

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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YOU WERE RIGHT, JOE

By J. T. McINTOSH

*You had it taped all the way,
pal—but how come you didn't
say this would happen to me?*

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

I CAN'T be sure you're getting this, Joe, but you've been right about so many of the other things, I guess you're very likely right about that, too.

You remember you figured that I wouldn't just materialize naked in the middle of a city street. You said I'd be a genuine human being of the time, correctly dressed and with some kind of personal history. But you warned me —

and I appreciate this, Joe; you didn't have to warn me, but you did it — you warned me that there was no telling I'd be like *me*.

I may as well admit now I wasn't happy about that. I never was much to look at and there wasn't any danger of my becoming the heavyweight champion of the world. But I'd got used to being the way I was, and I didn't

altogether like the idea of seeing a stranger's face every time I looked in the mirror.

If I'd known what I was going to be like, I'd never have done it. I'm sorry, Joe, but even for you I couldn't have faced it. Now that I'm here, though, I'll just have to make the best of it.

You were right, Joe, all along the line. Nobody ran screaming when I got here and I haven't been arrested. I was fitted into a spot that was made for me, dressed in the right clothes, able to speak the right language. I've got a name. And just as you said, I'm different. *Different?* That's like saying Gina Lollobrigida isn't like Aunt Phoebe!

When I first got here, I looked around, of course. I saw people walking about and colored buildings with hardly any straight lines in them. It took no more than a glance to show me this was a pretty advanced civilization, many centuries ahead of our time.

Before I did any more looking around, I did the second obvious thing. I looked down at what I could see of me.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, Joe. You know those ads: *You, too, can have a body like mine?* Well, that was me — golden tan, rippling muscles, chest a mile wide. Yeah, me Tarzan. I wore very short, tight

trunks and shoes, that was all, and believe me, I was scared stiff of myself.

WELL, you warned me, Joe. Funny, I was prepared to find myself very young. I even took the risk of finding myself very old. But I never saw myself as Superman. I can't seem to get used to the idea at all.

It wasn't that everybody around here was like this. Far from it. They all seemed young and fit and good-looking, but not big and not strong. I could see right away by the attention I got that I was something special.

And it scared the life out of me. Some people wouldn't mind finding themselves looking like a Greek god. Me, I'm not the type. I've spent my life not being noticed — you know that, Joe — and I wasn't cut out to be a symbol of manhood. I don't think I'll ever get used to it.

Anyway, Joe, apart from this, everything seems to be all right. And I'd like to say right away that I think it's safe for you to come along, too, if you want to. You never said you were sending me as a guinea pig, to see whether it was safe to go yourself, but I'm not completely dumb. I was ready to take the gamble just the same.

If you come, you'll probably also find yourself a gorgeous hunk

of man. You'll be able to figure it out better than me, but I guess maybe it's because the world we live in makes us tougher than the people living in *this* world have to be. When we show up here, we come out a lot bigger and stronger than we ever dreamed we were.

Well, maybe you won't mind being Superman, Joe. Come to think of it, I guess it'll suit you fine.

It's difficult to explain what I know and don't know about this world. My name's Elan Rock, by the way. I know *that*. I know the language, and though I haven't used it yet, I'm sure that when I do it'll come out just right. I know how to open doors and operate what they use instead of phones here and what to say instead of "Good morning" and how to do what they call reading and where I can get their idea of a drink.

I know everything like that. But what kind of society this is and how it's governed and what year it is and why there are no square buildings and why everybody walks instead of using cars, I don't know.

Now I'll have to break off for a while, Joe. When I'm used to this, I'll be able to talk to you no matter what I'm doing. Meantime, I don't want to make any big mistakes in my first few

minutes here in the future. I'll call you again soon.

I KNOW a lot more now, Joe. I've seen myself in a mirror and it's just as I thought, only worse. I've got the face of Apollo to go with the figure of Charles Atlas. I'd tell you more about how I look, but you wouldn't believe it.

The way I figure it, I couldn't just jump into the future and be somebody who'd never existed before. Elan Rock had to half-exist for twenty-five years so that I could come shooting up from the Dark Ages and *be* him.

I think you said something like that once, Joe, only I couldn't digest all you were telling me in such a short time before I got started.

You were right, too, about my reaching a place which was just within my limit of comprehension, a place just short of an environment that would make me go crazy.

And yet it's a lot simpler than ours. I know the whole code of laws, for example. I happened to see them a few minutes ago, over the door of what passes here for a Department of Justice. Translated, they go something like this:

You mustn't annoy other people. And if you're other people, you mustn't allow yourself to be annoyed too easily.



YOU WERE RIGHT, JOE

That's all there is to it. That code is taken to cover murder and stealing and other things like that which most people would agree are crimes. You can kill yourself if you like — that's no crime. The only sex crimes are acts that would break one of these two laws. And notice that it's a crime to be annoyed too easily.

You know, I got a respect for these people when I realized these were the only laws they needed. It wouldn't be any good trying to run *our* society under a pair of laws like that. Herb Jones would prove in court that he was annoyed by long underwear hanging out in Homer Smith's back yard. And a smart lawyer would prove that Herb Jones hadn't been too easily annoyed. So, according to the law, Herb Jones would get heavy damages.

You can give people a tremendous amount of freedom if you know they won't abuse it. That's how things must be here.

I was just beginning to get used to the idea of being Apollo when I hit snag number two.

I'm trying to suspend judgment about this, Joe. Naturally, morals differ in different societies. All the same, it gave me my second shock when a little dark girl, pretty as anything, took my hand and — well, gave me to under-

stand that she expected me to go up to her apartment and make love to her.

I smiled and shook my head, and she was obviously surprised and hurt, but what could I do? It's bad enough suddenly becoming a beefcake king without being in a place where sex is so free and open that — hell, you remember how I used to get all red and stutter when I had to talk to a girl!

It was only after the little brunette had gone on, her lovely straight back a living exclamation point, that I realized I could have politely thanked her and explained that I kept getting such propositions and a man can spread himself only so far and — you know what I mean.

I'll try that next time. I'm uneasily convinced that there's going to be a next time, maybe in five minutes. When it happens, I'll . . .

SORRY I broke off like that, Joe.

Before we go any further, we'd better have an understanding about the power over me that you say you have. You told me that if you didn't hear from me, if I held out on you, you could do something and I'd die. Frankly, I don't believe it, Joe. I think you said that just to keep me in line.

I don't think you can do any-

thing to me now any more than you can talk to me. You explained why I could communicate with you and why you couldn't communicate with me. I didn't understand what you said, but you were very convincing, anyway.

You weren't very convincing, though, when you said you could still control me while I'm here and you're still there. Didn't you know, Joe, that people can sometimes tell the truth from a lie, even when they don't understand either of them?

But all the same, Joe, I'm not running out on you. I'm going to keep reporting to you honestly what's going on.

Only if I'm wrong and you can reach clear up to here, Lord knows how many hundred years in the future, don't put the bite on me simply because I cut off for a few minutes. I may have a good reason.

Like just then. You can't blame me for cutting off that way. Something so screwy just happened that, for a moment, I thought the time-jump had driven me nuts.

Along the street came a half dozen savages in animal skins. I looked at the other people around for my cue. They seemed surprised but not frightened. So I guessed it was just an act, some stunt or other, maybe part of a

parade, and tried to look surprised but not frightened, like everybody else.

It was the savages who were frightened. They were yelling and running and glancing behind them. One carrying a stone club stopped in front of a woman a few yards from me, said something and raised his club.

Sooner or later, I had to find out if I was as strong as I looked. I stepped in and let the caveman have it on the chin. At the last second I realized that if I gave him all I had, I'd probably break his neck, so I pulled the punch.

What do you know, Joe — I knocked a caveman twenty-five yards! It must have been all of that before he stopped staggering back and went down. He was plenty tough, because even after that, he wasn't out.

On the other hand, neither he nor his companions seemed to have any urge to come at me with their stone clubs.

"Oh, you wonderful man!" said the girl I'd saved from a fatal headache. I'd give her a better line if I could, but that's the only way I can translate it without the various suggestions which accompanied it.

OTHER people in the street were hurrying over. The savages exchanged quick glances, turned tail and ran. The man I'd

floored was last in line for a while, but before they disappeared from sight, he had pushed past the others and was in front again. That's leadership for you.

I shrugged and walked on, pretending this sort of thing happened every day. Nobody stopped me, though there was excited conversation behind me. I didn't look back.

I don't know what that incident was all about. I'd have stopped and talked about it, only I didn't dare.

Maybe not everybody is as civilized as the people in this city. There's no law that children should go to school, for instance, so maybe the morons and drones of this community go outside and live as savages. Maybe there are people who don't believe in civilization. Maybe . . .

Your guess is as good as mine, Joe. Probably better.

There's a park beside me now, and I'd go inside and stop to consider things, if not for one thing.

It seems very likely to me that if girls make advances in the open street here, the parks must really be something for shy young guys like me. Flustering, to say the least.

I've got a lot of things to find out, and sooner or later I've got to take the risk of talking to people. The trouble is, how can I

be natural when I feel as unnatural as a kitten laying eggs? Can I go up to the first pretty girl I see and say, "Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise"?

I can't. She would.

Nevertheless, I'll have to talk to somebody the first time I see an opportunity.

There must be some kind of festival going on. Here's another procession — about twenty people, coming along the side of the park. I can't make out what they're supposed to be, but they're quite a sight. Like how Hollywood in our time would represent the people of the future. The women in brass bikinis and the men carrying enormous rayguns. And all as clean as if they'd been washed in the newest detergent. They look a bit puzzled. Maybe they've lost their way.

I'm slipping into the park in case they ask me. If I keep moving, the local talent won't get a chance to take a good look at me and decide I'm just what they always wanted.

Looks like I was right about the parks. It shouldn't be so unexpected, I guess. It was in our time that necking in public came in. This is only a step further.

Now what in hell's this?

BELIEVE it or not, Joe, I just killed a saber-toothed tiger! I know that's hard to swallow,

Joe. There were three of them, worse than anything you ever saw in a book or movie. They weren't really saber-toothed tigers—they were something there isn't a name for. Perhaps nobody yet dug up a skeleton of one of these things.

There were these three tigers and half a dozen couples and me within thirty yards or so. I didn't have much time to take a good squint at the beasts. The biggest of them came at me. I guess he figured that once I was out of the way, the other twelve packed lunches could be picked up without any argument. He was right at that.

I'm not boasting, Joe—I stood where I was because I was too scared to run. I told you I'm big, but not compared with a saber-toothed tiger.

He leaped at me, and I remembered how Tarzan used to throw himself on tigers' backs and get a half-Nelson grip on them. It didn't seem too practical, however.

I dodged the first rush. Somebody threw a knife at the tiger and nearly hit me. I got hold of it and faced the beast again. I didn't think for a moment that I was going to be able to do anything with the knife, which was a little folding one with a three-inch blade, but when you're practically naked and have to defend

yourself against a wild animal, you use a wooden sword if that's the only thing available.

The other specimens held off, waiting to see what happened. All the women were screaming, which helped, I guess. These creatures didn't seem to know any more about human beings than human beings knew about them.

The next time the tiger came at me, I ripped his side open as he passed, and from the roars he let loose, I began to think for the first time that maybe I *would* be alive in five minutes' time, after all.

It was that knife. I don't know yet whether it was just sharp or if it had some other quality about it, but it cut through the beast's flesh like water. And though a two-inch-deep cut all along his side didn't by any means put him out of action, he didn't like it.

Why I had a chance, Joe, was because the poor ugly tiger, with all his strength, didn't have reaction-time worth a damn. I could run around him like a speedboat circling a scow. Talk about telegraphing punches—this creature didn't telegraph them, he sent long letters about them by pony express.

I slashed the tendons about his neck and it was no more dangerous than crossing a busy street at midday—less, probably. He struggled a lot and he took a

long time to die, but in the end he did die.

I turned to the other tigers. They had seen what had happened, however, and showed unexpected intelligence by running as hard as they could go for a clump of trees two hundred yards away. The beasts disappeared among them and no one was sorry.

The six couples who were still around rushed up to congratulate me, pat me on the back and say I was wonderful. Two of the girls kissed me, and their escorts (I guess that's the word) didn't seem to mind. I didn't mind too much myself. In time, I think I could get used to this world.

But not to the sudden appearance of three unfriendly prehistoric monsters.

WE got out of the park without wasting any time about it, just in case what had happened before might happen again.

I found myself walking with a man and girl who talked so easily that I couldn't let the chance slip. There's no reserve among these people, Joe, and if they're surprised at the things you ask, they hide it politely.

It seemed that the arrival of the three tigers in the park had been as big a shock to them as it was to me. They weren't used to things like that. None of them

showed any desire to become used to them, either.

So the sudden arrival of three prehistoric monsters wasn't a normal hazard of living in this world.

The couple I talked to had been as frightened as the rest, but they got over it pretty quickly. They're not nervous, these people. Put them in danger and they're frightened; remove the danger and they shrug and say they're glad that's over.

Maybe that means there isn't much mental illness about. So why the savages?

These two people were soon willing to talk about anything at all, and a casual remark by the girl about my being alone gave me a chance to find out about the sex setup here.

Seems what they've done is separate love and sex. If you want someone, you don't have to pretend to yourself and her and everybody else that you're in love with her. On the other hand, if you're in love with a girl, you aren't necessarily limited to her and her only.

It's not so very different from things in our time, except they don't kid themselves and each other about it here. There's still love and there's still marriage, of course, but whether you're in love or not, or married or not, the usual thing is to have a fairly full sex life. Unless you don't want to.

And all I have to do if I want to be left alone — which I do, at least meantime — is wear a silver bracelet on my right arm. Which I'm now doing. One of my new friends gave it to me.

I didn't stay with the people I'd met in the park; I slipped away from them as soon as I could. It seems to me the best way of gaining information is getting a little at a time from different people. That way I won't reveal the full extent of my ignorance to anybody, just little bits of it.

I'm out of the park now and back on the main streets. There shouldn't be any saber-toothed tigers roaming around loose out here.

These don't look like main streets. I haven't seen a car or plane or truck or bicycle or wheelbarrow. Everything that moves on wheels does so in special underground lanes.

That's the solution to the traffic problem — no traffic, no problem.

I don't precisely know how you get to the underground lanes. That, however, is a question which can wait.

Already I'm getting used to the style of architecture. I think I like it.

Smooth curves have always been more beautiful than straight lines. We built in stone and in

straight lines because we didn't know any better.

Here most of the material is plastic of some kind — buildings, windows, pavement, everything. A moment ago, I bent to feel the pavement when no one was looking. It's perfectly smooth, unblemished, something between stone and rubber, but it's too soft for stone and too hard for rubber. It's obviously molded and it wears well. I couldn't leave any marks on it with my fingernail, though it gave when I pressed it.

In the streets, there's nothing but people walking. People not in any hurry, all very young-looking (maybe the older people use the public transportation). Friendly people, happy people.

I know what you're thinking, Joe — there must be a catch somewhere.

All I know is, so far I haven't seen it. Unless it's the saber-toothed tigers.

THIS is getting beyond a joke. The caveman didn't give me much trouble, I dodged the men with the rayguns and the prehistoric monsters, and I managed to handle the saber-toothed tigers. But if this sort of thing goes on much longer, communication from me is going to stop very suddenly.

You won't like that, Joe, because you'll never know what

happened to me. I won't like it myself. I like this place, except the hazards. I'd like to stay in it.

All in one piece, though.

This time it was men in red coats with the most primitive-looking muskets I ever saw. They were firing them, too. I didn't see anybody hit, but that doesn't mean these men weren't shooting to kill. The guns they were using didn't seem to be accurate to much closer than ninety degrees, which was just as well.

Perhaps somebody mopped them up. I didn't wait to see. Neither did anyone else. We didn't exactly stampede in panic, but we didn't waste any time getting out of range of those muskets.

This wasn't part of any game, Joe. I'm beginning to get ideas about this.

Suppose they do time experiments here. Suppose there's a sort of cowcatcher to brush off people and things who wander across the track. Or suppose there's a sort of time magnetism which pulls all time travelers in here.

How the saber-toothed tigers and the savages with stone clubs could be time travelers, I don't know, but any theory's better than none.

Only how come I landed up just as you said I would, a duly accepted member of this world, dressed in the right clothes and twice the man I was before, while

all the others appear exactly as they were in their own time?

I guess you've got an answer, Joe, as usual. Wish you could pass it on to me.

Here's something else. About a dozen people, men and women, in ball dress. Seventeenth century, I guess. They're blinking and staring around.

Gosh, I thought we invented the lowcut dress. The dress that redhead's wearing wouldn't get past the Hays Office if it was three inches higher. No, that's an exaggeration. It wouldn't get past the Hays Office if it was *four* inches higher.

YOU probably got some of that, Joe.

It was awkward. These refugees from the seventeenth century picked me to talk to. The redhead came straight to me. Her manner was prim and correct, which showed she was a lady, but her eyes were no lady's. They were even more inviting than curious.

I treated her like a sister.

The trouble was, I could understand what these people were saying and no one else who was around could. I found it hard to make up my mind whether to pretend not to understand them or not.

I guessed from the way they blinked and shaded their eyes

that it had been night where they came from. As a matter of fact, they'd been at a ball.

Naturally they wanted to know what it was all about. Before I'd really made up my mind whether to admit I could understand them or not, I found myself answering their questions.

Since this group, unlike the redcoats, was obviously puzzled rather than hostile, they were soon in the center of an excited crowd, chattering away but unable to understand a word.

I kept saying a word or two to the people beside me as well as talking to the strangers, to make it clear which side I was on. People offered me suggestions about what to tell the visitors and I did as they said. No one seemed much surprised that only I could talk to them. Everybody assumed, I guess, that I was a history student or something.

This went on for about ten minutes. Then the strangers winked out like a light and we were left staring stupidly at each other.

I didn't draw attention to myself this time by being the first to go on my way. But when it was clear that nobody suspected I knew any more about the incident than they did, I made my escape as soon as I decently could.

One side issue I'd like to mention is this, Joe. Humanity really

is on the upgrade. Looking at these people from the seventeenth century and comparing them with the people here, I couldn't doubt that there had been a big advance in intelligence, looks, poise and everything else that counts. It was like seeing a mongrel beside a pedigree pup.

Even the redhead, who obviously regarded herself as a beauty, was nothing special compared with any girl in the crowd.

I'd hardly got away from that when, in the very next street, I saw a bullfight, of all things. At first the bull and the matador didn't seem to be aware that things weren't what they'd been a few minutes before.

Then the matador looked up and stared, petrified. The bull nearly got him. He turned just in time, but his mind was no longer on the job. I don't blame him.

The bull and the matador didn't last as long as the visitors from the seventeenth century. They couldn't have been here more than a couple of minutes.

I hope all these people got back where they came from. I liked that redhead, despite her gap teeth. I didn't care for the matador and the bull, but I don't wish them any harm.

JOE, I don't know how to say this.

I've been picked up. It wasn't

an arrest — they made that clear from the start. In fact, they're very interested in me and it looks as if I'm going to have a great time here as the Hercules from the Past.

There were three men and two women, and they apologized for interfering with my liberty. Seems I have the same rights as everybody else here.

But there was desperate urgency, they said. They promised to explain everything later. Meanwhile, they had to insist on taking me somewhere in a hurry.

They knew my name and all about me. They even knew I wasn't the same as I'd been in my own time, because though nothing like this has ever happened, once it had happened it took them less than half an hour to figure out exactly what *had* happened.

Joe, I feel like a heel. But they told me to tell you this. They told me they felt worse about it than I do.

You see, if I'd simply landed up here and made no attempt to get in touch with you, they might never have known what had happened. But this link with you is the thing that's caused all the trouble.

We're holding open a hole in time, Joe. And as long as it's open, anything, anywhere, any-time, can fall right through the hole.

They told me there's a sort of dimensional elastic stretched all through time because of you and me. They can't leave it like that any longer. It could pull time itself apart.

Joe, you always said it was up to everybody to look out for himself. That's what they're doing, so you were right about that, too.

I mean you've been right about so many things that I got them to let me explain what will happen so you'll have a chance to figure a way out.

You see, they're cutting the elastic, Joe. And you know what's going to happen? They say I'll be all right because I'm here and they're going to cut it on my side.

But when it comes shooting back through time, it's going to pack one hell of a wallop.

You've got a few minutes to work it out. You can do it, Joe. After all, look how often you were right.

Good luck, Joe — and take care of yourself.

— J. T. McINTOSH