

Flight Risk

By

April 5, 2170

Dear Diary,

Today was my eighteenth birthday. So exciting! My travel package arrived a few minutes after 10:00 am. The bot said it was confused by our address. Please! How can a bot get lost? Anyway, it was fun to open the box, so full of possibilities!

Inside was a partial listing of my ancestral DNA matches, with pictures of the places my ancestors lived. If I want to go somewhere else, I can request a more complete list. And there was a letter with the time and date for my travel interview: April 29 at 2:00 pm. If I need more time to decide on my first solo journey, I can request an extension. As if!

I've been mulling over the options since our family journey last year. I've pretty much decided on visiting Nantucket again. I know, Dear Diary, I know. I could go to a new place, a new continent even. But Nantucket is so pretty and it smells so nice. What if I picked a different ancestral home and it turned out to be ugly or stinky? I have over three weeks to decide but I think I'm settled on Nantucket.

April 29, 2170

Dear Diary,

Today was my travel interview. I was so nervous but it went well, I think. There were the medical exam, the biometric exam, and the psychological interview. I told the interviewers I've decided on Nantucket because of my fond childhood memories of going there with my family. They reviewed the range of years available. My direct ancestors lived there between 1789 and

2028, so I could pick any year between those dates. We last visited in 2018, so I picked one year later: 2019. The interviewers said the calendar is open for July, so I'll be traveling on July 1, 2170, arriving in Nantucket on July 1, 2019.

There are more preparations, of course. I have to attend a seminar covering all the rules. Then I'll receive my luggage and clothing. And money for my hotel and food and such. Money! So archaic. But a necessity for 2019. And I already have my travel chip. The doctors injected it into my left arm today. It feels just like a grain of rice.

May 15, 2170

Dear Diary,

I attended my travel seminar today. So many things to avoid doing or saying while I'm in Nantucket. Be friendly, but not too friendly. Don't say anything that could reveal that I'm from the future. Don't do anything that will alter history – meaning, I guess, don't blow anything up and don't make a baby.

The monitors will remove me before my month is over if I screw up. They'll know where I am at all times, thanks to the rice chip. And forget about disappearing or failing to show up at the return rendezvous point.

June 30, 2170

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow is the big day! Mom and Dad gave me some vintage paper maps of Nantucket in the 2010s. My clothes and luggage arrived last week. Everything fits! And it looks adorable! Lots of denim and even linen. I wonder where they grow the flax to make linen from these days.

* * *

July 2, 2019

Dear Diary,

Sorry I had no time to write yesterday. It was a whirlwind of activity and impressions. At the travel center, the bots dialed in my DNA profile to precisely target the neighborhood of my Nantucket great-great-great grandmother. Sadly, I don't know her name or address, to make certain I don't try to contact her. But just knowing she's here, somewhere, is so exciting!

I'm staying at the Moontree Inn. I even had to sign a guest register, using a fake home address. How clandestine! I feel like a spy. But, in a way, I guess I am a spy, peering into the past and life above ground.

The inn is charming, my room is charming, and the grounds are charming. Especially the grounds! Real trees and grass and flowers! I barely remembered what grass and soil smelled like from our family journey last year. And the ocean! It's only three blocks from the inn. I can walk there anytime I like. So blue, so vast! And so salty! I just love it.

July 4, 2019

Dear Diary,

I had forgotten my history lessons about Independence Day in the United States. So, it was today! People had the day off from work and there were picnics – that's where you eat outside on the beach or the grass – and a parade. And after dark there were fireworks over the harbor.

And I met a boy – under the fireworks! He says he remembers me from last summer. He saw me in the village last year and thought I looked “interesting.” Hmm. Why didn’t he say “smart” or “pretty”? So much better than “interesting.”

Anyway, his name is Jason and he’s eighteen, too. He’s going off to college in September, to UC Berkeley. I wanted to tell him that Berkeley didn’t survive the methane wars, but the rules forbid that. I told him that I’m from California, which is kind of true, geographically. At least I live under the area that used to be California, so it wasn’t a lie. He teased me for not having a California tan. I explained that I live north of San Francisco where it’s foggy all the time. I think he bought it. I’ve never even seen fog, so I hope he doesn’t question me about it.

And, yes, Dear Diary, we are getting together on Sunday! He has a summer job at a library, so he has to work tomorrow and Saturday. That gives me time to explore and soak up some atmosphere and breathe the fresh-smelling air.

July 7, 2019

Dear Diary,

Jason is so much fun! He’s kind of a bookworm (hence, the library job), but he’s funny and sweet and so natural. I want to tell him about my background, but I have to be careful about what I say. And I know I’ll be leaving in just three weeks, so I have to keep everything casual. No involvement.

I accidentally told Jason about never seeing the sky at home. Since the methane wars, of course, we live underground, but I let him think I was referring to the fog.

We visited the carousel along the boardwalk. I remember it from my visits with my parents, but it seemed more magical today with Jason. And we ate cotton candy!

July 16, 2019

Dear Diary,

My journey is half over. I know I can return next year, but Jason might not be here. Maybe he'll stay in Berkeley or maybe he'll be somewhere else. We can't even write letters or phone (or something he calls "text" – what is that?). Jason asked what happened to my cell phone and I said I lost it on the trip from California. I couldn't tell him that we have a phone implanted in our hand when we're eight years old. I hate lying to him!

Jason is so delightful, so more complex and thoughtful than the boys in West North America. He has ambitions and dreams, things that are rare nowadays. In 2170, no one has to work because the bots can do almost everything that needs doing. It's only creative work that bots can't do. Bots have no imagination.

I told Jason that I'm studying to be an actuary. He didn't know what actuaries do, so I explained that they quantify risk. Like the risk of dying too early or living too long. I almost used the example of insuring against the risk of ending up in the wrong year or place on a time journey but caught myself. Close one!

July 23, 2019

Dear Diary,

Entering the last week in Nantucket. So sad, so panicked. I want to tell Jason everything. Instead, I make up stuff. I told him I'll be going to college in Maine. What a fat lie! We don't even have colleges in 2170. They were already dying out, even before the methane wars happened in 2075. When civilization went underground, physical campuses didn't survive. And Maine doesn't exist, either.

July 30, 2019

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow at 2:00 pm I go to my rendezvous point for the transport back to 2170. I saw Jason for the last time today, maybe forever. He said he wants to be a writer and that his favorite author is James Joyce. He told me about *Ulysses* and *The Dead*. "How gruesome, writing about dead people," I said. But he said it's not gruesome, only sad and melancholy. Kind of like our last day together.

And tomorrow night I'll be back in West N.A., precinct 352. Underneath the old California where the sun never shines anymore because the methane layer is too thick. Where I can take a tunnel train to East North America, but I can't stop under the area where Texas or Missouri used to be or anywhere in Middle America because the population dwindled and the underground cities there were abandoned decades ago.

* * *

August 10, 2170

Dear Diary,

There was quite the bruhaha when I returned home to precinct 352 last week. The travel officials accused me of being too friendly with Jason. I assured them that nothing happened. We never even kissed and I didn't reveal anything of my history or where I came from. The monitors, though, knew of my whereabouts all month long. I'm sure they were relieved when I was safely back in 2170.

January 2, 2171

Dear Diary,

Sorry I haven't written in so long. Mostly it's because I've been depressed after returning from Nantucket. I miss the ocean and the sky and the trees. And I miss Jason. He's probably taking great classes at Berkeley and reading great books. And maybe he is writing great stories.

My actuarial studies are OK. I can't say they are inspirational. I read *The Dead* when I got home last summer. It was so alive and so tender. It made me cry. I started reading *Ulysses* last month. So long, and so challenging. I wish Jason were here to discuss it with me. No, actually, I wish I were where Jason is. Life underground is stifling.

April 5, 2171

Dear Diary,

My nineteenth birthday. So different from a year ago. My travel package arrived, right on time at 10:00 am. The travel authorities won't let me go back to Nantucket this year. Too risky, they say. They might let me go somewhere else, but there will be some "extreme vetting" to make sure I don't get too friendly.

April 30, 2171

Dear Diary,

My travel interview did not go well today. They said I could go to Budapest, where my ancestors lived from 1875 to 1937. I don't speak Hungarian, so I said I would think about it. And they will let me stay only a week instead of a month. They call me a flight risk. I don't see how I could escape and not return to West N.A. There's the rice chip, after all.

I asked them how many people don't return from their time journeys. They said a few die, from car accidents or diseases. Some commit suicide. (I didn't need to know that.) But everyone else comes back "eventually."

I suppose I should take the Budapest offer, just to prove I can be "good" while I'm there. Maybe they'll restore my travel privileges if I show them that they can trust me.

September 10, 2171

Dear Diary,

I have to catch you up, Dear Diary! I did go to 1922 Budapest for a week. After the Hungarian-Romanian War of 1919, there was a period of relative calm when the cafes flourished again. I learned some Hungarian before I went and knew just enough to get around and not enough to get myself in trouble. My 1920s wardrobe was exquisite! One dress had sequins sewn all over it. So retro!

I have scheduled my next actuarial exam for October 15, so it's time for me to hunker down. (Sorry. I didn't mean any irony.) I've become hugely interested in time travel risks. The layperson has no idea how many things can go wrong. Like being deposited in an ocean or onto a glacier. If people knew, they would probably stay home.

April 5, 2172

Dear Diary,

I'm twenty years old today! Good news: I passed my last two actuarial exams. Bad news: the travel authorities still won't let me travel to Nantucket. So, I'm going back to Budapest, but earlier: 1898. I can stay two weeks but I have to behave myself. Time to brush up on my Hungarian!

You probably know this already, Dear Diary, but there was a bot uprising in East N.A. last week. It took three riot squads to get the rebellious bots under control. Then they were melted down. The rumor media attributes the naughty bots to some dark code infiltration from IndoChina. Hard to imagine, since all the undersea fiber-optic cables were destroyed in the aftermath of the methane wars. I wonder if I have any direct DNA ancestors from pre-war Asia? Worth looking into.

August 8, 2172

Dear Diary,

I really enjoyed my two weeks in Budapest. And 1898 was actually quite an exciting time. The clothing was cumbersome, though. Very elaborate underpinnings – you have no idea! But everyone was looking forward to the new century. I had to be very careful not to spoil their optimism.

My Hungarian is developing nicely. I even met a nice young man but my chaperones prevented me from having much contact. I think next time I'll try for a more liberated era.

December 16, 2172

Dear Diary,

Just a quick note to say that I've been researching my DNA history. Alas, I can't find any Asian DNA ancestors, so no trips to Japan or Nepal or Hong Kong, I'm afraid.

But I do have other thrilling news, nonetheless. I secured a six-month internship with the Galactic Group. They have a time travel risk division so I'm hoping for a rotation during my internship, to develop my knowledge in that area.

April 5, 2173

Dear Diary,

Age 21 today. No big deal these days, but in the pre-war United States it was the age one could legally drink alcohol. It's described as an effect similar to depresso-stimulant No. 4, but not as long lasting. Maybe I can try alcohol on my next journey. The travel authorities have offered Amsterdam as an alternative to Budapest. My DNA ancestors lived there from 1730 to 2050. I want to avoid the years around the three World Wars. There were some peaceful years at the end of the twentieth century that I'm considering. Fortunately, I don't have to learn Dutch, as most Nederlanders learned English in school during that time.

* * *

July 1, 1999

Dear Diary,

I arrived in Amsterdam today. The people are very friendly and the city is very colorful and cosmopolitan. There are canals everywhere. Mosquitos, too. And I've never seen so many bicycles, even more than in Budapest. I want to learn how to ride one.

But first things first. I ordered an alcoholic drink at the hotel bar. The bartender didn't even ask for proof of age. Turns out that the drinking age in the Netherlands is only 18. Guess I look at least that old. I had two glasses of wine, but I don't think they had much effect. Just made me sleepy.

There was an attractive young man in the bar who tried to flirt with me, but I lied and told him I'm married. Seemed to work. I'm just so afraid the monitors will yank me back to 2173 if I talk very long to anyone, especially attractive young men.

* * *

August 8, 2173

Dear Diary,

My three weeks in Amsterdam were utterly amazing. So much history to absorb. The incredible museums and paintings, the Anne Frank house, the architecture. Everyone was talking about “gearing up for Y2K.” I wanted to tell them not to worry about that, but I just smiled and nodded.

I start my permanent job as a junior actuary at the Galactic Group next week. I’m so glad they made me an offer at the end of my internship. They said they like candidates who ask a lot of questions.

January 16, 2174

Dear Diary,

I’m five months into my job at the Galactic Group and I’m loving it. I’ve been assigned to the research and development department. Mostly we brainstorm about new insurance products to offer. I thought I was interested in time travel risks, but now I’m focused on gene editing risks. The scientists keep leaping ahead of the regulators and the insurance companies have to fill the huge breach in between. Last month a gene editor produced triplets who are supposed to become creative geniuses, but the babies can’t digest proteins. I expect the parents will accept a big settlement from the editor’s insurance company and the regulators will add another restriction to their list of banned procedures. Since most would-be parents are more concerned about their babies’ looks than their intellect, it won’t cause much hue and cry.

Anyway, Dear Diary, Galactic doesn't issue policies that protect editors who tinker with brain function genes. Currently our policies protect only disease-suppression editing risks. Galactic tends to be more of a follower than a leader, I'm afraid.

April 5, 2174

Dear Diary,

Happy birthday to me! My time travel package arrived today. Still no Nantucket, but Dublin was added to my list. And I'm allowed to go for a full month! I requested vacation at Galactic for the month of July. I'm really jazzed about Dublin, since that is where *Ulysses* takes place. I wanted to go during the years that James Joyce lived there, but my DNA ancestors didn't move to Dublin until 1970. Still, it will be fun to visit the places Joyce wrote about in *Ulysses* and see the River Liffey.

* * *

July 3, 2023

Dear Diary,

I'm in Dublin and having a good time. I've visited a pub and tried Irish whiskey. And someone in the pub tried to teach me an Irish jig. I'm afraid I'm not coordinated enough to do it justice, but it was fun, all the same.

I've discovered that there are companies that sponsor *Ulysses* tours, where they take tourists to all the places that Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus visit in the novel. There's a three-day tour next week and I bought a ticket. Some people even dress in 1904 period clothes. I didn't know in advance, so I'll just wear my 2023 period clothes.

July 6, 2023

Dear Diary,

You'll never, never guess who is part of my *Ulysses* tour. Jason! From Nantucket! He just graduated from Berkeley. Remember, Dear Diary, we met in 2019 just before he started college. He has his B.A. in literature and came to see the Dublin that James Joyce wrote about. I've been longing to go to Nantucket to see him again and instead we meet in Dublin. Too, too weird. And too, too thrilling.

I asked him about girlfriends, boyfriends, "significant others" (a twenty-first century term), and he said, "None currently." I said, "Me, too."

I have to be careful not to be too friendly or the monitors will whisk me away. I think I'm safe for the rest of the tour, so two more days. Then I'll probably have to say goodbye to Jason – forever. I'm not sure if I can do that. But, of course, he may not feel the same way about me.

July 8, 2023

Dear Diary,

Jason and I sneaked away from the tour before it ended today. He thought it was to explore on our own, but I wanted to explain why I can't see him again.

I told him everything. Well, not exactly everything, but enough so he would understand where I come from. He took it amazingly well. Maybe he thinks I'm delusional or just making things up. But I showed him my hand where my phone is embedded and the rice chip in my arm.

He wants to see me tomorrow, but I told him it's too dangerous. The monitors know where I am. Instead, I gave him the address of my hotel. He said he'll get a message to me in a few days.

July 14, 2023

Dear Diary,

Jason's note was waiting for me at the hotel's front desk this morning. I'm to meet him at the international docks of the River Liffey at 11:00 pm tonight. Are we sailing to another country? It won't help. The monitors will find me.

July 21, 2023

Dear Diary,

Jason and I have been hiding out in Dublin, in a different hotel or guest house every night. When we met at the docks, he had a scalpel, anesthetic, and some bandages. I haven't yet learned where he got that stuff. He cut out my phone and chip and threw them onto a cargo ship that was departing Dublin that night. So far, the monitors haven't found me.

August 30, 2023

Dear Diary,

I've been afraid to even breathe for the past six weeks. Jason and I left Dublin and traveled south to Cork, but I can't leave Ireland because I don't have a passport. I try not to think about the pain I'm causing my parents. The travel authorities probably told them I died in an accident. In a way I did. I'm no longer the person I was.

I'm a fugitive, on the run from the future.