

An Ocean  
of Minutes

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Quercus

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It was as if it were now up to me alone, as if by some trifling mental exertion I could reverse the entire course of history, as if – if I desired it only – Grandmother Antonina, who had refused to go with us to England, would still be living in Kantstraße as before; she would not have gone on that journey, of which we had been informed by a Red Cross postcard shortly after the so-called outbreak of War, but would still be concerned about the wellbeing of her goldfish, which she washed under the kitchen tap every day and placed on the window ledge when the weather was fine, for a little fresh air. All that was required was a moment of concentration, piecing together the syllables of the word concealed in the riddle, and everything would again be as it once was.

*The Rings of Saturn*, W. G. Sebald

## SEPTEMBER 1981

People wishing to time travel go to Houston Intercontinental Airport. At the orientation, the staff tell them that time travel is just like air travel, you even go to the same facility. People used to be apprehensive about airline travel too. But when you arrive at the airport, it is not the same at all. Before you can get within a mile of the terminals, you reach a bus stop moored at the edge of a vast concrete flat, where you must leave your vehicle and ascend a snaking trolley, like the ones they have at the zoo.

A quarantine taxi makes its way to that lone bus stop, the airport appearing through a million chain-link diamonds. The driver is encased in an oval of hermetically sealed Plexiglas.

In the back seat, Frank is wearing a yellow hazmat suit. The colour marks him as infected.

Now is the time for last words, but Polly's got nothing. Frank keeps nodding off and then snapping awake, stiff-spined with terror, until he can locate her beside him. "We can still go back!" He has been saying this for days. Even in his sleep he carries on this argument, and when he opens his eyes, he moves seamlessly from a dream fight to a waking one. Already his voice is far off, sealed away inside his suit.

She pulls his forehead to her cheek, but his mask stops her short. They can only get within three inches of each other. The suit rubs against the vinyl car seat and makes a funny, crude noise, but they don't laugh. Polly would like to breathe in the smell of Frank's skin one last time, a smell like salt cut with something sweet, like when it rains in the city. But all she gets is the dry smell of plastic.

The news outlets went down weeks ago, but that didn't stop the blitz of ads for the Rebuild America Time Travel Initiative: billboards painted on buildings, posters wheat-pasted over empty storefronts, unused mailboxes stuffed with mailers. *There is no flu in 2002 and Travel to the future and rebuild America and No skills necessary! Training provided!*

At first, the ads were like a joke, gallows humour for people who were stranded once the credit companies went down and the state borders were closed to stop the flu's spread, people like Polly and Frank, who got trapped in Texas by accident. Later, the ads made Frank angry. He would tear the pamphlets

from the mailboxes and throw them on the ground, muttering about opportunism. “You know they don’t market this to the rich,” he’d say, and then an hour later, he’d say it again.

They stayed indoors except for the one day a week when they travelled to the grocery store, which had been commandeered by five army reservists who doled out freeze-dried goods to ragged shoppers. The reservists had taken it upon themselves to impose equal access to the food supply, partly out of goodness and partly out of the universal desperation for something to do. One day, the glass doors were locked. A handwritten sign said to go around the back. The soldiers were having a party. With their rifles still strapped on, they were handing out canned cocktail wieners, one per person, on candy-striped paper dessert plates that looked forlorn in their huge hands. Ted, the youngest and a boy from Kansas who had already lost his hair, was leaving for a job in the future. He was going to be an independent energy contractor. There was another sign, bigger and in the same writing, on the back wall: *2000 here we come!* It was a rare, happy thing, the soldiers and the shoppers in misfit clothes, standing around and smiling at each other and nibbling on withered cocktail sausages. But just that morning, the phone had worked for five minutes and they had got a call through to Frank’s brothers, only to be told it had been weeks since the landlord changed the locks to Frank’s apartment, back in Buffalo. The landlord was sympathetic to Frank’s predicament, but he could no longer endure the absence of rent. “But what about my stereo?” Frank

had said. “What about my records? What about Grandpa’s butcher knife?” His voice was small, then smaller, as he listed off everything that was now gone.

Frank was usually the life of the party, but that afternoon behind the grocery store, he picked on a pinch-faced woman, muttering at her, “Why don’t they stop the pandemic, then? If they can time travel, why don’t they travel back in time to Patient Zero and stop him from coughing on Patient One?”

“They tried.” The woman spoke with her mouth full. “The earliest attainable destination date is June of ’81. Seven months too late.”

“What? Why? How can that be?” This clumsy show of anger was new. Frank was normally charming. He was the one who did the talking. Later, his sudden social frailty would seem like a warning of the sickness that arrived next. It unsettled Polly, and she was slow to react.

But the woman didn’t need someone to intervene. “That’s the limit of the technology. It took until the end of ’93 to perfect the machine, and twelve years is the farthest it can jump. Or to be precise, four thousand one hundred and ninety-eight days is the farthest it can jump. Do you live under a rock?”

The tips of Frank’s ears pinked and Polly should have made a joke, offered comfort. But she was distracted. In that second, it stopped being a fiction. Time travel existed, and the plates of her reality were shifting. She felt a greasy dread in the centre of her chest. She wanted to drop her food and take Frank’s

hand and anchor him in the crook of her arm, as if he was in danger of being blown away.

Now they are pulling up to the lone bus stop, and they can see the new time-travel facility, across the lot bisected by trolleys. The facility is a monolith, the widest, tallest building either of them has ever seen, and something primal in Polly quails. The only thing remaining of familiar airport protocol is the logistical thoughtlessness of the curb: once you reach it, the line of unfeeling motorists waiting behind you means only seconds to say goodbye.

“You don’t have to go,” Frank says.

“Say something else. Say something different.” Polly is smiling and shaking her head, an echo of some long-ago courting coyness that once existed between them. It has landed here, in the wrong place entirely, but she can’t get control of her face.

“You don’t have to go,” he says again in his faraway voice, unable to stop.

Polly can only muster short words. “It’s okay. We’ll be together soon. Don’t worry.”

The sole way Polly had been able to convince Frank to let her go was through Ted, the reservist from Kansas. He and his buddies had a plan to meet in 2000. They had chosen a place and everything. “We can do the same,” she said to Frank. “I’ll ask for the shortest visa; I’ll ask for a five-year visa.” It was a setback when she got to the TimeRaiser office and they offered minimum twelve-year visas. But still he would meet her, on



September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993, at Houston Intercontinental Airport. “What if you’re rerouted?” he asked. He had heard about this from another patient, who heard about it from a cousin, who knew someone who worked at the facility, who said they could change your year of destination, while you were in mid-flight. Polly said reroutements were a rumour, a myth. Why would they send you to a time totally other than the one you signed for? That would be like buying a ticket to Hawaii and winding up in Alaska. But to calm him, she came up with a back-up plan. If something went wrong and either of them couldn’t make it, then the first Saturday in September, they’ll go to the Flagship Hotel in Galveston, until they find one another. “Not just the first,” he said. “Every Saturday, every September.” This is overkill, a lack of good faith, but he is distraught, so she gives in. And if the Flagship Hotel is gone, they’ll meet on the beach by its footprint. Even if, between now and ’93 aliens invade and the cities are crumbled and remade, the land will still end where the sea begins at the bottom of 25<sup>th</sup> Street.

Still he is not satisfied. He puts his head back. His skin is so grey and drawn that it looks about to flake off, and it’s as if the brown is fading from his hair. When Polly speaks again, it sounds like when she is drunk and trying to conceal it, enunciating each of her words, a single phrase requiring maximal concentration: “If I don’t go, you will die.”

“You’ll be gone twelve years. When you come back, I’ll be forty.”

A set of comforts she repeats to herself have become like

the chorus to a song. Men age well. I'll still be young. We can still have a baby. But now her face, her throat and her lungs flush with hot, hideous panic, like water rising over her head. She grabs the inside of his upper arm so hard that she can feel his flesh give way, even through all the sealed layers.

"You meet me on the other side. We'll see each other there."

He yelps and tries to pull away, but she won't let go.

"We can still do the things we talked about."

They will get back to Buffalo. They will eat meatballs at Polly's favourite restaurant on Seneca Street. They will push their bed under the window and every night after dinner they will lie there and chat, with their feet pressed against the cool wall. They will have a baby with curly hair, a warm, happy weight in his arms, kicking her chunky legs. But Polly can't say this out loud and expose it to a jinx. She wills him to know what she means through only the pressure on his arm, as if transmission requires just touch.

His face swims in the fog of his suit. He smiles. He's got her pictures in his mind.

One car behind them honks. Then others join in. The voice of their driver, made tinny by the intercom, says, "You gotta go." They squeeze each other's hands so hard the skin of his suit bites the web between fingers and there is no way they can touch skin to skin and the seat of her heart falls away and so does her resolve. She says over and over, "Don't forget about me," and she tries to memorize his shape. But there is no more

time. All the cars honk like the end of days. As soon as the car door opens she is taken to Decontamination, and they do not get to wave goodbye.

Since no one carries much luggage, there are no bags to block pathways or take up seats, and a trolley bench can fit three. Polly has the middle seat between a man and a woman. The three of them sit with their few belongings on their knees, in paper bags or in a battered briefcase, like the one the woman next to Polly holds. They must bring their papers and then they may bring anything else they can fit in a small bag, excluding weapons or flammables. They can bring photographs, but they've been told there is no point; photo paper can't survive the journey.

It is a stifling end-of-summer day, and heavy colourless clouds sink towards the tarmac. Plenty of them are travelling in groups – brothers and sisters, friends and couples – but no one on the trolley speaks. Once they're out of the bay, the bus makes a wide loop, and the travellers get a clear view of what they're leaving behind. The woman on Polly's left twists her neck sharply, like someone looking away when a nurse gives a needle.

They travel through a parcel of trees, musty and dappled, the electric motor whirring, like on a children's field trip. Polly inflates with a bright, absurd calm, an anaesthetic for this excision. She thinks, This is all right, now we just have to get

on the boat. She must remember to tell Frank that time travel is much more efficient than air travel; these trolleys mean no more getting lost on the way to Departures, no more taking the wrong ramp, going up when we should be going down.

The man has his Handbook open to the *Frequently Asked Questions List*, but his eyes are on the back of the seat in front of him. Polly read hers the same way, with rapt attention cleaved by stretches of averted gaze. The first part is easy – *Those with special skills may be eligible for an O-1 visa for aliens of extraordinary ability* – because she has one of these limited visas. Another part offers material for grim jokes: *You must not have any living descendants – i.e. children – or they must travel with you. Ensuring travellers have no descendants remaining is to diminish confusion or genetically incorrect alliances in the future.* But then the text declines into reality: *TimeRaiser can convey the whole cost of your travel expenses and you will be bonded to TimeRaiser for an agreed-upon period.* Only the small print spells out in blunt letters the atrocity of what she's about to do: *Attempts to mitigate the pandemic or generally shift outcomes of events through chronomigration lead to poor outcomes, hence international and federal law permits only correspondence with the past that is solely of administrative significance and of a non-personal, non-historical, non-legislative, and non-narrative nature. Human cargo may only pass to the future and never back.* She had read this passage to the end only once, and even then the hatches of her mind sealed shut before understanding could reach the inside.

The woman next to Polly is crying, at first with restraint,

but now holding her fist to her teeth, her knuckles turning shiny with spit. When she begins to make noises, Polly wonders if she should pat the woman on the leg or tell her not to worry.

The trolley stops in the mouth of a hangar. Travellers peel away in strips. Some head deeper into the hangar, into a vaulted hall lit by fluorescents. Others take up position inside the red lines chalked on the floor, which show where to wait for the mandated extra health screenings and bactericidal showers in advance of boarding the special planes, with quarantine cabins, flying to TimeRaiser facilities elsewhere: Shanghai, Frankfurt, Harare, Caracas, or Sydney.

In the midst of this clamour, the crying woman moves in slow motion. She gets to her feet once, but the weight of her bones and her sadness topples her, and she sits down again so heavily, the flimsy bench shudders. The staff, dressed like hospital orderlies, try to move her forcibly, but the woman says, "Wait, just wait. I'll do it." She is short and wearing sandals with multi-storey heels, the fabric straps crusted with sparkling purple stones. All the other travellers wear cheap shoes, with zero decorative function. Polly suggests that the woman take off her sandals, to make it easier to get down. The woman doesn't acknowledge Polly, but she removes her shoes. Her feet are dirty and the skin of her heels is cracked and fissured, and the shoes look even more out of place.

Polly and the woman are among the last to reach the inner door of the hangar, where travellers break into shorter lines,

waiting for an agent to take their passport and their ticket and their fingerprints. Polly's ticket says *GALVESTON SEPTEMBER 4 1993*. It's twelve years. It's a quarter of a blink of an eye in the life of the universe. Polly shuffles her documents around to find the order that will best please the agent. She makes sure the *O-1* embossed on her visa card is prominently displayed. Her passport is fresh and the pages still have that scent like money.

It was only last Thursday that they went to the makeshift clinic, where whole hallways were tented off, transit areas for the lucky sick, the ones awaiting transfer to the treatment centres. There, a nurse in a trim turquoise hazmat suit told her Frank was positive for the flu. She laid out the test strips like a card dealer, so Polly could see she had already run the test three times, with the same result each pass. The medication he needed was thousands of dollars. They could give him the free treatments dispensed by the public health service, but their efficacy was not so good. Though there was time travel, she said. Polly had not understood her. Was she saying that Frank should travel? Oh God no, she'd said, they didn't let carriers go, but Polly could go, so long as she passed the medical evaluation. TimeRaiser offered family health benefits. Once Polly signed as an employee, even though they weren't yet married, Frank could go straight to treatment, she just had to write his name on the line.

Polly tries to focus on the floor tiles, the grouting and the shiny chips in the eggshell white. But her mind keeps

retracting to an evening last week when Frank took her up to the roof of their apartment to watch the sun set, that last day before his symptoms appeared.

Months earlier, they'd chosen the complex because it had been emptied of life. Then the emptiness had turned oppressive. But the roof was specked with soda cans and butts from hand-rolled cigarettes, clues of others in this world who also came to snack and watch the sky.

They sat on a waxy banana box, back to back, and Frank produced a treat from his jacket pocket: a warped, fun-size box of raisins. They ate the raisins slowly so they would last until the sun went down, chewing each juiceless bead until only threads remained between their teeth. A wind-beaten pigeon approached, hopeful. "Don't fold," Frank said. "Don't waste anything on that sky rat; I saved those for you." Polly said, "But he's hungry," and held a raisin to its jerking beak. A second pigeon soon joined the first. "And another mouth to feed," Frank said, watching wistfully as she gave away the last raisin.

The sun setting over his shoulder, the noise of the wind, the churr of the gravel, his brown hair curling into the folds of his ear. What she would give to forget that moment, to unremember that last chance to trace those inimitable ears and fit her face into his neck.

An agent processes her papers, disinterested in his primary role in the drama circling him. Everyone is given regulation clothing and slippers, all of it blue, and the travellers, now

divided into women and men, remove their clothes in communal changing rooms, each person with eyes fixed firmly on the wall. When Polly pulls the limp blue material over her head, it tears under her armpit and the edge of her dingy bra is visible. She keeps her hand tucked into her armpit until she sees other women contending with far worse rips across the seat of their pants. There is no one to give them replacement sets of clothing, and when they arrive in the future, they will look as if the Eighties were even more destitute than they were. Polly throws away her home clothes, in one of many black bins down the middle of the room.

Something's torn in her bra, and the underwire has broken through, rubbing the soft of her skin raw. She is preoccupied with trying to tame it discreetly through the hole in her armpit as she walks, when she hears shrieking and she sees women stopping just before the exit, instead of going through. Polly sees the crying woman from the trolley, kneeling, with the contents of her case spread around her, as if she has lost something dear. She is making thick, strangled sobs.

It is an unacceptable noise. It triggers an avalanche of dread that comes plunging over Polly, and her ears and airways fill with it, and for a second she is too heavy to move. The only way she can get out from under it is to narrow all her emotions into a fine point of rage. She wants to scream at the woman, Do you think you are the only one suffering here?

★



In another immense room with naked bulbs, the politeness has dissolved with the quiet. There are no signs saying what to do. Passengers make mobs in the corners of the room, along a row of desks, by a line of white bins filled with plastic-coated radiation-proof jackets. There are not enough jackets in the necessary sizes and people are shouting and sniping at each other. Polly takes an extra-large because they are easy to reach. The bins with the smaller sizes are almost empty. Polly looks around with queasy confusion. She sees what did not register before. She is among the tallest in the room, and the palest. Almost everyone is small and black-haired. They are mostly women. They are not the same race as her. She doesn't know what race they are. Maybe they are from Mexico. She suffers layers of clammy embarrassment. It's impolite that she noticed their difference, it's backwards, like something Frank's mother would do. But now she's somehow in the wrong place for her kind, like she's wandered into the men's room. Did she miss the sign that said this was the area for foreign nationals? Are they being streamed by language?

When she puts on her jacket it gapes around the arm holes and at the middle, no matter how much she cinches the straps, and she is afraid of what the radiation might do to her exposed areas. Passengers have oozed out of the lines so chaotically, the agents have left the desks, patrolling the room like herders.

One grabs her papers and shouts, "Can't you read? You're O-1 not H-1. Get out of here. Over there!" The agent points. It's an imprecise gesture that takes in the whole back-end of

the hall. Alarms are blaring. Polly goes back into the changing room. It is the only other exit, aside from the distant gangway to the next phase. She'll wait in the changing room until it seems safe to go out and find a kinder agent. She leans against one of the black bins of unpeopled clothes, filled with cotton and rayon and striped polyester, little pearly buttons, a tattered blouse that had maybe once been a favourite. She looks away. She notices a small door she didn't see before, one ignored by everyone else, marked *O-1*.

It opens into the first compact space Polly has seen, with wooden folding chairs and low chipboard walls, and no ceiling. There is a potted plant in the corner and a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night* hanging on one wall. There's a clothes rack of plastic jackets, many in each size. The shouting from over the wall is muffled.

The only other person waiting in the room is a woman who looks like she could be anywhere between twenty-five and forty. The paper suit provides no cues. She has fine blonde hair and a tiny tight mouth, and keen angular posture that strains the seams of her shirt. She is staring straight ahead, cracking her knuckles one unlovely pop at a time.

The chafing in Polly's bra has gotten worse. She twists to shift the protrusion creating a dint in her flesh, but whatever it is, it has snagged itself on her skin. Her neighbour has moved on from popping all her knuckles to drumming on her seat like the ticking of a watch, and the relief Polly felt when she entered the room is gone. The sense of foreboding

crests. Though Polly is for private space and against mindless chatter, she thinks she has to speak. Then the woman looks at her, as if noticing her for the first time, and says, “What’s your special skill?”

“Pardon?”

“Your special skill? How did you get an O-1 visa?”

“I’m an upholsterer and a refinisher. I repair and restore old furniture.”

The woman laughs uproariously. Polly preferred the drumming.

“That is absolutely fascinating.”

“It is?”

“It’s fascinating that that’s what they’re after.”

“What do you do?”

She laughs again. “Acupuncturist. Isn’t that absurd?”

“What do you mean?”

The woman leans in, whispering. “Did you read the list of O-1 qualifying jobs in the guide? The first one: engineer. Fair enough. Makes sense. You need engineers to rebuild a country. And we’ve got architect, surveyor, that’s fine. Then there’s movie star and Grammy-winning musician. So that’s dumb, but still, understandable, for morale. But who else is on the list? Natural-medicine doctors, chiropractors, massage therapists, beekeepers. And now, upholsterers? Do you have any idea what they mean to do with these people?”

“No.”

“Why don’t they want the kinds of skills people want today? Like scientists, doctors, scholars. Lawyers.”

“They already have those people. They need people to fill the jobs no one wants.”

“No,” she hisses. “The jobs no one wants are what the H-1 visas are for. Canning beans. Building bridges. But we’re O-1. Extraordinary ability visa. But abilities for what? They don’t want lawyers. I’m a lawyer. I had to lie on my application. I had to say I knew acupuncture. I don’t know acupuncture. I don’t know massage. I’ve never massaged anyone in my life. Except erotically.” She laughs again, a high whine. “Aren’t you afraid this whole thing is a sex thing?”

“Excuse me?”

“Sex trafficking.” Her tiny mouth works furiously to get the words out. “Are we going to be sold as prostitutes?”

Polly fixes her eyes on the Van Gogh painting. The first time she ever laid eyes on it, in a guidance counsellor’s office, she thought it was magic: the way the painting was like a window, as if you could walk right into the scene. Just by looking at it, you were somewhere else.

“You and I are more sexually appealing than those people out there,” the blonde says.

Polly’s seen the painting too many times. She can’t get the light in the painting to do what it used to.

“I worked my whole life. Sixty-hour weeks.” The woman dispenses with the whispering. “Sunk all my funds into a luxury condo and then the pandemic struck.” She slaps her

hand down on the folding chair next to her, and two things happen. The chair snaps shut, and then it falls forward, its legs catching on the underside of the plant holder as it goes. The plant pot hits the floor and smashes, a loud, irreversible noise.

The woman stares at the pieces, appalled.

“Quick! Help me get it back the way it was.”

She jerks the chair out the way and it scuttles across the floor and knocks into the coat rack. The woman starts kicking dirt madly into the corner, under the furniture, and after a second Polly helps her. Polly is in a state now too, without knowing what retribution they are trying to escape. They are trying to be inconspicuous, but the woman can't stop herself emitting little yells of panic. On her hands and knees, she blunders into more chairs, and the chairs kick the walls, making knocking sounds, like someone looking for a hollow spot in a locked room.

Security guards arrive, slow moving and unworried. The woman rushes at them. She's shouting, “I still want to travel! I still want to travel!” but all they see is her charging. In a smear of motion, they half-trip her and twist her around, then bind her wrists together.

“All right all right,” they say to her.

“Can I still travel? But can I still travel?”

The guards don't answer. They take her away. The inside door is opened by an official with a clipboard, in a sharply pleated military dress, cursing and grappling with the radio clipped to her front. When she hails someone on the other side,

she says, “Female passenger, last name Bauer, O-1 status, has been transferred to Discharge. Eighty-six Bauer, please.” She addresses Polly. “Nader? This way.” She waves her through the door, into an even smaller room. This one does have a ceiling, with perforations for sound proofing. Obviously, Polly assures herself, this is a consideration for the travellers’ sake, for their privacy – not for concealing company crimes.

“I’m Dr Simpson. I’m an army psychologist. I’m going to inspect your case and perform a physical and mental evaluation to ensure you’re travel ready. Should you decide not to travel, now’s the time to say so. If so, you’ll have to return any TimeRaiser payments made to you – advance pay or health benefits to friends or family members – plus a thirteen per cent processing fee on these advance payments or health benefits. Are you ready?” She says this all so rapidly, it’s difficult to catch each word. She pushes a box of Kleenex at Polly and nods at her dirty hands.

“I’ll be honest with you,” the psychologist says. “We’re having a bad day. That was the second meltdown in ten minutes, and an O-1 at that. At this rate, we’re going to be sending only half our entrants through.”

The psychologist uses a blood-pressure cuff, then a stethoscope. Polly’s heart is still speeding from the broken plant, and how easily the guards subdued that woman, like they were folding a piece of paper.

“If I fail the evaluation,” Polly says, “do I still have to pay the processing fee?”

“Yes. So don’t fail the evaluation.” She flips a page. “Full name, age and birth date?”

“Polly Nader, twenty-three, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1958.”

“And you’re travelling to Galveston at September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Your ethnicity? Nader – what is that? Jewish?”

“I’m Caucasian.”

The psychologist peers at her. “What kind of Caucasian?” She puts her cheek on her fist and stares until Polly says, “My father was Arab.” She only left this out from habit. It’s complicated to explain, extraneous information that usually no one has time for. But now it must seem she’s hiding something.

“And your mother?”

“Caucasian.”

Polly’s windpipe clenches, but then the woman only says, “So you look white. Okay . . . let’s just keep things simple. I’ll put ‘Caucasian’. Height and weight?”

“Five foot five, 125 pounds.”

“Hair colour and eye colour: brown and brown.”

The psychologist opens Polly’s briefcase and uses a white spatula with blue felt on its tip, to sift her papers. She’s cautious, like a person handling evidence, then Polly realizes she is just that. She finds Polly’s baseball cards.

“What’s this?” Rollie Fingers looks preposterously out of place.

“I thought they might be worth money in the future.”

There are two versions to this story. The truer version is that the cards are travelling with her because they belong

to Frank; they have the synecdochical magic of a beloved's beloveds. But she thinks the psychologist will be more likely to comprehend the official, pragmatic version.

This backfires.

"Then technically I should confiscate them."

What Polly would like to do best is put her head between her knees. But that would be a sign of weakness, and it's clear that here, things go poorly for the soft.

"Aren't there special considerations for me, because I have an O-1 visa?"

Simpson regards her with drawn-together brows. Then she laughs.

"You know what? You keep the baseball cards. What does it matter, really? I don't know where you're going, you don't know where you're going. Makes the rules seem arbitrary, you know?" Simpson scribbles in a form, copying down the information on Polly's visa. "I like your style. You're a negotiator. My God, you should see the basket cases we've had today. Just now, a woman had to be forcibly removed because she was refusing to leave her shoes behind. Her shoes! And there were all these old biddies around her, saying, 'Don't worry, sweetheart, those shoes won't even be in fashion in the future.' It was comical, in a morbid way. And the shoes only had sentimental value. A gift from her mother. Touching, but we can't invest in people who can't even get through customs. I see you even travel light," she says happily. "No photos."

"They said photo paper would be damaged in travel."



“Sure, but that doesn’t stop most travellers. Unless Rollie Fingers is your boyfriend.”

Polly shakes her head no, answering her question seriously, just in case.

Now that the woman is inclined towards her, Polly asks in a high, watchful voice, “Do a lot of people travel to get medical treatment for a friend or family member with the flu?”

“Isn’t that the draw? That or basic survival.”

“I was wondering if you knew what strategies are most successful? For meet-ups?”

“What’s a meet-up?”

“When people try to find each other again? Once they arrive?”

“Oh, a meet-up. I see. You know, I have no idea. No meet-ups have ever happened.”

“No one has ever been successfully reunited with someone they left behind?”

“Literally speaking. Chronologically. It’s never happened before. The first travellers aren’t scheduled to arrive for another twelve years. But I can give you a contact form. Would you like a contact form?”

“Yes. What’s a contact form?”

Simpson removes a sheet from the back of her clipboard.

“Write down the name and number of anyone you’d like to keep abreast of your changing travel plans. It’s in case of reroutements. In case your services are deemed more useful in a different time.”

“Reroutements? I thought that was just a rumour.”

Just like that, with the slightest lift of her voice, Polly lets slip her weak spot. Wariness slides into the psychologist’s expression. They can’t afford another basket case.

“Don’t you worry about that,” Simpson says. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it. You won’t be rerouted. It would say, if you were going to be. Somewhere in here, it would say.” She makes a show of riffling through Polly’s file. “Can you sign the statement now?”

“I don’t have a phone number for him yet. He’s on his way to the hospital now.”

“Which hospital?”

“St Luke’s.”

“Great, good.” The psychologist takes back the contact form and writes *St Luke’s*. “Can you sign this statement now? It just says you agree to the terms. There’s others to get to.” The psychologist touches her bare wrist, as if she is wearing a watch.

Polly finds herself pinching the pads of her fingers, one by one. Their Saturdays in September idea is suddenly sickening. It is like a plan a mother would make to keep from losing her children on a subway. It’s a plan able to withstand early-closing doors and a snarl of stairways, not the ocean of minutes that twelve years holds. But uselessly, her mind has gone blank. Strange, random thoughts wander into the empty space. Is it dinner time? She is entering a world where the notion of something as normal as dinner time does not exist.

“Should you wish to break your contract now, I can set

you up with a repayment plan for the associated costs plus the thirteen per cent that you'll owe us. Otherwise, I need you to sign this final statement saying you are prepared for travel."

It was then that Polly began to experience a feeling of dislocation that did not leave her for many months. The pen in her hand and the paper on the table appeared far away, as if she was watching them on a movie screen. I'll see him in just a few hours, my time. This time tomorrow, he'll be waiting for me. We can still have a baby. The happy weight in my arms.

She heard the psychologist say, "TimeRaiser is a good company. We'll protect you. Today, or rather tomorrow, is the first day of the rest of your life. It's a gift."

On that movie screen, the hand drew ballpoint loops on the line: her own signature. That was almost the last thing she remembered of the whole trip. When she met other travellers in the future, she could not remember the sort of details they wanted to trade, because they were details that came after the paper was signed. Which gate did she leave from? Which class was the boat? Was she put in a lie-down seat or a sit-up one? Did she wear a radiation-protection apron or blanket? Shop talk was a way to divvy up what they'd endured without actually talking about it.

She could not remember the recording, played right as she pitched into a many-year sleep. A tender voice told of Polly being past the point of return and hence authorized to hear the story of the future that was waiting, how the tiny but intrepid TimeRaiser – Texas born and bred! – had endeavoured to

prevent the pandemic by inventing time travel, and when that didn't work, they did not relent, but tamed the flu by snatching carriers from right under its nose.

The last thing she remembered was this: when she was left alone in the last holding area, she finally located the snag in her bra. It was not underwire. It was a photograph Frank had tucked into the padding pouch. It was of the two of them at New Year's, confetti strands in their hair. Her Aunt Donna had set the zoom too close and each of them had an ear missing. On the back, Frank had written, *Something to remember us by.*

She couldn't explain what she did next. Polly flipped the photo over and folded it in half. And then she tore it up. Then she pressed the shards between the pages of her Travel Handbook and put it all in a garbage can in the corner.

Afterwards, she tried to console herself by imagining that horror had distilled her down to her most animal self, who had no use for photos – she had been out of her mind. But the truth was that she did it because Frank believed they needed props, aids, to remember each other. He believed the possibility of a future timeline in which she could forget him. This was intolerable.

She would regret this always. It would sit like a bubble in her lungs. Even if the travel had wiped it blank, she would still wish she owned the piece of paper that had housed the outline of his face, with the ruts his writing made in the back, where he had written his message without signing his name.

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