breath, he climbed down from the chair and dragged it back where it belonged.

Dave called our school “The Big Brown Box,” where we’re “processed” and “churned out like obedient zombies.” I guess it was Dave’s calling to be a rabble-rouser, but I’m not sure you can make a living at it. If you could, though, Dave would’ve made a very good one.

“So. How was the rant?” Dave asked, still out of breath but beaming with pride.

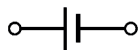
I thought a moment, comparing it to his past performances.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’d give it a solid B, maybe a B-plus.”

Dave seemed pleased with the grade. “Thanks. It wasn’t a personal best, but it was pretty good, wasn’t it?”

“Sure, Dave. Sure.”

I patted the big guy on the back, and then we headed off to the cafeteria to sit at our favorite table and wait for them to open so we could get our usual morning cup of joe.



Our Big Brown Box was one of those sprawling eyesores of a building—ominous, pompous, and dreary, not unlike a few of our teachers. Built in what seemed like record time, it towered over the neighborhood.

Metal detectors by the main doors were installed our sophomore year, as were the surveillance cameras and doors that locked electronically when classes began. The joke was they were either trying to keep the bad guys out or the inmates in. Even the drug-sniffing dog they brought in unannounced on occasion seemed afraid of the place and always bolted out the door when its job was done.

“Hear that, people?” Dave said loudly one morning, when all those electronic locks kicked in with their usual *thunk* that reverberated down the halls. “Homeland Security cares about you.”

Even though our senior year had just begun, oddly enough I was already getting a bit nostalgic and was thinking lately about my freshman year. Freshman year was essentially boot camp that never ended. Yeah, we were the scum, the newbies, the dorks and freaks and nerds and geeks that nobody loved or wanted. There were notable exceptions, of course—the few girls with supermodel looks already and an even smaller number of jocks with overactive thyroids who towered over the rest of us and made first team without even breaking a sweat. (Actually, Dave was one of those.) But like I said, they were the exceptions. The rest of us had to bow and scrape to the upperclassmen, even those who had little status otherwise. It got old fast to find all your stuff in the trash if you left it unattended for even a minute, or to have someone cut in line in front of you just because you were new.

At least no one ever beat me up cliché-style for my lunch money, although rumors that could actually happen resurfaced with every freshman class like some kind of cruel urban legend that just wouldn’t die. It was one of those stupid things you would think no one would ever believe, but it was always amusing to see the freshman lined up in the cafe with their money clutched tight in their fists while glancing nervously around for any sign of some lurking, hungry bully looking for a free lunch.

It would have been amusing, that is, if I hadn't done that myself when I was a freshman. More out of pity than anything else, I left the freshman alone. They had enough problems.

Sadder yet were the handful of recent graduates who just couldn't let the place go. You saw them the first couple of weeks of every new school year hanging around the hallways with their wistful little puppy dog expressions as if hoping they could fit back in somehow.

"Man, when I graduate, I'm putting this place in my rearview mirror, and that's it," Dave said when we saw one being gently escorted out because classes were about to begin.

"Agreed," Onion said. "High school's not going to be the high point of my life."

But enough about all that.

My name is George Wells. At home there was my dad and my younger brother Kenny. My mom died when I was ten. We lived in a ranch house in an older part of town, far from The Big Brown Box, which was why I depended on Dave to get there. I had my driver's license but never had any great desire to own a car, although on rare occasion Dad would let me drive his buzzy, bouncy econobox he bought for the fuel economy. And that was good enough for me.

Before you write me off as too ordinary, I will admit to one obsession that's a bit unusual. Actually, it was one that drove both Dave and Onion nuts. They were among the few who knew about it since it was a bit . . . well . . . strange, and the last thing you want to be known as in high school is strange. You get the whole shunned and scorned deal if that happens, so I mostly kept it to myself. I'm sure Dave and Onion wished I had a normal obsession like jogging or singing or something else totally mundane.

At any rate, here it is. Not long after my mom died, just by chance I saw the classic 1960 version of *The Time Machine* with Rod Taylor

and Yvette Mimieux. It was almost as if my whole life I had been destined to see that movie, as if that movie had been made expressly for me, and ever since I'd been fascinated with the idea of time travel. That wasn't what drove Dave and Onion crazy, though. The problem was that I kept quoting from *The Movie*—that's all we called it, just "The Movie"—since I had the whole thing memorized. I think I had watched *The Movie* at least thirty times through and had yet to grow tired of a single minute. If you haven't seen it yet, you must; if you haven't seen it in a while, see it again—it's an absolute masterpiece, easily one of the best movies ever made.

The Time Machine is based on the book by Herbert George Wells—no relation, sad to say. It's the story of the far future, where the human race has been divided into two groups: the peaceful though uneducated Eloi on the surface, and the brainy but monstrous Morlocks who live underground and prey on the Eloi above.

Spoiler alert here: George, the time traveler, helps the Eloi win their freedom from the Morlocks and then rejoins them at the end to restore human civilization.

Shortly after I saw *The Movie* for the first time, I began collecting wind-up clocks that chimed—mantel clocks, cuckoo clocks, you name it. The time traveler's parlor is full of chiming clocks, and I thought that looked beyond cool. After years of garage sales and gifts—"Well, at least you're easy to buy for," Dave once told me—I had dozens lined up in our living room on the mantel, tables, and walls. Basically, they were everywhere you looked, just as I had planned. My favorite was probably the miniature grandfather clock I found in a secondhand store; that was center stage on the mantel. It had a few dings and was missing a decorative piece on the front, so it was probably not worth much, but it had a nice loud chime. Unfortunately, my dad said no way was he going to listen to them all going off every hour on the hour, so I had to silence them. While

none of the clocks were priceless heirlooms or anything like that, it was pretty impressive to hear them all ticking, and whenever I was home alone I would un-silence them and try to synchronize them to all chime together. There was usually one or two that sounded a bit early and a couple that sounded a bit late, but still it was just like *The Movie*, as if the chimes were announcing that hidden somewhere in the house was a time machine of my own, just waiting for me to hop on board and explore the far past and future.

My dad thought my obsession with time travel had something to do with my mom's death and my desire to go back and try to save her—or at least see her again. But that wasn't it at all. Sure, it would have been great to see her again as she was, with her long brown hair and always-glad-to-see-you smile, but I knew it would just be a visit, a moment in time that wouldn't change the here and now. Besides, it would be sad to have to leave her behind again, knowing she was to die much too young, although with a time machine I could always pop in to see her again anytime I wanted.

There were lots of people I would have liked to meet throughout history, and while my mom and grandparents were at the top of the list, they weren't the only ones. I liked the idea of owning a time machine for three reasons, really. First, it would be great to witness some of the big moments in history and meet famous people I could talk to, like Ben Franklin and Mark Twain, Edison and Einstein. You know, the really super important people like that. Second, it would be fascinating to see what's going to happen to mankind in the future near and far. And third, and most important, because I wanted to find a friend like Filby, the time traveler's faithful friend who never abandoned him. That was my ultimate quest. Filby was the best friend anyone could ever have, the nearly perfect friend. Filby and George had a friendship that transcended death and time itself, as you would know if you ever saw *The*

Movie. Filby was forever loyal, Filby was forever caring, Filby would have done anything for George, the intrepid time traveler.

Somehow, somewhere, I was sure to find my own Filby. The only real question in my mind was when.

CHAPTER TWO

ONION AND DAVE

Her name was Nancy, but everybody knew her as Onion. Dave gave her that name early in our sophomore year, before the three of us had become best buds. Nancy always wore layers of clothes no matter what the weather. The look was definitely unique, almost to the point of being a classroom distraction.

So one day Dave said to a bunch of us in the cafe, “She’s like an onion. If you peeled off all her clothes, layer by layer, soon there would be nothing left.”

The name stuck.

Now, you would think a girl would hate a name like Onion, what with the bad smell and bad breath connotations. But the day after Dave’s comment went viral, Nancy showed up wearing something like half a dozen blouses—no two alike—two hats, two pairs of pants, and a skirt, willing to go along with the joke. She made a point of coming by our table at lunchtime to show us.

“You look like a pumpkin,” Dave said.

“Why, thank you,” she said. “Aren’t I glamorous?” And she spun about like a rock star, her arms raised as high as all those clothes would let her. “Besides,” she said, more seriously, “if you can’t laugh at yourself, who can you laugh at?”

Dave stared hard at her. “You mean you don’t care what the sheeple say about you?”

I could tell he was testing her the same way he tested me on the bus the day we first met.

She didn’t hesitate to answer. “Why should I? I live my life the way I want to, not the way the sheeple do.”

It was then that both Dave and I realized she was more than just okay. She was a kindred spirit. We cleared a space for her at our table, and she joined us every day after that.

In time, Onion became like the sister I never had and Dave the older brother I never had, even though he was older than me by only a few months.

Dave used to joke that Onion’s mom and my dad should get married so Onion could be my stepsister, but I could never imagine it. My dad and Onion’s mom were two completely different people. While they say that opposites attract, there still has to be some basis for two people to get together in the first place. My dad only spoke when there was something to say; Onion’s mom—like Onion—was always talking. My dad never showed any outward signs of worrying about anything, while Mrs. Gordon couldn’t wait to tell you what was troubling her. Thanks to his stint in the Navy, my dad liked things orderly and shipshape—“A place for everything and everything in its place,” as he said a thousand times—while Onion’s house overflowed with their strewn belongings on the tables, the chairs, everywhere.

“Not too much more than this,” Dave once whispered during a visit as we stepped over a pile of Onion’s clothes, “and they’ll officially be hoarders.”

“Maybe that’s why Onion wears so many of them,” I whispered back. “Just to get them off the floor.”

When Dave persisted that my dad and her mom should meet “just to see what happens,” Onion finally shut him down.

"Please. Let's not turn this into *The Parent Trap* or anything hokey like that, okay? Just stop already. Stop. That's an order."

Dave never brought it up again, which should tell you who's in charge.

And if you ever have any doubt about that, you should have seen Onion in gym class. She didn't just want to win—oh no, she wanted to crush and thoroughly humiliate her opponents . . . and usually did. With every goal or point Onion scored, she cackled in delight like it was the most fun she'd ever had. Needless to say, nobody wanted to play against her, and when players were picked to form teams, she was always picked first. Onion didn't win any friends in gym, but at the same time I think it made all the girls show her plenty of respect both in and out of it.

"What can I tell you?" she said once at our cafeteria table when I brought up her total lack of mercy. "I'm a tough broad." She grinned.

Dave and I just grinned stiffly at her in return like a couple of idiots. Neither of us would have ever dared call her that, even though it was absolutely true.

Every now and then, Dave would engage me in discussing *The Movie* since he had a vague interest in time travel from a philosophical point of view. Mostly, though, he just made fun of the plot.

At our usual table in the cafe one day, we were discussing the scene where George the time traveler rescues Weena—one of the Eloi and the time traveler's eventual love interest—from drowning.

"So Weena's screaming for help—"

Dave broke out in laughter.

"Sorry," he said, rubbing his eyes. "The name just struck me as funny. Who names their kid Weena, anyway?"

I stared at him. "It's thousands of years from now, remember?"

"So what? It will always be a stupid name."

The one thing Dave never laughed about was when I started talking about Filby. He seemed to grow impatient if I gushed too much about what a great friend Filby was, an ideal companion whose friendship was unparalleled.

"Nobody's that perfect," Dave would argue, refusing to look at me.

"But he supported George no matter what other people thought."

"So? George was an eccentric inventor. Of course everybody thought he was crazy. Who wouldn't?"

"Filby," I countered.

Dave didn't respond.

Why Filby was such a sore point with Dave I didn't know. I guess he thought that kind of unwavering friendship was impossible, while I still hoped to find my own Filby someday.

Dave's mom and dad were nothing like Dave. Nothing. He didn't even particularly resemble either of them, especially in width or height. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was adopted, and sometimes I still wonder. Dave's parents were a matched pair of always well-groomed, well-dressed optimists who just laughed at Dave's cynicism, as if he couldn't possibly be serious. Oddly, Dave took it all in stride.

"What did you expect? They're old people," he would say, even though they were both younger than either Onion's mom or my dad. "I'm related to them, but I can't relate," was his mantra.

Dave lived even farther away from The Big Brown Box than I did, in a neighborhood with sprawling homes on spacious lots with fancy street names like Diamond Court and Country Club Lane. Me, I lived on Third Street. I don't know if Dave's cynicism was due to his embarrassment at his parent's wealth or his rejection of their preppy "sold on suburbia" attitude. Either way, it sure seemed like he was trying hard to be and do the exact opposite.

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