

Time Warp

by Ashleen O’Gaea

The dust from our tires covered the flowers growing by the road and dimmed their colors to pastels. For some reason I saw them not as the spotted old weeds my parents disregarded, but as baby flowers, made younger if changed at all by the dust. I shifted on the back seat and watched the road disappear under the front of the car.

It’s a good day, I thought. Aside from the fact that it was sunny and the birds were singing, it was a good day because I had a sense of ... of excitement the air. We were on vacation, and this backroad was peaceful. Would I ever feel quite this way again?

“Didn’t you two come here once before?” I asked, not sure why I wondered.

Mom turned around and answered. “A long time ago, before you were born, Mandy. As a matter of fact, it was right after I found out I was pregnant.” She sounded surprised by the memory. “We came through from the other side, though, didn’t we?” she finished by asking my father.

Dad said, “Yeah,” and then, “Speak of the devil!” He braked for a turn. “There comes a car like the one we had then.”

As we watched, that car pulled over and stopped, and signaled us to do the same. Dad did. With a slight feeling of apprehension in the pit of my stomach, I got out when he did and followed Dad over to the other car.

“We’re lost,” the man said. “Can you tell us where this road leads?”

Dad scratched his head and nodded and began one of his inevitably complicated explanations. I was quiet, amazed that he didn’t notice. The man and the woman in the car looked exactly like Mom and Dad had looked eighteen years before. I’d seen pictures. The resemblance was stunning.

I knew it might be my imagination because the only alternative I could think of was fantastic. But I had to know. Impulsively, I walked around their car and asked the woman, whose appearance unnerved me even more than the man’s, what year it was.

“Nineteen,” she said, looking at me a little strangely, “forty-eight.” I fainted.

When I came to, my suspicions were confirmed. I felt weak and a little bit sick.

"Mandy," my father said gently, helping me up from the cool, shaded verge, "a funny thing seems to have happened. We seem to have met ourselves coming around the corner." I felt a little bit more sick. "Where am I?" I asked.

"You're right here with us," Dad said.

"You fainted," Mom said. I nodded. She didn't say anything about why a perfectly healthy eighteen-year-old with ... what's the phrase? With no known allergies or conditions, would just pass out. Then again, there was no explanation for me asking anyone what year it was.

Younger Mother came to stand beside me. and leaned in. "We believe I'm pregnant with you," she said. Ah. They *had* noticed their resemblances. But it wasn't only that they looked alike. The moms' voices were the same, too. Not like some siblings' are. Identical. Eerie was an understatement.

I almost fainted again. Instead, I stood up and walked back to our car. Nope, I wasn't asleep on the back seat, so there went the hope I was dreaming.

"We seem to have turned the corner into nineteen-forty-eight," Dad said in a tone that should have reassured me. Even in my disoriented state, I wondered how he and Mom could be so calm.

Fast-forward a few more questions and fewer answers. The Dads withdrew to the back of the older car and in their hushed conversation somehow satisfied themselves that we'd crossed into their time, rather than they into ours. After that, it wasn't hard to decide that we'd go back home with them.

It was a mostly silent ride. Now and then one of us would start to say something, and stop. All we knew about time travel was from H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and that wasn't helpful. For one thing, the nameless Time Traveler went on purpose, and for another thing, he went into the future.

What was helpful was that Younger Mom and Dad had moved, not long before, into the house I remembered. I even got my old room back.

It was odd knowing neighbors ... before I knew them. I was introduced as Younger

Mother's cousin, and my parents were introduced as the brother and sister of the Youngers. I went by my usual name, but my older parents had to use their middle names. It wasn't easy for any of us to adjust.

Most of the time, Anne (Younger Mother) and Ellen (Older Mother, but I had to call her by her first name) were home alone. Older Dad had gone on field trips while Older Mom was pregnant, and now that past, future, and present had gotten all mixed up, both Dads had to go. Older Mom and Younger Mom and I played hearts, went to coffees, and shopped. Hearts and coffee were recognizable; shopping wasn't.

Now and then I got a little impatient waiting for me and my friends to be born. Then I'd realize they wouldn't be *my* friends, and wonder how I could cope with all the people I knew, being almost two decades older. That usually ended in tears.

It was frustrating, remembering everything that had happened to me and knowing at the same time that none of it had happened yet. Older Mom wouldn't let me tell Younger Mom about it, but Older Mom had as much trouble keeping quiet about it as I did.

I was looking forward to teaching myself to tie shoelaces and other stuff and had to remind myself that maybe Younger Mom would want to be in charge of such things.

I read a very upsetting science fiction story that explained the disaster that resulted when two of the same person tried to exist at the same time. I had nightmares about it until I realized that Older Mom and Younger Mom weren't having any trouble.

One day when the Dads were home, the five of us went to the beach. It was different than I remembered it. More like it had been when I was a child, I realized when I remembered pictures I'd seen in Older Mom's and Dad's albums. The Moms and Dads chatted happily about which restaurants were new and still there.

We had a picnic, and there was a sandstorm, and a chill went up my spine when I saw Older Mom and Dad set up a little shelter just before the wind whipped up. Something about the shift in air pressure must have alerted them, but right afterward, they both commented they didn't remember what had just happened.

The shelter was still there, but they all acted like they'd found it. "Nice of the people who were here before not to take it apart," Older Mom said.

It was creepy enough to be the only one remembering them setting up the driftwood screens. And there went all my ideas about protecting my Young Self from all the dumb accidents I'd had. If the memory went away when you changed it, you'd be making a different person. Apart from the timeline risk, I'd had too much fun to want to do that.

Life was fairly ordinary. Once in a while we'd forget who we were and everybody would be confused. The Future People (I liked the sound of that; it sounded better than Older Mom and Dad) were tempted to play prophet. But mostly, we managed to keep things under control. Occasionally, watching something happen when we knew it was painful was hard, but there was nothing we could do about it.

I was glad to see that Mom and Dad weren't too unhappy about the prospect of watching a replay of the last eighteen years of their lives. I just hoped I wouldn't be.



We're in the waiting room now. Anne should give birth any minute. I'm looking forward to watching myself grow up. I won't like seeing her/me catch her/my/our fingers in that electric door, but most of the rest of it will be fun. I can hardly wait till she gets to her ballet classes, even though they didn't/won't last long.

I'm wondering when – if? – we'll tell Young Me who I am. I'm wondering how she'll feel, knowing I'll know everything she's going to do, at least up to a certain point. What if she does different things?

Maybe we'll get back someday. I'm thinking we should try. Would going back on that road again help? *Third time's the charm*, I think.

I'm wondering if Older Mom and Dad want to go back. I'm wondering if Anne and Paul want us to. I can't help wondering if they'll remember us if we do get back to our time. The thoughts are whirling in my mind like dervishes. It's making me a little dizzy.

A nurse! I'm born! Golly! I'm so excited I can't even stand up. But I want to hear this. I'll be the only person on earth to hear her own birth announced I'll have to change my name to my middle name, but

"Mr. Swan?" It's all Older Dad can do to let Younger Dad answer.

"Is Anne okay?"

"Yes," the nurse says. She smiles. "Your wife is fine. She's just given birth to a nine-pound, six-ounce baby boy."

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