

August 11, 1967

The first Time Traveler's Convention was also the last. And Nancy Cabrini went every year.

August 11th, 1967, in a convention center--with one more year before it was destroyed--was the site of the Perpetual Time Traveler's Convention. Time travelers from every corner of space-time would gather to exchange ideas, stories, tips, and warnings that had come up throughout their adventures. It was one of the few places in all of space-time that was allowed to have regular paradoxes and Nancy relished the opportunity. The last week with the Time Bureau was dull, forcing her to hunt down minor anachronisms in the 1980s to keep busy so she could have the convention day off. Others at the bureau thought it was a waste of time.

"You should go to the Jurassic Period," her coworker Vincent had told her, "there's a time lock hotel there that looks over a herd of brachiosauruses—or was it brontosaurus? One of those long-neck beasts. Seriously, I went for my last vacation? Worth it."

"I've been to most of the dinosaur periods," Nancy shrugged. "Just doesn't do it for me."

"Then go the Middle Ages! Knights, princesses...see a war or two?"

"Not to mention catch one of a hundred diseases?"

"You're such a pessimist," Vincent said.

"I've been doing this for a long time...even by my timeline. Besides, the convention is great, you should go."

"Yeah, no thanks," Vincent said. "Walk around a dusty convention center with a bunch of amateurs? You know it's open to every time traveler, right? Like, people beyond the bureau that we end up having to clean the messes? You remember that time someone 'forgot' their watch on a nightstand at Versailles?"

"You should have been here that time we had to recover a lighter from the neolithic era," Nancy said. "I was up to my shoulders in inconsistency reports for a month. Besides, even the time-locked places can have people slip through and affect the timeline. You weren't here for that one that fell apart during the reign of Cleopatra. That was a mess we spent weeks repairing."

"Fine. Take your boring convention vacation. I just thought you might enjoy doing something fun for a change."

“I will. Believe me.”

Nancy woke up on the morning of August 11th, 2167. She had barely slept, as excited as a child the night before their birthday. After a long night of tossing and turning, she was relieved that the big day had finally come. She jumped out of bed with vigor and prepared herself with appropriate clothing for the time. Even if she was just going to be in the convention center, having familiar fibers in the timeline was crucial if she decided to leave for any reason. With her hair and makeup done to the relative standards of the time, Nancy grabbed her bag and went to the bureau.

The operator at her time gate, Charlie, gave her a bright smile as she approached. “Well,” Charlie smiled. “Don’t you look groovy? What’s the occasion?”

“Just vacation,” Nancy said, showing her documents for the day. “No work today.”

“Good,” Charlie said. “You work too hard. You know the rules, so I’ll spare you the boring stuff. Just don’t crash any ecosystems or kill any future presidents?”

“On my honor, Charlie,” Nancy smiled. She took back her documents as the time gate hummed to life. The gate the reality inside the rings wobbled a little as the machine pushed further and further through time. The image settled on an old warehouse loading dock. Nancy took a deep breath and stepped through the gate.

Instantly, the smell of the 1960s rushed over Nancy and saturated her clothes and her hair. It wasn’t exactly pleasant, but it was real and her face hurt from smiling. She could hear traffic outside and walked down the hallway at a brisk pace. She made her way to a pair of big, double doors and pushed the left one open with her hip into the main attraction hall.

To her left was a series of long convention booths, selling everything from time-appropriate apparel to temporal souvenirs. To her right was a collection of different time travel machines, from her own Time Bureau’s time gate to the more advanced Chronosleeve from a future that would outlive Nancy and the more modest time capsules of early time explorers. They all had their merits, but Nancy was always envious of the futuristic Chronosleeve, purely for its practical and compact nature. If she could make it another hundred years, she could see herself getting one.

Nancy took out her pamphlet and examined the available options for speakers. Arc Averbond—the new parent of time travel—was giving their usual speech in halls A-H, though Nancy had already attended their speech from when they were eighty and the previous decades offered nothing new. She'd even had a collection of pictures on one wall of her office of her with the old time traveler as he aged and she stayed the same. Dr. Bristol and his Four Former Selves was a bit gimmicky but served as a good foundation for anyone with an interest in paradox theory. There was a symposium on time traveling in the Victorian Era that Nancy remembered being a little romanticized, but the Ice Age excursion team was surprisingly funny when she looked back on it. She'd have to make those decisions later. She had her own appointment to keep.

Nancy went to the food vendors and found the table she'd picked out a previous year. She liked the spot by the coffee bar and tried to remember if that's why she picked it. True, old coffee with real coffee beans wasn't exactly a rare commodity, but something about the brew from this time tasted different. After purchasing one of what she was sure would be many cups for the day, Nancy went and looked around the tables. Then, she saw her.

Walking through the tables Nancy approached the shy-looking woman sipping an identical coffee, down to the fixin's. The young woman had Nancy's long, dark hair and her striking green eyes. She was in the process of writing a note when Nancy set her coffee cup down on the table, just like I remembered.

"I survived another five years," the previous Nancy smiled. "I guess that's something to be grateful for."

Nancy hugged her previous self as she stood up. She couldn't remember why, but this hug had felt needed when Nancy had felt her future self hug her last time. It stuck out in her mind and Nancy only hoped that previous Nancy appreciated it the same way she had.

"I remember this," Nancy smiled, tapping the matching scar on her cheek. "Not a fun day in Berlin."

"I wish I thought to tell myself about it, but—"

"We have to keep some rules in mind," Nancy nodded. "Don't worry. It heals quick."

"I hardly remembered seeing it five years ago...or ten years for you?"

“It’s best to just focus on the order of things,” Nancy laughed. “It creates fewer headaches.”

“So,” Past Nancy said, opening her notebook. “Only three questions?”

“Just the three,” Nancy said.

“How’s the job?”

“Time Bureau is still going strong. I know we were a little worried about it, but it feels like we’re doing real good. You’re going to lead a team soon if I remember right.”

“Really?” Past Nancy frantically took down some notes. “I’ll have to ask for some pointers from Declan.”

“Skip right to Henry,” Nancy said. “I know he works out better.”

“Did we get a cat yet?”

“No,” Nancy sighed. “We get so wrapped up in getting extra training from Henry that we missed the adoption application date. We did just put in a new application and have someone coming by next month.”

“How about a partner?”

“Pass...”

“That bad?”

“We missed the application date for a cat...we get pretty busy in the next few months.”

“Still, must be lonely right? Spending all our time working?”

“Worth it, trust me. Especially with that big pay boost.”

“Where’s our first mission?”

“I don’t remember telling you that one,” Nancy asked. “And that’s your fourth question.”

Nancy talked with her past self for a while. For Past Nancy, it was harmless catching up, but Nancy was reminiscing on her previous work, missions with blunders she remembered laughing with herself about. Nancy made a few recommendations for how to handle the next few years. Some she knew she would forget, but it felt like enough just to warn her past self. She started having these meetings when she was a teenager. It started by writing the idea in her notebook and then a woman in her twenties came up and started talking to Nancy. Five years

later, she remembered to go visit herself and chose a spot to meet herself in another five years. Nancy was talking to her twenty-five-year-old self now.

They talked lightly for a bit and Nancy was a little sad when she had to go. She hugged herself goodbye and they went their separate ways. Nancy did stop by the water fountain where her younger selves were talking. Her hair was still bright pink back then and she rolled her eyes with a smile.

Nancy attended a few talks, stopping by the Ice Age team again and waving at herself from a few years prior. That version of her didn't have to meet anyone today, but Nancy remembered seeing herself a few years prior. She knew there were other versions of her running around the convention, but the bureau knew she was the source of the big paradox in the area, so they let it slide knowing that one of their agents was on the scene in spades. After the Ice Age team's presentation, Nancy went to a demonstration of some antique time travel machinery and got a quick lunch before attending a panel on temporal preservation techniques. It wasn't the most thrilling, but she needed to kill some time and also wanted to save some more interesting programs for future trips. There would always be this convention.

As the convention was starting to come to a close, Nancy looked around for a good spot to sit. She opted for somewhere a bit quieter and found a bench that looked outside the convention center and sat down. She made a note to herself: 4:30 PM, Bench on South Wing.

"I always kinda hated these little notes..."

Nancy turned around and saw her future self. Future Nancy was still very similar to Nancy, but her hair was trimmed much shorter and she had stylish glasses rather than contacts. She sat next to Nancy and looked out onto the city. Nancy was suddenly struck by how much older she looked. Even beyond thirty-five, this version of her future self was an old that went beyond linear time. Something big was going to happen and it threw all of Nancy's three questions out the window.

"Well? Your questions?"

"I, uh...are you OK?"

Future Nancy sighed and dropped her shoulders. "It's been a hard year. Without going too far into it, I'll tell you to buckle up."

“I...jeez, I don’t know where to start. I guess...do we still work at the Bureau?”

“We do,” Future Nancy said. “A few away missions didn’t exactly go as planned. That’s all I can say on the matter. The Bureau knows about our little ‘check-ins’ and doesn’t want me giving too much away.”

“I...shit.”

“You survive,” Future Nancy said. “I mean obviously you do. So don’t—well, I’d tell you not to worry, but I know me too well.”

“I just—does anyone get hurt?”

“Pass.”

“Doesn’t anyone die?”

“Pass, Nancy!” Future Nancy said, a little firmer. She let out a deep breath and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so angry with you, but I didn’t want to come.”

“Why did you come? You could have...we could have gone somewhere else.”

“I skipped the convention a couple times after—well, let’s just say I haven’t been in a while. Thought you’d want to know you survive another five years. So...congrats.”

“I almost wish I didn’t know.”

“That’s what this is all about right?” Future Nancy asked. “Our comfort about the next five years? Sorry to say it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.”

“I just...I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I am,” Future Nancy sighed. “I shouldn’t have come...just written one of those letters and left it here for you or...hell, I don’t know. I just hate this part.”

“I wish I could help.”

“Nothing to fix,” Future Nancy shrugged. “Sometimes, things are just...bad. That’s life.”

“Is there any more training I could do? Or maybe I can—“

“This isn’t your fault. Or it...won’t be your fault. We make every precaution, every pre-check, and every protective measure. But it was other people. You were in charge and you’re going to feel responsible. But I’ve done enough thinking for the last five years to know that there’s nothing I could do. And that’s the part that hurts the most. Nothing changes, that’s just life.”

Nancy hung her head a little. She hadn't had a meeting like this and it hurt to think about. Anything she could think to say would just feel hollow. Any comfort she would offer didn't feel sincere. The silence was all she could offer to her future self.

"Did we get a cat?"

"What?"

"We always wanted to get a cat. Do we?"

"Uh...no, not yet."

"Application must be coming up due right?"

Future Nancy let out a short laugh. "I guess so."

"Then...maybe you should put the application in."

Future Nancy chuckled a little and scratched the back of her neck. "I guess that's true. Might as well."

"Look, I don't know what happened," Nancy said. "But the past is the past, right?"

"Not for time travelers," Future Nancy said. "I think about going back and fixing things, but I know that it would be my badge...at the very least."

"All I'm saying is—"

"I know," Future Nancy said. "My therapist tells me I need to move on and make my own life. It's just hard not to pretend I can go back and make it all right."

"Hey," Nancy said, "I know you would if you could...cause I would if I could."

"I guess I know exactly what I need to hear," Future Nancy smiled. It seemed a little strained, but more in earnest than before. "I guess I should get going...fill out that application."

"Hey," Nancy asked. "Did you meet your future you this morning?"

"I...thought I'd take some time off. Just let the future surprise me for a change."

"I'll try to keep that in mind. All of it."

"No third question?"

"I don't think I need a third."

"I hope you enjoyed the convention," Future Nancy said, standing up and collecting herself.

"I hope you get that cat."

Future Nancy smiled and walked away. Nancy sat alone for a minute. She wondered how many future-hers were here that felt the same dread in her stomach. She wondered if she could go around and ask all the other Nancys in the building for advice on the future. One year, maybe two could be the difference between someone dying and someone surviving. Or maybe there were multiple years she didn't come. There was no point in doing a head count with the conference coming to an end.

Picking up her notes, Nancy underlined their meeting place with a broken heart. The conference closing ceremonies were about to begin, but Nancy worried her sour mood would set off another Nancy or the other conference attendees. Nancy was already thinking about maybe going to the Jurassic for her next vacation.