

Futures

Goodbye, Howard Henning

A form of control. By John E. Stith



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The day the visitor from the future arrived was remarkably clear. Harold could see all the way to Alcatraz and beyond from his office on the 29th floor.

Harold was halfway through a grant application, one so boring that he almost welcomed the interruption.

Just to the left of the doorway, between Harold's Chamber of Commerce awards for venture capitalism and his 'H. Henning' nameplate on the door, sparkling particles danced in the air.

The shimmering flared brightly and died. In its place appeared a short, oddly dressed man. The stranger wore a brown three-piece suit made from some thick material. His narrow black tie bisected his white shirt. Along the top of his upper lip was a pencil-thin moustache.

And in his left hand was a pistol, one that reminded Harold of old Second World War movies. The long, thin barrel sported a pronounced sight on the top. A Luger?

The gun barrel swung slowly until it was directed at Harold. The stranger frowned.

Harold's heart raced and his breath slowed. He held his hands very still. A seldom-used cranny of his brain made him question whether he'd put on clean underwear that morning. But of course he had.

Finally the man spoke. "*Gott in himmel!*" His voice had a buzzing, metallic edge to it.

"What?" Harold finally found his voice. "What are you doing here? Who are you?"

The stranger kept his gun trained on Harold as his wide eyes took in the view out the window.

"Well, Kermit H. Grover on a crutch," the

man said. "This isn't Germany. And this can't be 1924."

"You're right twice in a row. San Francisco. 2024." Harold felt a pinprick of hope.

The man let his gun arm drop. "Those cow-patties in the transportation department screwed up again. Now I'm going to have to fill out a blasted Form 18083 again." He glanced at Harold. "Sorry for the interruption." He moved to touch a bump on his wrist.

Harold took the gesture to mean the man was going to leave as suddenly as he had arrived. "Wait!" Harold said. "Who are you? And what's going on?"

The man hesitated, then shrugged. "Sorry. Wrong place, wrong time. I'm supposed to bugzap a guy named Hitler. You ever hear of an Adolph Hitler in your time?"

"The name rings a bell. You're telling me you

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go around your past killing people?”

“Just the bad ones.”

“But – but doesn’t that disrupt your own time?”

“Doesn’t work the way it does on the beam screen. Time, ah, heals itself. Disruptions fade away after a while. Rocks in a stream and all that. The ripples don’t get bigger and bigger.”

“Still –”

“Look, I’ve got to be going back. And not only did I not kill this Adolph perp, I’ll have to fill out that Form 18083. I really hate Form 18083.”

“Come on! This happens often enough that you have a form for it?”

“There’s a form for everything. Don’t you have bureaucracy in, what did you say, 2024?”

“Well, yes.” Harold reflexively straightened the grant application guidelines.

“Sorry, but I really have to get back.” The man touched his wrist. The shimmer returned, and seconds later the man was gone.

Harold held his breath in the silence, a calm broken only when his phone rang. The call pushed him out of his fog. Using 5% of his attention, he answered.

“How’s your morning going?” Sally asked.

“Oh, you know.”

She wouldn’t believe him anyway.

That same afternoon, the stranger appeared again, this time wearing a more modern suit. His pencil moustache was gone. The pistol was updated, too, with a snub nose.

“Sorry about this,” he said. “The grunTERS sent me to the wrong item on the list.” His gun swung until it was aimed at Harold’s loudly beating heart.

“Wait! Wait! Me? You’re going to kill me?”

The man looked apologetic. “In the next few years, you develop a home health kit that winds up killing millions of people.”

“That can’t be right. And – and you’re just going to kill *me*?”

“I really am sorry. Nothing personal. Good-bye, Howard Henning.”

The small gun was surprisingly loud in the confines of the office. Three shots. Some walled-off portion of Harold’s brain came to a bizarre conclusion. Nice grouping.

The pain lanced through his entire body. “Wait, wait! I’m not Howard. He’s my twin. I’m *Harold* Henning.”

Harold’s vision took on a reddish tinge, crowding the light from the edges inward.

“Oh, Kermit H. Grover on a crutch. You have any proof?”

“My – my wallet.” Harold found it hard to talk.

“Well, where’s your twin?”

“Killed – last year. Home – invasion. Maybe – one of you guys.”

“Oh, man, this is terrible,” the stranger said. “They’ll want me to fill out a Form 2055.”

“Look – you’re from the – future.” Harold’s vision began to shut down. His breath was ragged. “Take me back – fix me up.”

The stranger burst into uproarious laughter. “Sorry – sorry,” the man finally managed to say as he reached for his cuff. “But that’s just so absurd. If I took you with me, they’d make me do a Form 2114B. Do you have any idea how long it takes to fill out a Form 2114B?”

John E. Stith’s novels include *Redshift Rendezvous*, a Nebula Award finalist, and *Manhattan Transfer*. His latest novel is *Pushback*, a finalist for the Daphne Du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

John E. Stith reveals the inspiration behind his latest tale.

Writing Regulation, Vol. 5, Section 75.D.7
Rules for Writing an Afterword

1. Make it shorter than the original work.

Check. Barely.

2. Assume no one will read it.

Check.

3. It comes after, but it is not an afterword.

Check.

4. It’s also not an epilogue.

Check.

5. Describe how the work came into being or how the idea developed.

I wrote it.

6. Amplify. Answers for this section must exceed ten words.

Who doesn’t hate bureaucracy and endless forms? Wouldn’t you rather slowly pull out nose hairs instead of filling out a form that has any more blanks than one for your name and one for how much money to send you? And who wouldn’t jump at the chance to go back in time and smother little baby Hitler in his crib lair with no paperwork required?

One of the many techniques used by fiction writers is to illustrate a truth about life. Another is to exaggerate or magnify it to the point where any subtlety has long vanished.

Check.

