

#### **FUTURE FUTURES**

## A story by Donald J. Bingle

This story originally appeared in <u>Apollo's Daughters</u>, Edited by Bryan Young (Silence in the Library 2014); Reprinted by The Infinite Bard (www.theinfinitebard.com 2020)

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Published by 54°40' Orphyte, Inc.

#### **Future Futures**

### by Donald J. Bingle

"You've caused untold damage to the economy. You understand that, don't you?" Senator Lantis scowled at her like the crotchety old grandfather he surely was, his steel-gray eyes fiercely intent below his overly bushy eyebrows, but Grace Pilking did not flinch.

"I understand nothing of the sort," she replied from the witness table. In front of her, an array of unsympathetic politicians spread out behind a massive, curved, court-like bench in the Senate hearing room. Along with Chairman Lantis, all eleven members of the Subcommittee for Banking and Securities were in attendance for the session, which was being televised live, and not just on CSPAN. "Future Futures is merely a reporting service. We simply collect and relay information to our customers."

"A bit redundant, don't you think?" interrupted Senator Harrington, her nasal voice shrill and accusatory.

The charge irritated Grace more than it confused her, but her attorney had advised her that the more time spent on preliminaries

and irrelevancies in the testimony, the less time there would be for on-camera vilification of her company, Future Futures, Ltd., and the less likely she would slip up and give the newshounds a juicy sound-bite for the evening news. "I'm sorry, Senator Harrington, but which part do you find redundant? The collecting or the reporting of information? Surely the information is not, itself, redundant."

Senator Harrington exhaled a "hummphhh" with such force that a low whistle from her impressive nose accompanied the sounds of her vocal chords. "The name of your company, Ms. Pilking. Future Futures. Isn't that like referring to an 'orange orange?'" The Senator smiled, as if she had just said something clever, and not something that had come from a commercial for fruit-flavored cereal (Trix is for kids!). Grace guessed that the Botoxed bat was old enough to remember the line "raspberry red, lemon yellow, and orange orange," but too senile at this point to recollect its origin. More importantly, Grace could afford to be condescending to Harrington, ranking minority member of the Subcommittee or no. She knew for a fact the contentious biddy would be dead from a brain aneurysm by the end of the month.

"The moniker for our business is directed at our principal customer base and is, if you will, a minor play on words." Grace

paused for half a moment to see who would interrupt next, but when no one jumped in, she continued on in an effort to kill as much time as possible. "As I'm sure members of the Subcommittee know quite well, not only do the financial and securities markets of this great nation and the rest of the world trade stocks and bonds of individual companies, but they also trade in commodities, and more importantly on 'futures,' which are, simply put, contracts to buy or sell certain commodities or certain baskets of securities, like the Dow Jones Industrials or the S&P 500, at a fixed date in the future. These contracts are known as 'futures' in the industry."

Senator Lantis attempted to regain control of his hearing.

"That's how the investment banking firms make their oversized profits, betting on the future price of gold or pork bellies or interest rates with other people's money, rather than actually producing anything, right?"

Questions ending with "right?" or "isn't that correct?" were among the red flags her attorney had warned her about, but Grace knew instinctively not to let other people put words in her mouth. "Certainly people invest in companies or ask companies to manage their money in the hope and expectation that those entrusted with their funds will seek to make a profit. Whether those profits are large

or small, I leave to the expertise of those investing and to the invisible hand of the free market. Farmers can also benefit greatly, for instance, by being able to hedge against future risks of the marketplace by selling some or all of their crop at a fixed price ahead of the harvest, rather than take whatever unknown price may be available at a future date. Futures merely expand this concept to a wide variety of physical and financial products."

A nasal whine pierced the hearing room again. "You still haven't explained the redundancy in your name."

Grace wanted desperately to roll her eyes, but her PR consultant had warned her that never looked good on camera. "At Future Futures, we simply provide information about the future so that futures can be traded on the future, just like any other financial index or commodity."

Connor Swail, the esteemed Senator from the great state of Ohio, pushed his considerable bulk into the fray. "But your company has resisted regulation from the Commodities Futures Trading Commission."

"That's because we don't handle contracts for baskets of commodities or financial instruments. That's why our name is a minor play on words directed at our customers. We merely report information, like other indexes."

Senator Winston Chu piped up. "Information about the future?"

"Yes."

"Predictions, you mean," he pressed.

"No."

"But, how can that be, Ms. Pilking? No one can go to the future."

Grace smiled. "We go into the future with each passing second, Senator."

Chu flushed. "The future becomes the present with each passing second," scolded the Senator. "Surely, you're not trying to tell this Subcommittee that you travel in time."

Graced dialed up a broad smile and a brief, artificial chuckle. "Not at all, Senator. Not only would time travel be a practical impossibility—though, perhaps not a theoretical impossibility—under the laws of physics as we currently understand them, but I've been advised that such travel has been declared illegal by the United Nations, as well as …" She glanced down at a piece of paper being slid over the table top to her by her attorney, "… Senator Harrington's

home state of Wyoming, as well as Indiana and Arkansas, not to mention the municipalities of Santa Clara, Salt Lake City, and Chicago, all of which apparently have nothing better to do than legislate against things they neither control nor understand." Her attorney kicked her under the table. He was right. That last phrase was kind of snippy. It wouldn't play well in, well, Wyoming, Indiana, Arkansas and the various offending municipalities.

Connor Swail took his turn on attack again. "So, your company is a fraud, then. You admit this is all a scam."

Grace feigned shock and did her best to let a tone of contained indignation color her pre-planned response. "Not at all, Senator. I resent your attempt to smear a fine company and taxpayer, a company which employs over twelve hundred hardworking, dedicated, and honest employees."

Swail was like a dog with a chew toy, slathered with bacon grease. He just wouldn't let go. "Yet, as I understand it, you provide detailed information about the future to your clients, who pay considerable amounts of money for such prognostications, yet you admit that you have not ... and cannot ... travel to the future to collect such information."

Grace shook her head, her eyebrows tilted inward. "I'm sorry, Senator. I don't follow the causal connection. Statisticians, historians, bureaucracies, and storytellers all collect, compile, and report information about the past every single day and they don't travel in time to get it."

"But, but ..." Swail turned so purple, Grace wondered for a moment if he was going to have an aneurysm instead of Harrington. "...but, it's the *past*."

Grace turned her head slightly and nodded. "So?" "So, it's already happened!"

Grace shrugged. Despite the emphasis accompanying the senator's declamation, it was a trite and trivial observation.

"According to certain quantum theories, Senator, time is static ... fixed. Everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen, already is. It all exists simultaneously. We just perceive it one second at a time due to our own natural limitations. It's not like it isn't already there to be perceived."

Swail gestured with his hands, reaching, grasping, his fingers twitching almost as if he had Grace's neck within his grip and was strangling the life out of her. "But we have records of past events.

Documents, photos, tape recordings, physical evidence ... memories. We don't see the past."

She pursed her lips. "Actually, we see into the past all the time." She pointed toward the window to her left, heavily curtained to cut off the bright sunshine so that it could be replaced by the hot lights of the television crew. "The sunlight creeping around the edges of that curtain left the sun about 8.3 minutes ago. When you see the sun in the sky, you are looking 8.3 minutes into the past. When you look farther away, you look farther into the past. So when we see a comet slam into Jupiter or a star go supernovae, that event has already occurred. The Hubble telescope can see billions of years into the past. With a powerful enough telescope and sufficient distance, someone out there looking at Earth could watch everything in human history occur as if in real time, except from our point of view it would already be ancient history."

"Except," whined Harrington, "for the fact that the universe is just six thousand years old."

Grace took several deep breaths before responding.

Harrington, by her own beliefs, would be finding out the answer to that one soon enough. There was no reason for Grace to be nasty about it. "I understand you believe that, Senator Harrington, and I am

not about to argue theology with you. I believe that the universe is billions of years old and that there is substantial factual evidence to support my belief ..."

Harrington interjected. "You probably believe in evolution, too."

She gritted her teeth. Things were getting off track. "Like many scientific principles, I believe that evolution occurs, that it has occurred and is now occurring, that it is a fact in our world, whether one believes in it or not. Our belief is not necessary to its existence."

"Atheist!" spat Harrington.

More deep breaths. "Under the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Senator, my personal religious beliefs are none of your business, nor this Subcommittee's proper concern. I will say that I personally find it more pleasing to think of a God so powerful and so clever as to create a universe with fundamental principles of physics and chemistry He knows will lead, through a process of quantum mechanics, astrophysical occurrences, chemical reactions, and evolutionary changes, to human beings capable of venerating Him and His creations, rather than one who creates everything 'poof,' like a magician. But, in respect to your beliefs, I also admit to the possibility of a God so

powerful, so clever, and with such a sense of humor, that He could create a universe 'poof' and fill it with principles of physics and chemistry and evidence of the past so convincing that it would look, just for sport, like it was billions of years old, even though He created it all only six thousand years ago."

"Blasphemer," muttered Harrington.

"Scientist," corrected Grace. "And humorist. We are created in His image."

Senator Lantis banged his gavel twice. "Enough, ladies, please. Let's leave evolution and religion out of the discussion, shall we?"

Grace nodded once. "Of course. After all, I don't believe I am the one who brought it up."

Senator Harrington scowled in the Chairman's direction, but said nothing.

Senator Lantis continued. "Before we got off track, I believe Senator Swail was asking you about how you could provide information about the future without traveling there ..."

"And you side-stepped the question," interrupted Swail, "by all this nonsense about looking into the past because light travels at a finite speed. Then you riled up Senator Harrington on the age of the universe."

Grace said nothing, doing her best to simply look innocent.

"We're not children," whined Swail. "We understand things like the speed of light and that nothing can go faster than that. But that doesn't have anything to do with you selling information purportedly collected from the future."

"I respectfully disagree, Senator Swail, both on the facts and on the logic," replied Grace. "Quantum mechanics, most specifically quantum entanglement, suggests, with observational evidence, that two entangled particles remain instantaneously entangled no matter the distance between them. It's called 'action at a distance' or 'spooky action.' To put it simply, if you reverse the charge of one entangled particle, the other will reverse instantaneously no matter where it is, meaning that the first particle 'communicates,' if you will, its status across the universe at faster than the speed of light.

Moreover, if you smash sub-atomic particles, they can throw quantum constituents both forward and *backward* in time. Both of these theories indicate that communication from the future to the present is possible."

"I saw some of this gobbledy-gook on your website," volunteered Senator Chu. "Couldn't make sense of it then; can't now. But one thing did pop out at me about it."

"Yes?" said Grace, as blandly as possible.

"Two theories, but no indication of which one underlies the technology you purport to use to predict the future, or whether it's a combination of both."

Grace nodded acknowledgment. "Our actual engineering specifications are proprietary, of course."

"Patented?" asked Steven Thomas, the Senator from Alaska. He rarely spoke up at Subcommittee hearings. Some said that his solid Republican majority back home meant he didn't have to grandstand to get re-elected. Less magnanimous wags suggested he didn't speak much because he knew he wasn't that bright.

"Patents would require us to reveal the engineering and theoretical underpinnings fully, Senator Thomas. We believe it is in our best interests from a corporate and business perspective to simply maintain such proprietary information in strictest confidence. Even those who actually work on the data collection know only those parts of the mechanical process, and the underlying math and science, which is essential to their own particular job function. Only a

very few senior officers and scientific personnel know or have access to the complete information."

Senator Swail took another swing. "A very convenient approach if you were running a scam, this not letting anyone know how the process works, so no one can rat you out. Just make up anything you want about the future, sell it for whatever you can get, and don't explain to anyone anything about how the process works."

Grace furrowed her brow. "We wouldn't have clients very long, Senator, if we were charging exorbitant rates and feeding them far future folderol." She warmed up to her canned diatribe on the topic. She had to face this kind of question every single day with potential customers. "Most of our informational reveals are about the near future and all such reveals which have come and gone in terms of the future becoming the present have been borne out with 100% accuracy." Her words came fast and strong. "This isn't statistical prediction, it isn't probability analysis. It isn't," she said, turning her head to look at Harrington, "divination or witchcraft or guesswork. This is data mining the future."

"So you know everything that's going to happen before it happens?" interjected Senator Chu, a broad smirk of disbelief on his face. "What am I going to say next?"

"That's not how it works," snapped Grace, before her attorney unobtrusively placed his hand on her arm, subtly reminding her to calm down. "If you read beyond the 'gobbledy-gook' on our website, you would know that we do explain the broad outlines of our collection effort, and ..." she turned to look at Senator Laskin, "that it has everything to do with the conversation earlier about collecting information from the past by looking at things with telescopes."

Senator Laskin rolled his eyes. Apparently he was less concerned about how it would look on television than Grace's attorney.

Grace plowed ahead. "To see light waves from the past, you merely point your telescope to where something is, or, more accurately, where something was the appropriate number of light-seconds, light-minutes, or light-years ago, then record the visible light, or even the frequencies of radiation outside of the visible spectrum, like x-rays or gamma rays or ultra-violet light." She hesitated a moment to see if anyone looked too bewildered yet, then continued. "To gather information from the future, you simply point your collection array at the place where that item will be in the future and gather such information as is broadcast."

Senator Chu screwed up his face. "But by the time that information gets here, won't we by definition be in the future? I mean won't that future then be the present?"

"Not if the information is transmitted at faster-than-light speed."

Chu squinted his eyes shut and shook his head. "But even assuming communication by tachyons ..."

"Ah," interrupted Grace with a smile, "so you did read a bit more of the website."

"... which are postulated as being able to move faster than the speed of light, or by entangled quantum particles moving backward in time, how would you know where to point?"

Grace shrugged. This was the simple part. "Orbital mechanics. We know where the Earth will be in the future."

"Simple as that?" asked Swain, his tone still suspicious.

"Nothing simple about orbital mechanics. It's much more complicated than when looking at the position of the planets in the solar system from above." She could see mouths pursing, brows furrowing, and eyes squinting—all classic indicators of confusion. She had to simple it down. "Does anyone here know what the term 'retrograde' means, when talking about the night sky?"

To her surprise, Harrington spoke up. "Isn't that a term used in astrology, for when the planets move backwards?" Of course, the church-lady read her horoscope. Talk about blasphemy.

Grace simply smiled and tilted her head in a kind of half-nod. "Astronomy, actually. It's when the planets seem to change direction from our perspective, even though they don't really. It's caused by the interaction of their movement and our movement. The word 'planet' actually derives from the word for 'wanderer,' because, unlike the stars, those pinpoints of light that ancient man saw wandered about the sky in complicated and little-understood patterns."

"Go on," prompted Laskin, consulting his watch and scrunching up his nose as he noted the time.

"Well, we sit here on the Earth, rotating around its axis—and wobbling just a bit as it does that—revolving around the sun in a less than perfectly circular orbit, while the sun twirls around the center of the Milky Way galaxy, which is itself accelerating away from the center of the universe as it twirls." Eyes were beginning to glaze again. "Let's just say it takes a lot of math to point our collector array at the precise time at the spot on the Earth which will be transmitting data on a particular day in the future and that some days are able to

be captured by us and some aren't due to the configuration of the cosmos and our equipment."

"But who's transmitting?" demanded Swail.

"And why don't our SETI receivers, the big dishes searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence, pick it up as a discernible signal?" asked Chu.

She chose to answer the second question first. "SETI doesn't pick it up because it's perceived as part of the background radiation noise of the universe. It's encoded to look like that if you don't have the decoding algorithms, which gets to Senator Swail's point. We're transmitting the information, Senator."

"Mankind?"

She chuckled. "Future Futures, Ltd. On transmission dates, we broadcast an encoded signal to where Earth was in the past at a pre-planned time. The signal has a very limited length, like a burst transmission from a spy agency bug, and so can only contain limited information."

"I'd like to see that data," grumbled Senator Swail.

"I'm sure you would," she replied, "but our customers pay a significant price for such information."

"All part of the scam," Swail muttered.

"Our customers seem satisfied with the results. None of them have ever complained."

Senator Laskin looked at his watch again. "Let's move this along. If you can't or won't show us the data, you can at least tell us what types of questions are asked."

"That information is proprietary as well, as it might identify our precise client base. As I'm sure Senator Chu knows, however, from reading our website, the broad categories of information can be readily discerned. For example, a commodities futures trader might be keenly interested in the price of gold in the future. Same for other commodities and financial indices, as well as future information about politics, economic prosperity, and the like. We have a standard list of data points, one hundred to be precise, which we call the Future Futures 100. You can subscribe for all or some portion of such information. We also have a series of broader questions which we rotate through on a periodic basis. Each day we also broadcast a random fact about the current world that we believe may be of interest to our past subscribers. Our contracts provide the necessary funds for us to be able to assure current subscribers that we will be able to continue to broadcast such information into the foreseeable

future. Whenever the 'stars align,' if you will, we collect such information from the future us and report it to our current clients."

"Which brings us to the current problem." pressed Swail.

Grace sniffed. "You see it as a problem, Senator. To us at Future Futures, Ltd., it is simply a piece of data from the future."

"You've caused a market melt-down!"

"We don't control the financial markets, Senator."

"Well, what did you expect to happen when you reported to your clients that the world would end on April 22, 2072?"

"We reported no such thing, Senator."

"The market thinks you did! Are you saying now, for the record, before this Subcommittee and the public, that the market rumor is false, that the world doesn't end on April 22, 2072?"

"I have no idea whether the world ends on April 22, 2072, Senator."

Swail was twitchy with excitement as he pounced. "So, you are admitting that it was all a scam, that you can't collect information from the future."

She tilted her head and looked at him as she would a small child throwing a tantrum over a broken toy. "All I can say, Senator, is that we received no information from that date. Not the standard

components of the Future Futures 100, not answers to the rotating questions, not a random fact. No transmission was received."

Lantis sniffed. "Mechanical failure?"

Grace appreciated the lifeline preventing Swail from an immediate follow-up. "We, of course, ran a thorough diagnostic on our end. The data collection array was fully operational. Of course, we can't say whether there were mechanical issues at the other end."

Swail butted in again. Lantis hadn't held him at bay for long. "What about the 23<sup>rd</sup>? What did you receive from that date?"

"April 23rd was not a scheduled transmission date."

"The 24th?"

Grace sighed. "It doesn't work like that. We can't access every single day. The alignment calculations don't allow for it. But, let me save you some time. We have not received any transmission from any date forward from April 22, 2072. We don't know why. Perhaps the world ended, or perhaps mankind retreated into virtual reality to live forever. Perhaps we evolved beyond needing or wanting to transmit such information, or someone is blocking or sabotaging the signal. Or, perhaps, just perhaps, a future version of this Subcommittee has prevented such transmissions from

occurring, whether out of genuine concern or for its own political ends." She paused just a moment as a wave of verbal consternation erupted from the assembled Senators, before continuing. "It is not the place of Future Futures to speculate. It is our place simply to provide data to our customers for a price."

Swail snorted. "You mean, you still have customers?"

Grace nodded. "We do. Some of our access dates in the future occur prior to April 22, 2072, and, of course, we are still attempting to receive transmissions from dates future to the loss of signal. It is fair to say that our business has, however, been materially adversely affected by the lack of data. This investigation, as well as spurious class action suits by various groups claiming to be aggrieved by our reporting of the facts regarding our data collection efforts and the lack of data from 2072 forward, have, however, been distracting and expensive."

"How long do you expect to remain in business?" asked Swail, a gleam in his eye.

Grace gave him a weary smile. "At least until 2072, Senator, according to my information. Once the present meets that future, I can't say. At Future Futures, we don't guess. After 2072, you're on your own. We're all on our own." She was tired, more tired than she

believed possible. The emotional drain of testifying, being keyed up, constantly on edge so as not to make a mistake, took its toll. She barely muttered the next phrase, but the microphones picked it up and broadcast it to the world. Despite all of her preparation, all of the legal coaching, all of her expended effort, her next words became the sound-bite of the long day of hearings.

"God only knows what happens then."

For the first time all day, Senator Harrington smiled.

That's when Grace knew she'd made a mistake. That's when she knew the future of Future Futures, Ltd., even though she had no hard data to confirm it. Her minor slip of the tongue wouldn't be the cause of the company's demise, any more than Senator Harrington's aneurysm would be the company's salvation. But Future Futures was all about knowing ... and some people didn't want to know. They wanted to believe.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Best known as the world's top-ranked player of classic role-playing games for the last fifteen years of the last century, Donald J. Bingle is an oft-published author in the science fiction, fantasy, horror, thriller, steampunk, romance, and comedy genres, with a half dozen published novels (Forced Conversion, GREENSWORD, Net Impact, Frame Shop, The Love-Haight Case Files, and Wet Work) and about fifty stories, many in DAW themed anthologies and tie-in anthologies, including stories in The Crimson Pact, Steampunk'd, Imaginary Friends, Fellowship Fantastic, Zombie Raccoons and Killer Bunnies, Time Twisters, Front Lines, Slipstreams, Gamer Fantastic, Transformers Legends, Search for Magic (Dragonlance), If I Were An Evil Overlord, Blue Kingdoms: Mages & Magic, Civil War Fantastic, Future Americas, All Hell Breaking Loose, The Dimension Next Door, Sol's Children, Historical Hauntings, and Fantasy Gone Wrong. A number of his stories have been collected in his Writer on Demand™ Series, including <u>Tales</u> of Gamers and Gaming, Tales of Humorous Horror, Tales Out of Time, Grim, Fair e-Tales, Tales of an Altered Past Powered by Romance, Horror, and Steam, Not-So-Heroic Fantasy, and Shadow Realities.

Donald J. Bingle is a member of the International Thriller Writers, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Horror Writers Association, International Association of Media Tie-In Writers, and Origins Game Fair Library. More on Don and his writing can be found at <a href="https://www.donaldjbingle.com">www.donaldjbingle.com</a>.

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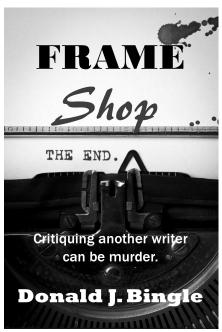
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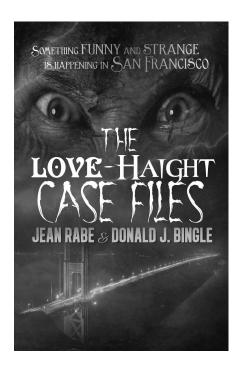


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