

# Futures

## This must be the place

There's no place like home. By Glen Engel-Cox



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**A**fter his first tour of duty, Henry returned to Santa Fe, New Mexico – his hometown – and walked its streets. He noted how many restaurants had closed or had changed names or cuisines, art galleries replaced by candy shops or tourist traps, streets converted to pedestrian use only. Everything seemed both familiar and strange. He had become a man out of time, or someone out of sync. He tried to make an appointment with his favourite barber, but learnt she had died ten years ago.

He stopped at Dirty's, a bar where he had once been a regular, and ordered a margarita.

"Hard or soft?" asked the bartender, his head down, focusing on cleaning glasses in the sink.

"Excuse me?"

"With tequila or teqnista?"

"What the hell is teqnista?"

The bartender looked up and noticed Henry's Space Force insignia. "Sorry, sir, I didn't realize ... freshly back, are you? Teqnista

is cultured agave, vat grown. That's why we call it soft. Easy tequila, not the soil-grown stuff. It's cheaper, but then, you can probably afford the real stuff."

"Hell yeah. Some Patron or Don Julio. Make it a double."

Henry had four before he passed out. He woke up the next morning back at Kirtland SFB. He had intended to spend his entire leave in Santa Fe, but ended up not going back before it was time to space out again.

He spent the second tour even farther away from Earth and when he returned, Henry hardly recognized Santa Fe at all. The city ordinance limiting heights on buildings had been lifted, and although some retained their Old World stucco, many had sprouted up 10–15 floors. The auto dropped him off two miles from downtown, and he initially thought he would have to walk the entire way until he saw others using a circular disc to whisk them along the routes. He checked his comm and

got instructions on how to find one of these and operate it.

Dirty's had disappeared, replaced by a hotel. But the hotel had a bar and he decided to have a drink in it, for old time's sake.

"Margarita?" he asked.

The cute waitress laughed. "You're old school, spacer! Love it, love you." He swore he saw her eyes light up, then felt embarrassed when she winked at him and turned away. He had been staring at her. He felt guilty, then wondered why. Yes, he had probably been born several decades before her, but chronologically they were probably only a year or two apart. His reference points had changed, though.

She placed the drink before him with a flourish. "Thank you for your service, this one's on the house."

Henry took a sip. It didn't taste like a margarita at all. He thought about complaining, but they had comped him. He finished it and left a tip for the waitress.

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Afterwards, he wandered around downtown, never quite getting his bearings, surprised when he recognized something, anything.

He thought about going back, but instead avoided Santa Fe following his third, fourth and fifth outings, deciding instead to go somewhere new, somewhere he didn't know in the past, where he wouldn't recognize the accumulation of years. He had a manhattan in Manhattan, where he caught a Broadway musical and didn't understand any of it. He had shoyu and sushi in Kyoto and even tried fugu, now that it could be grown without the toxins.

"What's it like?" asked a civilian sitting next to him at the Raffles hotel. Henry had ordered the Singapore sling because it was traditional, but it sat untouched.

"Space?" replied Henry.

"No. Coming back here, after being out there, when decades have passed. Is it strange?"

Henry stared into the cocktail in front of him, liquid the colour of a red dwarf topped with a cherry and orange-slice satellite. "Yeah. Everything changes." Including your reference points, he thought, realizing he never would have seen the cocktail in that way before spicing out.

On his sixth return, he went back to Santa Fe and walked its streets like a tourist, admiring how modern nanocultures had transformed the buildings into Ancestral Puebloan-like cliff dwellings. Santa Fe had canyons now, with buildings as high as 20 storeys or more, but the stucco was back by fiat in order to return the city to something like its past, and this made it strangely a combination of old world and new world. The only thing missing was the wooden ladders between floors.

At his bar stop, the bartender asked, "What'll it be, spaceman? I can do all the classics: margarita, martini, mojito, daiquiri, cosmo."

Henry pointed to what looked like a fireball

in front of a drinker down the bar. "What's that?"

"The newest thing, spacer. I call it a phoenix, after my hometown. I invented it about a month ago and it's going supernova."

"I'll try that."

The drink came in a flexible bulb like they used in space, but translucent, so you could see the liquid inside churning, changing hues from pink-to-red-to-purple-to-blue, as if burning, endlessly recreating itself, but still the same.

"To hometowns," Henry said, toasting the bartender, then sipping his phoenix and letting it warm him thoroughly. It felt good to be back home.

**Glen Engel-Cox** has lived in Texas, California, Malaysia, Ohio, Saudi Arabia and Washington (both state and District of Columbia). He currently resides in Colorado and is a full-time freelance writer specializing in energy and international development.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Glen Engel-Cox reveals the inspiration behind *This must be the place*.**

My wife and I worked overseas in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia for many years. When we repatriated back to the United States, we discovered that the culture shock was greater on the return than what we experienced living in those unusual (to us) places. This story began from a contest prompt to take a science-fiction cliché trope and find a new direction to go with it. I've always been fascinated by the concept of time dilation

— how a space traveller would experience time differently from the world they left behind. I thought if I suffered from culture shock from being away from 'home' for only a few years, how would a space traveller feel if decades passed? Although I had written it based on my repatriation experience, I was happy when one of my fellow contestants noted that, as an immigrant, they felt the story also spoke to the immigrant experience.

I joked with my wife that this story is the antithesis of traditional military SF stories, which would have been all about what Henry does on tour, not what he does on leave.

And the cocktails? That's all me. I love mixing drinks and thinking about what the future will bring about with new flavours and possibilities. Cheers!

