

EXTRACT

Life Out of Order

By Audrey Niffenegger

My name is Alba DeTamble and I was born a time traveler. We all are, of course, but most people only travel forward, slowly, creeping along by seconds and minutes that add up inexorably to a lifetime. My body makes mayhem of that: I lose my grip on the present and suddenly I am in another time and place, naked, disoriented, unready and fearful, resigned to losing hours or days in random time, worried about saying something I shouldn't, hoping not to cause a scene. A few genes have gone wrong in me in just the right way to produce this bad fit with the present, this maladaptation, this constant interruption.

I have loved time travel and I have wished to be done with it; I've seen what it did to my dad. He died when I was five. Time travel killed him and time travel keeps throwing him back into my life. It's confusing to hang out with my father because he usually seems so cheerful. I never tell him what's coming for him. It would ruin our short time together, and what would be the point? We can't change anything. Time works around us; we can only do what we have done, we can only go along with what has happened, what will happen. We can't carry anything with us, no money, no clothing, only our memories. We can affect others, we can be injured or die, we can do and be and say, but nothing we do will alter something we know to have happened.

[...]

Sometimes I get the feeling that it doesn't matter where I am, past, present or future, or who I'm with; I might look at Zach out in the back yard, mowing our mossy grass, and wonder, Are you my anchor, my once-and-always husband? Would you still love me if you knew all my secrets? Or, another day, I might wake up with Oliver beside me in bed, arrived during the night and somehow unfamiliar, an Oliver from some time not yet specified, and I might feel a pang of apprehension: where did you come from, what do you know, can you spare me the details?

If I had been a normal girl, I might have done all the normal things in the normal order: school, job, marriage, kids. I might have had one husband, or none, or one and then another, instead of two at once. Maybe I would have been less chaotic, less troublesome, but maybe also less loved; who knows? I look ahead and marvel at the near-misses, the good intentions and lucky guesses. I look back and regret all the lies. I try not to hurt people. But mostly, I just try not to panic.