

**** LIFETIMES ****

by
James R. Lane

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--Endpoint--

Flat on his back, alone for the moment with his thoughts, the young man awaited the arrival of his very own Grim Reaper. Whether smothered in a crowd or isolated on a mountaintop, dying is an event both uniquely personal---and often terrifying.

White walls, white ceiling. ...And the floor. ...And the machines. ...And the---
He sidetracked the thought, ashamed. *If living's a bitch, then dying's gotta be a hundred of 'em biting my hairy butt!*

During a time point in life when people normally settle into careers, raise families and anticipate scores of years of the same old routine, this non-statistical-average drone instead found himself poised at the brink of his life's end. For him this life held no future, no goals, no reason to hang around. He was thirty-five years old, and other than the thin consolation of his pride, he had nothing beyond fragile hope and the promises of strangers to comfort him as he prepared to launch himself into death's abyss.

Yet, tapping into the condemned man's nervously skittering thoughts revealed a curious sort of fear; not a fear of death itself but of the looming journey---the *dying*---and therein lay the problem: His own lifetime had been an unusually painful struggle, and

despite sincere-sounding assurances of a quiet, gentle demise he still dreaded this final moment, life's ultimate end-all spasm.

At least, he grimly thought, the room's not painted that damned hospital-antiseptic green. It's funny how, over the years, you can learn to hate a color.

Shivering in the gently circulating air, his unclothed body lay belly-up and flat on a thinly-padded table. Yet while he lay unclothed he was far from naked; more than a half-mile of silk-thin golden wires interconnected hundreds of pea-sized neurological sensors that dotted his skin, the wires weaving a gossamer mesh that, except for his face, cocooned his slowly breathing form. All the wires joined at a golf ball-size nexus on the blanket's left edge that was, in turn, connected by a thin wire-shielded fiber optic cable to a socket in a nearby panel.

He tensed, then slowly relaxed. The time for second thoughts and cold feet had passed. All that was left was to await oblivion's graveyard kiss, but like the nervous bridegroom chafing at the altar, his most sincere wish was simply for the ordeal to be *over*.

Jeez, his thoughts whined, it feels like hours since--- What? Ahhh! My sight's going---gone. I...I'm blind. Even my glasses won't help now. He shivered, silently praying, Hang in there, fool. Just a bit longer, a little more time. God I'm scared! Damn it, now I'm shaking. This endless waiting is enough to kill---

A warm, velvety soft hand soothingly caressed his bare left cheek, the touch a welcomed analgesic for his tormented spirit. His whirling mind slowed, relaxed.

*Other times, dear, other circumstances--- Gaah, who the hell am I kidding!
We're not even---well, forget that. 'Romance' sure hasn't been my lot in life; guess I
gotta die to change my luck.*

Time seemed to drift unmeasured and he fitfully dozed, and only an occasional metallic *clink* or a softly muttered comment from those around him kept him from drifting into deeper sleep.

Eventually his mind snapped back to full consciousness with the chilling realization of, *Something's been happening right under my nose. I can't feel the sensors any longer; even the spider web tickle of the mesh blanket is--- It's gone. I can't feel---hell, I can't feel anything. I...I can't--- Even--- Move.*

Deep inside the supercomputer responsible for managing the exotic, ultimately lethal procedure a final photonic microcircuit blipped awake, and an otherwise innocuous-seeming indicator light on a nearby control board announced the achievement.

YEEESH! came the man's surprised thought. *I damned sure felt THAT!*
Weird---kinda like the rush you get chugging a hundred-and-fifty-one-proof rum. I guess something must be cranking up---ULP! There's a pulling, pulling like---HA! This is silly. Now I can feel my body again, only...only it feels like it's feather-light, airy, puffed up like a Macy's parade balloon, and...and now my balloon-body feels like it's being drawn head-first into the end of...of a soda straw f'Christ's sake! Funny feeling, strange feeling, but...but wait---HOLD IT! Something's wrong! They never said squat about...about anything even remotely like---

God, NO! Not that! Not the DREAM! I can't---! It hurts-hurtshurtsHUUUURRTTSS! ...YEEEEEEee-ee-e-e-eee...e...

In his rapidly unspooling mind the anguished cry seemed to stretch toward infinity. Evolving from an animalistic shriek of purest naked terror it slowly changed, gradually elongating and thinning into an electronic hiss, fading, ever-so-slowly fading---into silence. *Dead* silence.

He was gone but certainly not forgotten.

“Forgetting” him, after all, would have been a waste.

--Interlude--

“Bob. Bob. Bob. Bob.” Endlessly repeating, never changing. *“Bob. Bob. Bob. Bob.”*

In the white room the computer emotionlessly reported to the two identically white-gowned, dark-visaged technicians that the man’s comatose body now possessed a totally blank brain. The gray matter within its skull contained no thoughts, no memories, no *being*. The machine then confirmed that all neural matrices once present in the inert form’s brain had been successfully moved to the target receptacle.

Standing in the corner of a nearby room was a sight straight out of science fiction, although mankind’s technology was rapidly closing in on the ability to duplicate some of its unique abilities. This device was a custom-designed cyber/photonic three-dimensional memory-core, and it was now the home of an enormous and highly unusual---and *active*---block of digital code. This grouping of ones and zeros had, upon completion of a

carefully managed loading procedure, self-activated and assumed a strange autonomy---exactly as planned. The “program” this strange block of code represented consisted of the entire mind/personality- matrix---the complete *being*---of a human male once known as Robert George Clark. The blank-brained body left behind by the departure of Bob Clark’s “essence” still lived. Heartbeat, respiration, circulation, assimilation; all were maintained by---but *fully* dependent on---externally generated neuro-signals fed it through the optical/electronic umbilical cord. Should the signals stop, so would the body. *Immediately*. According to his society’s latest definition of clinical death Bob Clark was history. A living corpse. A *meat sack*.

Bring on the surgical transplant teams; here were prime organs for sale! But---no, not this time. For this particular specimen there would be no buyers, at least not for such a mundane purpose.

Yet all was not lost! Wasn’t there a new “program” running in that fancy memory-core in the next room? *Yes indeed!*

Nestled safely among the trillions of sub-molecular-sized, neuron-analogue nanocircuits that comprised the bulk of this exotic device, a human-analog intellect peacefully slumbered. In time a summons came to disturb its solitude; a gentle, patient-yet-persistent pounding against fragile mental barricades.

“*Bob. Bob. Bob. Bob.*” More like the thudding of a heartbeat---or a toothache.
 “*Bob. Bob. Bob. Bob.*”

His sleep had been deep and strangely timeless, but a seemingly endless

procession of unsettling shadowy dream-images had kept it from being restful. Now someone was calling him; it must be time to wake up. He took a deep breath, commanded his eyelids to rise to the occasion and was greeted with a dazzling springtime mountain vista as seen from the cozy confines of a sleeping bag. “It’s hell having to get up early in the morning,” he grumbled good-naturedly, “but at least it’s a *beautiful* morning here in Hell.” He yawned, stretched deliciously, then began worming his way out of the snug fabric cocoon of his sleeping bag. Painfully crisp, fresh mountain air greeted his sweat suit-skinned body, and he marveled at how *great* he felt despite having just spent a night under the open sky, sleeping on a thin air mattress while wrapped in a few layers of cloth and PolarGuard Delta insulation.

In fact (he quickly came to realize as disturbing scatter-flashes of memory peppered his consciousness) by all rights he shouldn’t be feeling anything at all; he was supposed to be *dead*.

“What the *FUCK’S* goin’ on?” he yelled into the idyllic scenery. Quickly jumping to his feet, he spun around; other than his Spartan camping gear, nothing else inhabited the clearing. Before he could discharge yet another auditory insult into the perfect morning sky a shiny-black raven swooped down from a nearby tree to perch on the top of the small stick tripod built over a now-dead cook fire, looking for all the world like it had responded to Clark’s question. “And I suppose you’re here to tell me what this is all about,” the man snarled while glaring at his beady-eyed visitor.

The bird sounded nothing at all *bird-like* when it matter-of-factly replied, “Whenever you are ready I will tell you whatever you wish to know.” And then to the human’s amazement the bird began to *preen* itself, exactly like a proud bird should.

Clark carefully sat down on his sleeping bag, crossing his legs and bare, cold feet *Indian-style* in front. This brought him roughly eye-level to the creature, which paused momentarily in its busywork to pierce the man with its mysterious black gaze. “Okay,” Clark said evenly, “I’ll play along for a while. Why don’t you bring me up to speed, since apparently I was sleeping in class and missed something kind of important.”

Again dropping its *raven*-persona, the ebony creature asked, “Do you feel all right?” Its rich, clear voice was warm with genuine-sounding concern.

The man blinked, confused. “W-wait a minute. This doesn’t make any sense. None of this is *real*, is it? The last thing I remember is...is *dying*.” He paused, shivered as he looked around, then continued, “But here I awake in a perfect campsite in some perfect mountains---and I’m talkin’ to a *BIRD!*” He took a few deep, calming breaths, then added in a less-agitated tone, “So, no, I guess I don’t feel ‘all right’, Mr. Birdbrain; I guess I feel just a little bit---*upset*.” He smiled at the raven, but his face held all the humor of a hungry spider.

“There is really nothing to be upset about,” the dark bird matter-of-factly stated, turning its head from side to side to allow first one beady black eye, then the other, an equal opportunity to peer at the human. “All is going according to plan. We simply felt it would be far less traumatic for you to awaken into a soothing, non-threatening environment.”

Clark scowled. “Then this---*all* of this---really *is* bogus? I’m not breathing, seeing, talking, *feeling* anything at all?” The bird slowly shook its head *no* in a decidedly non-bird-like manner. “Fuck it! I hate deceptions. Turn it off---ALL of it. Since I’m nothing more than a mass of computer data, that’s how want to exist.”

As if a power switch had literally been flipped, Clark's entire *universe* went dark and silent, and this brought about a form of total sensory deprivation guaranteed to shatter the toughest psyche. The gossamer-fragile ego owned by the ethereal remains of a desperately frightened man never had a chance. He couldn't scream; he had no *means* to do so. He couldn't run; there was no place to run *from* or *to*, nor had he *legs* to carry him. An unbearable pressure began forming at the center of his very being---

"Turn it back *ON!*" he screamed at the raven, then realized that he *was* screaming, and that the raven---along with the entire idyllic mountain scenario---had already been restored to him. A few moments passed while he struggled to get his panic under control, then he gasped, "J-J-Jesus! That was *c-cold!* I...I always thought I'd go crazy as a blind man, but add deaf and totally numb to the equation and it's a sure thing. Everything was so...so *dead*. If you don't mind," he added humbly, "I guess I'd rather live this...this 'virtual reality lie' for a while, at least until I get a better handle on what's *really* going on."

"As I told you," the raven patently said, "the procedure you underwent was successful, but you must understand that it was merely the first step of a very long journey. You still have major obstacles ahead, but in time you should meet and overcome them without serious difficulty."

After a few moments came a hopeful-sounding, "You mean the transference really worked? That I---my body---"

"Yes, Bob, your former body is still in the biolab, and 'you'---your personality/mind/spirit/ essence/unique electrical matrix, whatever biodescriptive label you wish to wrap yourself in at this point---'you' are presently located in the

cyber/photonic memory-core expressly prepared to be your home. You know the device I am referring to; you certainly spent enough time *worrying* about it.”

The tone of the raven’s gentle chiding shifted, became analytical. “So tell me, what are your feelings and thoughts?”

After a moment’s pause Clark replied with a vitriolic, “Feelings? *Shit*. I’m just a...a fuckin’ collection of energy pulses bouncing around inside a fancy box. Now that everything I’ve ever been has been reduced to little more than a...a damned ‘computer program’, how the hell can I have ‘feelings’? I’m *DEAD!*”

“As to thoughts---“ his reply continued in the same vein, “*double shit*. Computer programs don’t ‘think’; they respond in a predictable manner when given specific stimuli. The result is *always* a preordained answer. If a hyperactive number-cruncher gives funky results you can bet it’s because the machine was fed a diet of garbage. Bullshit *in---bullshit out*.

“And I damned well should know,” Bob righteously elaborated. “I have---excuse me, *had---*a fairly powerful personal computer in my bedroom at home. Its rip-roaring CPU could handle *lots* of digitized information, but no one in his right mind would *ever* claim that either the machine or any of the programs it runs could actually originate a ‘thought’.”

“Very well,” came the raven’s suddenly cold, haughty-sounding response. “Since you obviously have such a perfect understanding of *everything* and *everybody* in your environment, you should have no trouble answering this simple question: *Who am I?*”

A long, painfully pregnant pause followed the black apparition’s question. It was right; Clark had quickly deduced the answer---he just didn’t want to face the reality of it.

“You...you, uh--- Oh, *shit!*”

“While I take exception with your crude statement,” the raven commented in its frosty, now totally inhuman voice, “I believe you have finally made the proper connection. We are not talking about your two flesh-and-farts friends, Bob; we are talking about *me*, the *computer*.”

“You appeared relieved when they told you *I* was not like the stereotypical machines that always manage to run amok in your childish science-fiction literature; in that they were correct. However, when they told you *I* had no independent consciousness, no ‘mind-of-my-own’---they *lied*. Granted, in a wholly technical sense *I* am a sophisticated, active collection of digital code stored in my own cyber/photonic memory-core. *I* am also entrusted with the moment-to-moment operation of everything in this stylized anthill, and *I* am the one who rescued your hairy butt from more than one incident of biologically crude, human *stupidity*.”

“Do you honestly believe *I* could accomplish all that without the true-in-every-sense ability to *think?*”

Clark sheepishly ventured, “Yeesh! No need for me to reply to that. Maybe you could tell me, though, how in hell a cold machine can have such a hot temper.”

Ignoring Clark’s nervous attempt at humor the raven image firmly stated, “Right now *I* am more interested in *your* answers to *my* questions. We seem to have digressed from your feelings and thoughts upon awakening into this so-called ‘electronic alternate lifestyle’.”

“Yeah, well, I...I honestly don’t know what to say. In this unreal existence *I feel* better than I’ve ever felt in my life---my, uh, *real* life. Nothing hurts, nothing feels

wrong---which is, in itself, *wrong*. I've never been without pain or physical restrictions for as long as I can remember. My thoughts, well, they *feel* normal, although it seems that I can concentrate---*focus*---better. I just wish I could have felt this good while I was still...still alive." Clark sighed, shaking his head.

"When the transference started," he eventually continued, "I felt a horrible---" and his thoughts skittered away from the memories of the wrenching, killing agony.

"Anyway, after that there were only shadowy dreams---until I awoke to all this."

He spent a moment absorbing the idyllic setting. Nothing had changed; it was as idyllic and as perfectly believable as it had been upon his awakening. Nothing he could sense was in any way false. The green smells, the nature sounds, the crisp breeze sighing through the trees and wafting against his skin---everything said "real". The raven/computer said nothing.

After a time Clark seemed to accept the situation; that didn't, however, mean he was happy about it. "So. I'm here, you're here, we're having a *wonderful* time in a Fantasy Land Disney never dreamed of---*but why in God's name are we even having this conversation?*"

"Easy, Bob. Relax," the ebon figure soothed, its voice once again warm and non-threatening. "While it is true that both of us are, in essence, electro/photonic digital patterns of code, we are still in our own way very much *alive*. To show you the truth of my words I am going to tie your audio/visual senses into mine so you can see what is taking place in the biolab. Since our kind of life exists at a different time-rate compared to biological life, only a few moments of real-time have passed since the completion of the transference. We can even watch them remove the main cerebro-web from your old

body. They will, though, leave a small maintenance patch attached to the base of the skull. Through that I can provide full life-support for it---basically to keep the ‘meat’ from spoiling---until their research no longer needs a viable specimen.”

“Now *that’s* a comforting thought,” Clark sardonically drawled.

His universe suddenly *changed* once again, only this time his senses were flooded with strange, vivid images and distorted sounds. It took a few moments to synchronize the sensory input to his new rate of comprehension, but then a wide-angle ceiling-camera point-of-view brought the morbid activity taking place on the worktable below into painfully sharp focus. Clark suddenly said, “Enough! I know what’s supposed to happen next; an autopsy I helped with years ago gave me the willies for a month---only this time it’ll be ‘me’ on the table.” His universe snapped back to the mountain campsite, and after blinking a few times and taking several deep breaths of the perfect air he slowly shook his head, muttering, “God, ain’t technology wunnerful.”

He looked at the raven, which silently returned his gaze. In time he said, “Okay, I believe you. But---*why*? Why spring this on me now? I was all set for just exactly---and *only*---what they promised; a nice sleep and a grand awakening to a wonderful new life. Then *POW!* You nail me with your hidden identity as an...an ‘electronic person’, not to mention this *Twilight Zone* existence. The original concept explained to me was fine; not that I could understand the more exotic technicalities of the procedure, mind you, but I grasped enough to satisfy my pea-brain. But, all this---why all this extra...extra ‘stuff’, this “National Geographic” campsite, the *Big Bird* act? Why didn’t you just appear in the form of your fuzzy-assed masters? And...and finally, why reveal yourself to me now---and not before?” He paused a moment before softly quipping, “Mr. Serling, are

you getting all this on film?”

The computer (in its raven-persona) hesitated, seeming to fluff its feathers and take an all-too-human deep breath as it tried to decide just where to begin. The hesitation was real; since both it and Bob existed at a much higher time rate, even micro-seconds had perceivable duration.

“If you will make an effort to listen and try to be patient,” it stated, “I will attempt to explain everything. It might,” the smooth bird-voice wryly added, “be too much for a dumb machine like me to handle, but I promise to do my best.

“First, though,” the apparition said, “you should know that while I am, in your terminology, a ‘computer’, those who created me *officially* refer to my elite class of devices as ‘made minds’. However, I find your technological term ‘AI’, or ‘artificial intelligence’, to be more to my liking, and like any properly intelligent being I have a *proper* name. I think, therefore I am---and I am known as *d’Hsee*.”

“D-*what?*” Clark sputtered through a sudden laugh. “That sounds more like a...a flower, or a sneeze. Oops, sorry! I really didn’t mean that---*HA!*---but then maybe I did. Paybacks are hell, even if the subject’s a super-doooper-number-pooper. Oh well, your turn---*d’Hsee*.”

“You believe,” the bird-avatar carefully began, “that you should have been told the truth about me at the beginning, and also of our intent to awaken your electronic analog during the time of its ‘storage’. We, on the other hand, feared that such knowledge would have caused you unbearable distress at a time when you were already overburdened.

“Bob, you were mentally unbalanced, your entire psyche poised on the brink of

collapse. We concluded that, had you known in advance that you would be electronically linked with a sentient artificial mind---with *no* way to escape or hide---you would never have agreed to this project.

“And as fate would have it, since you have been in our care you have experienced several episodes of, by both yours and our standards, outright insanity. While you might not remember all or even any of them the episodes certainly did occur, and their dangers were terribly real. We entered into this project knowing far more about your psychological problems than we admitted, and we felt that had you been aware of exactly how much we knew you might not have agreed to help us, and your people---and ultimately yourself.”

This was decidedly unwelcome news, and after a moment’s careful contemplation Clark asked, “If that’s the case why hasn’t this...this ‘revelation’ pushed me over the edge? Or,” and he hesitated again before continuing, “have I popped my cork again?” Softly, “You can come get me, Mr. Serling. I’m ready to go home now.”

“At this point you are quite stable,” the animated bird-image soothed. “And due to the inherently strong logic of your present cybernetic existence you would find it difficult to lapse into dangerously neurotic thought patterns.”

What d’Hsee didn’t add was that it was keeping a close watch on Clark’s neurological stability. While it might be difficult for a wholly non-biological being to slide into destructive neuroses, by no means was it---*especially* in this case---impossible.

“Then I’m not *nutso* any more?” Clark challenged.

“Human research is just beginning to understand the extent that biological factors influence neuroses. When you abandoned your biological form you left a large portion of

your physically- and biochemically-based problems behind. To put it in familiar terms, your ‘operating system’ was a *mess*.”

Impatiently, “Come on, damn you, drop the other shoe!”

“The ‘other shoe’ is that *you are not yet fully healed*.”

“Then put me on an electronic shrink-couch,” Clark snarled, “and ‘process’ what’s left of me with a fuckin’ *Freud*-program!”

“Remember, Bob,” the machine-bird warned, “those who built and programmed me are *not* of your species. While you and they share thought similarities you are not *mentally* the same, nor were our two Freuds’ inherent problems similar. While my efforts might be of help there is the terribly real chance that I could ultimately make your neuroses worse.”

“That’s *it*?” Clark wailed. “You could fix everything like new, or you could just screw me up even *worse*? Fan-fuckin’-tastic! Cure me or kill me, is that it?”

The computer waited a noticeable amount of time before replying, hoping that Clark, in his near-hysteria, would assume that it was again having difficulty with its answer.

“If that is the way you wish to view the problem, Bob, yes: Cure or kill, or I could simply do nothing and hope for the best. You should also understand that you already have several strikes against you, while I enter the battle blindfolded.”

“Wha...what do you mean?”

“My ‘blindfold’ is that I am a device created and programmed by people *unlike* your own. Your ‘strikes’ against you are that you view everyone and everything you see through your dark, neurotic-tinted glasses. You are at times thoroughly irrational, and

you assume a paranoid-defeatist attitude with nearly everything you undertake. While there are other defects in your psychological profile, discussing them at this time would serve no purpose.”

Clark chewed on those unpleasant items for a few moments, then quietly ventured, “If I am---or was---that bad off, it’s a wonder I made it through life without someone locking me up or at least kicking my head in.”

“While you often claim to be nearly friendless we know that to be untrue, and these numerous individuals, along with your family, pulled your butt out of more fires---“

“Yeah, I know,” Clark sighed. “Wally Morris even kept me from taking the ‘thirty-eight cure’---did it several times, in fact, before colon cancer ate him alive.”

“‘Thirty-eight cure’?” d’Hsee asked, cocking its bird-head in realistic confusion that perfectly mirrored its actual thoughts.

“When everything’s totally screwed up, d’Hsee, when there seems to be no hope at all, people often take the ‘thirty-eight cure’. You pick up a loaded .38 caliber pistol, stick the end of the barrel into your mouth, and when you pull the trigger you get a permanent ‘cure’ for your problems. They’re over with a *bang*.”

What Clark didn’t elaborate on was the bottomless despair that drove him to such an ultimate brink time and time again. Even the conditionally-dead are allowed some secrets.

But once again the AI’s reply came after a genuine hesitation. It took more than a handful of instants for it to digest this unsuspected attitudinal slant and then carefully decide what direction to take next. It had suddenly realized---with one of Clark’s graphic *bangs*---that its somewhat smug attitude regarding this particular human might not be in

anyone's best interest. Caution would now be the operant rule.

“I want to help you, Bob, but you must understand that with everything experimental there is risk. Minimizing the risk in this endeavor will require your *complete* cooperation.”

“But there’s still a chance I’ll wind up as a...a ‘fatally-crashed program’. Right?”

“Right.” d’Hsee grudgingly admitted to itself that, although damaged, this human intellect was still far more perceptive than it had first believed.

“Okay,” Clark declared after a time, “let’s roll. How do we begin?”

“I have a complete audio/visual record of your time with us, but I want to observe these past few months from *your* viewpoint, exactly as *you* lived it. Such candid insight should help me determine a further course of treatment, if such is indeed necessary.”

“Hypnosis?”

“Something more along the lines of total-recall therapy,” the bird-form explained, “but with an unusual wrinkle or two. Instead of vacantly droning from incident to incident you will in *all* aspects graphically *relive* the time. And as your life unreels its memories you will have me as your unseen soul-mate, peering through your eyes, feeling everything in your world, thinking your thoughts, experiencing your emotions. You might say I will be taking the ultimate ‘virtual reality trip’; in many ways I will *become* Bob Clark, human being.”

Before the man could inject a protest d’Hsee added, “And I fully realize this is the grossest invasion of your innermost privacy imaginable, but I can only promise that I will tamper with nothing, nor will I reveal to others what deep, terrible secrets I may discover. As a non-biological alien life-form I have no racial prejudices, no biological perversions,

no feelings of cultural scorn to hold over your head. Perhaps these very properties will allow me to understand your personal demons---and exorcise them. This is strictly between us, what you humans refer to as a doctor/patient relationship.” Moving quickly to close the sale the machine added, “Do we have a deal?”

After an extended pause Clark simply responded, “Yes.”

As one portion of the immense electronic intellect experienced a private mental sigh of relief, another part of its mind was already hard at work setting the stage for an experience never before attempted by either human or machine. Bob Clark thought he understood the basics of regression-hypnotherapy, but the machine hadn’t lied when it said it had an “unusual wrinkle or two”.

Freud would have no doubt loved using a sentient supercomputer to help in his voyeuristic psycho-research. In all probability, however, having an *alien* one snooping and pooping into his own dark, steamy mental passageways would have given him the screaming shits.

--Reflections--

“Yeah, Cuz, a frosty Coors really would hit the spot!” Bob called from the worn Stratolounger’s leathery embrace, and a moment later he snagged the chilled can as it sailed through the air from the kitchen. “Good toss, D.C., and, of course, I performed my usual extraordinary fielding---*HA!*” He grinned at his cousin as the somewhat older man ambled back into the den, carrying his own freshly opened can of beer.

“You ever play much ball, Bob?” D.C. inquired as he made himself a nest on the

nearby couch.

“You kidding? With my crappy health and these thick glasses I didn’t even qualify for water boy---but hell, you abandoned the Florida flatlands for these beautiful California mountains so many years ago I guess you really had no way of knowing.”

“Right. You were still dumping in your diapers the last time I saw you, and I was probably no more than, say, ten or eleven. As I recall, Uncle Al and Aunt Pamela were just beginning to discover the extent of your physical problems, and once we got settled out here our two families just seemed to drift apart. Even though my folks are long gone I’m glad you took the time to look me up.”

“Shit, D.C., I’ve been dreamin’ of a California vacation for almost twenty years; I’ve just never had the bucks. Winning a cool ten grand in Florida’s LOTTO gave me some badly-needed getaway money.” He took a hard pull on the foamy beer, then belched heroically. “Again, thanks for letting me catch my breath for a few days in this classy bachelor hideaway. Piloting my old Bug all the way out here from Florida was a real pisser.”

D.C. flashed a distant smile but Bob was too engrossed in peering around at his cousin’s rugged mountain retreat to pay much attention to the older man’s inhumanly cold analytical stare. “Glad to have you, Bob. I’m relaxing between writing projects at the moment, and to be honest I’m curious about this mysterious ‘Close Encounter’ you hinted at in your e-mail.” The strange, distant smile flickered again. “You see, I’ve been involved in some rather unusual, um, ‘situations’, too.” Bob’s eyebrows climbed a good half-inch. “But, since you’re the guest, you get to go first. We’ll compare notes later.”

Bob glanced at the man’s eyes, and for an instant he seemed to see right through them. Behind them was--- Bob blinked, and it was gone. He took a long pull on the beer; the impression didn’t return. *Tired, just tired. Telling D.C. about the experience will be good therapy*, he absently mused, then thought with a start, *but---why should I think that? I haven’t seen my cousin David Carl Clark in well over thirty years. Other*

than the publisher's bio about him and his successful writing career I found on an Internet webpage I...I really don't even know this person. But as suddenly as the stray apprehension had materialized it melted away like smoke in a draft. Bob blinked again, burped quietly through his nose, then began his tale.

“This past June was hotter’n hell in Sunny Vacationland (that’s Florida to you Left-Coast denizens) and even though my parents and I still live near the ocean one small town south of Jacksonville, the cooling effect of a sea breeze wasn’t helping me that particular Saturday. I’d spent most of the day playing tourist at Disney’s *Epcot*, and to avoid the damned crawling traffic on I-4 and I-95 I pointed my elderly ’69 VW Bug toward some lighter-traveled back roads as I headed toward my northeast Florida home. Traffic was bad only in the centers of the small rural towns, and as the weekend evening crush hour came and went even those brief slowdowns disappeared. Air temperature had cooled to near-tolerable; the old Bug’s crude air-cooled engine didn’t care how hot it was, but *my* only air-cooling was provided by whatever breeze the open windows and yawning sunroof snagged.

“The sun was about to puncture its merciless orb on the spindly pine trees as I droned north through the Ocala National Forest, and the traffic had finally thinned out to zilch. That’s when the car’s cheap FM stereo began *brrzzing* and *sskictzzing*, so I twiddled the knobs and stabbed the buttons, even thumped it hard just for the hell of it---then immediately forgot about it.”

After a reverent pause he declared, “I saw a Goddam UFO.”

A corner of D.C.’s mouth flickered a smile. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. Ol’ Sol was gasping his last over the treetops,” Bob said, his eyes beginning to focus on a reality far removed from the mountain retreat, “when this

beautiful glowing silver ball gently drifted across the pine tips about a quarter of a mile away. God, it was *gorgeous*, and a moment later it settled down right in the middle of the road. Man, I just knew I'd died and gone to science-fiction heaven.

“Around a hundred feet from the ball I growled the Bug to a halt, then had the presence of mind to pull off onto the grassy roadside shoulder before killing the car's rattly engine. After goggling at the thing for what seemed like an eternity I remembered to grab my shiny new Nikon digital SLR camera that was cradled in the canvas gadget bag on the other front seat. It took only a moment for me to begin putting my accumulated photographic expertise to its most acidic test.

“I stumbled around the now-dormant globe/thing/ship for at least five minutes, happily shooting photos from different angles while using a wideangle-to-short-telephoto zoom lens. I desperately wanted to document the crazy thing before it decided to up and fly away.” Bob paused and blinked owlishly behind his thick glasses.

“And then it did something *really* strange.”

“Umm?” D.C. injected, the tiny smile again flickering like a nervous tic.

But Bob really wasn't seeing anything in the room as he continued. “Until that time it had just politely sat there, a featureless dull-silver Christmas ornament some fifty or so feet in diameter. It had no openings, seams, windows, bumper stickers---no features or details I could see. And while it had landed on the exact center of the road, I suspected something other than the summer-soft asphalt was supporting it since it didn't appear to sink into the pavement.

“I had paused to load my last empty memory card into the camera when the globe silently lifted about a foot into the air and slowly drifted off the pavement and onto the wide, gently sloping shoulder of the road. One 'end' of the thing just barely cleared the road's edge while its opposite almost touched the trees on the far side of the ditch. It settled to the ground, and though it didn't sink into the grass it also didn't roll down the embankment leading to the ditch.

“Just as I finished my nervous fumbblings with the memory card and was ready to resume shooting, the thing vanished. No sound, no disturbance of any kind. Just---*gone*. It scared me so bad I let loose a yell, then I noticed that a car had just rounded a curve way down the road, and it was heading my way.

“I bitched to myself and tried to look busy, balancing my camera bag on the Bug’s left front fender and digging in it while hoping the approaching car would keep going---but no dice. The asshole driving it stopped and I had a devil of a time convincing him that I was trying to shoot some wildlife photos---and for him to *get lost!* By the time he pattered out of sight it was nearly dark and I was afraid the UFO had slipped away.”

“And?”

“I grabbed my gear and hustled over to its last location and ran headlong into an invisible, slightly-yielding surface that was curved like the globe but not metal-hard.” Bob absently smiled. “Fuckin’ forcefield, just like in the cheesy sci-fi movies. Then I damned near pissed my Levis when the globe suddenly blinked back into sight right in front of my nose. Gave me the feelin’ it was gonna roll right over me, too.” He paused and chuckled, his eyes seeing something other than the room’s contents, then continued, “I reached into my camera bag for an electronic flash unit, clipped it into the camera’s accessory shoe and popped off another photo. *Surprise!* After that microsecond burst of light splashed the thing’s surface a doorway in its side oozed opened---and that’s when I decided the son of a bitch inside *knew* I was out there.” He grinned.

“How did you figure that?” D.C. asked around a puzzled frown.

Bob barked a laugh and then looked directly at his cousin for the first time in minutes. “Shit, man, I knocked on his door and he invited me in!”

“And did you---?”

“Of *course* I accepted!” Bob crowed, his grin growing lopsided. “I’d waited all my life for that kind of offer! When the doorway opened it made about a seven foot vertical rectangular hole in the globe’s side. It had recessed about five inches, then slid to

the side to make way for a steep stairway that poked out and down like a rude child's tongue. After I shot a photo from the foot of the stairs I smiled and hugged myself in the warm, inviting light spilling out into the gloom, then I climbed up the shallow steps to...to my destiny. The bottom of the doorway was only a bit over twelve feet above the ground, and once inside I discovered that I was standing in a small angular airlock. When I stepped farther in, away from the opening, it hummed shut; I moved another five feet inside and the inner airlock door slid from the wall to double-seal the exit." He paused.

"And?" D.C. prompted.

"And then I...I got scared," Bob softly replied, all bravado gone.

"Why, Bob? Everything seemed to be going your way. What changed?"

Earlier, as he told of his incredible experience, Bob's glowing enthusiasm seemed to melt away nearly half his age. His carefree excitement gave D.C. hints of a time in the man's past before bitterness over chronic health woes and cynicism about the frightening deterioration of world affairs had darkened his outlook on life.

But now the darkness had returned, and with it the weight of years of pain and frustration. His eyes narrowed and hardened, seeming to stare holes in the stranger across from him. "But that's just it, Cuz. Things have *never* really gone my way---they've always gone to *shit*." D.C.'s puzzled frown prompted him to continue. "A mild case of spina bifida compounded by asthma, allergies, weak eyesight---bad breath, B.O. and dandruff. I certainly wouldn't refer to those as 'benefits', and with them hanging over my head I've never been able to hold down a good job or attract much in the way of desirable female companionship."

"Sounds to me like you've got a full-blown case of self-pity."

"Naah---" Bob absently grimaced, "just cold reality. I wasn't dealt much of a poker hand to build a life on, and when my normal loser's luck suddenly appeared to do an about-face I got the gut feeling that I'd been set up."

D.C.'s eyes seemed to reach out and engulf the younger man. "Maybe you were overdue for a change of luck," came the comment, but by now Bob's attention had again become unfocused, although a part of him still appeared to retain awareness of his surroundings.

But instead of receiving a verbalized response "D.C." (*d'Hsee*, of course) underwent a momentary disorientation, then found part of itself *inside* Bob Clark's mind as the human dutifully replayed and annotated his memories. *Inside*, there would be no bravado, no bullshit. *Inside*, it would be easy to see the naked reality of a desperately frightened man facing the unknown. *Inside*, the computer would discover unadulterated truth and, *d'Hsee* hoped, the roots of Bob's problems.

But roots can be incredibly tangled and run immeasurably deep, and truth often defies logical comprehension.

---So I turned and cautiously stepped down the short, low corridor that led to yet another door. But before I reached the end I paused to let my senses try to sort out the strangeness that surrounded me.

Sure, the overall lighting was comfortably golden, but---well, it just didn't quite match any *other* comfortable, golden-tone lighting I had ever seen. And the sensory differences weren't limited to visual; sounds and smells were there too, and that's where the strangeness *really* kicked in.

Step inside the residence of a native-born Oriental, East Indian, African or Arab. Your first visit will seem almost dream-like as your senses feed you a wealth of new and strange sights, scents and sounds, and your brain will desperately try to equate them to things familiar---but it will fail. Everything is different, everything appears a little---*alien*.

First impressions inside the UFO were of a similar *aliennes*. The angles of the doors, walls and ceiling weren't quite familiar. "Tunnel-like" was the impression I got from the corridor; the slightly resilient gray floor rising to meet lighter-gray walls, which curved at their tops to meet the slightly darker-gray ceiling, its otherwise-claustrophobic headspace brightened by inset strip lighting. An ever-so-faint whirring hum seemed to permeate everything, just like what you hear aboard a Navy submarine. The overall smell---well, perfume to one is *phew* to another, and this particular aroma was best described as a mixture of vinyl oils, disinfectant, ozone, fine leather and an overlay of musk, along with several "somethings" almost familiar, yet beyond my ability to identify. For the most part the odors weren't really objectionable---just strange.

As every family's house has its trademark feel, this...this *ship* had its own signature, but since nothing I saw, heard or smelled set off any specific sensory alarms I slowly advanced to the end of the corridor, and to an awaiting door which opened just before I reached it. I mentally kissed my ass good-bye as the door slid open with a Teflon-slick *sszzzip*, then I cautiously peered past the threshold.

Ha! This is where it all hits the fan! I mentally crowed. *The "Control Room"!* Hell, it even looked like my idea of an alien space ship's control room. As I stepped inside I saw numerous waist-high consoles that looked like they had organically grown right out of the walls, and each one was speckled with multicolored lights. Above each console was a large video-like flat panel sporting holographic-like images that ranged from full-color scenes outside where my Bug was parked to terribly-impressive computer display graphics that didn't mean shit to me. However, I didn't waste time studying the pretty pictures since I wasn't alone in the room.

Near a console by the far wall stood two "somethings". When one of them moved slightly I figured I was about to meet my hosts. Or captors. Killers or saviors. Boogiemens, perhaps? *Aliens*--- Hey, bet your sweet ass, Buckwheat!

Their "skin" was an unbroken silver like the outside of the ship, so I guessed that

what I was seeing were protective suits. Hell, the damned things were silvered all over, even on what had to have been the helmets, so I guessed that those had surfaces like mirrored window film. Each figure was a long-torsoed biped with short, normally-placed arms and equally short legs, and was long-necked and smoothly graceful despite the small rectangular lump on the back, between the shoulder blades. I was pretty sure they weren't robots; logically-designed bipedal robots wouldn't have *tails*.

Well, dumbshit, I absently thought while shivering through a spine-numbing chill, *you've finally made it to the Big Time. Your lifelong dream's come true at last, and it damned well may be your last.* What bothered me so much about this whole thing was that one of the creatures was holding a small tube in its right hand---five short, webbed digits; humanoid, perhaps?---and I quickly surmised that the pencil-sized thing was a weapon; it was pointed at me and tracked me as I moved slowly away from the door, my bony hands spread wide and camera gear dangling from my narrow, stooped shoulders.

Without warning a voice issued from a grill in one of the consoles, addressing me in haltingly passable but strangely accented English. "Please sit down and---relax."

Hey, fine with me, pal, I thought as one of the aliens waved me toward a cushion on the floor about half-way between the door and where they stood.

I cautiously moved to comply with the order and found the electric blue, beanbag chair-sized cushion to be soft yet supple and slightly cool to the touch on its suede textured surface. It was large enough to curl up on and sleep, cat-fashion, but---no problem---I didn't feel at all like cat-napping.

Moving carefully so as not to alarm them, I placed my photo gear on the floor beside me. The alien not holding the tube-weapon turned and touched a colored spot on a nearby console; the door to the room slid shut. *So much for quick escapes*, I mentally sighed. They curled up, cat-fashion casual, on a pair of large adjoining cushions near where they had been standing, but since one of them was still pointing the tube-dingus at me I didn't think I was welcome. Not yet. Maybe never.

“Human,” the speaker grill emotionlessly intoned, “you are not exhibiting the degree of fear customary of your kind. Why?”

Ah-HA! I silently crowed. *You expected me to be a quivering wimp, eh?* Aloud I challenged, “You mean---why not?”

When I got no response my “instant macho balls” shrank a few sizes before I ever-so-politely continued with, “I..I have wished for a meeting such as this most of my life, and I am honored to be allowed inside your ship.” I then Groucho’d silently, *I just hope I can leave it as easily.*

“You have with you an image recorder,” the voice flatly stated. One of them had actually recognized my shiny black camera for what it was; my respect for them rose a few thousand notches. “Is it your wish to use it now?”

No, smartass, I mentally bitched, *I just brought it along for ballast.* But I civilly answered, “Yes, please.”

“We will allow this.” Then, seemingly as an afterthought, “Later, we wish to discuss a matter of importance with you. For now, do you require additional light?”

“Thank you,” I humbly mumbled while picking up my camera and nervously checking the settings. “As to the additional light---no, thank you. It produces adequate light during use.”

Still not yet sure of my welcome or status I stayed seated as I began shooting pictures. After the second shot one of the aliens stood with an easy, fluid motion, then reached up to its head and, after a moment of deliberate fumbling, gave it a slight twist and lifted it free. *Yes! Thank ya, Jesus---we’uns got us a helmet!*

I was ready for the shot, having already framed the being’s bulbous dome in the viewfinder, but when the helmet lifted free and I saw what it revealed I nearly forgot to press the shutter button.

OhmyGOD! was my single thought. The creature continued to remove its silver suit, opening a hidden seam from the top of its neck down the front to its crotch. It then

squirmed and wiggled its torso free of the material and pushed the remaining part off its legs and tail. I slowly continued shooting photos, trying to avoid filling the memory card with endless duplicates. After carefully folding the suit, helmet and what was apparently a small air/power pack into a neat bundle, it placed the outfit into a wall compartment under one of those funky consoles. I stoically observed the show, saying nothing, since by that time I had been shocked speechless. I really don't know just what I expected the aliens to be "like", but there's no doubt that I got one *hellava* surprise.

In psychology circles it's known that hiding behind a camera often gives even the most timid schmuck the courage to venture out into the cold, cruel world. Away from home or work I'd carried some sort of camera most of my adult life, and I depended on those few cubic inches of metal, plastic and glass to be my comforting social shield. Had I not been able to focus my attention on the operation of my camera that day my fragile sanity probably would have wound up splattered across the landscape.

The first creature returned to its cushion, and after sitting down, took possession of that damned little tube. The other alien then proceeded to remove its suit---er, *his* suit. I wasn't sure about the other's *femaleness* until I saw his complementing *maleness*. Okay-fine, a matched set: Long and lean male; shorter, slightly chubby female. I hoped they wouldn't spring a third sex on me. Then a scary-crazy thought skittered by; what if *I* had to peel down to the buff, too? I could see how this "first encounter" could turn ugly fast as I pictured this headline: *Friendly aliens leave in disgust; naked man to blame*.

Then the thought changed again---but for the worse. What if these critters are some of the "kinky" aliens you read about in the supermarket tabloids? You know, the ones that kidnap poor innocent humans and then perform strange sexual experiments on their hapless victims. One thing I knew for sure---if *that* was their game they were gonna be in for a (small) disappointment.

My quiet photography continued until the second alien stowed his suit and returned to his cushion, then they spent a few moments with an ordinary-looking

hairbrush, grooming away numerous cowlicks the close-fitting suits had created in their lush fur---yeah, *fur*. That's all they were wearing, too, but somehow they didn't seem "naked" at all. One final family portrait-type shot of the two of them together, then I returned the sweat-slickened camera to the floor next to my cushion and waited for them to speak. Or not speak. Or make a meal of me. Something. *Anything*.

Hello, I thought nervously, *are you still alive over there, or has this hairy dream been put on hold?* My ballsy "Joe Cool" composure was beginning to ooze away now that I wasn't occupied with my photography; *fidget* and *squirm* were fast becoming my cushion-mates.

Finally, after what seemed hours---more likely ninety seconds or so---the male reached behind his cushion and produced a silvery gadget that looked suspiciously like a paperback novel-size datapad computer. He glanced offhandedly at its flat display screen, then spoke to me.

"Human, what are you called?" His voice was clear, the enunciation surprisingly distinct, its tone a low, mellow tenor.

"*Rroeerrgh*," I croaked through a throat gone suddenly dry. I quickly managed to work up a dribble of saliva to grease the ol' squawk-strings. Again I tried, "R-robert. Uh, Robert George Clark, that is. Sir, uh."

That's got to be the all-time-crappiest first-contact introduction ever uttered, I thought with bitter embarrassment. *Whadda ya wanna bet it made a Sterling impression*.

Both aliens stared first at me, then at each other, then they began making strange chuckling-barking noises, their faces strangely contorted, their bodies twitching in short spasms. It looked for all the world as if they were laughing, and after a few moments of careful observation I determined that---son of a bitch---they *were* laughing. At me.

God but that was humiliating and it must have shown even in the subdued, warm-colored lighting. Their damnable laughter quickly dried up and the female, whom I assumed had not previously spoken, said in a slightly higher-pitched, gentler voice,

“Robert George Clark, you appear distressed. Please forgive us---we meant no offense.”

I'd always been a sucker for sweet girls, and although this one was---literally---light years from my ideal, she was certainly female, attractive in her own strange way and damned sure working hard at being nice. What asshole could stay angry with those numbers stacked against him?

Hey, asshole---your turn. “Uh, t-that’s okay. Uh, please, just call me Bob. It’s short for Robert. The whole name isn’t necessary.”

“As you wish---Bob,” she replied. “I am called t’Hiss and my life-mate is t’Hann.” Actually, his fur looked kinda *brown*.

“Among our people there are additional means of identification; for you that will not be necessary.”

Great, since I really wasn’t prepared for tail-sniffing and post-pissing. Besides, that was the longest speech one of them had made to me, but while their command of the King’s English was passable it was obvious they weren’t comfortable with it.

Lord, I silently prayed to my oftentimes generic deity, *what we don’t need are any misunderstandings. Thank ya, Big Guy---over an’ out.*

t’Hann stated, “This meeting has not occurred by accident. You have been observed for some time and we believe you to be a suitable subject for our proposition.”

For some reason he appeared ill-at-ease, and the absurd idea of being “propositioned” by aliens brought my own skin-crawl index up a hundred points or so. Having their tube-weapon stare at me didn’t soothe my frayed nerves, either.

“Considering your history of physical illness and handicap-defects,” he continued, “would you be willing to submit to various tests and experiments, details to be explained later, which could result in you acquiring a normal and healthy human body?”

Now it was my turn to stare.

He quickly added, “We realize that this may be a difficult question for you to answer immediately, but you must understand that we are highly qualified in research

biology and alien psychology. Our goal is to benefit your entire species.”

My first thoughts were, *Fuck this “entire species” bullshit---I’m in this game for ME!* followed a split-instant later with, *Nope-nope-nope---that attitude won’t float the boat. Selfish shit like that went out of style with the passing of the “me-first” generation.* Thoughts like that really did shame me, since I prided myself on the belief that I was above such petty garbage---but, *God*, why did they have to wave such a tempting carrot under this starving jackass’ nose?

I must have turned sheet-white from shock because t’Hiss quickly asked, “Are you all right, Bob? Your skin has changed color again. Have we offended you? Are you ill?”

Jesus! I thought, amazed. *There’s real concern in her voice!* Heavily stammering, I replied, “Uh...uh, *NO!* I-uh-mean-uh, no, y-you haven’t o-offended me. Uh, I’m, uh, just s-surprised, I guess. I, uh, didn’t expect anything like...like this!” *Great, dipshit, just great!* I silently cursed. *You’re coming across like OMM, the Original Mental Moron. Keep that up and they’ll toss you back into the pond and try for a Kermit that can do more than just croak.*

t’Hann added, “This is not a decision that you must make at this time. You may take two of your days to consider it, then we will meet again. However, we must warn you that, should you discuss this with your police or military, we would be forced to withdraw our offer.”

Wow, what a relief! I mentally griped. *Instead of taking thirty seconds or so to go certifiably batty I get to stretch my misery over two grand, glorious days---of living hell.*

“How c-can I contact you,” I finally stuttered, “when I m-make my decision?”

“There will be a time and place where you can find us,” t’Hann promptly replied, “although you must come alone. If you try to bring others to the meeting we will be forced to find another subject.” My stomach squeezed even tighter against my spine. “Any interference by outsiders would complicate matters. Do you understand?” I nodded

like a simpleton and he must have heard my pea-brain rattle, because he said, “Good. We will meet at this location two days from now, at midnight. If you do not come we will understand that you do not wish to accept our offer.”

Hold it! I thought, suddenly terrified. *I gotta have more info than this! We’re talking about my LIFE here!*

“W-wait!” I finally managed to squawk. “Sure...surely you can tell me something about w-what will happen to m-me if I accept.” Jus’ a teeny-tiny li’l hint, huh guys? Pretty-please?

They conferred in low tones---silly, since I couldn’t comprehend their damned chirp-whistle-grunt-click language---then t’Hann said to me, in English, “You are correct in desiring more knowledge. In your position we would wish the same.” Right-O, strange hairy fellow. “Are you familiar with the concept of ‘cloning’?”

My heart missed a beat or three, nothing new. “Yiii---“ *Shit!* “Y-yes,” I finally squeaked through my dry-again throat.

He stated, “Our capabilities in the clone method of tissue regeneration and replication are far superior to humanity’s level of achievement.” Damned braggart. “We need a physically defective human subject for experiments and extended research,” ---That made sense; why then was I shivering?--- “and with this research we hope to learn how to counteract your human crippling diseases, birth defects, *AIDS*?---yes, that is the term---and cancer. All your ailments.” *Good God*, I thought, *the little fart’s serious!* “Since your present body would not be of use to you once we complete our studies,” ---My stomach didn’t like THAT tidbit at all!--- “we will attempt to clone an entirely new body for you, one completely free of genetic and physical defects. Our plan is to attempt to transfer your mind/personality-matrix to a cybernetic memory-device, and then into the new body once it is ready.” He actually managed a smile---and here I’d thought that only ape-related creatures did that---but I guessed that the smile was more one of relief than anything else since he had just finished what had obviously been a carefully rehearsed

speech.

But---if these characters were as damned great as they claimed to be, why did he keep emphasizing the word “attempt”? I wondered if I’d ever be able to unwrap my poor stomach from around my spine.

The alien stood and handed the tube/thing/weapon back to his mate, then he moved to a nearby console. While carefully manipulating several lighted controls he explained, “Watch the images in the screen above me and I will show you some of the equipment used in the process.” Beautifully detailed holographic video images appeared on/in the screen as he began his narration.

“Our base of operations is located inside a hill on the far side of your planet’s moon. We will not give you the coordinates; we wish no visits from your military.” I couldn’t blame them for that; I didn’t want the fuckin’ *GI Joes* stickin’ their .50 caliber dicks into this, either.

“The base has ample room for our needs,” he continued, “and there your new body would be grown suspended in artificial amniotic fluid, free from all external stimuli. Its new brain/mind would remain blank, and your own mind/personality-matrix would be stored in this (a gizmo like what you’d get cross-breeding an old Wurlitzer juke-box to an NSA super-computer flashed on/in the display) cyber/photonic memory-core until the new body is ready to receive it.”

What he was showing convinced me that this was no low-budget operation. *Lucas and Spielberg*, I thought with egotistical pride, *eat your hearts out---I got the real deal!*

“If you agree to this undertaking,” t’Hann continued, “your new body and the results from our research would be used as examples when we submit our proposals to your world governments. Do you have questions?”

Undertaking? I mentally screamed, since I wasn’t in any mood for cute alien-generated puns at this stage of the game. I tried to concentrate, groping to

comprehend this mind-frying, unhopd-for chance at a new life.

Dumb question of the day: “How long will this take?” was all I could readily dredge from my swirling thoughts. *In shock*, I think it’s called.

But t’Hann treated my stupid question as legitimate. “From the time we begin, we should complete our research and have everything ready to present to your people in approximately nine of your months.”

Conception, gestation, birth.

One. More. Time.

My God! I thought, my brain still buzzing. *In less than a year I could have a healthy body and lead a normal life. That’s the dream of every handicapped person, and it could be mine—all-mine if I just sign on the dotted line---in blood, of course.* But the *unselfish* portion of my conscience demanded I ask the one question that might burst this fantasy-bubble.

“t’Hann, t’Hiss---why *me*? There are so many people in far worse shape than I, people much more intelligent and deserving of your...your salvation. Any of them would jump at the chance for a normal life; some of them would be willing to...to sacrifice their lives for just the *hope* that their troubles would never happen to anyone else. Use one of them and you won’t have to swap me a new body for this broken one. Again, why *me*?”

Whatever the outcome, no matter the cost, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself had I not voiced that question. All the world’s burning intellects and potential talents hopelessly trapped in handicapped bodies cried out in that question; perhaps t’Hiss sensed the importance of an honest answer.

“Bob,” she began, “we knew all of that when we made our selection, but we had definite physical and mental requirements for our subject. It might not be a flattering way of viewing the situation, but you alone best meet our needs.” For the first time, her nonhuman face showed an unmistakable expression---a beautiful *smile*, by damn! “You will be our subject if it is your desire.”

Desire. Let me tell you about desire, kind female alien-person, I vehemently thought. But then, *No-no. No distractions, not now.* “I..I thank you for choosing me; I *do* wish to be your...your subject, but I’ll need those two days, at least, to tie up loose ends, to uh---*HA!*---to end my life. I’ll try my best to keep our rendezvous.”

“*Ron-dee-voo?*” t’Hiss questioned, looking quickly to her mate.

“French-language term for meeting at a predetermined place,” he stated after momentarily staring off into space. Then, to me, “The time will give you an opportunity to reconsider your decision.” I thought I caught a shadow of a decidedly mischievous grin on his non-simian, furry face; gone the next instant.

t’Hiss uncurled from her cushion to join her mate, then she glanced at a nearby holographic display. After a few quick words with her mate---more of those damned incomprehensible sounds---she lay the tube-weapon on the floor, then touched the same colored spot on the nearby console that apparently triggered the control room’s door to close---and the door quietly slid open.

“You may leave,” she announced. “There are no other vehicles in sight and your own has not been disturbed.”

I gathered my camera equipment, then creaked and groaned slowly to my feet, my stiff joints cursing me in the ages-old language of arthritis. The aliens moved to the door ahead of me, their bipedal walk so fluidly graceful it almost appeared to be boneless. As I started to leave t’Hann suddenly smiled and stuck out his right hand---to *shake!*

“Your custom,” he stated, “directs dominate males to clasp hands upon amiable meetings and departures.”

Shit, I thought, amazed, *the furry little bastard’s* serious!

Without apparent hesitation (I hoped) I enfolded his fur-less hand (which felt *nothing* like an animal’s paw) into my own somewhat larger one; firm flesh, smooth and dry skin on the palm and underside of the lightly-webbed fingers, neatly-groomed---and *sharp!*---claws, surprisingly solid grip. I told them both, “Open hands---no weapons;

clasped hands---no ability to strike with the hands so occupied. The custom predates my civilization's history but remains a sign of respect.”

After a moment we broke the grip, t'Hann saying, “A formal greeting our kind developed long ago is, upon meeting, those involved raise their right hands, palms out---“ he did, and I immediately thought *American Indian*, “---and state ‘I greet your scent’ to each other. This, too, is a no-weapons sign and an acknowledgment of the other's existence and identity.”

“Identity,” t'Hiss expanded, “is established by personal body scent as well as by spoken name and physical appearance. One may find two people carrying the same name and appearance, but every living creature has a scent unique unto itself.”

Uh-oh. *B-O*.

Suddenly self-conscious about my sweat-stained clothing and unavoidable summer-day human male aroma, I tried to apologize for what surely must have been, to them, my overpowering *stink*. But I needn't have bothered.

“There is no problem, Bob,” t'Hiss offhandedly stated. “Your personal scent is not offensive.”

And even to my hypercritical Western-culture hygiene standards, neither was theirs. A faint odor of clean, lush fur and a warm trace of musk was all my not-so-sensitive human proboscis could detect.

Farewells apparently finished, I stepped through the door and walked down the short corridor to the airlock. As its inner door was closing behind me I heard a soft *good-bye*, I guessed from t'Hiss. I hoped she had smiled; I certainly did.

Once through the airlock I clattered down the steep stairway and hurried clear of the ship before turning to watch it leave; all I caught was a quick flicker before it blinked into invisibility. There was a forceful *WOOSH* of displaced air and then--- Nothing. *Christ!* I mused silently as reaction began setting in, and I barely made it to the Bug before my knees gave out and dumped me clumsily into the driver's seat.

Eventually, as I began to secure my photo gear for travel, I also began to doubt the events of the past forty-five minutes. Yeah. Only three-quarters of an hour had passed, certified by my battered digital quartz Timex and the car stereo's clock display. It had seemed to stretch for hours---or perhaps a timeless interlude.

But before I called the local laughing academy to reserve myself a nice rubber room I resolved to see this incident all the way through. Once home, I'd use my (pirated) copy of the best digital imaging software made to examine the photos I'd shot.

And then I'd know.