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TWO GUYS FROM THE FUTURE

“WE ARE TWO GUYS FROM THE FUTURE.”

“Yeah, right. Now get the hell out of here!”

“Don’t shoot! Is that a gun?”

That gave me pause; it was a flashlight. There were two of them. They both wore shimmery suits. The short one was kind of cute. The tall one did all the talking.

“Lady, we are serious guys from the future,” he said. “This is not a hard-on.”

“You mean a put-on,” I said. “Now kindly get the hell out of here.”

“We are here on a missionary position to all mankind,” he said. “No shit is fixing to hang loose any someday now.”

“Break loose,” I said. “Hey, are you guys talking about nuclear war?”

“We are not allowed to say,” the cute one said.

“The bottom line is, we have come to salvage the art works of your posteriors,” the tall one said.

“Save the art and let the world go. Not a bad idea,” I said. “But, mira, it’s midnight and the gallery’s closed. Come back en la mañana.”

“¡Qué bueno! No hay mas necesidad que hablar en inglés,” the tall one said. “Nothing worse than trying to communicate in a dead language,” he went on in Spanish. “But how did you know?”

“Just a guess,” I said, also in Spanish; and we spoke in the mother tongue from then on. “If you really are two guys from the future, you can come back in the future, like tomorrow after we open, right?”

“Too much danger of Timeslip,” he said. “We have to come and go between midnight and four A.M., when we won’t interfere with your world. Plus we’re from far in the future, not just tomorrow. We are here to save art works that will otherwise be lost in the coming holocaust by sending them through a Chronoslot to our century in what is,

to you, the distant future."

"I got that picture," I said. "But you're talking to the wrong girl. I don't own this art gallery. I'm just an artist."

"Artists wear uniforms in your century?"

"Okay, so I'm moonlighting as a security guard."

"Then it's your boss we need to talk to. Get him here tomorrow at midnight, okay?"

"He's a her," I said. "Besides, mira, how do I know you really are, on the level, two guys from the future?"

"You saw us suddenly materialize in the middle of the room, didn't you?"

"Okay, so I may have been dozing. You try working two jobs."

"But you noticed how bad our inglés was. And how about these outfits?"

"A lot of people in New York speak worse inglés than you," I said. "And here on the Lower East Side, funny suits don't prove anything." Then I remembered a science fiction story I had once heard about. (I never actually read science fiction.)

* * *

"You did what?" said Borogove, the gallery owner, the next morning when I told her about the two guys from the future.

"I lit a match and held it to his sleeve."

"Girl, you're lucky he didn't shoot you."

"He wasn't carrying a gun. I could tell. Those shimmery suits are pretty tight. Anyway, when I saw that the cloth didn't burn, I decided I believed their story."

"There's all sorts of material that doesn't burn," Borogove said. "And if they're really two guys from the future who have come back to save the great art of our century, how come they didn't take anything?" She looked around the gallery, which was filled with giant plastic breasts and buttocks, the work of her dead ex-husband, "Bucky" Borogove. She seemed disappointed that all of them were still hanging.

"Beats me," I said. "They insist on talking to the gallery owner. Maybe you have to sign for it or something."

“Hmmm. There have been several mysterious disappearances of great art lately. That’s why I hired you; it was one of the conditions in Bucky’s will. In fact, I’m still not sure this isn’t one of his posthumous publicity stunts. What time are these guys from the future supposed to show up?”

“Midnight.”

“Hmmm. Well, don’t tell anyone about this. I’ll join you at midnight, like Macbeth on the tower.”

“Hamlet,” I said. “And tomorrow’s my night off. My boyfriend is taking me to the cockfights.”

“I’ll pay you time and a half,” she said. “I may need you there to translate. My español is a little rusty.”

* * *

Girls don’t go to cockfights and I don’t have a boyfriend. How could I? There aren’t any single men in New York. I just didn’t want Borogove to think I was easy.

But in fact, I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

I was standing beside her in the gallery at midnight when a column of air in the center of the room began to shimmer and glow and . . . But you’ve seen Star Trek. There they were. I decided to call the tall one Stretch and the cute one Shorty.

“Bienvenidos to our century,” said Borogove, in Spanish, “and to the Borogove Gallery.” Her Spanish was more than a little rusty; turned out she had done a month in Cuernavaca in 1964. “We are described in Art Talk magazine as ‘the traffic-control center of the Downtown Art Renaissance.’ ”

“We are two guys from the future,” Stretch said, in Spanish this time. He held out his arm.

“You don’t have to prove anything,” said Borogove. “I can tell by the way you arrived here that you’re not from our world. But if you like, you could show me some future money.”

“We’re not allowed to carry cash,” said Shorty.

“Too much danger of Timeslip,” explained Stretch. “In fact, the only reason we’re here at all is because of a special exemption in the Chronolaws, allowing us to save great

art works that otherwise would be destroyed in the coming holocaust."

"Oh dear. What coming holocaust?"

"We're not allowed to say," said Shorty. It seemed to be the only thing he was allowed to say. But I liked the way that no matter who he was talking to, he kept stealing looks at me.

"Don't worry about it," said Stretch, looking at his watch. "It doesn't happen for quite a while. We're buying the art early to keep the prices down. Next month our time (last year, yours) we bought two Harings and a Ledesma right around the corner."

"Bought?" said Borogove. "Those paintings were reported stolen."

Stretch shrugged. "That's between the gallery owners and their insurance companies. But we are not thieves. In fact—"

"What about the people?" I asked.

"You stay out of this," Borogove whispered, in inglés. "You're just here to translate."

I ignored her. "You know, in this coming holocaust thing. What happens to the people?"

"We're not allowed to save people," said Shorty.

"No big deal," said Stretch. "People all die anyway. Only great art is forever. Well, almost forever."

"And Bucky made the short list!" said Borogove. "That son of a bitch. But I'm not surprised. If self-promotion can—"

"Bucky?" Stretch looked confused.

"Bucky Borogove. My late ex-husband. The artist whose work is hanging all around us here. The art you came to save for future generations."

"Oh no," said Stretch. He looked around at the giant tits and asses hanging on the walls. "We can't take this stuff. It would never fit through the Chronoslot anyway. We came to give you time to get rid of it. We're here for the early works of Teresa Algarín Rosado, the Puerto Rican neoretromaximinimalist. You will hang her show next week, and we'll come back and pick up the paintings we want."

"I beg your pardon!" said Borogove. "Nobody tells me who will or will not hang in this

gallery. Not even guys from the future. Besides, who's ever heard of this Rosado?"

"I didn't mean to be rude," said Stretch. "It's just that we already know what will happen. Besides, we've already deposited three hundred thousand dollars in your account first thing tomorrow."

"Well, in that case . . ." Borogove seemed mollified. "But who is she? Do you have her phone number? Does she even have a phone? A lot of artists—"

"How many paintings are you going to buy?" I asked.

"You stay out of this!" she whispered, in inglés.

"But I am Teresa Algarín Rosado," I said.

* * *

I quit my job as a security guard. A few nights later I was in my apartment when I noticed a shimmering by the sink. The air began to glow and . . . But you've seen Star Trek. I barely had time to pull on my jeans. I was painting and I usually work in a T-shirt and underpants.

"Remember me, one of the two guys from the future?" Shorty said, in Spanish, as soon as he had fully appeared.

"So you can talk," I said, in Spanish also. "Where's your compañero?"

"It's his night off. He's got a date."

"And you're working?"

"It's my night off, too. I just—uh—uh . . ." He blushed.

"Couldn't get a date," I said. "It's all right. I'm about ready to knock off anyway. There's a Bud in the refrigerator. Get me one too."

"You always work at midnight? Can I call you Teresa?"

"Please do. Just finishing a couple of canvases. This is my big chance. My own show. I want everything to be just right. What are you looking for?"

"A bud?"

"A Bud is a cerveza," I said. "The top twists off. To the left. Are you sure you guys are

from the future and not the past?" (Or just the country, I thought to myself.)

"We travel to many different time zones," he said.

"Must be exciting. Do you get to watch them throw the Christians to the lions?"

"We don't go there; it's all statues," he said. "Statues won't fit through the Chronoslot. You might have noticed, Stretch and I broke quite a few before we quit trying."

"Stretch?"

"My partner. Oh, and call me Shorty."

It was my first positive illustration of the power of the past over the future.

"So what kind of art do you like?" I asked while we got comfortable on the couch.

"I don't like any of it, but I guess paintings are best; you can turn them flat. Say, this is pretty good cerveza. Do you have any roll and rock?"

I thought he meant the beer but he meant the music. I also had a joint, left over from a more interesting decade.

"Your century is my favorite," Shorty said. Soon he said he was ready for another petal.

"Bud," I said. "In the fridge."

"The cerveza in your century is very good," he called out from the kitchen.

"Let me ask you two questions," I said from the couch.

"Sure."

"Do you have a wife or a girlfriend back there, or up there, in the future?"

"Are you kidding?" he said. "There are no single girls in the future. What's your second question?"

"Do you look as cute out of that shimmery suit as you do in it?"

* * *

"There's one missing," said Borogove, checking off her list as the workmen unloaded

the last of my paintings from the rented panel truck and carried them in the front door of the gallery. Other workmen were taking Bucky's giant tits and asses out the back door.

"This is all of it," I said. "Everything I've ever painted. I even borrowed back two paintings that I had traded for rent."

Borogove consulted her list. "According to the two guys from the future, three of your early paintings are in the Museo de Arte Inmortal del Mundo in 2255: 'Tres Dolores,' 'De Mon Mouse,' and 'La Rosa del Futuro.' Those are the three they want."

"Let me see that list," I said.

"It's just the titles. They have a catalogue with pictures of what they want, but they wouldn't show it to me. Too much danger of Timesplits."

"Slips," I said. We looked through the stacked canvases again. I am partial to portraits. "De Mon Mouse" was an oil painting of the super in my building, a rasta who always wore Mickey Mouse T-shirts. He had a collection of two. "Tres Dolores" was a mother, daughter, and grandmother I had known on Avenue B; it was a pose faked up from photographs—a sort of tampering with time in itself, now that I thought of it.

But "La Rosa del Futuro"? "Never heard of it," I said.

Borogove waved the list. "It's on here. Which means it's in their catalogue."

"Which means it survives the holocaust," I said.

"Which means they pick it up at midnight, after the opening Wednesday night," she said.

"Which means I must paint it between now and then."

"Which means you've got four days."

"This is crazy, Borogove."

"Call me Mimsy," she said. "And don't worry about it. Just get to work."

* * *

"There's pickled herring in the nevera," I said, in Spanish.

"I thought you were Puerto Rican," said Shorty.

“I am, but my ex-boyfriend was Jewish, and that stuff keeps forever.”

“I thought there were no single men in New York.”

“Exactly the problem,” I said. “His wife was Jewish too.”

“You’re sure I’m not keeping you from your work?” said Shorty.

“What work?” I said forlornly. I had been staring at a blank canvas since ten P.M. “I still have one painting to finish for the show, and I haven’t even started it.”

“Which one?”

“ ‘La Rosa del Futuro,’ ” I said. I had the title pinned to the top corner of the frame. Maybe that was what was blocking me. I wadded it up and threw it at the wall. It only went halfway across the room.

“I think that’s the most famous one,” he said. “So you know it gets done. Is there a blossom—”

“A Bud,” I said. “In the door of the fridge.”

“Maybe what you need,” he said, with that shy, sly futuristic smile I was growing to like, “is a little rest.”

After our little rest, which wasn’t so little, and wasn’t exactly a rest, I asked him, “Do you do this often?”

“This?”

“Go to bed with girls from the past. What if I’m your great-great-grandmother or something?”

“I had it checked out,” he said. “She’s living in the Bronx.”

“So you do! You bastard! You do this all the time.”

“Teresa! ¡Mi corazón! Never before. It’s strictly not allowed. I could lose my job! It’s just that when I saw those little . . .”

“Those little what?”

He blushed. “Those little hands and feet. I fell in love.”

It was my turn to blush. He had won my heart, a guy from the future, forever.

“So if you love me so much, why don’t you take me back to the future with you?” I asked, after another little rest.

“Then who would paint all the paintings you are supposed to paint over the next thirty years? Teresa, you don’t understand how famous you are going to be. Even I have heard of Picasso, Michelangelo, and the great Algarín—and art is not my thing. If something happened to you, the Timeslip would throw off the whole history of art.”

“Oh. How about that.” I couldn’t seem to stop smiling. “So why don’t you stay here with me.”

“I’ve thought about it,” he said. “But if I stayed here, I wouldn’t be around to come back here and meet you in the first place. And if I had stayed here, we would know about it anyway, since there would be some evidence of it. See how complicated Time is? I’m just a delivery guy and it gives me a headache. I need another leaf.”

“Bud,” I said. “You know where they are.”

He went into the kitchen for a cerveza and I called out after him: “So you’re going to go back to the future and let me die in the coming holocaust?”

“Die? Holocaust?”

“The one you’re not allowed to tell me about. The nuclear war.”

“Oh, that. Stretch is just trying to alarm you. It’s not a war. It’s a warehouse fire.”

“All this mischigosch for a warehouse fire?”

“It’s cheaper to go back and get the stuff than to avoid the fire,” he said. “It all has to do with Timeslip insurance or something.”

The phone rang. “How’s it going?”

“It’s two in the morning, Borogove!” I said, in inglés.

“Please, Teresa, call me Mimsy. Is it finished?”

“I’m working on it,” I lied. “Go to sleep.”

“Who was that?” Shorty asked, in Spanish. “¿La Gordita?”

“Don’t be cruel,” I said, pulling on my T-shirt and underpants. “You go to sleep, too. I have to get back to work.”

“If you had overslept we would already know about it, wouldn’t we?” I said, sarcastically. But he was already snoring.

* * *

“I can’t put it off for a week!” said Borogove the next day at the gallery. “Everybody who’s anybody in the downtown art scene is going to be here tomorrow night.”

“But—”

“Teresa, I’ve already ordered the wine.”

“But—”

“Teresa, I’ve already ordered the cheese. Plus, remember, whatever we sell beyond the three paintings they’re coming for is gravy. ¿Comprende?”

“En inglés, Borogove,” I said. “But what if I don’t finish this painting in time?”

“Teresa, I insist, you must call me Mimsy. If you weren’t going to finish it, they would have arranged a later pickup date, since they already know what will happen. For God’s sake, girl, quit worrying. Go home and get to work! You have until tomorrow night.”

“But I don’t even know where to start!”

“Don’t you artists have any imagination? Make something up!”

* * *

I had never been blocked before. It’s not like constipation; when you’re constipated you can work sitting down.

I padded and paced like a caged lion, staring at my blank canvas as if I were trying to get up the appetite to eat it. By eleven-thirty I had started it and painted it out six times. It just didn’t feel right.

Just as the clock was striking midnight, a column of air near the sink began to shimmer and . . . But you’ve seen Star Trek. Shorty appeared by the sink, one hand behind his back.

“Am I glad to see you!” I said. “I need a clue.”

“A clue?”

“This painting. ‘La Rosa del Futuro.’ Your catalogue from the future has a picture of it. Let me see it.”

“Copy your own painting?” Shorty said. “That would cause a Timeslip for sure.”

“I won’t copy it!” I said. “I just need a clue. I’ll just glance at it.”

“Same thing. Besides, Stretch carries the catalogue. I’m just his helper.”

“Okay, then just tell me what’s it a picture of.”

“I don’t know, Teresa . . .”

“How can you say you love me if you won’t even break the rules to help me?”

“No, I mean I really don’t know. Like I said, art is not my thing. I’m just a delivery guy. Besides—” he blushed. “You know what my thing is.”

“Well, my thing is art,” I said. “And I’m going to lose the chance of a lifetime—hell, of more than that, of artistic inmortalidad—if I don’t come up with something pretty soon.”

“Teresa, quit worrying,” he said. “The painting’s so famous even I’ve heard of it. There’s no way it can not happen. Meanwhile, let’s don’t spend our last—”

“Our what? Our last what? Why are you standing there with your hand behind your back?”

He pulled out a rose. “Don’t you understand? This Chronolink closes forever after the pickup tonight. I don’t know where my next job will take me, but it won’t be here.”

“So what’s the rose for?”

“To remember our . . . Our . . .” He burst into tears.

Girls cry hard and fast and it’s over. Guys from the future are more sentimental, and Shorty cried himself to sleep. After comforting him as best I could, I pulled on my T-shirt and underpants and found a clean brush and started pacing again. I left him snoring on the bed, a short brown Adonis without even a fig leaf.

“Wake me up at four,” he mumbled, then went back to sleep.

I looked at the rosa he had brought. The roses of the future had soft thorns; that was encouraging. I laid it in on the pillow next to his cheek and that was when it came to me, in the form of a whole picture, which is how it always comes to me when it finally does. (And it always does.)

* * *

When I’m painting and it’s going well, I forget everything. It seemed like only minutes before the phone rang.

“Well? How’s it going?”

“Borogove, it’s almost four in the morning.”

“No, it’s not, it’s four in the afternoon. You’ve been working all night and all day, Teresa, I can tell. But you really have to call me Mimsy.”

“I can’t talk now,” I said. “I have a live model. Sort of.”

“I thought you didn’t work from live models.”

“This time I am.”

“Whatever. Don’t let me bother you while you’re working; I can tell you’re getting somewhere. The opening is at seven. I’m sending a van for you at six.”

“Make it a limo, Mimsy,” I said. “We’re making art history.”

* * *

“It’s beautiful,” Borogove said, as I unveiled “La Rosa del Futuro” for her. “But who’s the model? He looks vaguely familiar.”

“He’s been around the art world for years and years,” I said.

The gallery was packed. The show was a huge success. “La Rosa,” “De Mon Mouse,” and “Los Tres” were already marked SOLD, and SOLD stickers went up on my other paintings at the rate of one every twenty minutes. Everybody wanted to meet me. I had left Shorty directions and cab fare by the bed, and at eleven-thirty he showed up wearing only my old boyfriend’s trenchcoat, saying that his shimmery suit had disappeared into thin air while he was pulling it on.

I wasn't surprised. We were in the middle of a Timeslip, after all.

"Who's the barefoot guy in the fabulous Burberry?" Borogove asked. "He looks vaguely familiar."

"He's been around the art world forever and ever," I said.

Shorty was looking jet-lagged. He was staring dazedly at the wine and cheese and I signaled to one of the caterers to show him where the beer was kept, in the back room.

At eleven fifty-five, Borogove threw everybody else out and turned down the lights. At midnight, right on time, a glowing column of air appeared in the center of the room, then gradually took on the shape of . . . But you've seen Star Trek. It was Stretch, and he was alone.

"We are—uh—a guy from the future," Stretch said, starting in English and finishing en español. He was wobbling a little.

"I could have sworn there were two of you guys," said Borogove. "Or did I make that up?" she whispered to me, in inglés.

"Could be a Timeslip," said Stretch. He looked confused himself, then brightened. "No problem though! Happens all the time. This is a light pickup. Only three paintings!"

"We have all three right here," said Borogove. "Teresa, why don't you do the honors. I'll check them off as you hand them to this guy from the future."

I handed him "De Mon Mouse." Then "Los Tres Dolores." He slipped them both through a dark slot that appeared in the air.

"Whoops," Stretch said, his knees wobbling. "Feel that? Slight aftershock."

Shorty had wandered in from the back room with a Bud in his hand. In nothing but a raincoat, he looked very disoriented.

"This is my boyfriend, Shorty," I said. He and Stretch stared at each other blankly and I felt the fabric of space/time tremble just for a moment. Then it was over.

"Of course!" said Stretch. "Of course, I'd recognize you anywhere."

"Huh? Oh." Shorty looked at the painting I was holding, the last of the three. "La Rosa del Futuro." It was a full-length nude of a short brown Adonis, asleep on his back

without even a fig leaf, a rose placed tenderly on the pillow by his cheek. The paint was still tacky, but I suspected that by the time it arrived in the future it would be dry.

“Reminds me of the day I met Mona Lisa,” said Stretch. “How many times have I seen this painting, and now I meet the guy! Must feel weird to have the world’s most famous, you know . . .” He winked toward Shorty’s crotch.

“I don’t know about weird,” said Shorty. “Something definitely feels funny.”

“Let’s get on with this,” I said. I handed Stretch the painting and he pushed it through the slot, and Shorty and I lived happily ever after. For a while. More or less . . .

But you’ve seen I Love Lucy.