Some Fortunate Future Day
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When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defac’d
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down-raz’d,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen ... the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate—
That Time will come and take my love away ...

William Shakespeare, Sonnet LXIV

Time is many things, her father told her. Time is a circle, and time is a great turning gear that cannot be stopped, and time is a river that carries away what you love.

When he said that, he looked at Rose’s mother’s portrait, hanging over their fireplace mantel. He had invented his time device only a few short months after she had died. It had always been one of his greatest regrets in life, though Rose sometimes wondered whether he could have invented it at all without the all-consuming power of grief to drive him. Most of his other inventions did not work nearly as well. The garden robot often digs up flowers instead of weeds. The mechanical cook can make only one kind of soup. And the talking dolls never tell Rose what she wants to hear.

“Do you think he’s ever coming back?” says Ellen. She means Rose’s father. She is the dark-haired talking doll, the saucy one. She likes to dance around the room, showing her ankles. She arranges the sugar cubes in the tea service to form rude words. “Perhaps he has taken to drink. I hear that is common among soldiers.”

“Shush,” says Cordelia. Cordelia is the gentle doll, redhead and quiet. “Ladies should not speak of such things.” She turns to Rose.

“Would you like more tea?”

Rose accepts more tea, though it is now more like hot water flavored with a few leaves from the garden than real tea. She ran out of real tea months ago. There had been a time when food and tea and household goods were regularly delivered by the grocer’s boy from the nearby town. It was weeks after he stopped coming that Rose got up the nerve to put on her bonnet, pick a few coins from the box on the mantel, and walk alone into town.
It was then that she realized why the grocer's boy had stopped coming.

The town was flattened. Great zigzagging cracks ran through the streets, steam still pouring out of them. Great sinkholes had opened in the ground, houses half tipped to the side.

She wondered how she hadn't heard the destruction, though her house is more than a mile away. But then, airships flew overhead almost every night, dropping incendiaries into the nearby forest, hoping to flush out spies and deserters. Perhaps she was simply used to it.

She reached the edge of one great pit and stared down into it. She could see the top of the church spire sticking up, nearly reaching the top of the sinkhole. All around was the smell of decay. She wondered if the townsfolk had taken refuge in the church when the Wyrms came—she'd seen pictures of Wyrm fighters before, enormous, riveted copper tubes covered with incendiary bombs. She decided that her father was right. Towns were dangerous places for young ladies on their own.

"We're very happy here, aren't we?" says Cordelia in her tinny doll's voice.

"Oh, yes," says Rose, sloshing the tinted water in her cup. "Very happy."

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When Rose was eight, her father bought her a white bunny rabbit as a pet. At first she took good care of it, stroking its long silky ears with her fingers, feeding it lettuce from her hands. One day while she held it in her arms like a baby, letting it nibble a carrot from her fingertips, it sank its teeth into her skin, not knowing where the carrot ended and Rose began. She screamed and dashed it to the floor.

She was immediately sorry, but it was no use: The bunny was dead, and Rose was inconsolable.

That was when her father showed her the time device.

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It has been almost six months since her father left and went to the war. Though she hasn't been marking the calendar, Rose can tell that she is outgrowing her dresses. They are too tight in the bosom now and too short. Not that it matters, when there is no one to see her.

She goes out to the garden in the morning to gather ingredients for the cook. The cook used to make all sorts of things, but now it is broken and it makes only soup—whatever you put in it comes out in a sort of thick gruel. The garden robot follows her—in fact, it does most of the work. It digs long, even furrows and plants the seeds; it crushes bugs and other pests. It uses its calipers to measure the vegetables and fruit for ripeness. Sometimes, out in the garden, she sees smoke in the distance and hears zeppelins overhead. She finds other unusual things, marks of the war in the sky. Once she found a metal leg, torn off, lying among the carrots and vegetable marrows. She told the garden robot to get rid of it, and it dragged it away to the compost heap, leaving a trail of dark oil behind. Sometimes she finds
dropped pamphlets, showing pictures of starving children or great metal hands crushing innocent families, but the words are in a language she doesn’t understand.

This time she finds a man. The garden robot notices him first, whistling in surprise like a teakettle. She nearly screams herself, it’s been so long since she saw another living creature. He looks odd to her as she draws closer. He is collapsed among the rosebushes, one shoulder of his blue uniform—so he is on her side, not an enemy soldier—dark with blood. He is moaning, so she knows he isn’t dead. The roses’ thorns have scratched and torn at him, and his blood is the brightest, reddest thing she’s seen in six months, much brighter than the roses.

"Bring him into the house," she says to the garden robot. It clicks and whirs around him busily, but its calipers are sharp, and when it tries to close them around the soldier’s wrist, he bleeds distressingly. He cries out, without opening his eyes. His face is very young and smooth, the skin almost translucent, his hair white-blonde and fair. He is wearing an airship crewman’s goggles around his neck, and she wonders what battle in the sky he fell from and how far he had to fall.

Eventually she shoos the garden robot away and approaches the soldier carefully. He has an energy rifle strapped to his belt; she undoes it and gives it to the robot to dispose of. Then she sets about the task of freeing the soldier from the tangled briars. His skin is hot when she touches him, much hotter than she remembers human skin being. But maybe it’s just been so long that she doesn’t really recall.

She half drags, half carries the soldier up the stairs and into her father’s bedroom. She hasn’t been in there since he left, and despite the ministrations of the cleaning robots, the room has a dank, musty smell. The heavy wooden furniture seems to loom over her, as if she had suddenly become very small, like Alice in the children’s book. She gets him into the bed somehow and under the covers, using scissors to cut away the bloody parts of his uniform, baring his shoulder. He fights her weakly, like a kitten, as she does it, and she murmurs hush, and that it is for his own good.

There is a wound through the upper part of his shoulder. It is red and swollen and smells of infection. Dark-red lines radiate out from the puckered edges. Rose knows those lines mean death. She goes into her father’s study and pulls down one of the boxes from the mantel. It is slippery, polished wood, and from the inside she can hear a chittering noise, as of birds.

Back upstairs the soldier is tossing in her father’s bed, crying out unintelligible words. Rose wishes there were someone else with her, someone to hold him down as she opens the box and lets the mechanical leeches run over his body. The soldier screams and thrashes at them, but they cling tenaciously. They fasten on to the wound and the skin around it, their half-translucent coppery bodies swelling and darkening as one by one they fill with blood and fall to the side. When they are done, he is whimpering and clawing at himself. Rose sits down beside him on the bed and strokes his hair. “There, there,” she says. “There, there.”

Slowly, he calms. His eyes flutter open and then close. They are a very pale shade of blue. He is wearing copper dog tags around his neck. She lifts them and examines them carefully.
His name is Jonah Lawrence, and he is a second lieutenant on the airship Skywitch. “Jonah,” she whispers, but his eyes don’t open again.

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“He is going to fall in love with me,” she tells Ellen and Cordelia over tea, after the soldier has fallen asleep. “I am going to nurse him back to health, and then he will love me. That is always how it happens in books.”

“That is wonderful news,” says Cordelia. “What does it mean?”

“Love, stupid,” says Rose, annoyed. “You know what love is, don’t you?”

“She doesn’t know anything,” says Ellen, rattling her teacup with amusement. After a pause, she says, “Neither do I. What do you mean?”

Rose sighs. “Love means someone wants to be with you all the time. All they want is to make you happy and give you things. And if you go away from them, they will be miserable forever and ever.”

“That sounds terrible,” says Cordelia. “I hope it doesn’t happen.”

“Don’t say that,” says Rose. “Or I will slap you.”

“Do you love us?” Ellen asks.

The question hangs in the air, and Rose is not sure how to answer it. Finally she says, “Cordelia, you’re good with your needle. Come with me. I need you to help me sew up his wound, or it won’t heal.”

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Rose sits and watches while Cordelia’s tiny hands sew up the wound in Jonah’s shoulder. The sleeping potion she had given him earlier is keeping him quiet, though Ellen sits on his elbow anyway, just in case he might wake and begin to thrash about. He shows no signs of it, though. Rose begins to worry that perhaps she has given him too much and killed him. The idea is very dramatic—what a tragedy it would be, like Romeo and Juliet.

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When he finally wakes, it is just them alone in the room. It is nearly dawn, and watery light drips through the windowpanes. His eyes flutter open, and Rose leans forward in her chair beside the bed, her book and lap rug sliding to the floor. “Are you awake?” she says.

He blinks at her with his clear light eyes. “Who are you?”

“I am Rose,” she tells him. “I found you in my back garden. You must have fallen from your airship.”
"I was shot—" He puts his hand to his shoulder and feels the stitches. He stares at her. "You did all this," he says. "You healed me?"

She nods modestly. No need to mention Ellen’s and Cordelia’s contributions. They are not real people, anyway.

He catches at her wrist. "Thank you," he says. His voice is hoarse and sweet. "Thank you for saving my life."

Rose is pleased. He is beginning to fall in love with her already.

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After the rabbit died, Rose sobbed for hours in her room. Her father came in at last. She remembers his shadow falling across her bed as he said, "Sit up, little Rose. There’s something I want to show you."

Her father was a big man, with big, capable hands, like a gardener or plowman. In one of them he was holding an object that looked like a telescope—or no, she thought as he sat down beside her, it was a watch, for it had a face, with dials, at the far end. "When your mother died," he said, "I built this. I thought I could go back. Tell her not to go out riding that day. But I have never been able to make it take me back more than a week, and by then she had been dead for years." He handed it to her. "You can go back if you like," he said gruffly. "If you turn the dials like so—and so—you can return to the time when your rabbit was still alive."

Rose was delighted. She took the device from him and turned the dials, as he had shown her, to return her to that morning. Then she snapped the device shut. For a terrifying moment it was like falling down a well, everything hurtling upward and away from her. Then she was in her room again, the white rabbit in its cage, and she was no longer holding the time device. Delighted, she ran to the cage and opened it, lifting her rabbit out and cradling it closely against her, squeezing tighter until it went still in her arms. She loosened her grip in disbelief, but the creature was as limp as a rag. She began to sob again, but this time when her father came to see what was wrong, she didn’t tell him. He didn’t remember having shown her the time device and she was too ashamed to ask for it again.

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Jonah is shocked to learn that Rose is alone in the house, aside from the servant robots. He asks her endless questions: Who is her father (he’s never seen him, but he thinks he’s heard his name before), how long ago did he leave her, when was the town destroyed, how does she eat, live, survive? She brings him soup on trays and sits with him, answering his questions, sometimes bewildered at his surprise. It is, after all, the only life she’s known. In exchange, he tells her about himself. He’s only eighteen, the youngest second lieutenant in the army. He lives in the Capital, which she has always imagined as a place with beautiful soaring towers, like a castle on a hill. He tells her it’s much more like everyone rushing everywhere very fast. He tells her about the library, where the shelves of books rise high into
the sky, and you can reach them on floating steam-powered platforms. He tells her about the magnetized train that runs around the top level of the city, from which the clouds can be seen. He tells her about the dressmaking automatons that can sew a silk dress for a lady in less than a day and deliver it by pneumatic post. Rose tugs at the too-tight bodice of her own plain cotton childish dress, then blushes.

"I would love to go there," she says, looking at him with enormous eyes. "To the Capital."

"It's amazing what you've managed to do here, with the little you have," he says. "How lucky I was to fall from the airship so close to your doors."

"I am the lucky one," she says, but so softly that maybe he doesn't hear.

"I wish you could meet my sisters," he says. "They would be much moved by your heroism."

Rose can barely contain herself. He wants her to meet his family! His love for her must be serious indeed. She looks up so he cannot see the delight in her eyes, and she catches a glimpse of glittering eyes watching from a panel in the corner of the room. Cordelia, she thinks, or Ellen. She will have to reprimand them about their spying ways.

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"You mustn't spy on Jonah," she says to Ellen. They are having soup in tiny bone teacups. "You must respect his privacy the way you respected Father's."

"But where will he live when your father comes back?" asks Cordelia. "He will have to be put in a different room."

"When we are married, we will live in the same room," Rose says grandly. "That is what married people do."

"So he will move into your room?" Ellen's face is all squashed with disbelief: she is probably thinking of Rose's tiny bed, barely big enough for one.

"Not at all," says Rose. "We won't be staying here once we're married. We shall go to the Capital and live there."

There is an appalled silence. Finally, Cordelia says, "I do not think we will like the Capital very much, Rose."

"Then you can stay here," says Rose. "Grown-up ladies don't play with dolls, anyway. And someone must watch the house until Father returns."

She means the last to cushion the blow, but the dolls don't seem comforted. Cordelia sets up a wail that pierces Rose's ears. She hears running steps in the hallway, and the door flies open: it is Jonah, dressed in her father's clothes. "Dear God," he says, "is someone being murdered in here?"
"It’s just Cordelia,” says Rose, and turns to both the dolls, her face white with rage. “Stop it. Stop it.”

They are both silent, staring at Jonah. Rose is staring, too. She hadn’t realized how tall he was until now. He is so handsome, even in her father’s old clothes, that it hurts her eyes. "What are those things?” he demands, pointing at Cordelia and Ellen.

"Nothing,” she says hastily, standing up, thinking how childish he must think her, having tea with dolls. "Just toys my father made me.”

The look on his face does not change. "Will you come walk with me in the garden, Rose?” he asks. "I think I could do with some fresh air.”

She hurries to his side, not looking behind her to see if the dolls are watching.

They walk among the carefully planted flower beds, and Rose tries to explain. “It isn’t their fault—they tend to get upset over the littlest things,” she says.

“I’ve never seen anything like them,” says Jonah, catching up a stone and skipping it across the surface of the pond. “Automatons with real reactions—real feelings.”

“They were prototypes,” said Rose. “But my father thought giving them personalities was more trouble than it was worth, so he never sold the design.”

“Your father,” says Jonah, shaking his head, “must be some sort of genius, Rose. What else did he invent?”

She tells him about the garden robot and the cook. He does say he had wondered why there never seemed to be anything to eat but soup. She considers telling him about the time device, but she cannot bear to tell the story of her rabbit. He would think her cruel. All the while that she talks, he nods his head, considering, amazed.

“They won’t be able to believe this in the Capital,” he says, and her heart soars. She had been almost sure he was planning to take her back with him when he went—now she is completely.

“And when do you think you’ll be well enough to make the journey back?” she asks, eyes cast modestly to the ground.

“Tomorrow,” he says. A blue jay is calling from the treetops, and he raises his head to follow the noise.

“Then I must prepare a special dinner tonight. To celebrate that you’re well.” She takes his hand, and he looks startled.

“That sounds very pleasant, Rose,” he says, and turns so that they are walking back toward the house again. His hand slides out of hers. It doesn’t seem intentional, and Rose tells herself that it means nothing. They are going away together, tomorrow. That is what matters.
When Rose returns from the walk, she finds Ellen in her room, sitting on her bed. Cordelia is on the windowsill, singing a tuneless little song. When Rose comes in, dragging an empty trunk from the attic, Ellen scrambles to sit on it, kicking her little heels against the sides. “You can’t go away and leave us,” she says as Rose determinedly pushes her aside and begins to pile in her clothes.

“Yes, I can,” says Rose.

“No one will take care of us,” says Cordelia desolately from the windowsill. “Father will come back and take care of you.”

“He isn’t ever coming back,” says Ellen. “He went away and died in the war, and now you’re going away, too.” She can’t cry—she was never designed for it—but her voice sounds like weeping.

Rose snaps the trunk shut with a final sound. “Leave me alone,” she says, “or I’ll turn you both off. Forever.”

They are silent after that.

Rose dresses with care, in one of her mother’s old gowns. Lace drips from the cuffs and the hem. She goes down into the cellar and finds the last of the preserved peaches and a single bottle of wine. There is dried meat as well, and some flour and old bread. There is no use in saving these things anymore, now that she is going, so she fries vegetables from the garden with the dried meat and puts them out on the table with the fine china, the wine, and the preserves.

Jonah laughs when he comes downstairs and sees what she’s done. “Well, you did the best you could,” he says. “It reminds me of midnight feasts I used to have with my sisters, when we would raid the pantry at night.”

Rose smiles back at him, but she is aware of the eyes watching from the shadows—small shapes that dart and flicker when she looks at them. Cordelia and Ellen. She mentally damns them both to the pit of hell and goes back to smiling at Jonah. He is all pleasantry, filling her wineglass, and then his own, and proposing a toast to their winning the war. Rose has forgotten what the war is about or who they are fighting, but she drinks the wine nonetheless: It tastes dark and bitter, like cellar dust, but she pretends to like it. She drains her glass and he fills it again, with another toast: this one, he says, is for women like her; the war would be won already if all damsels were as valiant as she. Rose discovers that even though the wine tastes bad, it fills her with a pleasant glow when she drinks it.

On the third round of toasting, with the bottle nearly empty, he stands up. “And last,” he says, “a toast to some fortunate future day when, perhaps, once this war is over, we might see each other again.”
Rose freezes, the glass halfway to her lips. "What did you say?"

He repeats the toast. His eyes are bright, his cheeks flushed. He looks like a recruitment poster for airship pilots: *Seeking young men, hardy, handy, and brave ...*

"But I thought I was coming with you to the Capital," she says. "I thought you were going to bring me with you."

He looks startled. "But, Rose, the way back to the Capital is through enemy territory. It's much too dangerous—"

"You can't leave me here," she says.

"No, of course not. I had planned to alert the authorities when I returned, and they would send someone for you. I'm not callous, Rose. I understand what you did for me, but it's too dangerous —"

"Nothing is too dangerous if we're together," says Rose. She thinks she may have heard someone say this in a novel once.

"That's not true at all." Jonah seems agitated by her refusal to understand. "It will be much easier for me to maneuver without worrying about you, Rose. And you aren't trained for anything like this. It just isn't possible."

"I thought you loved me," says Rose. "I thought we were going to the Capital so we could get married."

There's a horrified silence. Then Jonah stammers out, "But, Rose, I'm already engaged. My fiancée, her name is Lily—I can show you a chromolithograph—" His hand strays to his throat, where a locket hangs on a chain. But Rose has no interest in this girl, this fiancée with a flower name like her own. She stumbles to her feet and away from him, even as he moves toward her. "I think of you as if you were my own little sister, Rose—"

She runs past him, runs up the stairs and into her father's study, slamming the door behind her. She can hear him calling out for her, but after a while, he stops calling, and there is silence. The sun has begun to set outside, and the room is filled with reddish light. She slips to the floor, her head in her hands, and begins to weep. Sobs rack her body. She is aware of the touch of hands on her hair and someone stroking her back. Ellen and Cordelia surround her, petting her as if she were a crying child. She sobs for hours, but they don't tire; it is Rose, finally, who wearies first. Her tears slow and stop, and she stares at the wall, vacantly, gazing into nothingness.

"He was supposed to fall in love with me," she says aloud. "I must have done something wrong."

"Everyone makes mistakes," says Ellen.

"It's all for the best," says Cordelia.
"I never liked him, anyway," says Ellen.

"If only I could do it again," Rose says. "I’d be different this time. More charming. I’d make him fall in love with me and forget everything else."

"It doesn’t matter," says Cordelia.

Dawn is lightening the room. Rose gets to her feet and goes over to her father’s desk. She rummages through the drawers until she finds what she is looking for, then returns to the window. Looking down, from here she can see the front door, the garden, the meadow, and the forest in the distance.

The dolls clamor around her legs like children, but she ignores them. She waits. She has nothing but time. The sun is high in the sky when the front door opens and Jonah steps out. He is wearing his uniform, patched at the shoulder where she cut it away from him. He is carrying nothing in his hands, taking nothing from her house as he goes. Nothing but her heart, she thinks. He sets off down the path that leads from the front door toward the meadow and to the wider road beyond.

He stops once, a few steps from the house, and looks back and up, squinting into the sun. He raises his hand in a halfhearted wave, but Rose does not respond. This Jonah, this version of him, no longer matters. It doesn’t matter where he thinks he’s going. It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t love her. She is going to change all that.

He drops his hand and turns away, and Rose looks down at the time device. She spins the dial back. One day. Two days. Three. She hears Cordelia call out to her, but she snaps the device shut, and the doll’s voice is lost in the whirlwind that picks her up and spins her round and carries her backward through time. In moments, it is over, and she is breathless, sitting once again on the windowsill. The dolls are gone, the time device no longer in her hands.

She anxiously looks out the window. Has she guessed the time right? Did she miscalculate? But no—her heart leaps up with happiness as she sees the man staggering out of the forest and dropping to his knees in the meadow. Leaving a trail of blood behind him, he begins the long and painful crawl toward her garden, where she will find him again.

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