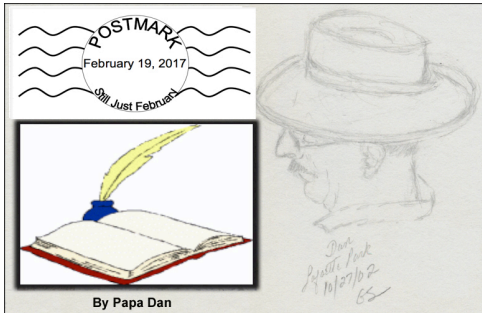


A “Tense” Meeting

By Dan Sapone



**“The Past, The Present, and The Future
walk into a Bar.
It was tense.”**

— A very old ungrammatical grammar joke

The Past and The Present Walk Into a Bar – Their Companion Is Late

I’m sitting at my usual barstool at *The Flying Pig*, a friendly bistro in San Francisco’s Mission District, sipping a Sonoma County Zinfandel and enjoying my usual BLT (on Focaccia with extra bacon), when two people walk in and take two of the stools at the end of the bar to my left. The guy appears to be in his late fifties wearing dress pants, a sport coat, a vest, and a fedora. His companion, perhaps in her thirties, is wearing casual slacks, a scarf, and a sweater. He places his hat on the bar, looks around and confirms, “Yep, she’s not here yet. As usual, with her, it’s easier to settle on the place to meet; but the time is often a problem for her.” His companion agrees. “That’s the trouble with ‘The Future,’ ” she said; “She usually arrives later than we expect.”

The bartender greets them with his usual enthusiasm “Welcome to The Flying Pig. My name’s Will. I’m glad you could visit us. Can I pour you something? We have some very interesting choices!” After listing some of their most recent acquisitions — the latest up-to-date local craft beers — she orders a 2019 Founders IPA and, after some discussion, he orders a 2012 Napa Valley Cabernet.

I can’t help overhearing their comments about the companion they were waiting for. The gentleman says, “Sure would be nice knowing what to expect from her. I mean, she’s not *always* a surprise; but we just never know until he shows up, you know?”

His companion agrees. “Right, I know she’s from “The Future” and all; but I think she gets it wrong most of the time. Some of the things she has told me about ... you know, ‘The Future,’ are just not believable. Others have just not turned out the way she warned. Last time we got together she had told me she was going to take a taxi, but she ended up arriving in something that didn’t even have a ...” William interrupts and brings their drinks and a menu, “You were right, sir, about that Cabernet. It was very popular in its day and I’m surprised we still have some. It was hidden behind something ... uh ... more recent. Hasn’t been much call for it lately. Our French Dip would go well with it, as would the Classic Roast Beef Sandwich. And, of course, everything goes well with your IPA, ... uh ... ma’am.”

“They call me Alpha. He’s Janus.” She whispers to Will, “I call him ‘Tom.’ “T” “O” “M” That’s short for ‘*The Old Man*’ .”

“Uh ... of course.”

Janus (aka “Tom”): “I’ll have the French Dip on sourdough. It was excellent last time.”

Alpha: "Have you been here before? I didn't know that."

Janus: "Just a few years ago ... This place has been here for quite some time. Actually, my memory of this neighborhood goes back to the thirties. I was here with an Italian guy named Vince — a ballplayer with the Seals in the Pacific Coast League. He had his younger brother, Joe, with him. The ballpark was just a few blocks from here at 16th and Bryant. Believe it or not, in those days, it was hard to find a place to get a drink around here."

Alpha: "You're not gonna tells us that 'DiMaggio' story again are you?"

Janus: "Apparently not."

Will: "And Alpha, what can I bring you?"

Alpha: "If the ingredients are fresh, I'll have a salad — romaine, cherry tomatoes, perhaps an avocado, a little parmesan, olive oil, and a little vinegar. I can taste the 'fresh'."

Will: "Coming right up."

Just then, a tall confident woman walks in and both Janus and Alpha say, in unison, "Well it's about *time*." Alpha: "We'd just about given up on you — ordered lunch already. Where've you been?" PapaDan notices the clock on the wall says 12:30 pm.

Cassie (sarcastically): "*Nice to see you, too*. You haven't changed a bit." She takes the barstool at the end of the bar next to Janus and ignores Alpha's question.

Alpha takes charge of introductions. "This is Cassandra — Cassie. That's Will and Ben behind the bar and this (she pointed to me, apparently aware that I had been eavesdropping) ... I didn't catch your name."

PapaDan (just a little embarrassed): "Around here, they call me PapaDan. Pleased to meet you."

Alpha (to Ben and Will behind the bar): "So, when's the last time you had The Past, The Present, AND The Future here at ... what's this place called ... ? The Flying something, right?"

Ben: "The Flying Pig. Uh, Cassie, can I bring you something?"

Cassie: "Is there a special today?"

Ben: "Yes, actually the chef is trying something new today, not sure what's in it or what he's calling it, but it probably has ... "

Cassie (interrupts): "Ground Lamb on Pita with olive oil, crushed garlic and sage, and ground tomatoes."

Ben (with a grin): "Well, I doubt it ... I mean we've never had ..."

Cassie: "Don't worry, you will. It's new. Your chef'll call it *Cordero con ajo*."

Ben (a bit startled): "Well, I'll check. And something to drink?"

Cassie: "You've got a mixed blend from up north — a Cab/Chard?"

Ben: "Uh ... I don't think I've ever ... "

Cassie (with a knowing smile): "Perhaps something new came in this morning?"

Ben (confused): “Well, I don’t ... I mean ... I’ve never heard of a blend quite like that ... I’ll see what came in. I’ll be right back.”

Cassie (to nobody in particular): “They’ll both be very popular before you know it.”

Alpha: “Alright, Cassie, you said we needed to talk. Something about some kind of warning?”

Janus: “Right, so is this another one of your ... uh ... surprises ... predictions ... ?”

Cassie: “Have some respect, will you? This time it’s serious. But, lunch first; and the wine will help.”

Will brings the French Dip and the salad, with silverware and some chips and salsa. Then he gestures to me, pointing to the far end of the bar. “Can I show you something? I’ve got this ... uh ... let me show you.” He leads me over past the last barstool, out of earshot of the three visitors, and leans across the bar. “These people with the strange names, they’re ... uh ... I don’t know. Different. He’s been talking about visiting the neighborhood like eighty years ago and, whatsername — Cassie — she seems to know things before we do. The other one seems kinda normal, but ... am I missing something? What do you make of them?”

“Well, funny you should ask. Listening to them, I was reminded of — you’re not gonna believe this, you’ll think I’m crazy — OK, and it won’t be the first time — I’m reminded of way back in school, Greek mythology.”

Will: “Dad. You’re not gonna get all ‘back in the old days’ on me, are you? Again?”

“Well, yes, I guess I am. OK, I’ll say this and you can ignore it. This is what came to mind while they were talking. In Greek mythology, Cassandra, was the daughter of the king of Troy, and was quite beautiful. Apollo, the son of Zeus, was the god of a bunch of things like knowledge, music, art, poetry, oracles, and prophecy. He was a youthful, athletic god accustomed to getting his own way. According to the myths, he was mesmerized by Cassandra’s beauty, so he gave her the gift of prophecy. But when she refused his romantic advances, he placed a curse ensuring that nobody would believe her warnings. So, I think that’s Cassie. And the guy at the bar, Janus — the Romans had a god named Janus. He was the god of beginnings, transitions, doorways, the passage of time, and endings. I suppose he would be in charge of ‘The Past.’ And ‘Alpha’ — I guess she’s about things that start right now. OK, you laugh, but YOU asked. These folks ARE a bit different.”

Will looks down at the other end of the bar at the three new customers. “Well, ‘Alpha’ did say something like ‘So, when’s the last time you had the Past, The Present, AND The Future here? Apparently, Cassie says she brought them together for some kind of warning. But she’s saving it for after they have lunch. Maybe you need to go back and listen.”

“Well, I’ll do my best. Everybody has to be good at something.” I slide back to my place at the bar next to the three visitors. Say, Will, how about another glass of this Zin.”

Meanwhile, the chef walks up from the kitchen and, with a flourish, presents his new creation — “*Cordero con ajo*,” he announces. “It’s new. I’ll be interested in your review.” Ben and Will are dumbfounded to hear this. (Will notices that the clock on the wall still says 12:30 pm.)



During the next few minutes, Cassie enjoys the new dish, praises it lavishly, and passes around the Cab/Chard bend for others to taste with their food. It receives decidedly mixed reviews.

Alpha: “Ok, Cassie, you brought us together, here and now, to pass on some warning to us, right? Or so you said. Tell us. What’s coming?”

Cassandra then lays out a detailed story of what’s to come — stimulated by the current American leadership and perpetuated by supporters of that leadership — a story of worthless and all-but-forgotten government institutions, disintegration of the underlying cohesion of communities, increasingly overt racism, degradation of the role of women, the domination of extreme wealth resulting in economic and social upheaval, and a widespread isolationism that made alliances and partnerships, internationally and locally, all-but-forgotten remnants of the past. The long-standing values and connections that have held societies together would soon to be remembered only by Janus and few others. A bit of a crowd gathers around that end of the bar, listening intently without comment. When she was apparently done with her warnings, Janus interrupts the silence with an observation and a question: “So, Cassandra, your warnings are believable, in that they have all happened a number of times in the past across long memory and they have all been repeated over time. However, since you are from ‘The Future,’ I must ask you if they are *inevitable*.” Are they fixed in stone, as is ‘The Past?’ Is there nothing that can prevent or reverse the warnings you give? Or are they just predictions?”

Cassie: “I am sorry, but that is beyond my expertise. What I know about is ‘The Future.’ I can tell you that the path to ‘The Future’ is made up of a long series of cumulative decisions that you all make every day. I can tell you what is to come if current trends continue along the same pathways. Frankly, it’s not that difficult; I’m sure you can see it yourself if you’re watching the news. **But**, each of you, makes thousands of decisions every day. When you leave this place, you will decide to turn right or left. After doing that you will decide where to go and how to get there, whom to bring with you and whom to leave behind; and you will decide what to do when you get there. That is the nature of “now,” and it’s something that Alpha knows more about than I do. However, I suspect that ‘The Past’ — that’s you Janus — can provide some insight.”

Janus: “Well, Cassie, I do know about how such things have evolved in the past. **AND**, as you suggest, ‘Evolved’ is the right word. Important decisions and outcomes were always determined slowly and without much planning. Let’s see — an example — back in 1770 at an important moment in history, that process was described accurately by a member of the British Parliament. It was Edmund Burke. He had this to say: ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ In England, slavery was abolished by the *next* generation of leaders on August 1, 1834. During that time, it turns out good men actually did something, but slowly. Here in America, it would take all that time, plus thirty more years **AND** a Civil War in the 1860s to abolish slavery here; **BUT** even then, good men continued to Do Nothing leading to the disastrous Reconstruction and the subsequent century of segregation and racism compelling the Civil Rights movement 100 years after that War — **AND STILL**, fifty years later, good men are doing a whole lot of nothing. So, Cassie, we ask: are the things you have warned us about certain to happen? Sounds like what you’re telling us is that the answer is a question — the same question — will good people actually **DO SOMETHING** about it? You see, there is time between



now and later to DO something to change the outcome you have described. If nothing is done, I can see that your predictions can be accurate. If good people decide to change that outcome, it can be done. THAT'S your warning. I see that now. The time has come. Before too long, I suspect, your warnings will become inevitable." Janus points to me — on the bar stool next to Alpha — "You've been listening, right?"

Before I could answer, Cassie stands up from the barstool. Will notices the clock on the wall still says 12:30 pm.

Cassie: "It's time for me to go. You, Janus, can provide advice from past experience — you have lots of it. BUT, you, Alpha, and you, sir, have the present responsibility. Somebody here must lead these fine people here flying with The Pig. If you choose to do that, and find a way out of the consequences I have described, well, we'll just have to see. It always falls to The Present to make the difference. And by the way, you get to pay for lunch. That comes with the responsibility. I don't carry any cash, but I can leave you this tip (*briefly lowers her voice*): If you own a lot of 'Tech' stocks, it might be a good time to rebalance your portfolio. (*Louder*) Will, Ben, please extend my compliments to your chef. His new recipe will become popular, as will the new approach to wine blending — that is certainly, uh, one of the possibilities. Thank you."

As Cassie walks out the door, PapaDan looks at his watch (it shows 12:31 pm). Nobody got a good look at the "vehicle" that met Cassie at the sidewalk in front of The Pig to take her back to 'The Future.' They were focused on the wine and the food in front of them and the people sitting beside them

— good people, all of them. There was much to consider.

Notes:

“Starts with a fisherman named Giuseppe who grew up in Sicily in the 1870s. Heard stories about a place called California and figured he could make a better living there than he would in his small town of *Isola delle Femmine* in northwestern Sicily, near Palermo. So, he left his wife and daughter in The Old Country in 1898 to find a new life in America, like so many did. Processed through Ellis Island, worked his way across the country to Pittsburg, California, where his wife’s father lived. Took four years to earn enough money, at 10 cents an hour working for the railroad, to send for Rosalia and his daughter. Moved to Martinez where they ended up with nine children. In 1914, Guiseppe named the eighth of those children after himself, Guiseppe, and hoped that he and his brothers would stick with the family fishing business. So, when Guiseppe Jr., known as Joe, was a year old, they moved to San Francisco to get serious about fishing. Ben, have you got another splash of that red?”

“Sure thing. This story is sounding pretty familiar and I want to know more; but, forgive me Walt, but what does this guy Guiseppe, uh , Joe, have to do with Seals Stadium and your ‘Golden Age’ of San Francisco baseball. This isn’t sounding like a baseball story.”

“OK, you’re right, it’s getting long, isn’t it. So, when Guiseppe Jr, Joe, was a teenager he said that the smell of dead fish made him nauseous and said he would do anything to get out of cleaning his father’s boat. His father called him lazy and good for nothing when he and his bother Vincenzo, Vince, started playing semi-pro baseball. Joe Senior insisted that they would never make any money playing games. In 1932, Vince got on the roster of the San Francisco Seals and talked the manager into letting his 18-year-old brother Joe fill in a shortstop one day. It was October 1, 1932 – Joe DiMaggio’s debut as a professional baseball player was right down the street from here in Seals Stadium.”

