

SIBYL

Life can be a drag.

BY DEBORAH WALKER

The ghost of my future smells of ash. “I thought that you were going to stop smoking,” I say.

“It’s been a tough year.” She rummages inside her bag and produces a packet of Marlboro Lights. “Life doesn’t always go according to plan, does it, Sibyl?” She lights a cigarette and blows the smoke towards me. Ghost smoke, a multiplication of the insubstantial.

“I think I’ll join you.” I take a cigarette from my own packet while taking a critical look at my future self. She looks much older than she looked a year ago. She’s not doing herself any favours by not wearing make-up. Her hair looks dry and brittle, and the roots need doing. “I see that you haven’t lost any weight.”

She shrugs. “Dieting’s a waste of time. I’m nearly forty. I am what I am.”

She’s in one of those moods. “So, what’s new?” I ask.

“Not much.”

I sigh. “That’s not very helpful. This rite is not without sacrifice, you know.” I point to the iron knife balancing on top of the dish of blood water.

“Don’t I know it?” She rolls up her sleeve and shows me her right arm. She is seven years older than me, seven more scars. This is how it works, once a year I can see seven years into the future.

“Shall we do the diary?” I ask.

“Ah, yes, the diary.” She takes the leather diary out of her bag. I’d bought it in Venice, on my honeymoon. I’m supposed to write in it every day: the diary of my life.

The ghost flicks through the pages. “The trouble with this diary is that it gets a little sketchy in places. You’re drinking a lot at the moment, aren’t you?”

I shrug. I like a glass of wine or two in the evening. It takes the edge off. Who is she to judge me? “Shall we get on with the markets?”

“Sure.” My future self recites share prices while I take notes. I play the market. Although playing implies that I’ve a possibility of losing. That’s not the case, not with the information I’m receiving. I’m the ultimate insider dealer.

When she’s finished, she says: “All right then, I’ll be off.”

“Don’t go yet.”

“What is it?” she asks, impatiently.

“You don’t look great.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I mean, what’s happened to you in



the last year?” I feel sorry for her, but more importantly I feel anxious. I need to know.

“It’s best not to talk about personal stuff, Sibyl, you know that.”

“How’s Alex?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“It is Alex, isn’t it? What’s happened? He’s not . . . dead, is he?”

She lights another cigarette. I do the same.

“Alex left me.”

“But last year you seemed so happy.”

“Ignorance is bliss. He’s been having an affair for the last three years. Alice gave him an ultimatum, and I lost out.”

“Alice? My best friend Alice?”

“That’s right. He’s taking me through the courts now, trying to get his ‘fair share.’”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Would I lie to you? Would I lie to myself?”

She looks at me. “What are you going to do, now that you know?”

I walk to the fridge and pour myself a glass of cold, crisp chardonnay. I drain the glass.

She watches me with a half-smile. I refill the glass. “You shouldn’t have told me.”

“At least I gave you a warning. That’s more than I got.”

“She didn’t tell you?” Timelines are divergent. Each future me is slightly different.

“No. She didn’t. But I thought you’d want to know. That’s our trouble, we always want to know.” She blows a plume of ghost smoke towards me. “You could divorce him.”

“You had nine good years of marriage.”

“No, I didn’t. For three of those years Alex was having an affair.”

She lets her cigarette fall to the ground. “What are you going to do, Sibyl?” She has a hungry look on her face. She wants me to say that I’m going to divorce Alex, before he’s had a chance to betray me. When did I get so bitter?

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“It’s your decision,” she says. “It won’t change anything for me. I’ll just carry on in this timeline where he betrayed me. You can’t change the past, only the future.”

“And you?” I say. “Are you going to look ahead, this year?”

“I always do, don’t I?” She rubs her arm. “Find out how I can improve my perfect life.”

“You don’t need to. You must have plenty of money stashed away.”

“No. I don’t need to look into the future. But then again, neither do you.”

“It’s a hard habit to break.”

She nods. I see the shadow in her eyes. I know her fear. The same fear that shrouds me every time I start the ritual. There will come a day when I reach into the future and my future self will be dead. What will I see on that night? Will I see nothingness, or something worse, something unbearably worse?

“I’m young,” she says. “I’m only thirty-eight. It will be okay to look.”

“Yes. It’ll be okay. Thanks for your help.”

“It’s nothing. Be well, Sibyl. Be happy.”

With a word I end the ritual, and my future self dissipates.

I tidy up, throwing the blood water down the sink and washing the bowl. Alex would be home soon. Could I change, make our marriage stronger? Did I want to?

A key rattles in the lock. Alex is home.

What could I say to him?

Divination is a drug.

I reach for the packet of cigarettes. Tomorrow, I’ll quit. ■

Find Deborah in the British Museum, trawling the past for future inspiration.