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The Time Traveler's Wife

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I

THE MAN OUT OF TIME

Oh not because happiness exists,
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.

But because truly being here is so much; because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.

...Ah, but what can we take along
into that other realm? Not the art of looking,
which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.
The sufferings, then. And, above all, the heaviness,
and the long experience of love,-just what is wholly
unsayable.

- from The Ninth Duino Elegy,
Rainer Maria Rilke,
translated by Stephen Mitchell

FIRST DATE, ONE

Saturday, October 26, 1991 (Henry is 28, Clare is 20)

CLARE: The library is cool and smells like carpet cleaner, although all I can see is marble. I sign the Visitors' Log: Clare Abshire, 11:15 10-26-91 Special Collections. I have never been in the Newberry Library before, and now that I've gotten past the dark, foreboding entrance I am excited. I have a sort of Christmas-morning sense of the library as a big box full of beautiful books. The elevator is dimly lit, almost silent. I stop on the third floor and fill out an application for a Reader's Card, then I go upstairs to Special Collections. My boot heels rap the wooden floor. The room is quiet and crowded, full of solid, heavy tables piled with books and surrounded by readers. Chicago autumn morning light shines through the tall windows. I approach the desk and collect a stack of call slips. I'm writing a paper for an art history class. My research topic is the Kelmscott Press Chaucer. I look up the book itself and fill out a call slip for it. But I also want to read about papermaking at Kelmscott. The catalog is confusing. I go back to the desk to ask for help. As I explain to the woman what I am trying to find, she glances over my shoulder at someone passing behind me. "Perhaps Mr. DeTamble can help you," she says. I turn, prepared to start explaining again, and find myself face to face with Henry.

I am speechless. Here is Henry, calm, clothed, younger than I have ever seen him. Henry is working at the Newberry Library, standing in front of me, in the present. Here and now. I am jubilant. Henry is looking at me patiently, uncertain but polite.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he asks.

"Henry!" I can barely refrain from throwing my arms around him. It is obvious that he has never seen me before in his life.

"Have we met? I'm sorry, I don't. . . ." Henry is glancing around us, worrying that readers, co-workers are noticing us, searching his memory and realizing that some future self of his has met this radiantly happy girl standing in front of him. The last time I saw him he was sucking my toes in the Meadow.

I try to explain. "I'm Clare Abshire. I knew you when I was a little girl..." I'm at a loss because I am in love with a man who is standing before me with no memories of me at all. Everything is in the future for him. I want to laugh at the weirdness of the whole thing. I'm flooded with years of knowledge of Henry, while he's looking at me perplexed and fearful. Henry wearing my dad's old fishing trousers, patiently quizzing me on multiplication tables, French verbs, all the state capitals; Henry laughing at some peculiar lunch my seven-year-old self has brought to the Meadow; Henry wearing a tuxedo, undoing the studs of his shirt with shaking hands on my eighteenth birthday. Here! Now! "Come and have coffee with me, or dinner or something. . . ." Surely he has to say yes, this Henry who loves me in the past and the

future must love me now in some bat-squeak echo of other time. To my immense relief he does say yes. We plan to meet tonight at a nearby Thai restaurant, all the while under the amazed gaze of the woman behind the desk, and I leave, forgetting about Kelmscott and Chaucer and floating down the marble stairs, through the lobby and out into the October Chicago sun, running across the park scattering small dogs and squirrels, whooping and rejoicing.

HENRY: It's a routine day in October, sunny and crisp. I'm at work in a small windowless humidity-controlled room on the fourth floor of the Newberry, cataloging a collection of marbled papers that has recently been donated. The papers are beautiful, but cataloging is dull, and I am feeling bored and sorry for myself. In fact, I am feeling old, in the way only a twenty-eight-year-old can after staying up half the night drinking overpriced vodka and trying, without success, to win himself back into the good graces of Ingrid Carmichel. We spent the entire evening fighting, and now I can't even remember what we were fighting about. My head is throbbing. I need coffee. Leaving the marbled papers in a state of controlled chaos, I walk through the office and past the page's desk in the Reading Room. I am halted by Isabelle's voice saying, "Perhaps Mr. DeTamble can help you," by which she means "Henry, you weasel, where are you slinking off to?" And this astoundingly beautiful amber-haired tall slim girl turns around and looks at me as though I am her personal Jesus. My stomach lurches. Obviously she knows me, and I don't know her. Lord only knows what I have said, done, or promised to this luminous creature, so I am forced to say in my best librarianese, "Is there something I can help you with?" The girl sort of breathes "Henry!" in this very evocative way that convinces me that at some point in time we have a really amazing thing together. This makes it worse that I don't know anything about her, not even her name. I say "Have we met?" and Isabelle gives me a look that says You asshole. But the girl says, "I'm Clare Abshire. I knew you when I was a little girl," and invites me out to dinner. I accept, stunned. She is glowing at me, although I am unshaven and hung over and just not at my best. We are going to meet for dinner this very evening, at the Beau Thai, and Clare, having secured me for later, wafts out of the Reading Room. As I stand in the elevator, dazed, I realize that a massive winning lottery ticket chunk of my future has somehow found me here in the present, and I start to laugh. I cross the lobby, and as I run down the stairs to the street I see Clare running across Washington Square, jumping and whooping, and I am near tears and I don't know why.

Later that evening:

HENRY: At 6:00 p.m. I race home from work and attempt to make myself attractive. Home these days is a tiny but insanely expensive studio apartment on North Dearborn; I am constantly banging parts of myself on inconvenient walls, countertops and furniture. Step One: unlock seventeen locks on apartment door, fling myself into the living room-which-is-also-my-bedroom and begin stripping off clothing. Step Two: shower and shave. Step Three: stare hopelessly into the depths of my closet, gradually becoming aware that nothing is exactly clean. I discover one

white shirt still in its dry cleaning bag. I decide to wear the black suit, wing tips, and pale blue tie. Step Four: don all of this and realize I look like an FBI agent. Step Five: look around and realize that the apartment is a mess. I resolve to avoid bringing Clare to my apartment tonight even if such a thing is possible. Step Six: look in full-length bathroom mirror and behold angular, wild-eyed 6'1" ten-year-old Egon Schiele look-alike in clean shirt and funeral director suit. I wonder what sorts of outfits this woman has seen me wearing, since I am obviously not arriving from my future into her past wearing clothes of my own. She said she was a little girl? A plethora of unanswerables runs through my head. I stop and breathe for a minute. Okay. I grab my wallet and my keys, and away I go: lock the thirty-seven locks, descend in the cranky little elevator, buy roses for Clare in the shop in the lobby, walk two blocks to the restaurant in record time but still five minutes late. Clare is already seated in a booth and she looks relieved when she sees me. She waves at me like she's in a parade.

"Hello," I say. Clare is wearing a wine-colored velvet dress and pearls. She looks like a Botticelli by way of John Graham: huge gray eyes, long nose, tiny delicate mouth like a geisha. She has long red hair that covers her shoulders and falls to the middle of her back. Clare is so pale she looks like a waxwork in the candlelight. I thrust the roses at her. "For you."

"Thank you," says Clare, absurdly pleased. She looks at me and realizes that I am confused by her response. "You've never given me flowers before."

I slide into the booth opposite her. I'm fascinated. This woman knows me; this isn't some passing acquaintance of my future hejiras. The waitress appears and hands us menus.

"Tell me," I demand.

"What?"

"Everything. I mean, do you understand why I don't know you? I'm terribly sorry about that--"

"Oh, no, you shouldn't be. I mean, I know...why that is." Clare lowers her voice. "It's because for you none of it has happened yet, but for me, well, I've known you for a long time."

"How long?"

"About fourteen years. I first saw you when I was six."

"Jesus. Have you seen me very often? Or just a few times?"

"The last time I saw you, you told me to bring this to dinner when we met again," Clare shows me a pale blue child's diary, "so here,"-she hands it to me-"you can have this." I open it to the place marked with a piece of newspaper. The page, which has two cocker spaniel puppies lurking in the upper right-hand corner, is a list of dates.

It begins with September 23, 1977, and ends sixteen small, blue, puppied pages later on May 24, 1989. I count. There are 152 dates, written with great care in the large open Palmer Method blue ball point pen of a six-year-old.

"You made the list? These are all accurate?"

"Actually, you dictated this to me. You told me a few years ago that you memorized the dates from this list. So I don't know how exactly this exists; I mean, it seems sort of like a Mobius strip. But they are accurate. I used them to know when to go down to the Meadow to meet you." The waitress reappears and we order: Tom Kha Kai for me and Gang Mussaman for Clare. A waiter brings tea and I pour us each a cup.

"What is the Meadow?" I am practically hopping with excitement. I have never met anyone from my future before, much less a Botticelli who has encountered me 152 times.

"The Meadow is a part of my parents' place up in Michigan. There's woods at one edge of it, and the house on the opposite end. More or less in the middle is a clearing about ten feet in diameter with a big rock in it, and if you're in the clearing no one at the house can see you because the land swells up and then dips in the clearing. I used to play there because I liked to play by myself and I thought no one knew I was there. One day when I was in first grade I came home from school and went out to the clearing and there you were."

"Stark naked and probably throwing up."

"Actually, you seemed pretty self-possessed. I remember you knew my name, and I remember you vanishing quite spectacularly. In retrospect, it's obvious that you had been there before. I think the first time for you was in 1981; I was ten. You kept saying 'Oh my god,' and staring at me. Also, you seemed pretty freaked out about the nudity, and by then I just kind of took it for granted that this old nude guy was going to magically appear from the future and demand clothing." Clare smiles. "And food."

"What's funny?"

"I made you some pretty weird meals over the years. Peanut butter and anchovy sandwiches. Pâté and beets on Ritz crackers. I think partly I wanted to see if there was anything you wouldn't eat and partly I was trying to impress you with my culinary wizardry."

"How old was I?"

"I think the oldest I have seen you was forty-something. I'm not sure about youngest; maybe about thirty? How old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

"You look very young to me now. The last few years you were mostly in your early forties, and you seemed to be having kind of a rough life. . . . It's hard to say. When you're little all adults seem big, and old."

"So what did we do? In the Meadow? That's a lot of time, there."

Clare smiles. "We did lots of things. It changed depending on my age, and the weather. You spent a lot of time helping me do my homework. We played games. Mostly we just talked about stuff. When I was really young I thought you were an angel; I asked you a lot of questions about God. When I was a teenager I tried to get you to make love to me, and you never would, which of course made me much more determined about it. I think you thought you were going to warp me sexually, somehow. In some ways you were very parental."

"Oh. That's probably good news but somehow at the moment I don't seem to be wanting to be thought of as parental." Our eyes meet. We both smile and we are conspirators. "What about winter? Michigan winters are pretty extreme."

"I used to smuggle you into our basement; the house has a huge basement with several rooms, and one of them is a storage room and the furnace is on the other side of the wall. We call it the Reading Room because all the useless old books and magazines are stored there. One time you were down there and we had a blizzard and nobody went to school or to work and I thought I was going to go crazy trying to get food for you because there wasn't all that much food in the house. Etta was supposed to go grocery shopping when the storm hit. So you were stuck reading old Reader's Digests for three days, living on sardines and ramen noodles."

"Sounds salty. I'll look forward to it." Our meal arrives. "Did you ever learn to cook?"

"No, I don't think I would claim to know how to cook. Nell and Etta always got mad when I did anything in their kitchen beyond getting myself a Coke, and since I've moved to Chicago I don't have anybody to cook for, so I haven't been motivated to work on it. Mostly I'm too busy with school and all, so I just eat there." Clare takes a bite of her curry. "This is really good."

"Nell and Etta?"

"Nell is our cook." Clare smiles. "Nell is like cordon bleu meets Detroit; she's how Aretha Franklin would be if she was Julia Child. Etta is our housekeeper and all-around everything. She's really more almost our mom; I mean, my mother is...well, Etta's just always there, and she's German and strict, but she's very comforting, and my mother is kind of off in the clouds, you know?"

I nod, my mouth full of soup.

"Oh, and there's Peter," Clare adds. "Peter is the gardener."

"Wow. Your family has servants. This sounds a little out of my league. Have I ever, uh, met any of your family?"

"You met my Grandma Meagram right before she died. She was the only person I ever told about you. She was pretty much blind by then. She knew we were going to get married and she wanted to meet you."

I stop eating and look at Clare. She looks back at me, serene, angelic, perfectly at ease. "Are we going to get married?"

"I assume so," she replies. "You've been telling me for years that whenever it is you're coming from, you're married to me."

Too much. This is too much. I close my eyes and will myself to think of nothing; the last thing I want is to lose my grip on the here and now.

"Henry? Henry, are you okay?" I feel Clare sliding onto the seat beside me. I open my eyes and she grips my hands strongly in hers. I look at her hands and see that they are the hands of a laborer, rough and chapped. "Henry, I'm sorry, I just can't get used to this. It's so opposite. I mean, all my life you've been the one who knew everything and I sort of forgot that tonight maybe I should go slow." She smiles. "Actually, almost the last thing you said to me before you left was 'Have mercy, Clare.' You said it in your quoting voice, and I guess now that I think of it you must have been quoting me." She continues to hold my hands. She looks at me with eagerness; with love. I feel profoundly humble.