

If Everything is Inevitable

by Angi Becker Stevens

Christine comes back from the future looking tired, which is the opposite of what I expected. For some reason, I imagined the future as being invigorating. But she walks into the apartment and abandons her suitcase by the front door, collapses into a heap on the couch next to me.

“How was it?” I ask.

“You know I can't tell you anything.” She speaks into a throw pillow, her voice muffled. Like she's being smothered and putting up a very pathetic attempt at a struggle.

“Were there flying cars?” I ask.

She lifts her head and looks at me. “Of course there were flying cars.” I'm not sure if she's being serious. We've been best friends since high school and roommates for the past two years, and I still can't tell most of the time what she really means and what she doesn't. I've also never understood exactly what she sees in me. It feels a little like a clever joke I don't get, a punch line I missed. I was always the hapless loser and she was always most-likely-to-succeed, and now I'm still waiting tables and she's out cruising around in time machines. My life became something tedious, hers became something impossible. The fact that most people believe she's just a secretary does not make me feel any better.

“What about you?” She asks. “What did you do while I was gone?”

“Eh,” I say. “You know. Went out with that guy again. It was okay.” The details are anything but confidential. They are just the sort of dull things no one would ever have any desire to know. “So what year were you in?” I ask. “Can you tell me that? It was hundreds of

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years from now, right?"

She nods, offering nothing more specific.

"Wow," I say. "So we were all dead by then." She doesn't answer me, turns her face back into the pillow instead.

When I'm lying in bed, she comes into my room and slides in next to me. She props herself up on her elbow, and it's like we're fifteen again, except her secrets are deeper now, no longer things she can whisper to me in the dark. I tell her we should steal the time machine, that we should move from era to era the way most fugitives move from place to place, reinventing ourselves every time. I imagine a succession of lives. I tell her that when we got to the end of one life, we could pick up and start over again.

"It doesn't work like that, though," she says. "Going back and forth in time doesn't mean you get to live forever."

"I know," I say. "But still. Wouldn't it be fun? We could go be flappers for a while and then take off just before the market crash, go spend a year fighting for suffrage or protesting Vietnam." I think probably all past decades have some major drawback or another, but it seems like any of them would be fine to visit as a tourist. Christine, though, doesn't really look amused. It's all make-believe to me, but to her it's just work. Real life. She's already traipsed all over the twentieth century, the way some people spend a summer seeing Europe.

She lays her head down on the pillow. "It was exciting," she says. "But I'm glad to be home." She says it like it wasn't really exciting at all. She seems, now, like a person who has seen too much. Not that she's traumatized, I mean, only that she's far too aware of how the next few hundred years are going to play out.

We lie there for a little while inches apart, not saying anything.

There is so little to say. I want to ask her all the questions she's forbidden to answer. I want to ask her which animals will go extinct and if the sky will always be the same color and if she knows how and when we're going to die. I want to know if everything is inevitable.

She closes her eyes. She doesn't move away when I rest my open palm on her cheek. I brush my thumb across her bottom lip; the skin there is dried out from some future air that I will never know the taste of. She keeps her eyes closed as her chin tilts up toward me, and when our mouths meet I'm not sure if this is something I have always longed for or something I have never imagined until now. My hands move across her skin, trying to unravel all the mysteries of the future back into a knot again. Trying to tell her that maybe she still doesn't know how everything turns out. I press my body against her and imagine I am the one who can pilot us through time, toward whatever life comes next.

