



To the Future, Ray Bradbury

To the Future

The fireworks sizzled across the cool-tiled square, banged against adobe café walls, then rushed on hot wires to bash the high church tower, while a fiery bull ran about the plaza chasing boys and laughing men. It was a spring night in Mexico in the year 1938.

Mr. and Mrs. William Travis stood on the edge of the yelling crowd, smiling. The bull charged. Ducking, the man and wife ran, fire pelting them, past the brass band that pulsed out vast rhythms of La Paloma. The bull passed, a framework of bamboo and gunpowder, carried lightly on the shoulders of a charging Mexican. "I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life," gasped Susan Travis, stopping.

"It's terrific," said William.

"It will go on, won't it? I mean our trip?"

He patted his breast pocket. "I've enough traveler's checks for a lifetime. Enjoy yourself. Forget it. They'll never find us."

"Never?"

Now someone hurled giant firecrackers from the bell tower. The bull was dead. The Mexican lifted its framework from his shoulders. Children clustered to touch the magnificent papier-maché animal. "Let's examine the bull," said William.

As they walked past the café entrance, Susan saw the strange man looking out at them, a white man in a white suit, with a thin, sunburned face. His eyes coldly watched them as they walked.

She would never have noticed him if it had not been for the bottles at his immaculate elbow; a fat bottle of crème de menthe, a clear bottle of vermouth, a flagon of cognac, and seven other bottles of assorted liqueurs, and, at his fingertips, ten small half-filled glasses from which, without taking his eyes off the street, he sipped, occasionally squinting, pressing his thin mouth shut upon the savor. In his free hand a thin

Havana cigar smoked, and on a chair stood twenty cartons of Turkish cigarettes, six boxes of cigars and some packaged colognes.

“Bill—” whispered Susan.

“Take it easy,” William said. “That man’s nobody.”

“I saw him in the plaza this morning.”

“Don’t look back, keep walking, examine the papier-maché bull—here, that’s it, ask questions.”

“Do you think he’s from the Searchers?”

“They couldn’t follow us!”

“They might!”

“What a nice bull,” said William to the man who owned it.

“He couldn’t have followed us back through two hundred years, could he?”

“Watch yourself!” said William.

She swayed. He crushed her elbow tightly, steering her away.

“Don’t faint.” He smiled, to make it look good. “You’ll be all right. Let’s go right in that café, drink in front of him, so if he is what we think he is, he won’t suspect.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“We’ve got to—come on now. And so I said to David, that’s ridiculous!” He spoke this last in a loud voice as they went up the café steps.

We are here, thought Susan. Who are we? Where are we going? What do we fear? Start at the beginning, she told herself, holding to her sanity, as she felt the adobe floor underfoot.

My name is Ann Kristen, my husband’s name is Roger, we were born in the year 2155 A.D. And we lived in a world that was evil. A world that was like a great ship pulling away from the shore of sanity and civilization, roaring its black horn in the night, taking two billion people with it, whether they wanted to go or not, to death, to fall over the edge of the earth and the sea into radioactive flame and madness.

They walked into the café. The man was staring at them. A phone rang.

The phone startled Susan. She remembered a phone ringing two hundred years in the future, on that blue April morning in 2155, and herself answering it:

“Ann, this is René! Have you heard? I mean about Travel In Time, Incorporated? Trips to Rome in 21 A.D., trips to Napoleon’s Waterloo, any time, anyplace!”

“René, you’re joking.”

“No. Clinton Smith left this morning for Philadelphia in 1776. Travel In Time, Inc., arranges everything. Costs money. But think, to actually see the burning of Rome, to see Kublai Khan, Moses and the Red Sea! You’ve probably got an ad in your tube-mail now.”

She had opened the suction mail tube and there was the metal foil advertisement:

ROME AND THE BORGHIAS!

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS AT KITTY HAWK!

Travel In Time, Inc., can costume you, put you in a crowd during the assassination of Lincoln or Caesar! We guarantee to teach you any language you need to move freely in any civilization, in any year, without friction. Latin, Greek, ancient American colloquial. Take your vacation in Time as well as Place!

René’s voice was buzzing on the phone. “Tom and I leave for 1492 tomorrow. They’re arranging for Tom to sail with Columbus—isn’t it amazing?”

“Yes,” murmured Ann, stunned. “What does the government say about this Time Machine Company?”

“Oh, the police have an eye on it. Afraid people might evade the draft, run off and hide in the Past. Everyone has to leave a security bond behind, his house and belongings, to guarantee return. After all, the war’s on.”

“Yes, the war,” murmured Ann. “The war.”

Standing there, holding the phone, she had thought: Here is the chance my husband and I have talked and prayed over for so many years. We

don't like the world of 2155. We want to run away from his work at the bomb factory—from any position with disease-culture units. Perhaps there is some chance for us, to escape, to run for centuries into a wild country of years where they will never find us and bring us back to burn our books, censor our thoughts, scald our minds with fear, march us, scream at us with radios...

The phone rang.

They were in Mexico in the year 1938.

She looked at the stained café wall.

Good workers for the Future State were allowed vacations into the Past to escape fatigue. And so she and her husband had moved back into 1938. They took a room in New York City, and enjoyed the theaters and the Statue of Liberty which still stood green in the harbor. And on the third day, they had changed their clothes and their names, and flown off to hide in Mexico.

"It must be him," whispered Susan, looking at the stranger seated at the table. "Those cigarettes, the cigars, the liquor. They give him away. Remember our first night in the Past?"

A month ago, on their first night in New York, before their flight, they had tasted all the strange drinks, bought odd foods, perfumes, cigarettes of ten dozen rare brands, for they were scarce in the Future, where war was everything. So they had made fools of themselves, rushing in and out of stores, salons, tobacconists, going up to their room to get wonderfully ill.

And now here was this stranger, doing likewise, doing a thing that only a man from the Future would do, who had been starved for liquors and cigarettes too many years.

Susan and William sat and ordered a drink.

The stranger was examining their clothes, their hair, their jewelry, the way they walked and sat. "Sit easily," said William under his breath.

"Look as if you've worn this clothing style all your life."

"We should never have tried to escape."

"My God," said William. "He's coming over. Let me do the talking."

The stranger bowed before them. There was the faintest tap of heels knocking together. Susan stiffened. That military sound—unmistakable as that certain ugly rap on your door at midnight.

“Mr. Kristen,” said the stranger, “you did not pull up your pant legs when you sat down.”

William froze. He looked at his hands lying on either leg, innocently. Susan’s heart was beating swiftly.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” said William, quickly. “My name’s not Krisler.”

“Kristen,” corrected the stranger.

“I’m William Travis,” said William. “And I don’t see what my pant legs have to do with you.”

“Sorry.” The stranger pulled up a chair. “Let us say I thought I knew you because you did not pull your trousers up. Everyone does. If they don’t the trousers bag quickly. I am a long way from home, Mr.—Travis—and in need of company. My name is Simms.”

“Mr. Simms, we appreciate your loneliness, but we’re tired. We’re leaving for Acapulco tomorrow.”

“A charming spot. I was just there, looking for some friends of mine. They are somewhere. I shall find them yet. Oh, is the lady a bit sick?”

“Good night, Mr. Simms.”

They started out the door, William holding Susan’s arm firmly. They did not look back when Mr. Simms called, “Oh, just one other thing.” He paused and then slowly spoke the words:

“Twenty-one fifty-five A.D.”

Susan shut her eyes and felt the earth falter under her. She kept going, into the fiery plaza, seeing nothing...

THEY LOCKED THE DOOR of their hotel room. And then she was crying and they were standing in the dark, and the room tilted under them. Far away, firecrackers exploded, there was laughter in the plaza.

“What a damned, loud nerve,” said William. “Him sitting there, looking us up and down like animals, smoking his damn cigarettes, drinking his drinks. I should have killed him then!” His voice was nearly hysterical. “He even had the nerve to use his real name to us. The Chief of the Searchers. And the thing about my pant legs. I should have pulled them up when I sat. It’s an automatic gesture of this day and age. When I didn’t do it, it set me off from the others. It made him think: Here’s a man who never wore pants, a man used to breech-uniforms and future styles. I could kill myself for giving us away!”

“No, no, it was my walk, these high heels, that did it. Our haircuts, so new, so fresh. Everything about us odd and uneasy.” William turned on the light. “He’s still testing us. He’s not positive of us, not completely. We can’t run out on him, then. We can’t make him certain. We’ll go to Acapulco, leisurely.” “Maybe he is sure of us, but is just playing.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s got all the time in the world. He can dally here if he wants, and bring us back to the Future sixty seconds after we left it. He might keep us wondering for days, laughing at us.”

Susan sat on the bed, wiping the tears from her face, smelling the old smell of charcoal and incense.

“They won’t make a scene, will they?”

“They won’t dare. They’ll have to get us alone to put us in the Time Machine and send us back.”

“There’s a solution then,” she said. “We’ll never be alone, we’ll always be in crowds.”

Footsteps sounded outside their locked door.

They turned out the light and undressed in silence. The footsteps went away.

Susan stood by the window looking down at the plaza in the darkness.

“So that building there is a church?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve often wondered what a church looked like. It’s been so long since anyone saw one. Can we visit it tomorrow?”

“Of course. Come to bed.”

They lay in the dark room.

Half an hour later, their phone rang. She lifted the receiver.

“Hello?”

“The rabbits may hide in the forest,” said a voice, “but a fox can always find them.”

She replaced the receiver and lay back straight and cold in the bed.

Outside, in the year 1938, a man played three tunes upon a guitar, one following another ...

During the night, she put her hand out and almost touched the year 2155. She felt her fingers slide over cool spaces of time, as over a corrugated surface, and she heard the insistent thump of marching feet, a million bands playing a million military tunes. She saw the fifty thousand rows of disease-culture in their aseptic glass tubes, her hand reaching out to them at her work in that huge factory in the future. She saw the tubes of leprosy, bubonic, typhoid, tuberculosis.

She heard the great explosion and saw her hand burned to a wrinkled plum, felt it recoil from a concussion so immense that the world was lifted and let fall, and all the buildings broke and people hemorrhaged and lay silent. Great volcanoes, machines, winds, avalanches slid down to silence and she awoke, sobbing, in the bed, in Mexico, many years away...

In the early morning, drugged with the single hour's sleep they had finally been able to obtain, they awoke to the sound of loud automobiles in the street. Susan peered down from the iron balcony at a small crowd of eight people only now emerging, chattering, yelling, from trucks and cars with red lettering on them. A crowd of Mexicans had followed the trucks.

“Qué pasa?” Susan called to a little boy.

The boy replied.

Susan turned back to her husband.

“An American motion picture company, here on location.”

“Sounds interesting.” William was in the shower. “Let’s watch them. I don’t think we’d better leave today. We’ll try to lull Simms.”

For a moment, in the bright sun, she had forgotten that somewhere in the hotel, waiting, was a man smoking a thousand cigarettes, it seemed. She saw the eight loud, happy Americans below and wanted to call to them: “Save me, hide me, help me! I’m from the year 2155!”

But the words stayed in her throat. The functionaries of Travel In Time, Inc., were not foolish. In your brain, before you left on your trip, they placed a psychological block. You could tell no one your true time or birthplace, nor could you reveal any of the future to those in the past.

The past and the future must be protected from each other. Only with this hindrance were people allowed to travel unguarded through the ages. The future must be protected from any change brought about by her people traveling in the past. Even if Susan wanted to with all of her heart, she could not tell any of those happy people below in the plaza who she was, or what her predicament had become.

“What about breakfast?” said William.

BREAKFAST WAS BEING SERVED in the immense dining room. Ham and eggs for everyone. The place was full of tourists. The film people entered, all eight of them, six men and two women, giggling, shoving chairs about.

And Susan sat near them feeling the warmth and protection they offered, even when Mr. Simms came down the lobby stairs, smoking his Turkish cigarette with great intensity. He nodded at them from a distance, and Susan nodded back, smiling because he couldn’t do anything to them here, in front of eight film people and twenty other tourists.

“Those actors,” said William, “Perhaps I could hire two of them, say it was a joke, dress them in our clothes, have them drive off in our car, when Simms is in such a spot where he can’t see their faces. If two

people pretending to be us could lure him off for a few hours, we might make it to Mexico City. It'd take years to find us there!"

"Hey!"

A fat man, with liquor on his breath, leaned on their table.

"American tourists!" he cried. "I'm so sick of seeing Mexicans, I could kiss you!" He shook their hands. "Come on, eat with us. Misery loves company. I'm Misery, this is Miss Gloom, and Mr. and Mrs. Do-We-Hate-Mexico! We all hate it. But we're here for some preliminary shots for a damn film. The rest of the crew arrives tomorrow. My name's Joe Melton, I'm a director and if this ain't a hell of a country—funerals in the streets, people dying—come on, move over, join the party, cheer us up!"

Susan and William were both laughing.

"Am I funny?" Mr. Melton asked the immediate world.

"Wonderful!" Susan moved over.

Mr. Simms was glaring across the dining room at them.

She made a face at him.

Mr. Simms advanced among the tables.

"Mr. and Mrs. Travis!" he called. "I thought we were breakfasting together, alone?"

"Sorry," said William.

"Sit down, pal," said Mr. Melton. "Any friend of theirs is a pal of mine."

Mr. Simms sat. The film people talked loudly and while they talked, Mr. Simms said quietly, "I hope you slept well."

"Did you?"

"I'm not used to spring mattresses," replied Mr. Simms, wryly. "But there are compensations. I stayed up half the night trying new cigarettes and foods. Odd, fascinating. A whole new spectrum of sensation, these ancient vices."

"We don't know what you're talking about," said Susan.

Simms laughed. “Always the play acting. It’s no use. Nor is this stratagem of crowds. I’ll get you alone soon enough. I’m immensely patient.”

“Say,” Mr. Melton broke in, “is this guy giving you any trouble?”

“It’s all right.”

“Say the word and I’ll give him the bum’s rush.”

Melton turned back to yell at his associates. In the laughter, Mr. Simms went on: “Let us come to the point. It took me a month of tracing you through towns and cities to find you, and all of yesterday to be sure of you. If you come with me quietly, I might be able to get you off with no punishment—if you agree to go back to work on the Hydrogen-Plus bomb.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Stop it!” cried Simms, irritably. “Use your intelligence! You know we can’t let you get away with this escape. Other people in the year 2155 might get the same idea and do the same. We need people.”

“To fight your wars,” said William.

“Bill!”

“It’s all right, Susan. We’ll talk on his terms now. We can’t escape.”

“Excellent,” said Simms. “Really, you’ve both been incredibly romantic, running away from your responsibilities.”

“Running away from horror.”

“Nonsense. Only a war.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Mr. Melton. Susan wanted to tell him. But you could only speak in generalities. The psychological block in your mind allowed that. Generalities, such as Simms and William were now discussing.

“Only the war,” said William. “Half the world dead of leprosy bombs!”

“Nevertheless,” Simms pointed out, “the inhabitants of the Future resent you two hiding on a tropical isle, as it were, while they drop off the cliff into hell. Death loves death, not life. Dying people love to know that others die with them; it is a comfort to learn you are not alone in

the kiln, in the grave. I am the guardian of their collective resentment against you two.”

“Look at the guardian of resentments!” said Mr. Melton to his companions.

“The longer you keep me waiting, the harder it will go for you. We need you on the bomb project, Mr. Travis. Return now—no torture. Later, we’ll force you to work and after you’ve finished the bomb, we’ll try a number of complicated new devices on you, sir.”

“I’ve got a proposition,” said William. “I’ll come back with you, if my wife stays here alive, safe, away from that war.”

Mr. Simms debated. “All right. Meet me in the plaza in ten minutes. Pick me up in your car. Drive me to a deserted country spot. I’ll have the Travel Machine pick us up there.”

“Bill!” Susan held his arm tightly.

“Don’t argue.” He looked over at her. “It’s settled.” To Simms: “One thing. Last night, you could have got in our room and kidnapped us. Why didn’t you?”

“Shall we say that I was enjoying myself?” replied Mr. Simms languidly, sucking his new cigar. “I hate giving up this wonderful atmosphere, this sun, this vacation. I regret leaving behind the wine and the cigarettes. Oh, how I regret it. The plaza then, in ten minutes. Your wife will be protected and may stay here as long as she wishes. Say your good-bys.” Mr. Simms arose and walked out.

“There goes Mr. Big-Talk!” yelled Mr. Melton at the departing gentleman. He turned and looked at Susan. “Hey. Someone’s crying. Breakfast’s no time for people to cry, now is it?”

At nine fifteen, Susan stood on the balcony of their room, gazing down at the plaza. Mr. Simms was seated there, his neat legs crossed, on a delicate bronze bench. Biting the tip from a cigar, he lighted it tenderly.

Susan heard the throb of a motor, and far up the street, out of a garage and down the cobbled hill, slowly, came William in his car.

The car picked up speed. Thirty, now forty, now fifty miles an hour. Chickens scattered before it.

Mr. Simms took off his white Panama hat and mopped his pink forehead, put his hat back on, and then saw the car.

It was rushing sixty miles an hour, straight on for the plaza.

“William!” screamed Susan.

The car hit the low plaza curb, thundering, jumped up, sped across the tiles toward the green bench where Mr. Simms now dropped his cigar, shrieked, flailed his hands, and was hit by the car. His body flew up and up in the air, and down, crazily, into the street.

On the far side of the plaza, one front wheel broken, the car stopped.

People were running.

Susan went in and closed the balcony doors.

THEY CAME DOWN the Official Palace steps together, arm in arm, their faces pale, at twelve noon.

“Adios, señor,” said the mayor behind them. “Señora.”

They stood in the plaza where the crowd was pointing at the blood.

“Will they want to see you again?” asked Susan.

“No, we went over and over it. It was an accident. I lost control of the car. I wept for them. God knows I had to get my relief out somewhere. I felt like weeping. I hated to kill him. I’ve never wanted to do anything like that in my life.”

“They won’t prosecute you?”

“They talked about it, but no. I talked faster. They believe me. It was an accident. It’s over.”

“Where will we go? Mexico City?”

“The car’s in the repair shop. It’ll be ready at four this afternoon. Then we’ll get the hell out.”

“Will we be followed? Was Simms working alone?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have a little head start on them, I think.”

The film people were coming out of the hotel as they approached. Mr. Melton hurried up, scowling. "Hey, I heard what happened. Too bad. Everything okay now? Want to get your minds off it? We're doing some preliminary shots up the street. You want to watch, you're welcome. Come on, do you good."

They went.

They stood on the cobbled street while the film camera was being set up. Susan looked at the road leading down and away, at the highway going to Acapulco and the sea, past pyramids and ruins and little adobe towns with yellow walls, blue walls, purple walls and flaming bougainvillea. She thought: We shall take the roads, travel in clusters and crowds, in markets, in lobbies, bribe police to sleep near, keep double locks, but always the crowds, never alone again, always afraid the next person who passes might be another Simms.

Never knowing if we've tricked and lost the Searchers. And always up ahead, in the Future, they'll wait for us to be brought back, waiting with their bombs to burn us and disease to rot us, and their police to tell us to roll over, turn around, jump through the hoop. And so we'll keep running through the forest, and we'll never ever stop or sleep well again in our lives.

A crowd gathered to watch the film being made. And Susan watched the crowd and the streets.

"Seen anyone suspicious?"

"No. What time is it?"

"Three o'clock. The car should be almost ready."

The test film was finished at three forty-five. They all walked down to the hotel, talking. William paused at the garage. "The car'll be ready at six," he said, coming out.

"But no later than that?"

"It'll be ready, don't worry."

In the hotel lobby they looked around for other men traveling alone, men who resembled Mr. Simms, men with new haircuts and too much

cigarette smoke and cologne smell about them, but the lobby was empty.

Going up the stairs, Mr. Melton said, "Well, it's been a long, hard day. Who'd like to put a header on it. Martini? Beer?"

"Maybe one."

The whole crowd pushed into Mr. Melton's room and the drinking began.

"Watch the time," said William.

Time, thought Susan, if only they had time. All she wanted was to sit in the plaza all alone, bright day in spring, with not a worry or a thought, with the sun on her face and arms, her eyes closed, smiling at the warmth—and never move, but just sleep in the Mexican sun...

Mr. Melton opened the champagne.

"To a very beautiful lady, lovely enough for films," he said, toasting Susan. "I might even give you a test."

She laughed.

"I mean it," said Melton. "You're very nice. I could make you a movie star."

"And take me to Hollywood?"

"Get the hell out of Mexico, sure!"

Susan glanced at William, and he lifted an eyebrow and nodded. It would be a change of scene, clothing, locale, name perhaps, and they would be traveling with eight other people, a good shield against any interference from the future.

"It sounds wonderful," said Susan.

She was feeling the champagne now, the afternoon was slipping by, the party was whirling about her, she felt safe and good and alive and truly happy for the first time in many years.

"What kind of film would my wife be good for?" asked William, refilling his glass.

Melton appraised Susan. The party stopped laughing and listened.

“Well, I’d like to do a story of suspense,” said Melton. “A story of a man and wife, like yourselves.”

“Go on.”

“Sort of a war story, maybe,” said the director, examining the color of his drink against the sunlight.

Susan and William waited.

“A story about a man and wife who live in a little house on a little street in the year 2155, maybe,” said Melton. “This is ad lib, understand. But this man and wife are faced with a terrible war. Super-Plus Hydrogen bombs, censorship, death, in that year and—here’s the gimmick—they escape into the past, followed by a man who they think is evil, but who is only trying to show them what their Duty is.”

William dropped his glass to the floor.

Mr. Melton continued. “And this couple take refuge with a group of film people whom they learn to trust. Safety in numbers, they say to themselves.”

Susan felt herself slip down into a chair. Everyone was watching the director. He took a little sip of wine. “Ah, that’s a fine wine. Well, this man and woman, it seems, don’t realize how important they are to the future. The man, especially, is the keystone to a new bomb metal.

So the Searchers, let’s call them, spare no trouble or expense to find, capture and take home the man and wife, once they get them totally alone, in a hotel room, where no one can see. Strategy. The Searchers work alone, or in groups of eight. One trick or another will do it. Don’t you think it would make a wonderful film, Susan? Don’t you, Bill?” He finished his drink.

Susan sat with her eyes straight ahead.

“Have a drink?” said Mr. Melton.

William’s gun was out and fired, three times, and one of the men fell, and the others ran forward. Susan screamed. A hand was clamped to her mouth. Now the gun was on the floor and William was struggling with the men holding him.

Mr. Melton said, "Please," standing there where he had stood, blood showing on his fingers. "Let's not make matters worse."

Someone pounded on the hall door.

"Let me in!"

"The manager," said Mr. Melton, dryly. He jerked his head. "Everyone, let's move!"

"Let me in. I'll call the police!"

Susan and William looked at each other quickly, and then at the door.

"The manager wishes to come in," said Mr. Melton. "Quick!"

A camera was carried forward. From it shot a blue light which encompassed the room instantly. It widened out and the people of the party vanished, one by one.

"Quickly!"

Outside the window in the instant before she vanished, Susan saw the green land and the purple and yellow and blue and crimson walls and the cobbles flowing like a river, a man upon a burro riding into the warm hills, a boy drinking orange pop. She could feel the sweet liquid in her throat; she could see a man standing under a cool plaza tree with a guitar, could feel her hand upon the strings. And, far away, she could see the sea, the blue and tender sea; she could feel it roll her over and take her in.

And then she was gone. Her husband was gone.

The door burst wide. The manager and his staff rushed in.

The room was empty.

"But they were just here! I saw them come in, and now— gone!" cried the manager. "The windows are covered with iron grating; they couldn't get out that way!"

In the late afternoon, the priest was summoned and they opened the room again and aired it out, and had him sprinkle holy water through each corner and give it his cleansing.

"What shall we do with these?" asked the charwoman.

She pointed to the closet, where there were sixty-seven bottles of chartreuse, cognac, crème de cacao, absinthe, vermouth, tequila, 106 cartons of Turkish cigarettes, and 198 yellow boxes of fifty-cent pure Havana-filler cigars ...

The End