

TILL TIME DO US PART

It was a normal July day in Round Rock, and I was cooped up in the apartment I share with my mom, basking in the air conditioning. I turned on the TV and flopped down onto the couch, intending to stay there all afternoon. All my friends were at sleepaway camp together, and I was bored beyond belief.

My mom, however, had other plans. No sooner had I selected a show than she came up behind me and snatched away the remote.

“Ugh, what?” I asked.

“Camila Rhodes, don’t you dare give me that tone,” Mom said. “I need you to clean out the hall closet. We need everything packed up and ready in two weeks so we can move, remember?”

“For the last time, why are we even moving?!” I said, throwing up my hands. “We’re happy here! You were so worried about me making friends in middle school, and now you’re taking them away!”

Mom looked shocked. It’s *true*, though. I wasn’t the most popular person in elementary school, so she was really worried about me moving up to a larger school. I finally opened up to people, though, and I have a good group of friends now.

“Camila, I have to go to work,” she said in her best “this-conversation-is-over” Mom voice. I can tell I’ve really hurt her, though. That makes me kinda sad, but I really don’t want to move. It’s her fault for putting me through this. “You can feel any way you want about the move, but you have to accept that my decision is final. If that closet isn’t cleaned out when I get home...” She let her threat hang in the air, and walked out muttering about “teenagers.”

Of course I cleaned it. Mom-threats are scary. As soon as I heard the door click shut, I dashed to the kitchen for a garbage bag and a few cardboard crates from our stash in the pantry. There was only one storage closet in our apartment of thirteen years, so I would need to move quickly if I was going to have it clean by the time Mom came home. I put in my AirPods, started an upbeat playlist, and opened the door.

A whole box’s worth of winter clothes spilled out on top of me, like in a cartoon. Sighing, I packed the coats and scarves into a box, labeled it “winter” with a Sharpie, and taped it shut.

One box down, about a million more to go.

Turning back to the closet, I noticed a glimmer of bright pink poking out from the detritus in the back of the closet. I'd never seen this box before. I pushed aside some board games and managed to pull it free.

It looked like a shoebox that had been feminized beyond recognition. It was bright pink, covered with paper doilies, showered with gold glitter, and was so prissily decorated on the whole that it couldn't possibly belong to me—I was a casual tank top and sweatpants kind of person, myself—so it must have been my mom's. But I didn't think she had this taste, either. I was about to toss it into a garbage bag when I caught sight of what was written on the largest doily. Gold ink spelled out *Megan + Tony* in loopy letters

Megan... my mom's name. I thought I heard her mention the name "Tony" before, but I couldn't remember who it was. Curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the box.

Inside the box were several envelopes, a pressed corsage, a high school yearbook, and a necklace with a twelve-sided crystal on it. Knowing full well that I was going to be in trouble, but surrendering to my impulses all the same, I slit open one of the well-worn letters. Inside was a single piece of peach stationery, on which a heartfelt love note was composed.

Dearest Megan - I know you just left, and I already miss you. I wish I could see you all the time, instead of this agony without you. I am so glad you discovered what you did. Now that we know we belong together, why stay apart? Stay next time you come. I know your parents won't care.

I am here for you. All you ever have to do is wish to find me.

I await our next meeting. Perhaps next Tuesday, 4 pm my time?

Write back soon! ♡Tony

After reading, I felt bad for looking through this stuff. It was clearly very personal. I almost considered packing it away without another glance, but then something caught my eye. Something about the yearbook cover seemed a bit off... did that say *1977*? That was five years before my mom was born! Why was this in her private stuff?

I looked for Tony in the yearbook, just out of curiosity. Someone had dog-eared a page, and when I flipped to it, it was the senior portraits. Sure enough, “Anthony” was written there. I couldn’t decipher the last name, because someone had written over his portrait in marker. *I’ll bring you to us, Tony. For all three of us. She needs you here as much as I do. XOXO Megan.*

I studied the portrait closer. There was something oddly familiar about Tony’s face. The slope of the chin, the untamable brown hair... things *I* saw in the mirror every day.

I had to get to the bottom of this. Abandoning all caution, I snatched up the wedding photo. It was unmistakably Mom and Tony, but something still didn’t seem right. I flipped the photo over. On the back were the words *Megan & Anthony Rhodes, May 17, 1983.*

I traced my finger over the words as if reading them again would force them to make more sense. I put down the photo and picked up the crystal. Something told me it wasn’t just a necklace.

A piece of paper was taped around the chain. I tore it a little to get to the clasp, and words peeked out at me. I unfolded the paper all the way and read it. In Tony’s handwriting, it said:

Dear Camila,

I’m sorry we never got a chance to meet. I know your mother would try to hide this letter, so whatever you’re doing, she clearly won’t approve of. But I digress.

You must be very confused.

“Well, no duh,” I said to the paper. Then I kept reading.

Allow me to explain. Your mother, Megan, was in a rough spot in her teenage years. Her parents—your grandparents—never really cared for her as parents should. She went through a broken relationship in early high school and suffered intense heartbreak. But then, in her darkest hour, she found a necklace—the necklace you now hold in your hand. She discovered its unique power to travel anywhere in time through wish power, and it was aptly named the Timewish Crystal. Wishing to find her true love, she found me. I, in your time, am at least twenty years older than her, but she found me when I was her age. She practically lived in my time period, even went to school with me my senior year. Her parents never noticed.

We went to college, wed when we were old enough, and a year later you came along. By this time, your mother was actually living in my time period, and it seemed that she would never go back to the present.

But something changed. The Timewish Crystal, you see, is not a mere gem. It thinks and feels for itself, and its mission is to help people. It had done so, giving your mother an escape from her life. But it also values order, and living too long in the past is dangerous. It can cause rips in the time stream, and the Timewish Crystal was left with no choice. It transported your mother, and you, back to the present, where it thought you belonged.

Your mother tried and tried to take you and her back, but eventually the strain broke her. She poured her pain into worry for you, afraid to lose you as well.

I remembered those years. I was too little to understand, but I knew Mom was super-overprotective. She wouldn't let me go so much as a step beyond our apartment without supervision, and I could never go to a classmate's birthday party until she had interrogated their parents to death. I remembered all the things she tried to drown her pain in, all the nights we spent watching cartoon reruns because neither of us really wanted to face real life.

Eventually, she must have forgotten the Timewish Crystal. But I have not. I found a weaker one, and though it is too weak for me to transport myself, I am able to put this letter in a safe place, where undoubtedly you will find it someday. As it is around the chain of the Timewish Crystal, you must by now know the purpose of this letter.

Your mother is too time-sick from all the time she spent in the past. But you are not. Since you were born (technically) in the past, you will feel no ill effects. And thus you can come and get me. If I know your mother, she will try to get you both away from all the memories she's run from for years. Only you can bring the family back together.

All you have to do is wish.

We're counting on you, Camila!

Your father, Tony

I turned and scooped up the necklace. Feeling ridiculous, but knowing it was my best shot all the same, I closed my fingers around the gem and thought hard.

I wish to bring my family back together. I wish to find the father I never knew. I wish to repair what has been broken. I wish to make my mother happy once more. Oh, and please make sure my dad's the right age so there isn't a weird time gap or whatever.

The gem pulsed a steady scarlet, like a heartbeat. Motes of red light illuminated the closet, and slowly a dreamlike sensation began to overtake me. I felt as though I was floating through space, my hair and clothes buffeted about by intangible winds. Slowly, the world dissolved, and I was left for a brief moment floating in the void beyond time's reach.

Then I shot out of the void as though catapulted by some great force. Dimly I wondered what was about to happen. It didn't really seem to matter, though. Even as I fell through the sky in a different, unfamiliar time, I didn't feel concerned by neither the fact that I must have been falling at terminal velocity nor the jarring landing afterward. It was only as I got up from my prone position on a random sidewalk, surveyed my surroundings, and took in the vastly different world, that I realized I had done it. I had actually time-traveled.

Then I realized I wasn't holding the Timewish Crystal anymore. I looked all around, thinking maybe I had dropped it, but saw no trace of the ruby. Then I looked down at my feet, and my excitedness shriveled.

The gem had been smashed by my rough return into time. The chain now only held a jagged quarter of the crystal, and while it could probably bring me back safely, I didn't know about anyone else.

Still, I had to try. I picked up the shattered remains of the Timewish Crystal, swept them into my pocket and set off along the sidewalk, scanning faces. According to the letter, I should be pretty close to where Tony was.

I came upon an electronic sign for an elementary school. It said that the date was today, in 2002. I was right in my target era. Bolstered by this reassurance, I quickened my pace.

I only hoped I really could make my family whole again...

The end, for now.