

Futures

The bar at the end of whenever

An unusual destination. By J. J. Litke



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The bar's front door burst open and banged into the wall. A man stumbled in, wearing a vest and string tie that were at least a century out of date. He clutched at the door frame, eyes wide as coasters. "What year is it?"

Damn, not this again. I set the mug of beer I'd just pulled down on the bar top and slid it over in front of one of my regulars, Luis. "It's 2018, buddy, and you're in Albuquerque. New Mexico. United States." I threw in that last just in case the guy was coming from some really distant space-time. You never know.

The guy blinked hard, then he tugged at his vest, like that was going to straighten up his clothes and make him suddenly fit in. He pasted on a smile and edged up to the bar. "Right. Sorry, that must sound crazy."

I shook my head. "That's a regular occurrence here. What event were you aiming for?"

From his barstool, Luis threw some side eye at the stranger and snorted. "Another of them trying to prove Pat Garrett didn't shoot Billy the Kid, I'll bet."

"I told all of you before," Joey piped up from the other side of Luis, "there's no way Brushy Bill wasn't —"

"Hush up, you two." Last thing I wanted to hear was one more rehash of evidence on both sides of *that* particular argument.

The stranger stood there for a long moment, eyes narrowed and mouth hanging open like a goldfish. "I ... no, I was going for Tombstone."

"Ah, OK Corral. Gotcha." I leant my elbows on the bar top. "Now you know the gunfight weren't actually at the corral itself."

"Sure, was in an alley, wannit?" Joey cut in. "Not an alley, more like an empty lot," Luis said.

"Well what's an alley but a lot between buildings?"

"Point taken."

The guy's nose wrinkled up like he was getting a big whiff of pickled eggs. "I know it wasn't in the corral. I entered that into Google-Time and left myself an extra hour to walk around. Do a little exploring."

"There's your problem right there," I said.

"See, GoogleTime wants you to either trust their reckoning with the presets, or enter something exactly right on your own."

"Yes, yes, but I'm sure I got the location —"

"No you didn't," Luis interrupted again. "If you're an hour off the target, you got to get the spatial coordinates smack dab right. Earth rotates at right about a thousand miles an hour."

"And 67,000 miles 'round the orbital path at the same time," Joey threw in.

"Zactly," Luis said. "You gotta make dead-on accounting for both. Don't you know nothing about space-time?"

"Pfft, amateur," Joey agreed.

"So then," I said, taking the explanation back over, "if you enter space-time coordinates that don't match up with a safe destination, it reads as a glitch. They got a failsafe built into Google-Time that routes all glitches to Albuquerque on the spatial dimensions, and drops them in a sequence along the time line." The failsafe location being Albuquerque must have been added by some joker trying to be funny — we were the

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wrong left turn. Although spacing out their arrival events was nice, as all of them showing up at the same instant in the same spot might get kinda messy. At least the programmers put that much thought into it.

The guy looked like he was gonna argue, then switched gears. “Hold on a sec. How do you know about this? GoogleTime didn’t exist in 2018.”

Luis and Joey started giggling into their beers, and I rolled my eyes. “Because, genius, we got people like you showing up here on the regular, all confuzzled about why they’re standing outside of some old bar on the edge of town instead of wherever they’re trying to get to. Not everyone comes in here, but some days it’s like a constant stream.”

“Oh.” The stranger went all crestfallen. “I suppose that makes sense.” He shot a look back and forth, like anyone else was around

to care about what he had to say. “Actually, the real reason I’m going there is because I have a theory —”

“Don’t care.”

“But, I have a theory that Wyatt Earp had —”

“Truly, don’t care.” I waved a hand at him.

“Hey, now,” Luis poked his nose in once more. “Space-time travel is supposed to be view-only, you don’t got permission to edit.”

The stranger’s eyebrows shot up. “Of course not. I don’t want to change anything, I just want to verify that —”

“That, nothing.” I stuck my hands on my hips. “Look, mister, just try using the preset like you shoulda done in the first place. Now unless you’re gonna order something, I got better things to do.”

He stood there for a few seconds doing his goldfish impression again, like he couldn’t believe we didn’t want to hear another historic

conspiracy theory. “Well, thanks for the help, I guess.” He turned and slunk out of the bar.

“Hey, I’m almost empty.” Joey waved his mug like I might not believe him without evidence.

“Get me another beer, will ya, Kid?”

“I don’t go by that no more, Joey.”

“Sorry, Billy.”

The bar door slammed open, busting into the wall again. A figure in head-to-toe metallic coverings braced one limb against the door frame, swivelling its helmeted head back and forth at us. “Vhaat yeer izit?”

I heaved a sigh. It was just gonna be one of those days.

J. J. Litke writes SFF, moonlights as a college instructor, and believes that time travel sounds like a lot more fun than it really is.