

 AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT

How does the main character's attitude about the future change over the course of the story?

The future is bright. At least that's what Mom is always saying. But it doesn't seem particularly bright right now, in this cold, musty church basement. We're at this used-book sale, where for five bucks you can fill a bag with books, so there's one bag for Mom and one for me. Whatever organizational logic there might have been in this place has given way to chaos—mysteries in the memoir section, grizzly horror novels in the children's section. Most of the books are beat up; there are hardcovers missing dust jackets, dog-eared thrillers, and coffee-stained romances with embarrassing titles. Some books, when I pick them up, disintegrate in my hands. Spines crack, brittle pages fall out.

When I look around, I see Mom's bright-red hair in a sea of gray. She is busy filling her bag with novels, which she reads to "unwind" and "escape." I watch her pick up a book and read the first page and then the second. Soon a bottleneck forms, as people try to squeeze past her single file. They keep bumping into her, but she doesn't notice. I am relieved that she has lost herself completely in her book.

I turn and venture deeper into the basement. And then I notice it sticking out from a particularly messy bookshelf, mocking me: a Ray Bradbury novel. I blanch as everything comes flooding back. A few weeks ago in English class, I tried to say something insightful about "The Night," the Bradbury story we'd been discussing. It's a simple story, really, about a boy and his mother who go out one summer night looking for the boy's brother. They're worried that something terrible has happened to him, but—spoiler

INFERENCE
What clue does this line give you about the other shoppers?



**CHARACTER**

Wow! Lots of details here! What kind of person is Mom? How does James seem to feel about her?

**CHARACTER**

Why doesn't James want to look at these kinds of photographs?

INFERENCE

To whom is she writing?

alert!—they find him. Everything turns out all right, but the boy realizes that someday something won't turn out all right, and it's like the end of childhood for him, in a way, and the story makes me feel something I can't name. Well, I guess I blurted all that out in class, because suddenly everyone was staring at me like I had sprouted a big zit on my nose, and my teacher said, "James, we finished 'The Night' 10 minutes ago. Did we lose you again?"

Everybody laughed, and I think my heart stopped beating.

I quietly turn away from Bradbury and look down at my bag. It is half filled, although I don't remember putting anything into it. I let out a sigh. Across the room, Mom has stopped reading and is talking on her phone, probably "working a deal." She preaches a lot about focusing on whatever you're doing, but she can multitask better than anybody. She works hard—that's the truth. When we had to sell our home, after Dad lost his job, Mom said, "We don't need to pay a realtor. I can do it." And she did. Now she sells other people's homes. **She always celebrates when she makes a sale, preparing a big dinner for us—homemade pizza and garlic bread, gingerbread for dessert, Dad's favorites**—but I don't understand what's to celebrate. The day we sold our house was the crummiest day I can remember.

I have room in my bag for one more book. Then it will be time to detach Mom from her phone. Or if I find another book, maybe I can pay my five dollars and walk home, let Mom take her time.

One more book, one more . . .

I find myself in the photography section—big glossy books filled with photographs of celebrity mansions, Earth as viewed from space, the aftermath of natural disasters, **nothing I want to look at.** My eye is drawn to a book that doesn't seem to belong. It has just a plain red cover. No title or anything.

I pick it up and open it carefully. Inside, every line on every page is filled with miniscule handwriting. I realize that it's someone's journal, though there aren't any dates. Each entry begins with "Dear Future" and ends with "Sincerely, The Past."

I put down my bag and start reading.

I doesn't take me long to figure out that "The Past" is a girl, or was a girl, and that her first initial was A, and that she was going through a pretty crummy time. She doesn't go into too many details, but it had something to do with her mom being sick and someone with the initial S picking on her at school. A played soccer but didn't think she was very good at it, and she played piano but didn't think she was especially good at that either, and she liked a boy with the initial T, but she didn't think that T liked her very much because T kind of liked S, even though S was a bully. And lately she hadn't been doing so well in school, and everyone thought she was D-E-P-R-E-S-S-E-D (she spelled it out like that). The one thing she truly loved, what got her through her most difficult days, was writing in this journal.

She wrote, "Dear Future, I don't know if you'll ever read these words, or if you'll care. I don't even know who you are. But I want you to know that I was probably a little bit like you. And I hope you're doing OK. And that I am too. **Sincerely, The Past.**"

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it and continue reading. I'm not even skimming. True, I'm not reading the story of someone who lived through a war or some important historical event. It's just the everyday thoughts and fears and hopes of some girl, and I can't imagine anything more interesting.

When I reach the end of the journal, an hour has passed and I haven't moved. A is still in the same place too—worried, lonely, misunderstood, yet somehow hopeful. I feel anxious not knowing what happened to her. I rummage through the pile where I found her journal, hoping there's another volume, but I don't find one.

I reread A's final entry, and only then do I notice on the inside back cover an address written so small you'd practically need a magnifying glass to read it. It's an Ohio address. I live in Pennsylvania, and we're neighbors with Ohio, but I've never been there.

Written beside the address is a note: "If found, please return."

My first question is: What happened to A?

My second question is: How did her journal end up here, in this church basement, in my hands?

My third and fourth and fifth questions are: Did she lose it? Did she throw it away? If so, why?

My sixth question is: How can I get it back to her?

And the answer to my sixth question is in my pocket.

It doesn't take long for me to connect the address to a phone number. Only after I've dialed the number does the seventh and most important question pop into my head: What am I supposed to say when she answers?

But she doesn't.

A message informs me that the number has been changed.

So I dial that number, still uncertain about what to say. I don't even know her name.

And then a voice says hello. A girl's voice. She sounds older than I am. Older than the girl who kept the journal. But not old.

"Hello," I say. "I'm trying to reach someone with the first initial A."

"Uh, my name is Annie," she responds. "Who's this?"

"I know this is going to sound weird, but did you lose a journal with a red cover?"

"Who is this?" she repeats.

James, I should say. But instead I say, "It's the future."

There's a long pause during which she's probably wondering who's this weird kid calling her. She asks me the address written on the inside back cover, and I tell her.

"That's my old address," she says.

"Do you mind if I ask how old you are?"

"Nineteen," she says.

"How old were you when you kept your journal?"

"Thirteen."

"That's how old I am," I tell her.

"Thirteen seems like a long time ago," she says.

"How are you?" I ask. "Are you happy?"

"Happy enough," she answers. "I mean, no one's happy all the time, right?"



AUTHOR'S CRAFT

How does the author create rhythm in this section? What mood does this rhythm create?

HELLO
my name is

THE FUTURE

CHARACTER

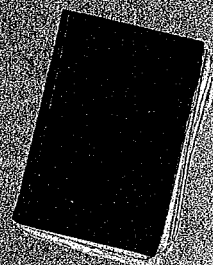
Why doesn't James tell Annie his name?



CHARACTER
Why does James say this?



PLOT
This is part of the resolution of the part of the story that resolves a conflict. What conflict is being resolved for James?



CHARACTER
How has James changed over the course of the story?

"You can say that again."
"How are you, Dear Future?"

I want to tell her everything I'm worried about. I want to tell her about spacing out at school and how we had to move. I want to tell her that my dad is D-E-P-R-E-S-S-E-D. I want to ask her if everything will be OK. But I don't know how to say what I really want to say.

"How are you?" she asks again.
"Some days are better than others."

"Sounds familiar," she says. "How's today?"

I look over at Mom, sitting cross-legged on the floor, absorbed in another book. She looks up, notices me, and touches her ear as if to say, "Hey, enough with the phone."

With my free hand, I raise my bag filled with books to show her. She smiles.

"Are you still there?" Annie asks.

"I'm here."

"So, how's today?"

"To be honest, today started off awful," I reply. **"But it's better now."**

This isn't going to be one of those stories about how two strangers become pen pals or best friends or anything like that. Annie thanks me for calling, gives me her new address, and asks if I wouldn't mind mailing her the journal.

"Sometimes, I miss the past," she says, "even if it wasn't always easy."

When I return home, I write her an old-fashioned pen-and-paper note. I don't ask about the boy she used to like or about the girl who bullied her. I don't even ask about her mom, though I want to. I just write that I'm glad I discovered her in that room filled with books.

At dinner, we say what we're thankful for. Mom insists we do that every night before eating. Mom is thankful for her guys—that's what she calls me and Dad. Dad is thankful for the dinner Mom prepared—that's what he says when he can't think of anything else to say. I tell them that I'm thankful for the journal I found, and then I tell them all about Annie.

"I was very unhappy when I was 13," Mom says. "I thought being 13 meant I wasn't a kid anymore. I wasn't ready for that."

"I'm still not ready," Dad says.

"Tell me the truth," I say. "Do you get less happy as you get older?"

They exchange glances. Maybe neither of them wants to answer.

"You can't really measure happiness," Mom replies eventually, "but nothing has brought as much meaning into my life as you two."

Dad rubs his beard. "When you're happy, you want to make it last forever. And when things are difficult, the urge is to hurry up and get happy again. But hard times are part of life. What matters is how you get through them and who you get through them with."

He smiles at Mom. Dad has a terrific smile.

That night, I stay up late studying. Afterward, I slowly reread Annie's journal from beginning to end, paying attention to every word.

➤ **In some dear future, I would like to remember this day. And miss it. ☺**