

Unchanged

"Excuse me, do you know where to find the human psychology books?" eleven-year-old Zach Werse asked. It was Saturday, December 3, 2022, and it was an unusually chilly morning. Zach was in the library trying to find the perfect book for his English assignment. He was authoring an essay about how ten hours of online gaming per day not only makes you smarter but leads to future success in life. He had not found much to support his theory, but he was determined not to give up. Zach already had plans to debate with his parents to allow more screen time. They always let his little sister do whatever she wanted and never said anything about her screen time. *I wish I was the youngest.*

"Yes, down the hall and the first door to your right," the librarian replied softly. She pointed with a long purple acrylic fingernail and appeared to be engrossed in a book which had strange symbols instead of letters. Although Zach had been coming to this library as long as he could remember, he never saw this particular librarian. There was something odd about her.

As Zach walked over to the heavy, oaken door, he noticed a "DO NOT ENTER" sign and another sign with "BANNED BOOKS - RESTRICTED ACCESS." *Of course, this is exactly where the book would be. Adults would want to prevent kids like me from finding these.*

The massive door screeched open and swiftly closed behind him. He was instantly greeted with a thick, musty smell and the stale air tasted like spoiled eggs. The room was dark and there were endless bookshelves of leather-bound tomes. Zach walked down the numerous corridors and noticed intriguing books titled "How candy is actually really good for you!" and "Wearing helmets while riding a bike can cause more harm."

Before Zach knew it, he was suddenly face to face with an enormous circular structure that was synchronously strobing purple, blue, and pink. It looked vaguely familiar to the time portals he had seen in popular science fiction movies. *Maybe, this wasn't such a good idea.* Suddenly, Zach felt a tug on his shoes and realized the portal was sucking him in.

"NOOOOO!" Zach screamed as the portal fully engulfed his body. For a split second, he felt shearing pain, but it stopped, and he was pummeled to the floor.

A little dazed, Zach realized he was in the same room and shakily walked out the heavy oak door. The lights of the library were dimmed and there was not a single patron in sight. Zach noticed that it was night, and the glow of a crescent moon provided an eerie, ambient light. *I could've sworn it was just past noon when I entered the library. I must be losing my mind.*

As Zach walked out of the library, he noticed that the neighborhood looked different. It appeared that many of his neighbors had new strange-looking cars. Even his own house looked like it had a fresh coat of paint on it. Climbing up the creaky porch steps, Zach felt defeated and alone. He rang the doorbell and a strange lady who was definitely not his mother answered the door.

"Sorry, I must have knocked on the wrong door," Zach responded. He was about to walk away until he caught a glimpse of his initials, he carved into the doorframe last year with the pocketknife his sister bought him for his birthday.

"This is my home. Where are my parents, Bella and Joe Werse?" pleaded Zach with exasperation.

"You're the Werse child that's been missing for over 10 years! Come inside, I'm going to call your mom!" the lady exclaimed.

Zach walked inside their inviting, warm home. The smell of cinnamon and fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies wafted from the kitchen. Zach sat down on a plush, comfortable armchair. Weariness washed over him, and the rest of the evening passed with dream-like fogginess. He awoke to soft, mushy kisses all over his face.

"MOM!" Zach screamed as he saw his mom's sweet smile.

"This is a miracle! I missed you so much, Zach," his mom whispered into his ear with tears running down her cheek. "You look exactly the same as the day I dropped you off at the library."

Zach's mom showed him to her car and drove to their new house. Zach walked inside and immediately looked at the date on the wall clock which read "December 4, 2032". It had been exactly 10 years and a day since he had gone apparently missing. That meant his sister went to college and now he was the younger one. *YES!!*

6 months later....

Zach felt miserable. His life was completely turned around and he was depressed. All his friends were in college, and he had to finish 6th grade. None of the kids at school liked him and he was bullied. They thought he was a freak for being gone for ten years and coming back the same age. He missed his old life so much. He was having nightmares about that horrible portal and how it changed everything.

After one nightmare, Zach awoke to a warm Saturday morning. The birds weren't up chirping yet and daybreak was only a few hours away. He realized that he needed to go back to the library and find that stupid portal. *I'm going to fix it once and for all.* Zach snuck out of the house through the backdoor and rode his brand new hoverboard to the library. Just a few minutes before eight o'clock, the first librarian arrived.

"You are here early," chimed the librarian as she unlocked the door. "It is so exciting to see such an eagerness to read. You will have the whole library to yourself." The library looked nearly the same as it did ten years ago. He passed the reference desk and to his surprise he saw the same strange-looking librarian with the purple acrylic nails reading the strange book. It appeared like she never moved or aged. *Weird, I thought I was the first one in the library.* As Zach glanced at her, he caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a wink.

At that point, Zach broke into a jog and ran down the hallway. Almost like it was yesterday, he immediately saw the same restricted oak door. Without hesitation, Zach entered the room. The same musty odor greeted him. Thankfully, the portal with the strobing lights was still there. He took a deep breath and this time he allowed the portal to pull him through.

Zach heard a loud thud and found himself on the floor. Shaken, Zach walked out and entered the main library. Sunlight was streaming in, and the library now had a fountain in the middle of it. As he quickly passed the reference desk, he asked the librarian with purple acrylic fingernails what the date was to confirm his plan had worked. Again unchanged, she appeared to never have moved from her seat.

The librarian pointed to a holographic sign glowing across her desk which flashed the date June 3, 2042. Zach stood frozen looking at the date in horror and realized that his plan had backfired. Maybe being the big brother was not so bad after all.