ONE

Princeton, New Jersey,

14 March 1954

'Albert Einstein speaking.'

'Who?' asks the girl on the telephone.

It's the morning of Albert's seventy-fifth birthday. He's seated at his study table on the second floor of his small house on Mercer Street in Princeton turning the pages of his scrapbook embossed in silver:

ALBERT EINSTEIN SAMMELALBUM

He presses the black plastic Western Electric telephone closer against his ear.

'I'm sorry,' the girl says. 'I have the wrong number.' Her accent is Boston Brahmin.

'You have the right number,' Albert says.

'I do? May I ask, sir, please – what is your number?'

'I don't know—'

'You don't know your own phone number? You are Albert

Einstein. How come the world's most famous scientist doesn't know his own phone number?'

'Never memorise something that you can look up,' Albert says. 'Or, even better, have someone else look up for you.'

Tobacco sparks from his briar pipe spew across a letter from the German physicist Max Born. Albert extinguishes them with a slap.

'OK, sir,' the girl says. 'I'm sorry I bothered you.'

'You haven't bothered me in the least. How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'I'm seventy-five today.'

'You are? Seventy-five – that's something. Happy birthday.'

'Thank you. You have given me a fine birthday present.'

'I have?'

'You have raised an interesting philosophical problem. You dialled a wrong number. The wrong number for you. The right number for me. It is a most intriguing conundrum. What is your name?'

'Mimi Beaufort—'

'Where are you calling from?'

'From my lodgings, outside Princeton.'

'Your lodgings, you say – where's your real home?'

'Greenwich in Fairfield County, Connecticut.'

'That's a nice place. Will you call me again?'

'If you really are Albert Einstein, I'll call again. Sure I will.'

Albert toys with his copious white moustache. 'Check me out in the directory.'

His right leg is jiggling and bouncing. The ball of his foot rises and lowers rapidly. He flexes his calf muscles. He's quite unaware his leg is making such rapid movements.

*

Puffing at his pipe, filled with Revelation, a tobacco blended by Philip Morris and House of Windsor, Albert gazes at the birthday cards and cables piled up on the desk and tables, even on his wooden music stand. He hasn't the foggiest idea who's sent them.

There are congratulatory cables from people he does know: Jawaharlal Nehru, Thomas Mann, Bertrand Russell and Linus Pauling.

He shifts uneasily in his chair, troubled by the pain in his liver.

He opens *The New York Times* to find that its editorial page has quoted George Bernard Shaw's view that history would remember Albert's name as the equal of Pythagoras, Aristotle, Galileo and Newton.

On chairs, mahogany commodes and occasional tables are mimeographed academic papers from Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Study marked for his personal attention: papers from mathematicians, physicists, archaeologists, astronomers and economists. A rack of briar pipes stands next to jars of pencils in front of a gramophone and vinyl records, mostly of violin and piano music by Bach and Mozart.

There are four portraits on the wall. One of Isaac Newton. A second of James Maxwell whose work Albert has described as the most profound and the most fruitful that physics has experienced since the time of Newton. A third of Michael Faraday. The fourth of Mahatma Gandhi. Beneath the portraits is the framed emblem of the Jain religion, symbol of the doctrine of non-violence. He looks at the letter from Born.

'I believe,' Born declares, 'that ideas such as absolute certitude, absolute exactness, final truth, etc. are figments of the imagination which should not be admissible in any field of science.'

'I agree,' says Albert to himself.

'On the other hand,' Born continues, 'any assertion of probability is either right or wrong from the standpoint of the theory on which it is based. This loosening of thinking [*Lockerung des Denkens*] seems

to me to be the greatest blessing which modern science has given to us.'

'Very good,' Albert mutters.

'For the belief in a single truth and in being the possessor thereof is the root cause of all evil in the world.'

'So says Born,' says Albert. 'Quite right.'

Albert's treasured Biedermeier-style grandfather clock chimes ten. When the chimes end, he smiles to himself. *F = L + S. Frieden entspricht Liebe und Stille.* Or: *P = L + S.* Peace equals Love plus Silence.

EINSTEIN ATTENDS A CONCERT WITH HELEN DUKAS AT THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE IN BERLIN, 1930

Outside Albert's study, his live-in secretary and housekeeper, Frau Helen Dukas, has been waiting until the clock chimes the hour. She doesn't like what she's just heard Albert saying on the telephone. 'You will call me again?'

You = another time-wasting female admirer.

She comes into the study bringing with her the aroma of camphor. Albert has long meant to tell her: 'The organic chemical

$C_{10}H_{16}O$ is unpleasant.' He's never quite summoned up the courage to do so.

Frau Dukas opens the green shutters of the study's main window with a flourish, the clatter intended as a reprimand. The window looks out onto the weeping willows, maples and elms of the leafy suburban street.

The sunlight increases the wateriness in Albert's eyes. He rubs them with the back of his hand and blinks.

Frau Dukas, austere, tall and slender, is originally from south-west Germany, the daughter of a German-Jewish merchant. Her mother was from Hechingen, the same town as Albert's second wife. As Albert's secretary and gatekeeper for some twenty-five years she's dedicated herself to providing him with a quiet life.

Her bedroom in the house on Mercer Street, separated by a bathroom, is next to Albert's. There's also a small studio and bedroom set aside for Albert's stepdaughter, Margot, when she visits. And another that had been Albert's sister, Maja's. Maja died four years ago.

'Who was that you were speaking to?' Frau Dukas asks.

'A young lady called Mimi Beaufort. I like her voice. From good old Boston. The home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk only to Cabots and presumably the Beauforts. Families that talk only to God. D'you think you can find out who she is?'

'She calls you by mistake and you want me to find out who she is?'

'I do. Anyone who's never made a mistake has never tried anything new.'

'Do you mind me saying you mustn't waste your time?'

'Helen. *Kreativität ist das Resultat Verschwendeter Zeit.* Creativity is the residue of time wasted. Find out who this Mimi Beaufort is. Check out the name in the Greenwich, Connecticut, telephone directory. And please bring me a cup of hot chocolate.'

Albert wears scuffed leather slippers, no socks. His frayed shirt, open at the neck, reveals a worn blue sweatshirt.

Frau Dukas arranges a blanket around his feet. 'I have never seen so many birthday cards,' she marvels.

'What is there to celebrate? Birthdays are automatic things. Anyway, birthdays are for children.' Once again he wipes away the wateriness from his eyes. Their sparkle contrasts with the lines and furrows of his brow. 'I am seventy-five. None of us is getting any younger.'

He fills his pipe from the tin of Revelation tobacco and lights up. A cloud of smoke billows upwards. 'Please, Helen, bring me my hot chocolate.'

'All in good time.'

'What are you holding, Helen?'

Frau Dukas hands him a newspaper photograph of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.

'Some schoolchildren from Lincoln, Nebraska, have asked you to sign this. Are you prepared to sign it for them?'

Shrouded in the cloud of pipe smoke, Albert stares forlornly at the image. 'If I must.'

'I will get your cup of chocolate,' Frau Dukas says, as if promising a reward.

She leaves him alone to sign the photograph *A. Einstein 14 March 1954*.

Then he takes out a sheet of paper and writes:

> 140,000 souls perished at Hiroshima. 100,00 were terribly injured. 74,000 perished at Nagasaki. Another 75,000 suffered fatal injuries from burns, injuries, and gamma radiation. At Pearl Harbor – how many died? They tell me 2,500. The British poet Donne tells us:

> ‘any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’ The western world is satisfied, satisfied. I am not. The wonderful things you learn in school are the work of many generations, produced by enthusiastic effort and infinite labor in every country of the world. All this is put into your hands as your inheritance in order that you may receive it, honor it, add to it, and one day faithfully hand it to your children. Thus do we mortals achieve immortality in the permanent things that we create in common.

Frau Dukas returns with the hot chocolate. Albert loads more tobacco in his pipe, waving at Frau Dukas to be seated: ‘A letter please . . . Helen, to Bertrand Russell.’ He dictates: ‘I agree with your draft proposition that the prospect for the human race is sombre beyond all precedent. Mankind is faced with a clear-cut alternative: either we shall all perish, or we shall have to acquire some slight degree of common sense.’

The grandfather clock chimes the quarter hour. ‘Here, then, is the problem,’ Albert continues, ‘which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war? People will not face this alternative because it is so difficult to abolish war – With kind regards, Albert Einstein.’

He takes off one of his old slippers, removes a small granite pebble from between his toes and sets it on top of Born’s letter.

‘I liked the young lady’s voice. Think of relativity. When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute – and it’s longer than any hour. That’s relativity. Mimi Beaufort. Beaufort is a remarkable name.’

‘Why?’ Frau Dukas says with a tone that suggests there’s nothing remarkable about it.

Turning towards the windows to ponder the play of dappled sunlight on the trees, Albert says: 'It means the beautiful fortress.'

The sight of a group of Afro-American children playing in the sun makes him smile.

The leader sings: 'My momma livin . . .'

The group sings: 'Where she livin?'

Performing a hip-shaking dance, they sing in unison:

'Well, she lives in a place called Tennessee.
Jump up, Tenna, Tennessee.
Well, I never been to college,
I never been to school.
But when it comes to boogie
I can boogie like a fool.
You go in, out, side to side.
You go in, out, side to side.'

Albert struggles to his feet and performs a boogie-woogie of his own devising. Still with his back to Frau Dukas, he says: 'Take this down, please: "There remain prejudices of which I as a Jew am clearly conscious; but they are unimportant in comparison with the attitude of whites towards their fellow citizens of darker complexion. The more I feel an American, the more this situation pains me. I can escape the feeling of complicity in it only by speaking out."'

'Who is that to be sent to?' Frau Dukas asks.

'To me. To me, Helen. A reminder to myself. Now . . . I want you to treat the following as strictly confidential.' He sighs heavily. 'My personal relationships have all been failures. What man would not visit his stepdaughter when she was dying of cancer? My first wife died alone in Zürich. My daughter has disappeared. I have no idea where she is. I don't even know whether she is still alive.'

'Please . . . don't allow your past to destroy you.'

'My son – my son . . . you know, Helen – my son Eduard has been in clinics for schizophrenics for almost twenty-five years. Therapy, electroconvulsive treatment, has destroyed his memory and cognitive abilities.'

'But not your loving relationship with him.'

'My only loving relationship is with the Jewish people. That is my strongest human bond. I told Queen Elizabeth of Belgium: "The exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler – *Ich bin ein Betrüger*." I need fresh air – my liver hurts.'

Frau Dukas opens the windows.

Outside, from the radio of a battered Buick four-door sedan, comes the sound of Doris Day singing 'Secret Love'.

Albert makes a gesture of impatience. 'Check out that telephone directory, Helen.'

Frau Dukas does so and discovers the Beaufort family residence is Beaufort Park in Greenwich, Fairfield County, Connecticut. He wonders what Mimi Beaufort looks like. Her voice certainly holds the eternal appeal of youth. Is she going to be a new friend? A confidante perhaps. A secret love to calm his soul troubled by his age, his aches and pains and dark forebodings. The shafts of sun fall across his desk. He relishes the patterns. He flicks through the worn pages of Mozart's Sonata for Piano and Violin in E minor, K.304.

It's an honour to find such tenderness unfolding, such purity of beauty and truth. Such qualities are indestructible. He believes, like Mozart, he has unravelled the complexities of the universe. Its essence of the eternal is beyond fate's hand and deluded humankind. Age allows us to feel such things.

He stares at the shadows flickering on the floor. In the patterns he fancies he sees the faces of his family, his friends and loved ones.

His intimate and treasured friendships seem to him to have been cyclical. Too many have evaporated. Ever since his beginning. Long ago. In Ulm at eleven-thirty in the morning at Bahnhofstrasse B135, the house destroyed by one of the most violent Allied air attacks in December 1944. He remembers writing to a correspondent whose name he's forgotten: 'Time has affected it even more than it has affected me.'

Is there anything left now of old Ulm? he wonders. What of my friends and loved ones: those who have made up my life and formed me? Me: The Most Famous Face on Earth.

How kind to me were the residents of Ulm who intended to name a street after me. Instead, the Nazis named it Fichtestrasse after Fichte, whose works Hitler read, and who was read by other Nazis like Dietrich Eckart and Arnold Fanck.

After the war, it was renamed Einsteinstrasse. His response to the news sent to him by the mayor always makes him smile. 'There's a street there that bears my name. At least I'm not responsible for whatever is going to happen there. I was right to decline the rights of a freeman of Ulm considering the fate of the Jews in Nazi-Germany.'

He takes up his pen and writes:

> Like you I cannot help my birthplace. But I can help my history of my intimacies in youth. The religious paradise of youth was my first attempt to free myself from the chains of the 'merely personal', from an existence dominated by wishes, hopes, and primitive feelings. Out yonder there is the world in all its vastness existing independently of us human beings standing before us like a great, eternal riddle, at least partially accessible to our inspection and thinking. The contemplation of this world beckons as a liberation. In childhood I noticed that many a man whom I had learned to esteem and to admire had found inner freedom and security in its pursuit. The mental grasp of this extra-personal world within

the frame of our capabilities presented itself to my mind, half consciously, half unconsciously, as a supreme goal. Similarly motivated men of the present and of the past, as well as the insights they had achieved, were the friends who could not be lost. The road to this paradise was not as comfortable and alluring as the road to the religious paradise; but it has shown itself reliable, and I have never regretted having chosen it. Except perhaps for the fact I doubt there is a sentient being anywhere on earth who does not know my face.