

The Fortune Cookie Story Project - I write a 2- or 3-page short story based on fortune cookies. This is the first story of the project. The fortune for this story was "The best profit of future is the past".

Just Another 135 Years at the Office

by Chris Maddera

John Bradley sat at the table in Briefing Room #7. He checked his watch. The project leader should have been there by now.

There was a buzz, and a green light on the door's palm reader glowed. When a man in a gray Armani suit entered, John did not get up to shake his hand.

"You're late," John said.

"Yes, sorry about that," said the man in the suit. "But, really, no such thing as "being late" in this business, is there? Better late than never, I suppose." He sat in the chair across from John, then removed two bright blue folders from his briefcase before setting it on the floor.

The folders were identical. On the front of each folder were the words AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY - DESTROY AFTER USE. He slid one folder across the table to John, and placed the other one in front of himself.

"So, what do you have for me today?" John asked, more to himself than to the man in the suit.

"Something really easy," the man said. "And really exciting." He watched as John opened the folder, scanned the contents of the 3-page summary, and chuckled.

"Nice," he said, scanning over the pages again. "Are you guys serious with this?"

"Absolutely. It might not seem as important as some of your other outings, but I assure you, it is. This is worth hundreds of millions -- if not billions -- of dollars to us."

"So, this," John said, holding the folder up. "is just as important as stopping John Wilkes Booth from assassinating Abraham Lincoln?"

"Yes." The man in the suit thought for a moment, then began flipping through the pages of the folder. "Here, let's go through some of this material." Seconds later, he held up a copy of what seemed to be a very old and tattered document. "This is the patent for powdered processed cheese. J. L. Kraft was awarded this in 1916. He couldn't do much with it though. Still, he managed to sell a few million pounds of it to the government. At a huge discount, I might add. It was not a big hit.

"But then, just a couple of years before World War II, he packaged the powdered cheese with...macaroni."

"Pure genius," John said, dryly.

The man in the suit continued, unfazed by John's apparent lack of interest.

"Yes. It was genius. When the war hit, and there was milk and dairy rationing, guess what suddenly started selling like crazy? Instant macaroni and cheese." He paused, waiting for John to finally grasp how exciting this prospect was, now that he had given it the proper historical perspective.

"Okay," John said. "There's money to be made in mac-and-cheese."

The man in the suit nodded slowly. Finally, he thought, he was getting through to John. He found another paper. This one showed projected earning for mac-and-cheese sales. "But look at the gap, 1916 to 1936. Twenty years this powdered shit just sat around, useless. So, you are going to go back a couple of years before Kraft gets that patent, and you're going to get it for us instead."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Anything else while I'm there?" John asked.

"Like what?"

"1914. I might have an opportunity to stop the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, maybe prevent War World I. Just a thought."

"No. Absolutely not. Kraft missed out on selling his product to the government during that war. He wasted his

opportunity, but we're not going to waste ours. We like War World I -- and II. They're good for business."

John Bradley didn't say anything.

"Listen, John, this isn't the Air Force. We don't focus on a bunch of big picture stuff here. It's not all about stopping assassinations, as much as I know you like that sort of thing. I'll be the first to admit that the world is a better place because you saved Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, and John F. Kennedy. You're the guy who let the world have John Lennon for another 30 years. All good things. All *great* things. But we need to focus on the bottom line and making our stockholders happy. It really is that simple."

"How long am I suppose to be there?" John asked.

"That's really up to you. Your timepiece battery will last three years. If you want to come back, three years is your deadline. If you want to stay, we'll understand. As long as it all works out for us at this end, you know." The man in the suit smiled, then began gathering up the sheets of papers on the table.

"Trust me, John, this is big stuff, important stuff."

"How is *this* important?" John asked.

The man in the suit closed his blue folder, gathered up his briefcase, and stood up to leave. "I told you," he said. "It's worth hundreds of millions --" He held up a finger for emphasis. "-- if not billions -- of dollars. Get some rest. You leave at noon tomorrow."

The man in the suit placed his hand on the door's palm reader. The door buzzed and clicked as it unlocked, and without saying another word, he left.

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The man in the suit waited alone in the gate room. He checked his watch. 11:55 AM. John Bradley should have been here by now.

A moment later, the steel door opened. John was in a newly redesigned Eckels suit. To the typical person it looked like an astronaut's space suit made of gold and silver. He was followed by two armed security guards, and three lab technicians. One was busy studying John's vital signs on a data pad, a second carried his helmet, and the third carried a briefcase wrapped in gold foil.

"Okay, this is it, John. Are you ready?" asked the man in the suit.

John looked over to the lab tech with the data pad, who glanced up long enough to give an affirmative nod.

"I guess so." John said.

The man in the suit waved a tech over, and took a few steps back to allow him to help secure the Eckels suit's helmet.

The third technician handed the gold-wrapped briefcase to the man in the suit, then left the gate room, followed by the guards and the other technicians.

"John, we are not here to change the world for the good of all mankind, okay? We just want to change it enough for ourselves. Remember, we have a responsibility to the shareholders. So, no thwarting assassination attempts on archdukes, got it?" The man in the suit smiled, and handed John the case. "Good luck," he said.

And then he left, leaving John alone in the room.

A voice crackled over the helmet speakers. "Okay, John, we're going to open the gate." It was the man in the suit. He was in the observation room now, watching what was happening on monitors.

John could feel the low hum of the time machine powering up. Within seconds it sounded like jet engines. At the center of the machine, small sparks of blue light began to appear, increasing in number and intensity second by second. Then, they were gone.

Thunder shook the room, as long tentacles of blue lightning reached out into the room, heating the air.

John held the briefcase closer to his chest and tightened his grip on it.

He started up the ramp, his steps slow and deliberate against the wind created by the time displacement. The lightning seemed to be reaching out for him, attracted by the gold Eckels suit. It looked as if the gate was pulling him into itself.

Then he was gone.

The room was quiet.

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In the observation room, the man in the Schutzstaffel uniform smiled.