

PLUS Ca CHANGE .

Isaac Asimov used to say that when his father was born, man had not yet left the surface of the Earth in powered flight; when he died there were footprints on the Moon and color video cameras halfway to Saturn. Progress has certainly been progressing, and perhaps you agree with the cat who, after making love to a skunk, said, "I reckon I've enjoyed about as much of this as I can stand."

For some time now, it has been getting harder to dream a dream that isn't apt to up and come true on you, forcing you to live with all its new complications and implications, which once could have been safely left for your grandchildren to worry about.

If you worry that accelerating future shock may make you a Stranger in a Strange Land, allow me to reassure you. Let me tell you about the familiar, bedrock universals that will carry over into any world of tomorrow, reminding you of the world you know now. Every so-called "law of nature" is vulnerable to new and better observations, save one.

I'll bet cash on it: Murphy's Law will outlive thee and me.

If tickets become available in your lifetime for regular passenger service to Luna, or Neptune, or even Alpha Centauri, you can reliably expect that the seats will be too cramped for an Ewok, the in-trajectory movie will be one you have already seen and hated, the food will be tasteless and toxic, and the coffee will qualify as an industrial solvent. The flight you wanted will be overbooked, and you'll never see your luggage again.

Similarly, if vacation paradises are built in orbit during your lifetime, you will find them full of the wrong kind of people, infested with *tour-ists* rather than thoughtful travelers like yourself. Everything will be mercilessly overpriced, including air. If your hotel is in "luxurious free fall," you will need bellhops not only to handle your luggage, but to handle *you*; they and all resort employees will customarily be found floating a few feet distant, one hand drifting your way, palm upward—relative to you. (Be *certain* to tip the air steward adequately.) The plumbing will be indescribably barbaric, and give you at least one disease unknown to your doctor at home. The promised "romantic spacewalk" will consist of fifteen minutes in something very like a coffin with arms, with plumbing that makes the stuff inboard look good. Half the photos you snap will be spoiled when you forget to keep the Sun out of frame; the rest will be ruined by cosmic rays. The entertainment *will* probably be truly spectacular, but the drinks will cost two weeks' pay apiece, and their essential recipe will be two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen. Upon reentry, you will sprain something, and when you land a horde of sadistic customs inspectors will gleefully insult you, confiscate your souvenirs, subject you to something like a full-body CAT scan with unshielded equipment, stick a hundred needles into you, and fog any surviving film. Then you'll get home to find out that (as Tom Waits said) everything in your refrigerator has turned into a science project, the water was left running in the bathroom, and your next-door neighbors had a *much* better time at the Luna City Hilton for half the money.

When it becomes possible for you to buy an antigravity flight belt, you will find that fresh out of the showroom it requires expensive repair; that the warranty is

worthless, that the resale value plummets with every passing second; that the device wastes immense amounts of precious resources, has inadequate safety features and requires expensive licensing, registration, insurance and inspection rituals every year; that parts are unobtainable; that the roofs are full and there's no place to park; and that Japan makes a better one cheaper.

And presently you'll notice that the sky is full of idiots. The wise will tend to stay indoors ...

When fusion power finally starts to come on-line, its implementation will be delayed by a vocal environmental lobby demanding a return to something safe, clean and natural, like fission.

When you can afford a TV linkup that offers you 245 channels in 3-D with digital stereo sound, there won't be a damn thing worth watching on any of them.

About the time they complete a Unified Field Theory, someone will identify a fifth, impossible force. You'll never be able to understand it. Your teenager will grasp it at once.

Then they perfect a method for keeping people sexually vigorous into their nineties, they will simultaneously extend the lifespan to a hundred and fifty. (And you won't be allowed to retire much before a hundred.)

If intelligence-enhancing drugs are ever perfected, they will for some reason fail to work within the city limits of Ottawa, Ontario, Washington, D.C., or Moscow, Russia. (Note: the same may not be true in Tokyo . . . or Beijing ... or...)

When the whole world is linked together by computer network, and you have a billion terabytes of information available to you, you will not be able to find the little piece of matchbook cover on which you jotted down that essential access code.

Finally—perhaps most ominously—as computers become smarter, as they reach the threshold of human intelligence, it will become possible ... and soon after that, *necessary*—to bribe them.

Myself, I take comfort from one final rock-certainty: No matter what marvels tomorrow rains on us, science fiction writers like me will always manage to dream up something absolutely far-fetched and preposterous for the day *after* tomorrow.