40-26-38

Robert F. Young

At First Miss Cunningham thought the middle-aged man in the brown business suit was no different from the usual run of middle-aged men in brown business suits who eyed her hungrily whenever she walked into an afternoon cocktail bar. Then, as her eyes became accustomed to the dimness, she saw that the brown business suit this one was wearing had a strange cast and an even stranger cut, and that the look in his eyes had nothing to do with hunger.

The license plates on Miss Cunningham’s 1960 Lightning-Bird did not lie when they said, 40-26-38. They did not even exaggerate. So her surprise was understandable. She was accustomed to men who tried to make her at first sight, not men who looked at her as though she were a female brontosaurus that had just crawled out of a bog.

She was even more surprised when, a moment later, the brown-suited man did try to make her. “A Manhattan,” she said automatically, when the bartender told her that the gentleman in the brown business suit would like to buy her a drink, and what would she have, please? Well, maybe he liked female brontosauri.

Whatever the case, his modus operandi was disappointing. Miss Cunningham, who was a connoisseur when it came to pickup-technique, winced a little when he edged down the bar and uttered the time-worn line, “I saw you sitting here all alone, and I’m all alone too, and I wondered if—” and she would have shed him with a single chilling glance if the absence of hunger in his eyes had not piqued her curiosity. Yes, and irritated her ego, too. 40-26-38 weren’t numerals to be taken lightly, and any man especially a middle-aged one who did take them lightly needed an orientation course in American culture.

“Yes, I am all alone,” she said presently. “And feeling kind of blue, too.”

The brown-suited man looked mystified. “Blue?”

“You know. Disgusted. Fed up. The same old routine every day. The same old passes...I’m a photographer’s model, you know.”

The brown-suited man nodded as though he’d known what she was all along, and had just been waiting for her to reveal it. “And I’m a photographer,” he said. “A photographer from the future.”

Miss Cunningham gaped. But that was all right. Gaping abetted the full-lipped attractiveness of her face. “I don’t believe you,” she said.

“Of course you don’t. If I were you, I wouldn’t believe me either without proof.” So saying, the brown-suited man pulled out a chromium dusted wallet and exhibited the following articles: a 14¢ postage stamp with Harry Truman’s picture on it; a 36¢ postage stamp with Dwight D. Eisenhower’s picture on it; a 59¢ postage stamp with Lawrence Welk’s picture on it; a lottery stub that read for the benefit of the Veterans of Extraterrestrial Wars.

There was also a tri-dimensional photograph of a gleaming vehicle so low and long it made Miss Cunningham’s Lightning-Bird look like a Model-T; a little metal calendar that glowed what day it was (October 24, 2562?) ; a sheaf of small, tissue- thin bills ranging in denomination from $5.00 to $500.00, each denomination featuring the engraving of a different face, none of which were familiar to Miss Cunningham, except for the one on the fifty, which she recognized as Yogi Berra’s; a walking license (a walking license?); a telescopic comb with an inbuilt massage unit; and a personal card that read: Jon J. Jerrold, Photographiste

Specializing in promotional photographing of all kinds Visiphone: TR. 36-4021 Suite 902, Godfrey. Bldg.

“So you see,” Jon J. Jerrold said, replacing the articles in his wallet and returning the wallet to his pocket, “I really am from the future.”

Miss Cunningham pinched herself. “Ouch!” she said.

Jerrold laughed. “Oh, this is really happening all right. Though I imagine it does seem rather bizarre to you. It is rather unusual.”

“It seems crazy, if that’s what you mean,” Miss Cunningham said. “Not just your being able to travel in time, but your coming all the way back here...Why?”

“Because of you, Miss...Cunningham, is it not? I’ve been observing you through a time-scope for weeks now, and I’m convinced you’re the perfect person for the job.”

“What job?”

“I want you to be my model,” Jerrold said. “I want to take you back with me to 2562.”

Miss Cunningham gaped again. It was an afternoon for gaping. “But why me?” she said, after a while. “Why, of all the women there are in 1960, should you want to take me back with you?”

Jerrold lowered his eyes from her face, raised them quickly. “I think the reason...reasons...are quite apparent.” Miss Cunningham looked blank for a moment, but presently the message got through.

She thrilled with mammalian pride. Still “But you must have plenty of 40-26-38's in 2562,” she objected. “Why come all the way back to 1960 for one?”

“That’s just the point, Miss Cunningham. We do not have any 40-26-38's in 2562. For that matter we don’t have any 32-26-38's. In fact, we don’t even have any 31-26- 38's.” He waited for Miss Cunningham’s next “Why?” then went on: “Women began changing during the latter years of the twentieth century—perhaps because of the accumulated hereditary effect of earlier and earlier weaning of infants, perhaps because of the accumulated hereditary effect of their assuming more and more of the responsibilities once pre-empted by men. Noone knows for certain, but whatever the reason, in a few centuries the female bust atrophied to a point of near non-existence. Now do you see why I want to make you my model, Miss Cunningham?”

“No,” Miss Cunningham said flatly. “Maybe there aren’t any real women in your generation, but there’s plenty of them in mine. You don’t think I’m the only one the Bureau of Motor Vehicles issued special license plate numbers to, do you? Why don’t you pick one of the others?”

“Because you have a certain...quality which none of the others possess.”

Miss Cunningham was only human. “For how long?” she asked.

Jerrold looked uncomfortable. “That brings up an annoying aspect of time travel,” he said. “A person returning to the past encounters nothing that is not already a part of his hereditary evolution and can therefore easily reintegrate himself into his society upon his return to his own time. But a person traveling into the future encounters many things that cannot conceivably be a part of his hereditary evolution, and if he were to be allowed to return to his own time, he might never be able to re-integrate himself into his own society. As his failure to do so might very well disrupt the entire space-time continuum, we have a strictly enforced time-law prohibiting any such return.”

“I’m not sure,” Miss Cunningham said, “but it sounds as though you’re trying to tell me that if I go with you to 2562, I’ll have to stay there for the rest of my life.”

“That’s about the size of it. But,” Jerrold hastened to add, “consider the advantages. As I mentioned before, I’ve been observing you through a time-scope for weeks, so I know that at the moment you’re unemployed because of a disagreement with your last employer—”

“The creep!” Miss Cunningham said. “He wanted to marry me, and every time I went out with someone else, he threw a fit. Believe me, I told him off!”

“Your last employer,” Jerrold repeated. “And not only are you unemployed, you’re deeply in debt, and despite your qualifications you have no immediate prospects of another job. Now I can offer you three times the wages you’re accustomed to receiving, Miss Cunningham, using the 2562 wage-index as a basis, not the 1960 wage-index. In actual cash, you’ll be receiving ten times what you receive now, or did, a short time ago. Moreover, I can guarantee you a job for ten years, and, if your...ah...assets hold up, even longer. And if something should happen to me, there are hundreds of other photographers who would come begging for you to work for them the way I’m begging you now. So what do you say, Miss Cunningham? Will you go?”

Miss Cunningham was silent for a while. She thought of many things: she thought of the fourteen payments she still owed on her Lightning-Bird; she thought of the bill from her dressmaker that had come in the morning’s mail; she thought of the gray hair she’d discovered behind her left ear the day before yesterday; she thought of all the frustrated suitors she would leave behind her if she decided to go; but most of all, she thought of an old saying she’d heard once upon a time—

In the country of the blind, the one·eyed man is King.

Miss Cunningham did a little paraphrasing: In the country of the breastless, the one-breasted ‘Woman is Queen.

And I’ve got two of them! she thought.

“I’ll go,” she said.

“Well,” a tall, flat-chested girl said, when they stepped into the gleaming studio, “I see you found one.”

“Miss Cunningham, this is Miss Flynn,” Jerrold said.

“Miss Flynn, this is Miss Cunningham, your new co·worker.”

For a girl who would probably end up being an old maid before she was thirty, Miss Cunningham thought, Miss Flynn was surprisingly lacking in the mousiness usually associated with such unfortunate creatures. Certainly, if she was in the least disconcerted by Miss Cunningham’s obvious mammalian superiority, she did not show it. She stared for a moment, but that was all. But then, so had everyone else Miss Cunningham had seen on the mobile walkways that had transported her and Jerrold from the time travel agency to the Godfrey building. Especially the women, all of whom were flat-chested, but not quite as flat-chested as Miss Flynn.

Jerrold, clearly, was eager to get started. He handed Miss Cunningham and Miss Flynn a couple of flimsy garments that vaguely resembled half-slips, indicated a pair of dressing rooms, and told them to change. When Cunningham returned to the studio proper, feeling a little too obvious now, Miss Flynn was already there, and had taken her place on one of the two pedestals that stood before a life-size painting of a 2562 boudoir. At Jerrold’s request, Miss Cunningham took her place on the other pedestal. She and Miss Flynn were inches apart now, and Miss Cunningham noticed that they were practically the same height. Their hair was the same color, too, and they had the same kind of noses...There was, Miss Cunningham realized with a start, an amazing resemblance between them. With one exception, of course. No, two exceptions. Could this resemblance, Miss Cunningham wondered, have anything to do with the “quality” Jerrold had alluded to in the 1960 cocktail bar? And then the logical answer virtually leaped at her, and she almost burst forth with delighted laughter. Why of course!

After taking a dozen shots from various angles, Jerrold told the two girls to step down. “Tomorrow we’ll start on something different,” he said. “I’ve been assigned to do the tri-di’s for an article shortly to appear in International Geographic, called ‘Sexual Customs of Certain Mid-twentieth Century Cultures.’ You’ll be the motif, of course, Miss Cunningham. And we’ll use you, Miss Flynn for contrast.”

Miss Cunningham glowed, The future, certainly, spelled “success” for her. The world of 2562 was her apple, and it tasted better with each bite. “When will the pictures you just took be published?” she asked,.

“Very soon,” Jerrold said, “I went way past my deadline, trying to find someone like you, You’ll find them in one of the feature ads in Svelte.”

So for the next few weeks Miss Cunningham haunted the automatic newsstands. After a while she began to think that the next Svelte would never appear, but finally, stopping at a sidewalk stand one brisk November morning on her way to the studio, she saw the brand new issue iridescing behind one of the dispenser windows, just begging for someone to buy it.

She inserted the correct change, and when the magazine plopped into the tray, she picked it up and riffled through its pages to the ads. The one she wanted was on the inside of the back cover. It was a full page job, and for a moment her three dimensional made even her gasp. As she had guessed, it was a breast-aid ad—

But not exactly the kind of breast-aid she’d had in mind.

Miss Cunningham was not a person usually susceptible to insights, but standing there in the November street, two of them smote her simultaneously right between the eyes:

(1) Blaming “accumulated hereditary effects” for the decline and fall of the female bust was ridiculous in view of the relentless fact that woman had always tried to please man since time began and would go on trying to please him till time ended: when he preferred big breasts, she would grow them, and when he ceased to prefer them, she would cease growing them.

(2) If there were such things as breast-reducing aids in 2562, as the ad in Svelte would seem to indicate, it might be the better part of valor to take advantage of them, because in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is never King: he is the well-paid freak in the sideshow the monster hucksters hire to promulgate their wares.

Miss Cunningham glanced once more at the big BEFORE beneath her picture, then closed the magazine and threw it in the gutter.