

# The Time Machine

By Emily Cameron, Age 11

Her feet plodded across the cold tiles, and she curled her toes against the chill from the icy floor—she should have worn her slippers. Pushing her tangled brown hair out of her face and clutching her bathrobe more tightly around herself, she groped her way through the dark of the house. Her fingers moved instinctively toward the light switch in the room, but she pulled them back, afraid that the click of the switch and the light would alert her sleeping family. Megan knew her parents would be furious if they caught her stumbling through the house at this hour, but they wouldn't find out if she was careful. All she wanted was a glimpse of it—*the time machine*.

Her father had been working on a time machine for months. He spent most of his time locked up in the garage. Often, Megan would hear the soft clinking of metal on metal and her father muttering to himself as he worked. He had hinted that he was working on a time machine, but when Megan and her younger siblings had demanded to see it, her father had refused. "It's too dangerous," he pointed out sharply, catching the crestfallen look on his children's faces. "Something might go wrong, or one of you—" His eyes settled on Megan, who had always been the misbehaving one. "—might mess it up. Besides, I haven't quite figured out how one could get *back* to the present."

Now, Megan blindly groped her way through the pressing darkness of the kitchen. *I won't mess it up*, she promised herself. She was *eleven*; she wasn't a baby anymore. She didn't need to be protected from every single danger. Besides,

what was the harm of just *looking*? She wasn't actually going to use the time machine.

Her groping fingers touched something cold, something metal. What was it? *Yes! It's the doorknob to the garage*, she thought triumphantly, easing open the door. Suddenly, the urge to see the time machine overwhelmed her; not caring if her parents awoke, her fingers fumbled across the wall and flicked on the switch.

As she stepped uncertainly inside the garage, Megan became uncomfortably aware of a soft, low humming noise. The air was strangely warm and stuffy. Sweeping an expectant glance around the cramped room (*where was it?*), her eyes landed on a glowing, bizarre contraption in the center of the garage. Megan knew instantly that this had to be the time machine. It was a jumbled assortment of twisting wires that were all entwined and tangled together. A square panel was sticking at an odd angle out between the thick wires, covered with knobs and buttons. In front of the machine, there was a placemat, which Megan assumed a person was supposed to step on in order to be teleported. The whole contraption was humming as a silvery substance flowed inside the wires, and the machine illuminated the entire garage with its eerie, greenish glow.

"Wow," Megan breathed. She plodded forward, her feet tingling against the cold garage floor as she fingered one of the knobs on the control panel. In her excitement and wonder, she had forgotten that she wasn't supposed to touch the machine. *But there's no harm in just touching it*, she reasoned. She experimentally twisted one of the knobs with numbers on it to 30. *Wonder what that does*, she thought.

As she stepped forward closer to the machine, something rough and prickly brushed against the sole of her bare foot. Glancing down, she realized that she was standing on the threadbare placemat that was connected to the rest of the machine. A jolt of panic and realization flooded through her. She was in exactly the correct

position to be teleported—but she didn't want to be teleported. In a frenzied panic, she frantically attempted to hop off the placemat, but it was as though her feet were glued to its rough surface. The dimly illuminated garage began to swirl before her eyes, and a strange sensation of dizziness overwhelmed her. What was happening? Her stomach churned and she opened her mouth to scream, but the high-pitched shriek was ripped away from her lips as she began to tumble through the air . . . it felt as though she was falling, falling into nothingness as the world swirled before her. . . .

*Thud.* The ground slammed into her, and she felt hard, rocky earth pressing against her side. Bewildered, she opened her eyes and squinted against the scorching sun. She was sprawled in the middle of a grassy, overgrown field, surrounded by an assortment of brightly painted houses. Dragging herself to her feet and brushing off the clumps of dirt clinging to her mud-streaked bathrobe, confusion mingled with nagging fear, swept through her. Where was she? How far back had she teleported—or was this the future? Glancing around, Megan figured that she must have been teleported back in time . . . her surroundings were old-fashioned, and yet . . .

A pang of realization slammed into her. Of course . . . it was so obvious, why hadn't she thought of it before? She remembered twisting the little knob on the control panel of the time machine to 30. She must have teleported back thirty years ago, to the exact same spot she had been in the present. That explained why there was this empty field here—her family's house hadn't been built yet.

Suddenly, she became uncomfortably aware that several people were staring at her in bewilderment. She had just appeared out of thin air clutching a stained, white bathrobe around herself and staring around in confusion behind her storm cloud of tangled, mouse-brown hair; why shouldn't people stare at her? To make matters worse, a soft, familiar humming announced the arrival of the bizarre time

machine, which had apparently teleported back in time with her. Attempting to appear normal despite her disheveled appearance, she paused to ponder her situation while self-consciously tugging her grubby fingers through her stringy, unbrushed hair. She needed to get back to the present—but how? She stared at the complex assortment of thick, tangled wires and spent several wasted minutes attempting to figure out what the little knobs and buttons on the control panel meant—to no avail. Swallowing back a fresh wave of nagging panic, Megan tried to think straight, but fearful thoughts kept barging into her mind. *What if I can't get out of the past?* she thought desperately. *What if I'm stuck here forever? I should have never messed with that stupid time machine. . . .*

Well, it was no use crying over spilled milk about it. Megan needed to do something. Gripping one of the thick wires in her mud stained hand, she lugged it across the field, ignoring the sharp stabs of pain every time she trod on a pointed piece of gravel or dirt with her bare feet, unaccustomed to the feel of the rocky ground. But the brief sensation of determination ebbed away almost immediately as she realized the dire situation she was in. She had no idea what to do. As she stood in the middle of the cracked sidewalk, the gnawing pit of helplessness expanded inside her stomach. Megan could sense the questioning stares of passerby flickering from her untidy appearance to the complex contraption she was clutching, but she ignored it. Her tight grip on the time machine began to loosen as her sweaty palms caused her hand to slip off the wire she was clinging on to. Tears sprang up threateningly against her eyelids. *I'm going to be stuck here forever*, she thought miserably.

“Wow! What’s that?” An eager voice broke in roughly to her helpless thoughts. Glancing up, Megan spotted a young boy who appeared to be about the same age as her staring at the machine in awed curiosity.

“A stupid time machine,” Megan muttered bitterly, the sharp words triggered by her resentment toward the machine spilling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

The boy was evidently amazed. His round, plump face positively glowing with wonder, he flashed her a glance of deep respect and stared at the twisted wires, his round glasses slipping down his rather flat nose. Something about the way he peered over the top of his lenses and his pudgy features indistinctly reminded Megan of someone, but she was unable to recall exactly who.

“Have you tried using it yet?” he demanded, tearing his gaze from the machine to her face for a brief moment before continuing to stare at it.

“Yes,” Megan murmured, the question rousing the gnawing pit of panic in her stomach.

“And . . . ?”

“Um . . . well, it worked, I suppose,” she replied. “I’m . . . um . . . I’m from the future, thirty years from now.” The words tumbled out of her mouth before she had time to register how unbelievable she must sound.

“Wow! Really? What’s it like in the future?” the boy pressed.

“You—you *believe* me?” Megan said doubtfully. The boy fervently bobbed his head up and down. “Well . . . I don’t know. It’s—I mean, there are iPads and such—”

“Eye pad? What’s that?” the boy broke in.

“It’s a touch screen tablet,” Megan snapped, irritated by his constant babbling and interrupting. “Anyways, what’s your name?”

“I’m Aaron,” the boy announced, jabbing a stubby finger at his puffed-out chest.

“Aaron,” she repeated. The word tasted familiar on her tongue. Aaron was her father’s name. “I’m Megan.”

“Why are you wearing pajamas and a bathrobe?” Aaron demanded abruptly in an unashamed tone, as though he were asking a perfectly normal question and not a rather insulting one. “Why are your clothes all dirty?” His large, round eyes flickered toward her disheveled head. “And what’s wrong with your hair?”

Megan cast him a sharp glance and self-consciously swept a hand across her clothes to brush off the hardened mud. “Because . . . I landed in that muddy field when I teleported.”

“Oh,” came the unsatisfied answer. “So . . . when are you going back—to the future? Why did you come here anyways?” he pestered eagerly.

“I came here by accident. My dad was designing this time machine, and I wanted to look at it, but I stepped on something wrong and I teleported back to the past,” Megan muttered through gritted teeth.

“You didn’t answer my first question: when are you going back?” Aaron pointed out.

Megan had been vainly trying to avoid this particular question. “Probably never,” she admitted dismally, casting a resentful glance at the time machine. “I can’t figure out how to get back.” She waited for the boy to smirk, to tell her unnecessarily that she had been stupid to fiddle with something she didn’t know how to properly use, but for once, Aaron remained uncharacteristically quiet.

Sticking out his plump rear end, he bent forward for a closer inspection of the time machine, his round eyes staring over his wire-rimmed glasses. Megan watched him for a moment as he sharply prodded the thick wires and poked at the knobs and buttons on the control panel, muttering, “Very cleverly designed . . .” Finally he straightened up, shoved his slipping glasses back up his nose with a stubby finger, and announced, “I don’t think your dad invented the part yet where a person could get *back* to the present.”

Megan indistinctly recalled how her father had always refused to show her the time machine, pointing out that he hadn't quite figured out how one could get back to the present. A horrible sinking feeling twisted in her stomach as she realized how stupid she had been to ignore his words. "So—so I'm never going back to the present? *I'm stuck in the past?*"

"Er—well, yes, you are," Aaron confessed. Catching the desperate look on Megan's face, he added, "Well—I can help, if . . . if you want. I'm good with machines. Maybe I could get you back to the present."

"Maybe," Megan repeated doubtfully. She doubted this plump, chattering boy could do anything to help her, but it was worth trying.

Aaron rifled around his in sweatpants pockets and triumphantly dumped out the contents of it, scattering the sidewalk with all sorts of tools. Megan stared as he plunked down on the ground and began to fiddle with the machine, untangling wires and adding new knobs to the control panel, all the time muttering inaudibly to himself under his breath. His stubby fingers poked, prodded, and jabbed at the buttons he had installed, sometimes nodding in satisfaction and other times frowning and ripping off the knob. Aaron looked so familiar to Megan, but no matter how hard she pondered his round features, she could not recall who he looked like.

After several hours, Aaron finally rose to his feet. Wiping the sweat mingled with dust and grime off his face, he stared at the time machine in an unsatisfied way and turned to face Megan. "That's the best I can do," he admitted grimly. "I just hope my best is good enough to get you back to the present."

"Er—thanks, Aaron," Megan said. "Are you sure—?"

"I'm not sure. You might get stuck between the present and the past, or it might work. I don't know. I've already set the knobs to go forward thirty years. Just step on that placemat there and you'll teleport, hopefully, back to the future."

Just as Megan placed one bare foot on the mat, an idea struck her. “Aaron!” she gasped. “What’s your last name?” Her words slurred together as the world began to swirl in front of her.

A hollow, faraway voice was yelling, barely audible. “My last name is Adamson!”

*Adamson . . . Adamson . . .* But that was *Megan’s* last name, too! Unless . . . was it possible? As she glanced back at Aaron’s face for what she thought was the last time, she suddenly remembered what he reminded her of. Aaron was her *father* in the past! But she didn’t have time to fret about that now. The real question was: was Aaron’s time machine going to work? Would she get back to the present safely?

The ground slammed into her. Her cheek was pressed painfully into an icy cold floor, tingling on her entire face. The floor was freezing . . . *freezing . . . freezing?* Megan dared to open her eyes. She stared breathlessly around the familiar, cluttered room, with its stuffy, uncomfortably warm atmosphere. The time machine was humming tunelessly nearby. A disbelieving, happy realization swelled in her chest. She was *home*.

A soft, pearly orange glow crept across the garage. The sun was rising; it was dawn. Knowing that her family would be waking up soon, Megan rose to her feet and tiptoed up the stairs into her room, flinging herself into the bed sheets. No sooner had she pressed her eyes shut and began to heave long, deep breaths as though she were sleeping soundly than her mother stumble into her room to rouse her from her “sleep.” “Morning, Megan,” she said heartily, then frowned at the sweating, exhausted appearance of her daughter. “What’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve just been on a long journey!”

“Er—no, Mom, I’m fine, really,” Megan stammered.



“Are you sure?” Her mother’s frown deepened. “Megan, have you been somewhere?” When Megan vigorously shook her head, she pressed, “Is there anything you want to tell me, Meg? Anything at all?”

Megan’s thoughts flashed back to the suspenseful trip in the middle of the night to her father’s time machine. She remembered how she had stepped on the wrong thing and had been teleported back in time, and how she had met a young boy named Aaron, who was really her father in the past. She remembered the tension and panic that had curdled in her stomach as she wondered if she was ever going to get back to the present, and how Aaron had helped her get back. “No, Mom,” Megan said, suppressing a grin. “Nothing at all.”