NO FUTURE IN I T

It's not easy to keep exactly one-eighth inch of beard on your face. For a writer, though, it's good protective coloration. With a suit and tie, you look like a gentleman who's decided to grow a beard. With rumpled old Salvation Army clothes, you look like a down-and-out rummy. It depends on the class of people you want to listen to, study.

I was in the rummy outfit when I met Bill Caddis and heard his incredible story. At first I thought Bill was on the same scam I was; he talked too well to be in the dreg business. He was for real, though.

There's this wonderful sleaze bar in downtown Tampa. No name, just a bunch of beer signs in the window. The one for Pearl has a busted laser that flutters stroboscopically. You don't want to sit too near the window. It's a good bar for private conversations because it's right under the twelve-laner that sweeps out over the bay, and there's a constant moan of traffic, all day and all night. There's a fine gritty layer of plaster dust everywhere, and not too much light. The bartender is missing an eye and ten front teeth, and smiles frequently. The booze is cheap; they make most of their money upstairs, and like to have lots of customers in the bar, for camouflage.

I sat down at the bar and the bartender polished glasses while one of the whores, a pretty boy-girl, sidled in for the kill. When I said no she pleaded mechanically, saying she was saving for a real pair of tits and the Operation. I hesitated—I string for the Bad News wire service sometimes, and they like sexy pathos—but turned her down more finally. Bad News doesn't pay that well.

When she left the bartender came over and I ordered a Myers's with a beer chaser, suitable hard-core combination. I'd taken two Flame-outs before I came, though, so I could drink a dozen or so without too ill effect. Until morning.

"Little early in the day for that, isn't it?" The man next to me chuckled hoarsely. "Not to criticize." He was nursing a double bourbon or scotch, neat.

"Dusty," I said. The man was dressed a little more neatly than I, in faded work clothes. He looked too old to be a laborer, shock of white hair with a yellowish cast. But he did have the deep tan and permanent squint of one who's spent decades in the Florida sun. I tossed back the jigger of rum and sipped the beer. "Come here often?"

"Pretty often," he said. "When my check comes in I put a few bucks on a number. Otherwise . . ." He shrugged. "Cheap whiskey and pretty women. To look at."

ABBYY PDF Transformer 2.0 Click here to buy www.ABBYY.com

"How many of them do you think are women?"

"Just looking, who cares?" He squinted even more, examining me. "Could I see your palms?"

Oh, boy, I thought, a fortuneteller. Might be a story if he actually believes in it. I held out my hands.

He glanced at them and stared at my face. "Yeah, I could tell by the eyes," he said softly. "You're no alcoholic. You're not as old as you look, either. Cop?"

"No. Used to be a teacher." Which was true. "Every now and then I go on these binges."

He nodded slowly. "Used to be a teacher, too. Until '83. Then I worked the sponge boats twenty years." When he picked up his glass, his hand had the regular slow shake of a confirmed alky. "It was good work."

I reached in my pocket and turned on the tape recorder. "Why was it you stopped teaching? Booze?"

"No . . . who drank in the eighties?" I didn't, but I wasn't old enough. "It's an interesting sort of pancake. You want to hear a story?"

"Sure." I signaled the bartender for two drinks.

"Now, you don't have to buy me anything. You won't believe the story, anyhow."

"Try me."

"You a social worker? Undercover social worker?" He smiled wryly.

"Is there such a thing?"

"Should be. I know. You're a writer."

"When I get work, yeah. How could you tell, Sherlock?"

"You've got two pens in your pocket and you want to hear a story." He smiled. "Steal a story, maybe. But you'll never get it published. It's too fantastic."

"But true."

"It's true, all right. Thank you kindly." He touched his new drink to see whether it was real, then drained off the old one in one gulp and sighed.

"My name's Bill Caddis. Doctor William Caddis, it used to be."

"Medical doctor?"

"I detect a note of reproof. As if no medico ever—well. No, I was an academic, newly tenured at Florida State. History department. Modern American history."

"Hard to get a job then as it is now?"

"Just about. I was a real whiz."

"But you got fired in '83."

"That's right. And it's not easy to fire a tenured professor."

"What, boffing the little girls?"

That was the only time he laughed that day, a kind of wheeze. "Undergraduates were made for boffing. No, I was dismissed on grounds of mental instability; with my wife's help, my then wife, they almost had me institutionalized."

"Strong stuff."

"Strong." He stared into his drink and swirled it around. "I never know how to start this. I've told dozens of people and they all think I'm crazy before I get halfway into it. You'll think I'm crazy too."

"Just jump in feet first. Like you say, I'm a writer. I can believe in six impossible things before my first drink in the morning."

"All right. I'm not from ... here."

A loony, I thought; there goes the price of a double. "Another planet," I said seriously.

"See? Now you want me to say something about UFOs and how I'm bringing the secret of eternal peace to mankind." He raised the glass to me. "Thanks for the drink."

I caught his arm before he could slug it down. "Wait. I'm sorry. Go on."

"Am I wrong?"

"You're right, but go on. You don't *act* crazy."

He set the drink down. "Layman's error. Some of the most reasonable people you meet are strictly Almond Joy."

"If you're not from `here,' where are you from?"

"Miami." He smiled and took a sip. "I'm a time traveler. I'm from a future."

I just nodded.

"That usually takes some explaining. There's no `the' future. There's a myriad of futures radiating from every instant. If I were to drop this glass on the floor, and it broke, we would shift into a future where this bar owned one less glass."

"And the futures where the glass wasn't broken ..."

"They would be. And we would be in them; we are now."

"Doesn't it get sort of crowded up there? Billions of new futures every second?"

"You can't crowd infinity."

I was trying to think of an angle, a goofball feature. "How does this time travel work?"

"How the hell should I know? I'm just a tourist. It has something to do with chronons. Temporal Uncertainty Principle. Conservation of coincidence. I'm no engineer."

"Are there lots of these tourists?"

"Probably not, here and now. You get quite a crowd clustered around historically important events. You can't see them, of course."

"I can see you."

He shrugged. "Something went wrong. Power failure or something; someone tripped over a cable. Happens."

"They didn't try to come back and rescue you?"

"How could they? There are lots of futures but only one past. Once I materialized *here,* I wasn't in my own past anymore. See?" "So you can kill your own grandfather," I said.

"Why would I want to do that? He's a nice old bird."

"No, I mean, there's no paradox involved? If you killed him before you were born, you wouldn't cease to exist?"

"Of course not. I'd have to be there to kill him." He sipped. "For that matter, I could go back and kill myself, as a boy. If I could afford it. Travel gets more expensive, the closer you get to the present. Like compressing an infinitely tough spring."

"Hold it." I had him. "I'll buy another round if you can talk your way out of this one. The Earth is moving all the time, spinning around, going around the Sun; the Sun's moving through space. How the hell do you *aim* this time machine?"

He bleared at me. "Don't they teach you anything about relativity? Look, if you get up from the bar, go to the john, and come back in a couple of minutes—the bar's moved thousands of miles. But it's still here. You're on the same track, that's all."

"But I'm talking about time and you're talking about *space!"*

"There's a difference?" He drained his glass and slid it toward me with one finger.

I decided I'd stay long enough to find out what his con was. Maybe do a one-pager for a crime magazine. I ordered him another double. "You folks from the future can sure hold your liquor."

"Couple of centuries of medicine," he said. "I'm ninety-two years old." He looked about seventy.

Looked like I was going to have to push him for the gaff. "Seems to me you could be a millionaire. Knowing where to invest . . ."

"It's not that easy. I tried. I should have left well enough alone." His drink came and he stuck his fingertip in it; flicked a drop away. "I'm sort of a Moslem," he said. "Not supposed to drink a drop of liquor.

"People try it all the time; there's no law against it. But put yourself in this position: you're going to deliberately strand yourself two hundred years in the past. What do you do for capital? Buy old money from collectors?"

ABBYY PDF Transformer 2.0 Click here to buy www.ABBYY.com

"You could take gold and diamonds."

"Sure. But if you can afford that—and time travel isn't cheap either—why not invest it in your own present? Remember, once you materialize, you aren't in your own past anymore. You can never tell what might have changed. People do try it, though. Usually they take gadgets."

"Does it work?"

"Who knows? They can't come back to tell about it."

"Couldn't they build their own time machine, go back to the future?"

"Aren't you hearing me? There's no such thing as *the* future. Even if you could travel forward, there's no way you could find the right one."

Somebody came into the bar; I waited until the door eased shut, muting the traffic noise. "So what happened to you? You made some bad investments?"

"In spades. Seemed like a sure thing.

"Let me explain. Where I come from, almost nobody lives on Earth, just caretakers and the time travel people. It's like a big park, a big museum. Most of us live in orbital settlements, some on other planets.

"I really was a history professor, specializing in the history of technology. I saved up my money to go back and see the first flight to the Moon."

"That was in '70?"

"No, '69. It was during the launch when the accident happened. Nobody noticed me materializing; I didn't even notice until I tried to walk through someone afterward.

"Fortunately, that was a time when everybody dressed as they damn well pleased, so my clothes didn't look especially outrageous. I bummed my way down to Homestead and picked up some work sorting tomatoes, that kind of thing. Saved up enough to get fake IDs made up, eventually went back to school and wound up teaching again. Married along the way."

"The one who tried to put you in the peanut jar."

"That's right. Here's what happened. If there was one sure thing to invest in, it was space. My wife didn't agree, but there was no way I could tell her why I was so sure.

"I went ahead and invested heavily in space industries—really heavily, buying on margin, wheeling, dealing—but my wife thought it was all going into a conservative portfolio of municipals. I even snitched some stationery from our accountant and wrote up annual reports to show her."

"I think I see what's coming." Not a bad story.

"Yeah. The Soviet-American Orbital Nonproliferation Treaty, the goddamned Proxmire Bill."

"Well, killer satellites ..."

"That's the kicker. That's really the kicker. In *my* future's past, it was the

ABBYY PDF Transformer 2.0 Click here to buy www.ABBYY.com

killer satellites that ended the possibility of nuclear war forever! They finally scrapped the missiles and settled down to shouting across tables."

"Well, you can't think we're in any danger of nuclear war now. Not realistically."

"Yeah. I liked our way better. Anyway, the bottom dropped out. I had to tell my wife that we were broke and in debt; I had to tell her everything. I thought I knew her. I thought she would believe. The rest is pretty obvious."

"Sponge boats."

"Right." He took a long drink and stared moodily into the cloudy mirror behind the bar.

"That's it?" No scam?

"That's it. Write it up. You'll never sell it."

I checked my watch. Could just make the 1:35 to Atlanta, get in a half day at the typewriter. "Well, I gotta run. Thanks for the story, Bill."

I stood up and put my hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy on the sauce, okay? You're no spring chicken anymore." "Sure." He never looked at me.

On the way to the subway terminal it occurred to me that I shouldn't try to sell the thing as a human-interest feature. Just write it up as fiction and I could hawk it to *Planet Stories* or one of those rags.

The ticket machine gave me an argument about changing a hundred-ruble note and I had to go find a conductor. Then there were repairs going on and it took us twenty minutes to get to Atlanta; I had to sprint to make my Seattle connection.

Space settlements. Time travel. Nobody would swallow that kind of bull, not in 1924.