

E-TIME

by: Maria V. Snyder

With her finger poised above the send button, Jan scanned the letter. It had to be convincing. She had spent two weeks composing this e-mail. It had to be perfect.

The sound of pounding footsteps grew louder as security guards raced toward her. Time was running out. She hit the send key. The high pitched whistle of the machine reached a crescendo, creating a miniature wormhole that existed for a mere fraction of a second. Not enough time for a physical object to travel through, but long enough for an electronic message. The noise diminished as the wormhole collapsed.

"Freeze," a male voice ordered in the sudden silence.

Jan glanced down at the open wallet in her lap. Three young children smiled up at her. Her husband stood rigid next to them, scowling.

"Doctor Vincent, take your hands away from the keyboard and raise them," the guard instructed.

Jan held her hands shoulder high. Her eyes remained locked on the picture.

"Turn around slowly."

As she rotated, the government-issued office chair squealed. Two security guards stood in the doorway with their arms extended out. Jan eyed the twin black barrels of their guns. She glanced down to see the photograph again. Three little sunbeams and the storm cloud still remained. Facing the men, Jan wondered if they would shoot her if she rushed them.

"Dr. Vincent are you aware that the Generator Area is restricted?"

"Of course, you idiot. I created this area."

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"Amy's here," Jan's mother called from the bottom of the stairs. Jan stuffed the last T-shirt into her backpack and zipped it closed. She strode into the hallway, and spotted Amy standing in the foyer with an identical overstuffed pack leaning against Amy's long legs.

"Come on up, Aim," she said, "I have one more thing to do before we go." She retreated to her room without waiting for her friend's reply. Turning on her computer, Jan smiled as Amy plopped onto her bed.

"What's so important? We're going to be late." Amy's face glowed with excitement.

Pushing a stray strand of black hair out of her eyes, Jan tapped at the computer's keyboard, accessing her e-mail account. "James promised to send me the name and address of a great youth hostel in Paris. I want to get it before we leave." Jan waved a hand at an open notebook on her desk. It was their travel itinerary. The book had a colored tab for each European city. Under each city the pages were filled with tourist destinations, hotels, train schedules, and restaurants. Jan had planned out every detail of their two month-long backpacking trip through Europe.

She frowned at the two empty lines in her Paris section as she clicked on the inbox icon. Only one message had come in. The sender's name was her own. Jan squinted at the screen, making sure she had read it right.

Amy picked up Jan's travel book, scanning the pages. "Is this our schedule?" When Jan nodded, Amy said, "Cool."

Jan smiled at her long-time friend. After Jan had found out which countries she was interested in, Amy had been content to let Jan organize the trip. Her serene personality the exact opposite of Jan's.

"Did James deliver?" Amy asked.

"No. Unless I sent myself a message in my sleep, I think someone sent me a crank."

Interested, Amy put the book down and stood behind Jan. "Hey, check out the date." Amy pointed.

The communication had been sent June 10, 2022. Twenty-one years into the future. Definitely a crank, thought Jan. Amused, she clicked on the mail.

The message read: This is not a hoax. The technology exists to send messages through time. I am communicating to you from the future because I want you -- me -- to be happy. I am your miserable older self. Do NOT go to MIT in the fall. Find an art college and pursue painting. You have the talent. Remember the painting you hid under your bed last night? The watercolor of an orchid. That's just a hint of the skills you have yet to develop. Astrophysics is the safe course, but take a risk. Paint for your soul. And whatever you do -- do NOT marry Mark Vincent. He won't reveal his true self to you until after you exchange vows. This is not a hoax. This is your life.

"Wow," Amy said, awed.

Jan shook her head, glancing at the paintings that hung in her room. Detailed objects of the universe shone back at her with hard primary colors. She had meticulously copied NASA photographs to have her own swirling galaxies, solar systems, nebulae, and comets with eye-aching, luminous tails, to decorate her bedroom. She tugged her hair back behind her ear. Not go to MIT? she thought in disgust. I have a full scholarship. Why would I waste my money and time in an art college? Jan eyes cut to her twin bed with its tidy bedspread. Tucked underneath dwelled an experiment. Instead of an off-world subject, Jan had chosen to paint a still life. While the exercise had amused her, the results were not stellar.

The arrow hovered over the delete button on her computer screen. She clicked the mouse, erasing the message from the screen and from her mind.

"What are you doing?" Amy cried.

"Come on, Aim," Jan chided. "You don't really believe that nonsense. My mother's been playing with the computer. She's been campaigning for me to go to art school since I was ten. I'm impressed, though. She just learned how to access the internet last month."

Jan shut off her computer. Calling James on the phone, she got the information she wanted. She carefully stored her complete trip notebook into a pocket of her backpack, and followed Amy from the room. Her thoughts on flight schedules and quaint European villages.

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The security guards escorted Jan Vincent to the office at the end of the hall. The imagination-sucking gray walls held no decorations. The metal furniture wore a faded coat of paint, as if routine and regulation had worn the colors down. The sweet, clean tang of ink battled with the musky, stale odor of sweat. Jan slumped in an unyielding folding chair opposite the desk, waiting for the Director to arrive.

She held the photograph of her family close to her chest, feeling her heart beat pulsing through the thin film, willing it to transform. Please, she prayed. But the faint memory of deleting the message,

traveling to Europe, and starting MIT in the fall nagged at her mind. Everyone had always said she was strong willed, that she had a cement block resting atop her shoulders, and that it would take a major disaster to push her off her intended path. Youth had only made it worse.

She realized her folly in trying to influence her past. Jan had nothing in common with that eighteen-year-old girl. They were two entirely different people.

The picture was the only splash of color in the tedious room. Her husband radiated disapproval as her beautiful children beamed. She hadn't seen them smile like that in years. Better that they never existed than to be prisoners of the government.

Jan's shoulders drooped with defeat. Nothing had changed.

The End