

## The Futures Market

Patersen stabbed the cigarette out in the heavy glass ashtray on the table, the walnut surface stained with milky wet rings from the damp glass on the waxed wood finish.

“I can tell you things that you want to know. I don’t expect you to take my word for it. I expect you to test my information before you pay me.” He laughed and wiped his chin.

“What’s so funny, Dr. Patersen?” Mr. Formby sat back, loosened his thin black tie and tugged at the stained collar on his white shirt.

“Sorry. I just can’t get used to smoking in here.”

Formby nodded. Patersen took another cigarette and swept Formby’s lighter off the table. The lighter was heavy, steel, the oily smell of Ronsonol like a bus on a city street corner on a hot July afternoon.

“I’d get arrested for smoking in a government building back where I come from.” He misted up a little saying that, and swore under his breath. “I’ll tell you that much for free. No smoking allowed where I come from. Not in public, anyway.”

“And so where, precisely, do you come from, Dr. Patersen?” Formby asked gently.

“2018. As of a week ago.”

“I don’t quite follow you, Dr. Patersen. ‘2018’ what?”

“I mean that I’m from the year 2018. Sixty-eight years in your future. And I just appeared here, somehow, a week ago. Somehow. I know that sounds crazy. But I can prove it.”

After a barely perceptible pause, Formby nodded at the shabby, trembling figure seated

before him. “I see. I thought you came in to report a crime, an assassination plot against President Truman when he. . . .”

Patersen waved the question aside. “That’s what I told them. Look at me! How else do I get a government agent to listen to me for five minutes?” He rubbed the shabby lapels of his coat, bright with grease. “I’ve been living on the street for a week. I need a bath. I need clean clothes. Food. I want to get off the street. So you figure I just dial up the FBI and say, ‘Hey guys, I’m from the future. I don’t know how I got here, but never mind all that. I’m tired of living on the street. So what do you want to know about the future? I can tell you anything you want to know. I know all about what’s coming up for you. This is the real future’s market.’ ” Patersen laughed, maybe a little too loudly, and wiped at the corner of his mouth, his hand trembling.

Formby nodded vaguely. “This isn’t really my beat, Dr. Patersen. I’m going to call in a colleague.” He rose.

Patersen panicked, cursing the lightheadedness a week on the street had left him. “No, wait . . . please. . . .”

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“2018. I see. Why have you contacted us, Dr. Patersen?”

“I feel like you’re humoring me, Mr. Withers.”

“Humor me, Dr. Patersen.”

Patersen stared. He wished Withers would remove his dark glasses. Formby sat in a chair turned around backwards, chain-smoking Pall Malls.

Still, they hadn’t put him in a straitjacket yet. Withers’ ID said FBI, same as Formby’s. Patersen rolled his glass around in the damp white ring on the table.

“I’m not insane. That’s the first thing. Just give me a chance. You won’t regret it.”

Patersen flipped the ash off the end of his cigarette. “So, what can I tell you about the future?”

“What were you, in 2018? What was your work?”

Patersen stared at the lenses in Withers’ dark glasses. “A man shows up from sixty-eight years in your future, and the first thing you can ask is what he did for a living?”

Withers glanced at Formby, who shrugged. “Well, OK. When did you arrive here? Do you know how you came to be here?”

Patersen scratched at the week-old beard on his neck.

“I got here a week ago. One minute I’m walking down the street, the next minute, the wind shifts, and I look up, and it’s the same street, but . . . but there are no cracks in the sidewalk. And my home isn’t there anymore.

“I’ve been here for a week, waiting to get back, walking that same damned block around and around but I don’t think that I’m going to get to go back now, and I need to make some money, because I’m cold and tired, and I think I know something you guys want to know, but I want to get paid for it. I didn’t ask for this. I want to go home. I got a family! But I don’t think I’m going to get to go home. My wife isn’t even born yet. . . .”

Withers waited until Patersen raised his head from the table, his eyes a smear of wet red. The stenographer leaned patiently in his chair recording every sound, and Patersen wondered a little hysterically what the shorthand glyph for ‘weeping pointlessly and impotently’ looked like.

“I’m not crazy,” he continued at last. “And I can prove it to you. I know what your future’s going to be. This is 1950, right? Korea! Korea’s a big deal right now, right? I can tell you how that’s going to turn out. You can plan for it. And Vietnam—I’ll bet that isn’t even on

your radar, is it? The Vietminh are harassing the French right now, but. . . . And would you like to know when the Soviet Union is going to collapse? I can tell you all this. The government can use what I know. I can use a million dollars. I think that's what it's worth. My life story. The first half of it, anyway. . . . I'm going to have to spend the second half of it living through old newspaper headlines." He sighed heavily. "But I don't have to do it broke, hungry, cold, out on the street."

Withers nodded. "So, there is no assassination attempt on President Truman? That's not a part of your history?"

"I said I had information about a presidential assassination. I didn't say anything about President Truman. 'Course, I wasn't exactly lying. I meant a future president. I just left it vague so I could get in to see you."

"Which president, then?"

"Kennedy. November, '63. In Dallas."

Withers looked steadily at Patersen. "Which Kennedy? Who kills him?"

"John. The war hero. Nobody ever knows who really did it. Does it. Will do it. I mean, they catch a guy. I can tell you who they catch. But there are questions about it that never get answered. Johnson succeeds him."

"Johnson?"

"Lyndon. Senator from Texas. He'll be on Eisenhower's Space Committee. Eisenhower's elected in—I guess it's in 1952? I'm not really sure if Johnson's been elected to the Senate yet or not, but if he hasn't, maybe we could use that as my test."

"Continue."

“Yeah, well, Johnson succeeds Kennedy, gets mired down in Vietnam, big mess, and doesn’t run for re-election in, uh, ‘68. But we’re getting too far ahead for this to be of any use as a test of my authenticity, and I don’t want to give away my whole life for free.”

“Just a few questions more, Dr. Patersen.”

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“We’ll keep you here tonight, Dr. Patersen. You’ll not be sleeping in the parks anymore. Think about what you’d like for dinner. Anything you like. And we’ll send in some clean clothes.”

Patersen meekly followed Withers and Formby down the long hall to the elevator, down three flights and then through a heavy steel door, armed security guards stationed on either side, big fellows, not kids—World War II vets. The wearied part of his mind that was still awake wondered idly what they kept down here that needed such protection.

Formby held the door for him as Patersen entered, head bent low with exhaustion. “Here you are. You’ve got a bed, bath, and if you want anything else, just ask.”

“Maybe later. I’m so tired . . . . So, I get the chance to prove myself?”

“Oh, you have already proved yourself,” Withers said.

Patersen stopped, mouth slightly opened. “I have?”

“Dr. Patersen, during your life, I mean prior to coming here, to 1950, did you ever hear any news or speculation that this sort of thing ever happened? People disappearing like this?”

“In my life? All the time. Alien abductions.” He laughed. “But people just slipping back sixty-eight years? Of course not. Nobody knew this could happen. I sure as hell didn’t know this could happen. Not before last week.”

Withers nodded. “None of you ever does. That’s good.”

Patersen froze in the doorway. Both guards, without turning, shifted their hands to rest on their sidearms.

“It’s an imprecise art, time travel, even in 1950. You aren’t really the sort we like to catch, I’m afraid. We prefer to retrieve single people, but the process doesn’t allow for precision, and I’m afraid occasionally we miss the mark and grab someone like you. I often wonder if we’ve got any better at this by your time. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, I suppose?”

“Still, we can make your life quite pleasant, if you cooperate. There is much that you know about the world to come that we certainly do want to hear. Much indeed. Tomorrow, we’ll move you to a more permanent facility where we keep the rest of our . . . catches.”

Patersen stared silently, and he suddenly wondered about his wife, who would miss him in about sixty-two years, after she was born, grew up, got married to him. . . .

“Rest, Dr. Patersen. We’ll start fresh tomorrow.”

“You did this?” He whispered. “You snatched me here?”

“We did. We have about fifty people from your decade, which is a shame—we probably know as much about your time as we need to, but you never know. One can never know too much, eh?”

Patersen looked at Withers dully. “I want to go home,” he said. “I want to get out of here. You can’t do this.”

Withers smiled. “Of course we can do it. We do it all the time. And evidently we’ve been pretty good at this, because no one that we retrieve has ever heard of our project, and if word got out, I should think it would make quite a stink, eh? But no one ever knows about this.

“Oh, and please don’t think about trying to leave us. You will not escape. Evidently no one ever does.” Withers turned away, speaking over his shoulder. “But of course, you already know that much, don’t you?”