

HEROES OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

HUGH COOK

THE REELING FLICKER OF days slowed, steadied, froze. A quick look around. The time machine was sitting on grass. Beyond the grass: buildings. It was, recognizably, Central Park. Manhattan. With a huge sigh of relief—so far, no nuclear war—Jack Fabrax dismounted, clambering down onto the grass, lugging the heavy suitcase after him. God, what a weight! The time machine flickered and dissolved. It would return in precisely seventy-two hours.

There was a slight risk involved in sending the time machine back to 1962. Conceivably, Kevin Culdaneath would work out what had happened. Conceivably, Kevin would climb aboard the time machine and chase Jack into the year 2003. But Jack wanted to have the option of going back to 1962. In case things didn't work out as expected in this brave new world, the world of the Third Millennium.

Jack was sweating profusely by the time he had manhandled the suitcase to the street. He stood there, watching for a taxi. But did they still have taxis in the Third Millennium? And would his greenbacks be valid currency? He had more than half expected shiny flying machines, the U.S. dollar replaced by the credit or some such thing, and the people to be walking round in fancy aerodynamic robes, or nothing at all.

But, outwardly at least, everything looked amazingly normal. The automobiles were styled differently, but were conceptually similar. And people still wore pants, shirts, shoes. Jack himself was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, a white shirt, a conservative tie, and nobody looked at him twice. A guy in a suit just like his walked by, talking to someone using a two-way radio, a dandy little gadget small enough to fit easily into the palm of your hand.

"Taxi!"

Jack had it all figured out. He would get the taxi to drive him round town. He would chat with the cabby and find out the latest.

The cab driver was a Negro. A really black Negro. Totally black—an amazing blackness which seemed to shimmer into blue. A woman. She had weird scars on her face, patterned scars like a sergeant's chevrons. Someone cut her? Then why didn't she have plastic surgery?

"Empire State Building," said Jack.

"What?"

"Empire State! The building!"

No dice. The Negress asked a couple of questions, but her English was barely intelligible. She had to be drunk. Angrily, Jack got out of the cab, hauled his suitcase out onto the sidewalk, slammed the door. How could anyone possibly not know the Empire State Building? Could it have been demolished? Torn down? Lost to memory? No, impossible.

Three taxis later, Jack finally found a driver who spoke English. Sort of. The cabby was from Afghanistan, wherever the hell that was, and took him along approximately familiar streets—the city’s basic layout was still the same—to the Empire State Building. Outside the building, there were soldiers in strange blotched uniforms who carried weapons which looked strangely light, like children’s toys.

Despite having figured out that inflation would brutalize his meager cash reserves, Jack was shocked by the cab fare. He bought a paper, a copy of the New York Times, meaning to check first the date, second the news, and third the stock market prices. He really wanted to know—and know fast—just what his stock certificates were worth.

The date? Thursday 6 November 2003. The right date, then. The stock market? Well, it still existed. Against all the odds, the world had survived the threat of nuclear war—so far—and the stock market was still in operation. However, Jack could find no listings for his stocks. Okay then, maybe the companies had changed their names. No problem. Work on that later.

How about the news? Well, that was problematical. Sport was sport, that much was the same. Sport was still sport, food was still food, fashion was still fashion and crime was still crime.

But. Apart from that, the news was unintelligibly weird, full of people and places and words and countries he had never heard of. Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, Nelson Mandela, Jason Rance, Argan Vlastavich, Michael Jackson, Madonna and the Artist Formerly Known As Prince—who were these people? And if there was some guy “formerly known” as Prince, why the hell not say who he was now?

And what was HIV? And the Internet? And cyberspace? Ah, this makes sense. Ebola fever—a disease, evidently. Some kind of plague. But—Bangladesh? A place, evidently. A city? A country? And how about this? African American. What’s that? Okay. The woman in the taxi. Straight out of Africa—that would explain that total skin. An American straight out of Africa, an African American.

Then he found an article he did understand. About Germany. Nazis in Germany had demonstrated in Berlin, had fought with the police, had desecrated Jewish graves. Reading this, he went cold. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Germany! Not East Germany or West Germany but just straight Germany.

In that moment of shock, a glimmering of understanding came to him. He had not arrived in the future at all. Instead, he had been precipitated into an alternate universe. In this alternate universe, there had been no Hitler, no Holocaust, and Germany had not been divided into two separate countries. In this alternate universe, the terrors of Fascism belonged not to the past but to the

present.

Not the future, but an alternate universe. That was his thesis, and a second article confirmed it. A dry, boring article about an economic agreement between Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia which was being negotiated in St. Petersburg. Evidently, in this alternate universe the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics did not exist. There had never been a Lenin, so St. Petersburg had not become Leningrad. Presumably, there had never been a Second World War, either.

And, in this alternate universe, his stock certificates were probably useless. The companies—no listings for them on the stock exchange! probably did not even exist. That meant he had no resources but the metal in the suitcase. The realization came as an appalling shock. He had figured it out so nicely. A little jump into the future, just forty-one years, enough time for his enemies to die and for his stocks to fatten up but not enough time for civilization to change out of recognition. But he had got it wrong.

"I need a cigarette," said Jack.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit up. Then, feeling hungry, he walked into an eatery, lugging his suitcase with him.

As he walked into the eatery, all conversation stopped. People looked at him, and stared. Immediately, Jack realized something was wrong. Hideously wrong. He had made some dreadful mistake. He glanced down at his fly, half-convinced everything down there was hanging out in public. But, no, it was all in order. He was a respectable guy in a suit.

His first impulse was to run. But—no! This was America, damn it. He was an American citizen, a citizen of the Free World, and there was no way he was going to be run off by a bunch of people staring at him. Besides, if something was wrong, he had to find out what.

So Jack walked up to the counter. Cleared his throat.

"Hamburger," he said. "Gimme a hamburger. Yeah, and a coffee. Black."

The guy behind the counter turned to his colleague. The two spoke together briefly in a language which was, unmistakably, Russian. Russian! What the hell were a couple of Russians doing serving food here in New York?

"You want ketchup on the burger?"

"Yeah."

Jack paid for his food, took it to a table, went back for the suitcase, then sat down to eat. As he did so, a woman got to her feet. She walked toward him. A very beautiful blonde, immaculately coifed. As she approached, he smelled her perfume. Her eyes were an icy blue. She was an angelic vision of Nordic perfection. Only one thing was wrong. She was not smiling.

"Hi," said Jack, speaking without bothering to remove the cigarette from his lips.

Without a word, the woman reached out. She plucked the cigarette from his lips. Then stubbed it out on his hamburger.

"Hey!" said Jack, half-rising.

Angrily, he grabbed her by the wrist. In response, with her free hand she sprayed him with something from a little aerosol can. He breathed red flame, and his world dissolved into a reeling whirl of agony. It was like when he had dived into that pool, back when he was a kid, and there had been too much chlorine in the water. The same watering pain in his eyes, only worse.

Slowly—choking, gasping, lungs heaving—Jack began to recover. Then one of the countermen approached him.

"Mister," said the counterman, in heavy Russian-accented English. "You better get out. If you come back, I'll call the cops."

"Sure," said Jack, grabbing his suitcase. "Sure. Sure. I'm going."

Out on the street, he put down the suitcase and mopped his sweating brow. This was crazy! Something had gone dreadfully wrong back there but what? He reviewed his own behavior. All utterly, totally normal. And now, out in the street, nobody was taking any notice of him, but for a couple of panhandlers—a hell of a lot of beggars on the street, now he thought about it. His clothing, though it came from 1962, was not significantly different from what conservative business types were wearing here in 2003.

Jack took a good look at those people. A hell of a lot of Asians on the street—tourists? Or what? And a lot of Mexican types, too, some speaking Spanish as they went by. Also: a muttering lunatic, a patently deranged man in rags who was talking to himself pretty loudly, gesticulating as he did so. Nobody called the cops to have the guy taken back to the nuthouse. Instead, everyone ignored the mad muttering lunatic, as if a dementing lunatic standing on the sidewalk in broad daylight in the middle of New York was the most natural thing in the world.

Some weird sights, then. But. There were still guys who looked just like Jack Fabrax. White guys in suits. Yet, somehow, the locals had picked him as abnormal, aberrant in a truly intolerable way. Why.* The only thing he could think of...maybe they thought he was queer. Yeah. That was possible. Maybe, in this brave new world, only sexually abnormal people wore business suits. That thought made Jack truly uncomfortable. He wished there was someone he could ask, someone who could explain it all to him.

But—time enough to figure it out later. Right now: business. Money was a priority. The suitcase was full of gold, and now it was time to start changing that gold to cash. Then he could start looking for information. And, if necessary, for a new set of clothes.

Inside of half an hour—phone, phone book, taxi—Jack found his way to a pawn shop. Showed just one gold wedding ring.

”You got some ID?”

A routine question. Low key, bored. But it riveted him.

Shocked him rigid.

”Yeah, yeah...hang on...must’ve left it in the car “

And he backed out. Still reeling. Identity—he’d never even thought of the problem. Why not? Because it was totally insoluble.

Outside, a guy was hanging around, muttering stuff to passersby. Strange stuff.

”You want jash, amies, soft? You want jubes, man?”

Desperate enough to chance anything, Jack moved closer. He wanted to kind of inconspicuously drift closer, but that was impossible because of the weight of the suitcase. It was killing him. He was one red mass of flushed sweat.

”What you want, man?”

”What’ve you got?” said Jack, cautiously.

”Anything, man.”

”How about a gun?” said Jack, too nervous to ask for what he really wanted.

”Sure, man. Get you a Glock, get you anything.”

A Glock? Might be anything. A Third Millennium ray gun. A death ray super-blaster. Annihilate a tank at half a mile with its zap-ray. The alien name carried with it the authentic thrill of the new. But, no, he didn’t really want a gun, not right now.

”Come on, man. What you want?”

”ID,” said Jack, unable to conceal his nervousness.

”Five hundred bucks. Get you a green card, driver’s license, social security number.”

”Five hundred!” he said. His shock was genuine, unconcealable. Five hundred would clean him out. Hard on the heels of shock came anger. “Five hundred! You gotta be kidding!”

”Okay, okay! Chill, man, chill!”

They settled on \$250. Maybe too high—Jack got the impression he was getting the wrong end of the bargain. And he did not like, no, not one little bit, the visit to the grimy back room where they took his photo and produced the documents. But. He got out alive. Complete with ID. And the ID he had purchased was good enough, at least for the pawnbroker.

Five pawn shops later—slow and cautious does it—Jack was feeling better. All going to plan. He had done it. He had worked his big swindle back in 1962 and he had got away clean, escaping in the mad professor's time machine. Okay, so maybe his stock certificates were useless—if the newspaper stock market listings could be trusted, the tobacco companies in which he had so astutely invested simply did not exist in this alternate universe. But gold was still gold, money was still money, money could evidently buy anything, and he was going to be rich enough to start over.

Only problem now—he was right out of cigarettes. But, okay, there was a barber shop just across the road. Jack crossed the street, went inside. Looked for the cigarettes. And saw them, okay. Gray pasteboard packets with no brand names. Just the bare unadorned label CIGARETTES in black and a message in red saying THESE THINGS KILL YOU.

"Two packets," said Jack, gesturing.

"See your paper?"

"What?"

"You know. Your paper."

"No," said Jack. "I don't understand. I just want some cigarettes, okay?"

"Okay, you want the cigarettes, I need to see your paper."

"My what?"

"Your paper, man! Your prescription!"

"Prescription?" said Jack, bewildered.

"You are a registered addict, right? Right? Hey, you—I'm talking to you! You an addict, or what? You a cop?"

"No," said Jack. "I'm not a cop."

"Then get outta here. You don't get out, I'm calling the cops, right now."

Back on the sidewalk, Jack started to figure it out. In this alternate universe, smoking was quasi-illegal. Or was it? He wavered between belief and disbelief. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. Maybe there was just something weird about that particular barber shop, that particular guy.

”Face facts,” said Jack. “You just don’t know.”

Okay, then. It was time to do some serious research. Go to the library—that was it. In this alternate universe, the Empire State Building was in the same place, so the library should be in the same place too.

Only—it wasn’t.

Well. The steps were there. And the lions. But the rest of it was a bomb crater, roped off with yellow plastic tape. Jack stood there staring, stunned.

”What you looking at?”

Realizing his mouth was open, Jack closed it. Blinked. Focused on the stranger who had addressed him. A girl. Well, sort of. Pretty weird-looking girl. A blonde with a bunch of rings in her nose and a ring through her eyebrow and a semi-pornographic tattoo of a big-breasted mermaid writhing up the side of her neck.

”Hi,” said Jack, weakly.

”Yeah,” she said. “Hi.”

Then she laughed, as if he had said something outrageously funny, and stuck out her tongue at him. With shock, Jack saw there was cold white metal riveted right through her tongue. Sick, sick, sick! Really psycho stuff! A pretty girl, and she had stuck something right through her tongue.

Then something clicked. Suddenly, Jack understood. The dementing lunatic he had seen talking—almost shouting—on the street. The incomprehensible, disoriented cab drivers, who scarcely seemed to know Broadway from Fifth Avenue. The insane Nordic woman with the staring blue eyes who had stubbed out his cigarette on his hamburger. The guy at the barber shop who—bizarrely—had demanded a prescription when he asked to buy cigarettes.

It all made sense. All the data hung together. Given one simple insight—given one simple thesis—Jack was suddenly able to organize a thousand different pieces of data into one simple, internally consistent picture. Now he had a simple Explanation of Everything. New York had been converted into one big lunatic asylum. Obviously.

”Ah,” said Jack.

Ah. Eureka. I have it. Now I understand! That was why nobody had called the cops to take away the dementing lunatic. The guy did not have to be taken to the asylum because he was already in the asylum, together with the madwoman with the staring eyes who had tried to gas Jack with her Third Millennium aerosol weapon—his eyes were still sore and smarting—and this psycho kid with the mutilated tongue. That, doubtlessly, explained why armed soldiers were guarding the Empire State Building. The building was, presumably, the administrative headquarters of the lunatic asylum—a place to which the inmates were

forbidden access.

"Want some cancer?" said the girl.

"Some what?" said Jack.

"You smoke."

"I do?"

"Your hands. Your teeth."

Jack's fingers were, in a way which was not uncommon in 1962, stained with nicotine. His teeth likewise.

"You selling cigarettes?" said Jack.

"Twenty bucks. One packet."

Even allowing for inflation, that was an incredible price.

But Jack was down to his last cigarette.

"Deal," he said, producing a twenty.

In response, the girl dipped her hand into her crotch --

Her crotch!

Jack reeled. She was wearing a man's jeans. Yes. He was not hallucinating it. A man's jeans, with the zip going right up the front, following the line of her, her--

The twenty was gone, snatched away, and the cigarettes were in Jack's hand. He dropped them. He felt sick. A pretty girl, and she was dressed in this sick, totally obscene lesbian fashion. And Jack had a clear contrasting vision of his lost sweetheart, the adorable Amy Zebrolooda, whose pants had little zips on the side, little zips which, consonant with feminine modesty, made no obvious reference to her, her --

"You don't want them?"

The girl stooped, reached down for the cigarettes. Jack stepped on them, keeping them safe. Despite their provenance, he was going to keep them. He needed his nicotine.

"Okay then," said the girl,

And she was gone, retreating down the street. After fifty yards, she turned, and made a rude sign. Yes. More evidence. He was trapped in a lunatic asylum, that was for sure.

"Spare me one?"

A man's voice. Who?

Turning, Jack saw a bearded man who looked as if he was dressed for a hunting trip.

"Sure," said Jack, relieved by the normality of the encounter, the normality of someone trying to bum a cigarette off him.

Jack opened the packet and the stranger took a cigarette. Jack lit it for him with his gold lighter.

"You're a brave man," said the bearded guy.

"It's a free country," said Jack.

"Is it?"

"Well," said Jack, considering. "It should be."

"Yeah," said the bearded guy.

"You hunt?" said Jack.

"Sure thing," said the bearded guy.

"Me too," said Jack, establishing common social ground, disowning his charcoal gray suit. "Sarnac Lakes, ever heard of them?"

"Sure," said the bearded guy. "Up near Mt. Marcy."

Jack got the impression that he had bridged the sartorial gap which separated them. They had established common ground. They were both hunters, woodsmen, smokers of tobacco.

"So," said Jack, gesturing at the bombed-out ruins of the library, "when did this happen?"

"Where you from?" said the bearded man.

"Me?" said Jack. He wavered, poised on the edge of fiction. Then decided to risk the truth. He needed to find out what was going on in this alternate universe. And fast. "I'm...I'm from the past. Kind of. An alternate universe. I'm from 1962."

"That so?"

"Yeah. I, uh...came in a time machine."

"Aliens help you?"

"Aliens?" said Jack, startled. "No. There was this guy, Angus Void. Mad professor type. He built this, this...time machine."

"You sure you not with the aliens?"

"I'm sure."

The bearded man looked around, as if checking for hidden observers.

"Name's Vance," he said. "I'm with the militia."

"The militia?" said Jack.

"Not here," said Vance. "You come with me."

They ended up in a place in Brooklyn, where the streets were full of people speaking Russian. Vance explained the site had been carefully chosen—"Last place anyone would look for us." Once they were safe in the hideout, up above a karaoke bar (whatever karaoke was), Jack told his story.

Jack expected resistance. Skepticism. But, to his surprise, Vance accepted the entire story without a single objection, as if time travelers from the past were no big surprise. Vance seemed to have B how to put it? -- a special capacity for belief. A special capacity to filter information and, automatically, to know what was true and what was not.

With relief—just to confess was a relief, and to confess and be believed was a double relief—Jack told everything. How he fell in love with Amy Zebrolooda, the mad professor's beautiful female assistant. How he lost Amy to Kevin Culdaneath, his slick and very rich rival. How he took revenge by conning Kevin, swindling him out of millions. The bulk of the money went into tobacco stocks, and some he converted to gold. Then he stole the professor's time machine and fled into the future.

"Or so I thought," said Jack. "But something's out of whack. This place is strange beyond comprehension, I need someone to explain, I need to know what's going on."

"Okay then," said Vance. "You've come to the right guy."

Then Vance explained.

In this universe, America was ruled by a totalitarian federal government which had a lock grip on newspapers and television. The government had been infiltrated by space aliens, and was using a much-dreaded fleet of black helicopters to organize mass abductions of unsuspecting citizens. Once the aliens got hold of the citizens, they were subjected to unspeakable medical practices, including torture and brainwashing.

The aliens' long-term strategy was to use the resources of the federal government to break the will of the people to resist, and to take away their weapons—assault rifles, machine guns, flame throwers, shoulder-launched rockets, all confiscated, in outright defiance of the Constitution. Once America's strength had been broken by a combination of brainwashing and disarmament, the alien invasion fleet currently waiting out in the Oort Cloud would land openly, and the conquest would proceed.

At first, Jack found this stuff hard to believe. It was B well, from the perspective of a nice, normal guy from 1962, it was wacky. No other word for it. Like old-fashioned science fiction from back in the 1950s, the 1940s, whenever.

"You don't believe me, huh?" said Vance.

"I didn't say that," said Jack.

"Jack," said Vance, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know what a computer is?"

"Sure," said Jack. "A, a, you know. Adding machine. Well—thinking machine, that's more like it. IBM. In my world, we got this company, IBM."

"Yeah, IBM, okay, we got IBM too. Jack, let me show you something."

Then Vance took Jack into the secret back room and showed him the computer, which was like a TV screen hooked up to a special kind of typewriter.

"You can use this," said Vance. "Over the telephone. Talk to other people. The Internet, that's what we call it. Federal government, they got the newspapers, the TV. But we've got the Internet."

It was a simple concept, and Jack got the hang of it inside of five minutes. The computers talked to each other, and there was no way the federal government could stop it, there were just too many machines, too many telephone lines.

"They got a bunch of new laws," said Vance. "Arrest us, switch us off, shut us down, throw us in jail. But, bottom line is, they can't stop us."

It took another five minutes for Jack to learn how to actually use the Internet. Then Vance gave him a list of Internet addresses and left him to it.

For two days solid, Jack hid out in Brooklyn, chain-smoking black market cigarettes and burrowing deeper and deeper into the revelations of the Internet. Alien landings. Alien spaceships hiding behind comets. Supposed American senators who were actually aliens in disguise. The miracle of recovered memory, which had allowed a defiant human spirit to fight back against the invaders. Recipes for helping you determine if you yourself had actually been an alien at some stage of your personal evolution.

In the closed, claustrophobic confines of the hideout, the constant reiteration of the hideous truth was overwhelming. It was all there. Anatomical drawings of

aliens. Diagrams of alien space ships. Recordings, covertly made, of interrogations in which aliens grilled captured citizens. The secret plans used to brief the crews of the black helicopters. The federal government's protocols for the planned establishment of the concentration camps. The secret Russian bases, complete with Russian tanks, which had already been built on American soil with the connivance of the American government.

The vision of New York as one big lunatic asylum had already been forgotten. Instead, Jack was in the grip of a much more persuasive, much better documented Explanation of Everything. An essentially simple, internally consistent picture which gave him a hard grip on the confused, fragmented and at times totally bizarre reality he had encountered on the streets.

Overwhelmed by the impact of the Internet, Jack forgot all about checking out the history of tobacco stocks or inquiring into the rise of the Nazis in Germany. His attention was entirely given over to the authoritative, immaculately presented, intensely detailed accounts of horror brought to him by the Internet.

In the face of this horror, the militias were fighting back. The militias were secret armies consisting of people like Vance. Having begun their campaign of armed resistance by blowing up federal buildings and assassinating federal officials, they were now moving into a new phase of freedom fighting, escalating their campaign by targeting foreign embassies, nuclear power stations, airports, subway trains and prominent public buildings of any description.

"So," said Vance, at last. "What do you think?"

"I'll level with you," said Jack.

"Yeah?"

"It's like this," said Jack, taking a big breath. "I can't handle it. I've got to go back. I'll be in big trouble, but it's better than this."

"Hey," said Vance. "It's your life. I won't stand in your way."

And so, seventy-two hours after his arrival, Jack was standing there on the grass of Central Park, waiting for the time machine to return. Vance was there too, together with a couple of his militia buddies, all three of them equipped with absurdly small cameras with which to film the scene.

On schedule, the time machine shimmered into existence. Only there was something wrong. The machine arrived in a cloud of dust and smoke, and from it there breathed a dreadful stench of burnt hair and roasted flesh. The thing in the driving seat grimaced at Jack, its seared face one mass of burns.

"Jack," said the thing.

It was Kevin. Kevin Culdaneath. Kevin—his rival, the man who had stolen Amy's heart.

”Kevin,” said Jack. “What happened?”

”They nuked us,” said Kevin. “Nuclear war, Jack. Nuclear war.”

And then he said no more, because he was dead. In the ensuing silence, Jack heard crackling flames, and realized the time machine was well alight. It was burning. No way to put out the flames. No way to build another one. The designer of the time machine, Angus Void, was undoubtedly dead.

Back in the world which Jack had come from, the world of 1969., the conflict between the monolithic tyranny of the Soviet bloc and the Free World had proceeded to its inevitable conclusion: a nuclear exchange which must, surely, have reduced the world to ruin. And Jack was stuck here, forever, stuck in an alternate universe in which New York had been taken over by people from Russia, Mexico, and the heart of Africa, in which space aliens had subverted the Constitution of the United States of America and a tyrannous federal government had set out to crush the rights of the people, making cigarette smokers into abhorred criminals and forcing free speech to retreat to the Internet.

”Hey!” said a cop, arriving at the run. “What happened?”

”No idea,” said Vance. “We just got here.”

”Get anything on video?” said the cop, glancing at the little cameras.

”No,” said Vance. “We were too late.”

Then, as a growing crowd began to gather, Vance and his buddies discreetly retreated, taking Jack with them.

”Well?” said Vance. “What you want to do?”

It was an easy question to answer. Back in the world Jack had come from, the lost world of 1962, the Free World had been prepared to risk nuclear war to defy the Soviet Union. In this alternate universe—freedom, free speech, Constitutional rights were surely still worth fighting for. To Jack, his destiny was plain. It was to join the militia: the heroes of the Third Millennium.

”Me?” said Jack. “I’m with you.”

And they took it from there.