



Time in Thy Flight, Ray Bradbury

Time in Thy Flight

A wind blew the long years away past their hot faces.

The Time Machine stopped.

“Nineteen hundred and twenty-eight,” said Janet. The two boys looked past her.

Mr. Fields stirred. “Remember, you’re here to observe the behavior of those ancient people. Be inquisitive, be intelligent, observe.”

“Yes,” said the girl and the two boys in crisp khaki uniforms. They wore identical haircuts, had identical wristwatches, sandals, and coloring of hair, eyes, teeth, and skin, though they were not related.

“Shh!” said Mr. Fields.

They looked out at a little Illinois town in the spring of the year. A cool mist lay on the early morning streets.

Far down the street a small boy came running in the last light of the marble-cream moon. Somewhere a great clock struck 5 A.M. far away. Leaving tennis-shoe prints softly in the quiet lawns, the boy stepped near the invisible Time Machine and cried up to a high dark house window.

The house window opened. Another boy crept down the roof to the ground. The two boys ran off with banana-filled mouths into the dark cold morning.

“Follow them,” whispered Mr. Fields. “Study their life patterns. Quick!”

Janet and William and Robert ran on the cold pavements of spring, visible now, through the slumbering town, through a park. All about,

lights flickered, doors clicked, and other children rushed alone or in gasping pairs down a hill to some gleaming blue tracks.

“Here it comes!” The children milled about before dawn. Far down the shining tracks a small light grew seconds later into steaming thunder.

“What is it?” screamed Janet.

“A train, silly, you’ve seen pictures of them!” shouted Robert.

And as the Time Children watched, from the train stepped gigantic gray elephants, steaming the pavements with their mighty waters, lifting question-mark nozzles to the cold morning sky. Cumbrous wagons rolled from the long freight flats, red and gold. Lions roared and paced in boxed darkness.

“Why—this must be a—circus!” Janet trembled.

“You think so? Whatever happened to them?”

“Like Christmas, I guess. Just vanished, long ago.”

Janet looked around. “Oh, it’s awful, isn’t it.”

The boys stood numbed. “It sure is.”

Men shouted in the first faint gleam of dawn. Sleeping cars drew up, dazed faces blinked out at the children. Horses clattered like a great fall of stones on the pavement.

Mr. Fields was suddenly behind the children. “Disgusting, barbaric, keeping animals in cages. If I’d known this was here, I’d never let you come see. This is a terrible ritual.”

“Oh, yes.” But Janet’s eyes were puzzled. “And yet, you know, it’s like a nest of maggots. I want to study it.”

“I don’t know,” said Robert, his eyes darting, his fingers trembling. “It’s pretty crazy. We might try writing a thesis on it if Mr. Fields says it’s all right . . .”

Mr. Fields nodded. “I’m glad you’re digging in here, finding motives, studying this horror. All right—we’ll see the circus this afternoon.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Janet.

The Time Machine hummed.

“So that was a circus,” said Janet, solemnly.

The trombone circus died in their ears. The last thing they saw was candy-pink trapeze people whirling while baking powder clowns shrieked and bounded.

“You must admit psychovision’s better,” said Robert slowly.

“All those nasty animal smells, the excitement.” Janet blinked. “That’s bad for children, isn’t it? And those older people seated with the children. Mothers, fathers, they called them. Oh, that was strange.”

Mr. Fields put some marks in his class grading book.

Janet shook her head numbly. “I want to see it all again. I’ve missed the motives somewhere. I want to make that run across town again in the early morning. The cold air on my face—the sidewalk under my feet—the circus train coming in. Was it the air and the early hour that made the children get up and run to see the train come in? I want to retrace the entire pattern. Why should they be excited? I feel I’ve missed out on the answer.”

“They all smiled so much,” said William.

“Manic-depressives,” said Robert.

“What are summer vacations? I heard them talk about it.” Janet looked at Mr. Fields.

“They spent their summers racing about like idiots, beating each other up,” replied Mr. Fields seriously.

“I’ll take our State Engineered summers of work for children anytime,” said Robert, looking at nothing, his voice faint.

The Time Machine stopped again.

“The Fourth of July,” announced Mr. Fields. “Nineteen hundred and twenty-eight. An ancient holiday when people blew each other’s fingers off.”

They stood before the same house on the same street but on a soft summer evening. Fire wheels hissed, on front porches laughing children tossed things out that went bang!

“Don’t run!” cried Mr. Fields. “It’s not war, don’t be afraid!”

But Janet’s and Robert’s and William’s faces were pink, now blue, now white with fountains of soft fire.

“We’re all right,” said Janet, standing very still.

“Happily,” announced Mr. Fields, “they prohibited fireworks a century ago, did away with the whole messy explosion.”

Children did fairy dances, weaving their names and destinies on the dark summer air with white sparklers.

“I’d like to do that,” said Janet, softly. “Write my name on the air. See? I’d like that.”

“What?” Mr. Fields hadn’t been listening.

“Nothing,” said Janet.

“Bang!” whispered William and Robert, standing under the soft summer trees, in shadow, watching, watching the red, white, and green fires on the beautiful summer night lawns. “Bang!”

October.

The Time Machine paused for the last time, an hour later in the month of burning leaves. People bustled into dim houses carrying pumpkins and corn shocks. Skeletons danced, bats flew, candles flamed, apples swung in empty doorways.

“Halloween,” said Mr. Fields. “The acme of horror. This was the age of superstition, you know. Later they banned the Grimm Brothers, ghosts, skeletons, and all that claptrap. You children, thank God, were raised in an antiseptic world of no shadows or ghosts.

You had decent holidays like William C. Chatterton's Birthday, Work Day, and Machine Day."

They walked by the same house in the empty October night, peering in at the triangle-eyed pumpkins, the masks leering in black attics and damp cellars. Now, inside the house, some party children squatted telling stories, laughing!

"I want to be inside with them," said Janet at last.

"Sociologically, of course," said the boys.

"No," she said.

"What?" asked Mr. Fields.

"No, I just want to be inside, I just want to stay here, I want to see it all and be here and never be anywhere else, I want firecrackers and pumpkins and circuses, I want Christmases and Valentines and Fourths, like we've seen."

"This is getting out of hand . . ." Mr. Fields started to say.

But suddenly Janet was gone. "Robert, William, come on!" She ran. The boys leaped after her.

"Hold on!" shouted Mr. Fields. "Robert! William, I've got you!" He seized the last boy, but the other escaped. "Janet, Robert—come back here! You'll never pass into the seventh grade! You'll fail, Janet, Bob—Bob!"

An October wind blew wildly down the street, vanishing with the children off among moaning trees.

William twisted and kicked.

"No, not you, too, William, you're coming home with me. We'll teach those other two a lesson they won't forget. So they want to stay in the past, do they?" Mr. Fields shouted so everyone could hear. "All right, Janet, Bob, stay in this horror, in this chaos! In a few weeks you'll come sniveling back here to me. But I'll be gone! I'm leaving you here to go mad in this world!"

He hurried William to the Time Machine. The boy was sobbing. "Don't make me come back here on any more Field Excursions ever again, please, Mr. Fields, please—" "Shut up!"

Almost instantly the Time Machine whisked away toward the future, toward the underground hive cities, the metal buildings, the metal flowers, the metal lawns. "Good-bye, Janet, Bob!"

A great cold October wind blew through the town like water. And when it had ceased blowing it had carried all the children, whether invited or uninvited, masked or unmasked, to the doors of houses which closed upon them. There was not a running child anywhere in the night. The wind whined away in the bare treetops.

And inside the big house, in the candlelight, someone was pouring cold apple cider all around, to everyone, no matter who they were.

The End