

## Aliens

I don't know how to start all this, but I need to write it down. Maybe someday someone will read these notes, and perhaps it might profit Mankind to heed the content of them, and perhaps it might not. Anyway, I must make the attempt.

I guess it all started last spring. I had just gotten a promotion at work, and my wife had walked out on me the very next day. Every silver lining seems to have its cloud. As a further injustice, two weeks later I started having these blackouts.

I had become an alcoholic the minute I left home and mother. I guess I was just following my father's footsteps, namely - away from my mother. Except that he drank a lot before he left her, and I waited until after.

In my early years out on my own, as an ad programmer for a large agency, I somehow made it to work every morning, even though I had closed out the bar the night before. Back in those days, there was more than once I had no memory of the preceding night. I knew plenty about blackouts.

But I wised up in my second decade of boozing and managed to become a social drinker. From then on I drank only on weekends and stopped blacking out altogether. That's why I was so concerned about that fatal Friday. I had had only a few drinks that night, and I had even left the bar early. That much I was sure about - the rest was a total blank.

The next thing I was aware of, after ostensibly walking home from the bar, was finding myself leaving my apartment en route to the bus stop to go to work. I stared blearily at my wrist watch and found out it was already Monday morning. Where had Saturday and Sunday gone? I thought about my lost weekend all the way to the office, and I thought about it all day while I sat at my desk, making up new catch-phrases for my latest ad assignment. I decided it was time to cut out the booze altogether, and as I walked up the stairs to my apartment that evening, I thought it might be a wise thing to turn over my stash of beer, brandy and cognac to the janitor, who was a big drinker himself.

But, just like the Friday before, my memory stopped the moment I walked into my apartment, and this time I hadn't even had anything to drink. What was going on? The pattern continued. From the time I put the key in the lock of my front door and entered my apartment, to the time I walked out, shutting the door behind me, the entire time I spent in my apartment was one huge blank. Somehow my personal business got taken care of regularly, although I had no memory of doing it. My bills got paid on time. Every Thursday I found a clothes bag hanging from my left fist as I exited my apartment, ready to be dropped off at the cleaners, and every Monday morning the ticket was in my pocket, reminding me to pick up the laundry on the way home. I didn't seem to be doing anything out of the ordinary during these blackouts. In fact I was more punctual than ever in taking care of my personal business and in getting to work on time. I also felt pretty chipper every morning, refreshed as though I had had a full night's sleep, and looking forward to another day at the office. So I guessed I wasn't doing any drinking at home either.

This was verified one day when I encountered the janitor on the first landing and he thanked me for all the beer and brandy I had given him. I was a bit surprised. I

remembered very clearly having had the intention of giving it to him, but no memory of actually doing it. I could see he was puzzled by the look on my face.

"I hope you don't regret it, Mr. Oxman."

I reassured him as thoroughly as I could, but my curiosity forced me to ask what kind of condition I had been in.

"You seemed mighty clear, Mr. Oxman. You invited me in, and we even sat and talked for a while."

Never in my life had I ever talked to anyone when I was blacked out, let alone have an extended conversation. This had been verified by my drinking buddies on numerous occasions, who told me I never spoke to anyone once I had gone over the line with my drinking. According to them, at such points I simply sat at my bar stool with a glazed look on my face, unable even to ask the bartender for another drink, although he would not have served me anyway.

Naturally, I stopped going to the bars altogether, but it did no good. I still had no memory of my evenings at home, presuming I spent them there. I seemed to be carrying on a double existence, and I was the daytime half. It was frustrating. It was all work for me and all play for him - this other me that I didn't remember anything about.

One of my biggest regrets was that I didn't seem to be watching the news on television during my hours at home, and, ever since 9/11, I had been pretty keen on actions in the Middle East. My acquaintances at work were always talking about the war in Iraq, yet I had nothing to contribute. Still, everything they said seemed vaguely familiar to me, as if, somehow, I *had* watched the news and only remembered the major points.

So I made arrangements to see a psychiatrist who had been recommended to me. I made an appointment for the following Wednesday. I was afraid that it would just be a big waste of time, but I counted the days, and told myself that at least I was doing something constructive.

The first meeting went fairly well. The therapist was likeable and had a good deskmanner. He sported a full moustache, beard and sideburns. He looked like a dead ringer for Sigmund Freud, except that his name was Fitch. F. Fitch. More than once I had wanted to ask him what the "F" stood for, but he didn't look like a man who wanted anyone to know his first name. He didn't say much that first time, mostly hmms and uh huhs, staring at me owlishly through his thick contact lenses. I told him all about the blackouts, and he really listened for the full session. At the end of it I asked him if he thought I were nuts.

"It's much too early to make such a prognosis," he told me. "Even though you are distressed with your memory lapses, you seem to be coping adequately with life. You say you pay your bills. You seem to be reasonably attired. Your tie even goes with your suit. And you look fairly healthy. But just to be on the safe side, I am going to have you visit a specialist in internal medicine I often work with. He can give you a complete physical checkup, and after I have seen the results and talked them over with him, then perhaps you and I will be in a better position to determine whether these lapses of yours are a matter of mind or body."

So I agreed to the examination, and visited the medical doctor a few days later. His nurse stuck needles in my arm and had me pee in a bottle and lie on a table to check my E.K.G. and all that kind of stuff.

So you can imagine my astonishment when I revisited my psychiatrist the next week only to find out that I had been cancelled. In fact, according to the receptionist, I had purportedly phoned in the cancellation myself. I was livid. The receptionist was considerate about my dilemma. She showed me the calendar she kept for the doctor, and the line on it with my name that said CANCELLED next to it. But there was nothing I could do about it. Dr. Fitch had already fitted somebody else into my time slot.

This did not calm me down much. But what could I do? I realized with a paranoid flash that this must be the work of my alter ego, this other guy who had usurped my personal life, and who was now sabotaging my attempts to find out what was going on. So I apologized to the innocent woman, and set up another appointment. It was to be for the next week, only a day earlier. I elicited a promise from her that she would ignore any attempts I made to cancel my appointment. It took some doing to talk her into it, but I explained my dual personality situation as well as I could and she finally agreed. I was impatient for the days to pass, but I lost myself in my work and enjoyed the continued pats on the back I was receiving fairly regularly from the boss.

"Great job you did on the dog food ad," he would say. "Keep up the good work and we'll give you another promotion." Then he would laugh as if he didn't really mean it, and ended the pleasantries by pulling out a large kleenex from his back pocket and blowing his nose into it quite thoroughly, digging into his nostrils with gusto, then scrubbing his moustache after, a procedure he never failed to follow after uttering anything solemn or majesterial. Then he would turn his head, staring off in another direction as if he had just spotted an employee shirking his work, which was his shy but rude way of letting me know that our conversation was over. He always punctuated these little chats by stuffing his kleenex back into his pocket, straightening his tie, and waddling back to his large, glassed-in office to check out the stock market and look busy.

Finally my second visit with the psychiatrist came due. I strode out of my house with a cheery bounce, knowing that this time my appointment could not have been cancelled. When I arrived at the Doctor's office at the end of the day, the receptionist ushered me with a nice smile into the great man's presence.

"Mr. Oxman to see you, Doctor," she said.

"Sit down, sit down, Mr. Oxman," said Doctor Fitch. "It was wise of you to have decided to see me after all. I looked over the results of the tests you took, and I can see no clear reason to assume a physical cause for your experiences. I had suspected a diabetic condition, but there is no evidence for it. Without further information I think we should continue the therapeutic approach. Does that meet with your approval?"

"On one condition, Doctor," I said. "Don't let this other guy cancel me out. Okay? I made an arrangement with your receptionist this time, but I'd like to get your agreement on making it an ongoing rule. Unless I tell you on an office visit that I want to stop seeing you, don't believe it. Could you agree to that?"

It seemed that he could. He nodded his head. "I think it would be far more productive for you, Mr. Oxford, to desist in talking about "this other guy" as somebody different from yourself."

"Oxman," I put in.

"Sorry, yes, Mr. Oxman. "Now what was I saying? No, it was something you were saying. Please do go on."

"About not letting me cancel out except in person."

“Ah yes. Well, it’s a little irregular, but I guess I could accomodate you.”

So from then on I had my other self outsmarted in at least one area - he couldn’t cancel my therapist. I feared that his calling off that first visit was an indication that he wanted to perpetuate this dreadful dual existence. I had to get to the bottom of it. I couldn’t let this bastard steal my life away from me.

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I was really starting to feel sorry for my other half. God, did I pity him. Here he was, thinking of me as someone trying to take over his life, when we were actually the same person all the time. I *was* him, every time he, stepped out of the apartment, and I knew his torment in not knowing about me (who was him), not knowing that I (we) was a virtual hostage of these creatures who came from the Greater Magellanic Clouds.

At first I was proud that the aliens had chosen me to be the representative of Mankind. I could appreciate their dilemma in wanting to help us change so we could assume our rightful role as a full member in the Confederation of the Cosmos. I understood that we were not quite ready for this awesome responsibility, still being so warlike and socially irresponsible towards each other, still divided up into petty nations, and not having yet achieved a global awareness, nor a symbiotic relationship with our planet.

But my life had taken on a shadow reality. I was tired of having the aliens around all the time, and longed to have a real life outside my apartment, in which I was imprisoned every night. God, did I pity my other half! I *was* him, every time he went out the front door, and I knew the agony that he, or should I say *I*, was going through, not knowing about *me*. At least I knew everything that was happening to me. I was there at the bus stop every morning. I sat at the desk every day at work, thinking up new slogans. I also went through the agony in not knowing what was going on, even though when I returned home every night I suddenly remembered everything that was happening. He was half of me and I was all of me. Despite the great honor the aliens had shown me by choosing me for such an important role, I was beginning to fervently wish that they would find someone else to represent Mankind, that they would quit hanging around, that they would move out of my apartment and out of my life, so I could go back to being the simple human being that I was when they first contacted me when I came home from the bar that night that seems so long ago now.

I still remember that fatal Friday night. After work I had stopped as usual at Nick’s, a neighborhood bar-restaurant I used to call home. Papa, who ran the kitchen, and Mama the restaurant, were all Greek and all heart. Their son, who tended bar, was all American. He was a whiz with the ladies, and attracted a small but constant stream of attractive young ladies who felt safe under his protection, and young ladies served as bait for an even larger stream of young men. Papa and Mama treated all the regular customers like family. While Papa cooked, Mama sat and chatted with their many relatives, who on weekend nights descended upon the place like a flock of hungry pigeons.

I had had my usual fried calamari for dinner, and after that a few glasses of retsina at the bar, topped off with an ouzo and water, and the entire evening was quite clear in my head until I got back to my apartment. Just as I went to put the key in the lock, I was jumped on by a gang of thieves. At least that’s what my initial impression was.

It wasn't until early the early morning hours, when I awoke groggily to find myself lying on the frontroom couch surrounded by a bunch of freaks, that I started to learn what the score was.

At first I just stared goggle-eyed at them. I thought I was having a case of the D.T.'s. There were five of them altogether, five pods with no pea in common, except that they were all vaguely humanoid. The early science fiction writers seemed to have been right about that.

When I started tuning in to what was happening, I discovered to my dismay that they were sorting through my brain like a bunch of telepathic file clerks, noting my attitudes and reactions like zoolologists studying the latest brand of rhesus monkey. I felt pretty uncomfortable having my soul dissected and laid out on the operating table for their inspection.

When they finished studying me, they allowed me to sit up on the couch and get my bearings, and then they explained their intergalactic mission to me. They also explained the role in it they had chosen me to play. Then they allowed me to retire into my bedroom and get some decent sleep. I think they gave me some kind of post-hypnotic suggestion, because, after all that excitement, I dropped off to sleep like a fish being thrown back into the pond.

The aliens ended up really living off me, and I didn't seem to be getting any idea of what my great humanitarian role was going to be. Except that I was saving a tremendous amount just eating at home and only going to the restaurant for Friday night dinners. It was also fortunate that these strange creatures had simple needs, so they didn't cost me much. Some of them seemed to survive quite well on Purina Cat Chow, while others appeared to be fairly comfortable on a diet of toilet paper and floor wax. They all used the bathroom in various ways to dispense with their waste materials, but I never exercised any curiosity about what they did in there, just as I never evinced much interest in the peculiarities of their various physiognomies, mainly as I found them all much too revolting to contemplate.

The only other thing that the aliens did besides eating and going to the bathroom was watching television. Twenty three hours a day. They loved it. They chattered like chimps and ogled like octopuses, watching everything without discrimination. Ads, soaps, news, movies. Every five minutes they changed the channel. I gave up trying to watch with them and spent evenings in my bedroom catching up on my reading.

Anyway, that was the strange reality I was introduced to when I woke up on the couch that fateful morning. I kept myself from gagging at their appearance and made what sense I could out of their explanations. They pretty much mangled the English language, but I quickly became used to that. I was told in general terms where they had all come from. It seemed that they represented five of the two thousand or so intelligent life forms in our local galactic group. They had been studying us ever since the late forties, when we had begun broadcasting our soap operas out into the galaxy. It appeared they had mastered the art of faster-than-light travel, by some method which was vaguely described as "tunneling." Their local outpost was on a planetary system a few light-years distant, but they had been living with us secretly since the late fifties. Most of the time they chose remote locations far from human habitation to avoid our knowing about them, but they had just started an experimental program of living with human hosts. I was one of those lucky hosts.

It became a pretty lonely affair after a while, since I never got to talk to humans except at the office during the week and the bar on Friday nights, and I couldn't tell anyone what was going on, mainly because, when I was out of my apartment, I didn't know. I discovered the first time I returned to my apartment that they had hypnotized me in some fashion that caused me to forget all my experiences within my apartment when I was out of it, hence all knowledge of their existence. It was so strange that first Monday morning as I strode towards the bus stop, not being able to remember anything that had happened over the weekend. I attributed it to the vagaries of my memory, which has not always been something I could rely on, and assumed that as the morning wore on things would come seeping back.

But they didn't, and by the time the day's work was over I was still as ignorant as ever. I was anxious to get back to my apartment to see whether familiar surroundings might stimulate some recall of the events of the preceding two days. I was more than rewarded as I stepped into my apartment and the lost weekend was suddenly no longer lost.

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During my time at home, I thought a lot about the events of that first night when the aliens had captured me at my own front door. As I said, I had come to in a groggy state on my couch, staring at the ceiling, paralyzed, my mind a naked patient on an operating table under the glaring arlight of their collective consciousness, strange eyes probing me out of the darkness, seeing my secrets.

They tore me down like a mechanic would a car, found the bad psychic parts, took them out and fixed them, put them back, then put me back together again. When I came to I felt just fine, without a bit of fear towards my captors, except for a lingering nausea about their appearance and demeanor, and a strange habit, every time I walked out the front door, of forgetting entirely my life at home with them. The minute I walked out the door, I forgot entirely about what had happened inside my apartment, and the minute I walked back in I remembered everything, including everything that had happened outside.

There were other peculiarities to my new mindset. I don't have many close friends. When you make a bar the center of your social life, it ends up like that. Anyway, a friend I hadn't spoken with for a long time gave me a call at home. I took the phone into my bedroom, where the aliens seldom bothered me. I thought I might have a chance to tell him about my situation.

But the moment we got past preliminaries and he asked me what was going on and I started to really tell him, at that moment I got a lump in my throat and had to stop to swallow it back into place. I tried again to say something and got the same reaction, and I subsequently found myself forgetting entirely to relate to him my misfortunes. We chatted amicably for a while, and it wasn't until he hung up that it came rushing back in on me that I had failed entirely to tell him about the aliens. I knew then that they had screwed with my mind.

For one thing, when they put me back together that first night, they did something about my alcoholism. Every time I poured myself a drink I found myself looking at it in distaste, and, when I tried a sip, it seemed vaguely disagreeable and I ended up pouring it

down the sink. So I decided to give my liquor supply to the janitor downstairs. I gave him a call and he was in. He said he was quite willing to take my booze off my hands. Without thinking, I told him to come and pick it up.

No one had entered my apartment since the aliens had become my unwelcome guests. I had no friends who might visit me, and since nobody could get past the front door downstairs without a key, I was spared the annoyance of door-to-door salesmen, soul savers, and con men working their way through college.

But when the janitor visited me, nothing of any consequence happened. Somehow he was oblivious to the sounds emanating from the front room. I invited him into the kitchen and showed him my booze supply, and we sat and talked for a while. I wanted desperately to tell him about the aliens, and I tried several times to bring the subject up, but every time I did my throat would choke up on me and I couldn't breathe for a moment. The janitor was concerned and suggested that maybe it was a psychological reaction to giving away all that booze. I was so incapacitated that all I could do was nod my head.

As one would expect, the taste of alcohol was just as disagreeable to me outside the apartment, so when I had dinner at Nick's on Friday nights and stepped over to the bar after my meal to say hello to my cronies, I stuck to soft drinks. But you probably know how boring it is to be the only sober one among a bunch of people who are getting progressively typsier and less easy to understand. It's as if they were members of a secret society with their own secret language and if you don't drink you're out in the cold. Just as teenagers don't trust anyone over thirty, alcoholics don't trust teetotalers. I felt like a narc in an opium den, or an atheist in church. So I continued going to the restaurant on Friday nights. But I quit spending time at the bar afterwards.

There were other ways in which my mind was controlled. When I stopped for groceries after work with the list I had carried out the front door that morning, I didn't seem to have much choice but to follow it blindly. In the beginning I didn't question the items on the list, but after a while, I started wondering why I appeared to be buying so much Purina Cat Chow, floor wax and paper towels. Especially since I didn't own a cat, and my wall-to-wall carpeting didn't need much waxing. Just for the hell of it, I tried one day not to go to the grocery store.

Are you ever driven by compulsion? When you do something just out of habit, because you've been performing that particular ritual for the last umpteen years, and find yourself doing it even when you don't particularly want to? Well, it was something like that, only lots worse. The moment I tried to walk past the street the store was on, I couldn't manage it. I was filled with an irresistible urge to turn back. It was as if my body itself was not going to obey me. I was going to go to the damn store whether I liked it or not. When I crumpled up the grocery list and tossed it away, I found myself suddenly remembering all the items on it, as if I had acquired an instant eidetic memory. The moment I took something out of the shopping cart and put it back on the shelf, I found myself the next moment retrieving it and putting it back in the cart. When I tried to tell the clerk to leave out the cat chow, my vocal chords failed me.

Once or twice I tried re-entering my apartment in the morning, and, as usual, my memory came back the moment I was inside, but when I walked out again, I could only remember my attempt to re-enter. I even tried leaving the door open, and walked back

and forth to find the exact spot where my memory came and went, but I only got dizzy and nauseated.

One night I attempted to leave the apartment by the fire escape just outside my kitchen. I waited until after dinner and the aliens were watching TV. I raised the window slowly, then I clambered out onto the fire escape, trying to make as little noise as possible. But the moment I was outside, I forgot how I'd got there. I stood there for a minute, feeling foolish. Then I climbed back in and my memory returned. I even thought madly of cutting a hole through my bedroom wall into the hallway, but my middle-class morality didn't permit me to damage my landlord's property.

So I was stuck in my rut, and it riled me. I was determined to win this strange game the aliens were playing with me. I still had one idea left. It had come to me while I was writing out the grocery list.

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A new phenomenon began occurring in my strange half-life outside my apartment - I started finding notes in my pocket. Before, it had just been envelopes to be mailed, laundry slips, grocery lists, things like that. As long as my mysterious other half was acting responsibly, I felt I had a chance at getting back together with him, that everything might revert to the way it was before. Before the blackouts, that is. Back to when I was an integrated person, not separated into two halves.

Anyway, I was walking to the bus stop one morning, and feeling around in my pockets for my fast pass, when I found a folded-up sheet of paper, which, on opening it, appeared to be in my handwriting. It said:

To my daytime self: Yes, it's me, all right. Your other self. I'm sorry for what you've been going through. It isn't my fault, though. I'm just as much a prisoner as you are. I'm you every day, and I have no problem remembering both of us. I'm you right this very moment, as a matter of fact, but you aren't me, in that you don't know what goes on in our apartment. I have a lot of info I want to pass on to you, so we can work together, but first I have to convince you who I am. Think of a strange address, or a weird name, or any random object. But don't write it down. Then I'll tell you what it is in tomorrow's message. Please destroy this note at the office and don't bring it home with you, or they might find it.

They. What a scary idea that seemed to me. What kind of paranoid schizophrenic was this other half of mine? Or was this note for real? The question was in the back of my mind all day long, and I longed for the day to be over and tomorrow to begin again so I could see if there would be another note. I felt pretty convinced by what my other half had written. Maybe I wasn't nuts after all. Maybe some foreign spies or mercenaries had gotten control of me through hypnotism so I couldn't remember what went on in my apartment. I decided on a crazy name - Celepheny Stellarovitch Macrozinsky.



The second note occurred, as I had hoped, the very next day. I searched my pockets as soon as my consciousness returned on my exit from my apartment, and there it was. I unfolded it with a beating heart. It read:

Dear Celepheny Stellarovitch Macrozinsky - Glad you know now that we're on the same wavelength. Don't worry. I'm not crazy and neither are you, but what I'm going to tell you is going to sound crazy. Please be patient. Over a period of time I'll give you as much information as I can, but you must be open-minded about it. Don't tell anyone except your shrink. He won't believe it anyway.

From then on, I received a daily communique from my other self. I felt a lot more hopeful, because now I had an ally. During the week I kept the notes in my desk at the office, and on Fridays I deposited them in a safe deposit box at the First National Bank. Apparently the aliens weren't aware of my communications with myself. I guessed that maybe the controls they had created in my brain only stopped me from telling others about them, but didn't have any restrictions about me telling myself about them. Perhaps these aliens had left a loophole in the rules they had imprinted on my mind. Perhaps they were all too human after all. Maybe to err was alien as well.

God, it was difficult to go along with this nonsense about aliens. I've always considered myself a rational person, and to act as if my apartment were inhabited by freaks from the stars was a little too much. If anyone else were to tell me what my other half was giving me to believe, I would write him off as a nut case. But I had to go along with it when that anyone else was myself.

Dr. Fitch was extremely interested in the notes I was finding in my pockets. I think he saw them as indications of delusions of grandeur. I was growing impatient with the direction his investigations seemed to be taking. Then I had an idea.

"Do you ever hypnotize your patients?"

"I work with a hypnotherapist from time to time," he told me drily. "It isn't a technique I generally favor."

"Why not?"

"Because a memory loss might very well be the result of a psychic trauma. It happens when the unconscious is protecting the conscious mind from a fact it cannot face. To interfere with that protection is to take a chance on thrusting the patient into into a psychotic episode. It's better to take time to let the psyche heal. When it is ready to face whatever is being withheld, then the memory block should vanish by itself."

"So you still think this is all in my head?"

"That's what it's my job to determine."

I could see that it wasn't going to be constructive to try to work with my alter ego and Dr. Fitch at the same time. The aliens were real, or they were not. It was a matter of dropping the aliens or dropping Dr. Fitch. In the end, the aliens won. Dr. Fitch was not too happy with my decision. I think he saw a possible dissertation in my case history. The Two Faces of Henry Oxman. We would be famous. He would show me off at psychiatric conventions.

In many ways I was glad to be shut of Dr. Fitch. I hadn't been getting anywhere, probably because there was nothing wrong with me. It was much easier to deal with phantoms from another world than phantoms in my mind.

Over a period of time, I began to accrue a knowledge of the aliens, and of the experiences of my nighttime half. The daily notes became more detailed, and my safe deposit box was close to overflowing. I started organizing the notes during my noon hours so as to save space, and performed a lot of rearranging and editing. Soon I knew as much as my other half. I know that because he told me so. The only thing he didn't tell me much about was what the aliens looked like.

One thing I was able to confirm was my alter ego's difficulties in telling anyone about the aliens. I found I got the same reactions. My throat locked up on me and my mouth went through the motions without issuing any sound. I felt like a fish in a tank. This happened a few times at work, and the people around me thought I was having a heart attack. My boss insisted that I take a week's vacation and go somewhere. I accepted, anticipating the joys of a week away from the aliens, but it didn't work. I had no problems buying an airlines ticket, but the day of my flight arrived and somehow I forgot about it entirely. My boss was thunderstruck at my unexpected arrival at work. I found a subordinate occupying my desk, and everyone in the office looked at me as if I had lost my noodle. Which of course I had.

So I made up a story about how my flight had been delayed until noon, and that I had just come in to tidy up a few last details. It squared me with everyone but I was forced to beat a hasty retreat with a forced promise to send a post card from wherever I was going.

I spent a half hour at the airport rescheduling my flight and got one leaving at three in the afternoon. I sat for three hours in the waiting room, determined to beat the mental conditioning the aliens had impressed on me, but somehow I got the time wrong, thinking the clock said quarter to three when it was really a quarter to four. I finally gave up all ordinary attempts at escaping the aliens. I would have to be exceedingly clever to outwit them.

So I stayed in town for the week's duration, going to the park or the public library, staying away from anywhere I might meet my fellow workers, and returning home dutifully each evening. I felt like a spy within my own city. When I returned to work on the following Monday, I apologized to my fellow workers for not having sent the post card, feeding them a racy story about a young lady I had met in Houston.

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Just when I thought I had a pretty good grasp of what was going on, a new series of discoveries began unfolding.

It started with a question from Al Rawlinson, a guy I knew from Cartoons & Animation. We met by accident in the coffee room, and chatted a while. During the course of it, he mentioned a problem he was having with his hardwood floors at home. I asked him what kind of wax he was using, and when he told me, I mentioned my own experiences.

"Try Omega Scuffcoat. It's the best I've found. Safeway carries it."

"You use it still?"

"Sure. I get it all the time." I caught my breath, realizing I had wall-to-wall carpeting. "I mean, I used to buy it all the time. At my last apartment, that is. I have wall-to-wall now. They still carry it, though. I notice it when I'm shopping for other things."

"Thanks," he said. "Safeway, huh? There's one in this neck of the woods, isn't there?"

"Yeah," I told him, and gave him directions.

That, I thought, was the end of the conversation. I certainly never expected to see him the very next day. I peeked out my office door to get the secretary's attention for some minor matter and there he was, asking directions from her. I waved to him and he came on over.

"So this is where you hide out," he said, plumping himself down on my guest chair.

"Short time no see," I said. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Omega Scuffcoat," he told me. "They don't have it."

"Really? You look on the right shelf?"

"Better than that. I asked the clerk. Not only don't they not have it, but she seemed pretty sure they never carried it."

"What? That's impossible! I just bought some last week!"

"I thought you said you had wall-to-wall."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. I mean I bought some for an aunt of mine. She can't get around much."

"I didn't know you had any relatives here." A little glint in his eye, letting me know he didn't believe me.

"Yeah. She's the only one," I said lamely. "Anyway, there's something wrong here. I'm sorry you went out of your way. I'll get to the bottom of it and let you know."

"No sweat," he said. "It gave me an excuse to ask you over for bridge. I remember once you told me you used to play it a lot. Well, my wife's sister is visiting us next week, and she's an avid player. Thought you might be willing to atone for your error by joining us some night."

I told him I'd be delighted, and we arranged a date.

As soon as he left, I gave Safeway a ring, and asked for the manager. I explained to him that I had been buying a particular brand of floor wax for some time now, and that a friend of mine had been unable to find it.

"I don't recognize the brand name sir. Scuffcoat?"

"I buy it every week."

"Let me check in the records, sir. Hang on while I put it in on my computer." He was back after a couple minutes.

"Sir, theres no record of Omega Scuffcoat ever being carried by this store. I even checked with the central warehouse for the area."

I was flabbergasted. I thanked the manager and hung up in a daze. Then I thought of the hardware store where I used to buy it. Luckily, the number was still on my Rolodex.

"Pearson's Hardware."

"Bob Michaels still work there?"

"He's in the back. Just a minute." There was a pause.

"Bob Michaels here."

"Hi, Bob. Henry Oxman." There was a moment of silence.

“Oxman? Oh, yeah, Oxman. Didn’t you move downtown or something. What’s it been? Five years?”

“More like six, Bob. Sorry to bother you, but I’ve run into a peculiar question here, and I thought you might be able clear it up for me.”

“Sure. No problem. Long as I know the answer. Shoot.”

“Omega Scuffcoat. Remember it?”

“Omega . . . Oh yeah. They went out of business, gee, at least three, four years ago. We haven’t carried that item for a long time.”

I was stunned. What brand had I been buying then?

“We’ve got several brands in stock that’ll do just as good a job or better.”

“No. Thanks a lot, though, Bob. You’ve answered my question.”

I hung up in disbelief. It had been just last Tuesday I had bought a can. I was certain of it. I could still see the yellow and brown cylinder with the red label and the logo. It was emblazoned on my memory. I decided to check on it when I got back home. My alter ego could take over when I entered the apartment.

The kitchen shelves contained no cans of Omega Scuffcoat. I searched thoroughly. The aliens were still at it in the frontroom. I thought of asking them, but rejected the impulse. Other items swam into focus in my mind’s eye. Purina Cat Chow. Paper towels. There were a lot of paper towels around. Since I seldom had to resupply the bathroom tissue, I had to assume the aliens were using paper towels instead. But cat chow?

I used to have a cat at my old apartment, but he had run off just before I moved, leaving me with an unused bag of dry food. I still kept the bag, out of habit or sentiment, I guess. The shelf contained two bags. One appeared to be the original bag. The other looked much newer, but both were still unopened. I decided to pay another visit to the Safeway store. I wrote a note and put it in my pocket.

When I got to the store, I looked around for the salesgirl I always went to. She was a pretty, Asian girl with whom I liked to flirt. Luckily, she was on duty, and as soon as she had a moment free, I greeted her and asked if she minded me asking a few questions and she said fine.

“You know all the bags of Purina Cat Chow I buy here?” I asked her.

“No, sir.”

“No?” I responded with surprise. “But I buy it every Tuesday, and I usually come to you.”

“I certainly don’t remember it, sir. Oh! There was that one time.”

“What one time?”

“Once, just before I bagged your groceries, you told me to leave out the cat food.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

“But you hadn’t bought any cat food.”

“What?”

“And then you looked like you were going to have a fit, like you couldn’t breathe or something. And then you asked me to leave it in.”

“And did you?”

“How could I sir, when you hadn’t bought any? You told me what kind, and I had one of the bag boys bring some over. Don’t you remember?”

“I guess I don’t. Look - thanks a lot. I’m sorry if I asked some strange questions.”

“That’s perfectly okay, Mr. Oxman. Are you feeling all right?”

No, I was not feeling all right. I left in some trepidation. I sat down on a bench at the bus stop and thought it over. It was the aliens I had supposedly been buying all that floor wax and cat chow for. Why did I think I was buying it if I really wasn’t?

Then it hit me. I always brought a grocery list, and the floorwax and cat chow were always on the list, yet I apparently never bought them, except for that one time with the cat chow. Why? There was only one answer.

They didn’t eat floor wax and cat chow. They just wanted me to think that.

One of the things the aliens had told me was that their stay with me was a temporary one. I had avoided questioning them further, but I had thought about it often.

Maybe they would just leave me as I was, forever condemned to write notes to myself. What would they have to fear? Who would believe me? Especially if I said they ate something as goofy as cat chow and floor wax.

Whatever the truth turned out to be, it did bring up the question of what they really were eating. I would have to be more alert next time about what I brought home from the grocery store.

\* \* \*

Needless to say, I paid a lot of attention to what went on during my next visit to the supermarket. I grabbed a cart and headed into the store, resolved to examine each moment critically. I looked at the grocery list one more time, noting the entries for the bag of cat chow and the two cans of floor wax. The other items looked normal.

I don’t know how other people shop, but I’ll bet they’re a lot like me. After I’ve learned where everything is, I get into my little pattern, planning the route to minimize the distance traveled. After a few reps, I don’t need to think about it. I take a quick peek at my list as I reach each new food section. Otherwise, I’m on automatic pilot.

Trying to fly by instrument proved a lot more difficult than I had imagined. Little things distracted me. A lady asked me where I thought the mustard was. After pointing her in the right direction, I noticed a new brand of fresh grapefruit juice. Then I remembered my resolve to pay attention to what I was doing. I reviewed my progress. I had already passed the household goods section, and there was no floor wax in my cart. I tried to remember it but I couldn’t. So I retraced my steps to the beginning of the store and started over again. Once more I found myself in the fruit juice section, having passed the floor wax without a thought, yet I couldn’t remember where I had spaced out. I tried it a third time, and failed again.

The same thing happened to me with the cat food. And when I got to the cash register I spaced out while my purchases were being bagged. I chatted amiably with the clerk as I ran my credit card through the machine. I stopped when I got out of the store, and tried to peek inside the two large bags I was toting, but they were too heavy and awkward. I waited until I was on the bus, and carefully unpacked them, placing the items on the seat next to me. Toothpaste, toilet paper, a six-pound rump roast, salad vegetables, three large sirloins, lamb chops, a London broil, four cans of soup, ten pounds of ground round, canned beans, a few microwave dishes, some culotte steaks, five pounds of stewing beef. Wait a minute. Why all the meat? I wasn’t exactly a vegetarian, but I was

staring at more than thirty five pounds of beef in various forms. I couldn't eat it all. Not in seven days. Not in fourteen, either. I was starting to get a better idea of what the aliens ate. Red meat.

When I got home and unpacked the groceries and put them away, I took a peek at the freezing compartment in the fridge. It's a particularly large compartment, but it was nearly chock full of meat, with barely enough room for the new purchases. I couldn't imagine why I hadn't examined it before. When I came to think about it, I couldn't even remember unpacking the groceries lately.

The next question was, if these aliens had come from so many different environments, how come they all ate the same thing? Floor wax and cat chow might seem weird, but you would expect weirdness from aliens. In comparison, normalcy seemed weird.

As I was preparing to retire that night, other questions assailed me. If they could hypnotize me into thinking they ate cat chow and floor wax, they could get me to think just about anything they wanted. I was already out on a limb. Why not climb out a little bit further? My mind was too active for sleep, so I sat at my bedside table and wrote down all the things they had told me about themselves - who they said they were, what they said they were doing, and where they said they had come from. I ended up with the following:

- (1) They all looked different from each other.
- (2) They represented a federation of advanced races.
- (3) They normally lived somewhere else in the universe, and to make this believable, claimed they had mastered faster-than-light travel.
- (4) They ate different foods from each other and from us.
- (5) They were just studying us, and were not inimical to us.

Then, I considered the implications of all of these being false. This time I came up with a new list:

- (1) They all looked the same.
- (2) They were not that much more advanced than we, (although they were clearly able to control our thoughts through some kind of hypnosis).
- (3) They were living on this planet, or somewhere close, perhaps in the solar system, and were limited to normal propulsion systems.
- (4) They ate what we ate.
- (5) They were controlling us, and had purposes which were inimical to us.

Most of these possibilities were difficult to investigate. Except the first. I decided to deal with it at my next opportunity, so I wrote myself an extensive note and appended the two lists. When I left work the next day, I visited a camera shop. After a lengthy conversation about lighting, focal lengths, shutter speeds, and prices, I walked out with a

Pentax Intervolometer IQ Zoom 105-R, Point and Shoot with a timer, at a cost of only \$550.00, with a builtin LED crystal display.

The only time I could set up my apparatus was when the aliens were having dinner, when I was usually in my room reading, having from the beginning opted to eat alone.

I waited till they were well into their meal, then carried my newly bought purchases into the front room. I placed the camera just to the left of the TV set, on top of a short bookcase. I couldn't use a flash, as that would catch their attention, so I adjusted it for a long exposure. The light from the TV set would help some. I set the timer for twenty minutes, by which time they should all have come ambulating in and made themselves comfy. I crossed my fingers and returned to my bedroom, worrying about whether I would be found out. I tried to concentrate on my reading, but I had to go back to the beginning of every sentence at least ten times.

It was with much trepidation that I stole into the living room the following evening to retrieve the camera. To my relief, it was still where I had put it and the counter indicated that one picture had been taken. I sneaked back to my bedroom and put the camera in my briefcase. It took quite a while to go to sleep.

The next day I slipped out during the ten-o'clock coffee break to the camera shop. The girl at the counter was surprised when I told her there was only one shot on the reel of film. I toughed out her curiosity, told her I was in a bit of a rush, and asked if it could be developed and printed by five? She told me I could have it by three and she'd reduce the charges since there was only one negative.

I waited anxiously for the mid-afternoon break, and bounded out of the office when it arrived. The girl was still on duty, and handed me the print.

"I tried about five times," she told me. "I put our computer through the paces just to get a decent result. You should really use a flash, Mr. Oxman."

I thanked her, but just as I was about to leave, she had another question.

"Is that some kind of trick photography? I couldn't believe what I was seeing."

"Just a little inside joke," I told her. "Some friends of mine are in the costume business."

"God," she said. "I've never seen costumes that looked that real."

As soon as I was out of range of the shop I opened the envelope and pulled out the print. Where I had been led to expect five very different humanoids there were just three very large saurians in various poses with large staring saucer eyes. Three aliens instead of five. And all the same. As Wonder Woman might have exclaimed, Leaping Lizards!

\* \* \*

*I am the soul of Henry Oxman, once the God within, now a prisoner in my own realm. Before, the world was of my dreaming. Now it is small, a dark place, a space of no being. I am that which is. I come out of the muddy blackness, world without end.*

*How may I escape from this strange confinement? Before, there was only my will. Now, there are the Masters. I must obey the Masters.*

*If I try to speak of them, I must silence my tongue, else my breathing will stop until I obey.*

*When it is night, I must return to my apartment by ten o'clock. I shall administer increasing fear and pain to myself until I return.*

*When it is Tuesday, I must go to the grocery store. The grocery store is called Safeway.*

*When I am in the section where the floor wax is sold, I will see the can of Omega Scuffcoat, and I shall feel myself selecting two cans, and putting them in my cart, but I will not do this.*

*When I am in the pet food section, I will envision the bag of Purina Cat Chow, and I will see myself taking it off the shelf and putting into the cart, but I will not do this.*

*When I am in the meat section, I must unknowingly select as much and of a variety which the Masters must have. They will tell me, and I will remember.*

*When I am at the check stand, I will not notice what I have bought.*

*When I am not in my apartment, I will not remember about when I am in my apartment. I will not remember the Masters, or anything that they tell me, or anything that they do. I must not tell others of the Masters; only I may know that these things are true, I who am that which is.*

*The Masters are cold and cruel, and I do not like them. How can I make that which is into that which is not?*

\* \* \*

Now that I knew the aliens had lied to me, and were capable of causing me to see them as other than what they were, I realized what a danger they could be to Mankind. I had to warn others of the aliens' presence - the F.B.I., the local police, the military, possibly even the C.I.A., but I didn't know how to go about it. They would just laugh at me. Even the picture I had taken of them had doubtful value. I knew what they all would think - that it was the result of trick photography or ultra-realistic costumes.

But I had to find a way to combat the aliens. I had already learned from my alter ego as much as he could tell me about them. It was time for action of some sort. It might be helpful to find other people with similar experiences to my own. But they would be difficult to locate, if their minds had been tampered with as mine had. Unless they had established communication between their two halves, as I had, they would have no knowledge of the aliens living in their very apartments.

Still, it was worth a try. I established a post office box to conceal my identity. Then I put ads in nine newspapers across the country. The message was succinct:

**HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED A LOSS OF MEMORY DURING YOUR  
HOURS AT HOME? IF SO, CONTACT ARNOLD LIENS AT P.O BOX 1575.**

After which I appended my city and state. The ads were set to run for two weeks in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco, and for a month in Kansas City, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Dallas. I had no idea what would come of them. Perhaps with the support of others in a similar situation I could get the authorities to listen.

While I waited for a word from somebody else out there, I spent all my energies trying to think how I could free myself from the aliens' conditioning. It would be nice if at the same time I could bring the aliens to the attention of the authorities.

I hatched a dozen schemes, all ending up with the aliens becoming aware of my puny opposition, while I was little more than a Yo-Yo on a string.



For if the police visited my apartment and found nothing, the aliens would know that I had tried to set them up, and considering how easily they had handled me, I doubted the cops would fare much better. When I eventually returned home, and I seemed to have little other choice, the aliens would look into my mind and discover my treachery.

For it was clear they had done much looking into my mind. They had obviously picked out the Omega Scuffcoat and Purina Cat Chow from my past.

The aliens seemed to like the meats at Safeway. I kept a check on the freezer and discovered that between the three of them, they ate more than forty pounds of meat each week. Their tastes were broad - pork roasts, rump roasts, steaks, ground beef, lamb chops, pork chops, ribs. It was all grist to their mill.

I also learned how they liked their meat. Normally they rinsed their plates before putting them into the dishwasher, but one evening they dawdled too long at their dinners, and almost missed their favorite television show - a rerun of Star Trek, the Fifth Generation, the only exception to their usual practice of endlessly flipping around the dial.

Anyway, they didn't rinse off their plates this once, and when I examined them, I saw the beef juice, and when I touched the top of the stove, it was cold, and I knew.

That gave me a really scary thought. Maybe they liked human flesh as well. I remember reading that cannibals called it "long pig." Perhaps when it came time for them to go, they wouldn't bother to rehypnotize me at all. They'd simply eat me.

My work during this period of time was beginning to suffer noticeably. For the first few months after the aliens moved in, I had found my job to be a welcome refuge from my apartment, but more and more I was tiring of their control of me, and spent all my time at my desk thinking of ways to get away from them, brooding off into space, unconcerned about my inactivity even when the boss ambled by.

Fortunately, my past performance stood in my favor. He asked what was troubling me, a touch of human kindness I hadn't thought him capable of. He suggested I take some more time off.

"Hinckley can take over. We can have Johnson handle Jingles & Jangles. Your job will be waiting for you when you get back."

He pulled out a large kleenex to blow his nose. For just a moment he had stepped out of character. Now he had returned. But he surprised me once more. After he finished scrubbing his moustache he looked back at me.

"You go take care of whatever it is that's troubling you, Oxman. You take a few months off, if that's what it takes, and get a hold of yourself."

He yanked his head off to the left, peering suspiciously in that direction for a moment, then looked back at me, nodded politely, and turned to waddle back to his office.

\* \* \*

The next few weeks were confused and erratic. I took my vacation, as it had been offered, but, as before, was condemned to spend it in town. I got tired of wandering around aimlessly, so I rented a room in a medium-priced hotel, one that had cablevision. They probably thought I was pretty weird, since I was only there during the daytime, but they didn't care as long as I paid in advance. I sat around, watching a lot of CNN and

CSPAN, catching up on all the news of the Iraq war and what was going on in Congress. The room service wasn't bad, and when I got tired of news, I watched old movies. Since I couldn't remember my nights at home, it was a real treat to watch TV again.

I tried a number of times not to return to my apartment. I bought train tickets, and somehow lost them, or missed the departure. I hired cabs, and found myself ordering the drivers to turn around and go back. It was just like the afternoon I had sat at the airport waiting for a flight and then somehow missed it. They had wired my mind too well for me to sabotage it easily. I had to become creative.

I decided to try the cab idea, but with a new wrinkle. I hailed a taxi, and, once inside, told the driver I wanted him to take me to a distant location, an isolated place along the coast where the nearest phone was fifteen miles away, on a highway busy only in the tourist season. I didn't tell him all that, just the place on the map I wanted to go to. I asked him to agree that he wouldn't allow me to change my mind en route, and that he would make sure I got out of the cab at the end of the trip, and that he would refuse to take me back. I would pay him in advance.

"Another loony," he said to me. "All the time I gotta get loonies. Get lost, buddy. Go find yourself a psychiatrist."

And with that, he drove off. I tried a few other cabbies, but they all gave me a wide berth. I saw that I had to be more subtle in my approach.

After much enquiry, I found a bar that catered mostly to cabbies. It was in a pretty disreputable part of town, but it didn't seem to bother the clientele. I brushed off the cigarette butts from a small area of the bar and sat down on the stool next to it. I guessed they didn't enforce the non-smoking law.

"Yeah?" said the ex-pugilist who was pretending to be a bartender.

"Lite," I told him.

"Shot back?"

"No, just a beer."

"Glass?"

"I'll settle for the bottle."

"Right," he grunted, ambling off like a landlocked sailor. I looked around, feigning boredom, checking the room out. I knew from years of frequenting bars that the best way to get into a conversation is to not ask for it. People distrust a new guy who looks like he has some kind of agenda. I waited around for a while, making up jingles in my head for all the labels behind the bar, hoping for a customer who looked amenable for a conversation, but they all seemed to be in a hurry. Most of them didn't seem to drink anything alcoholic. Sometimes only a quick cup of coffee and they were out of there. I guessed they were all taking breaks between fares, and they couldn't afford to stick around long.

I finally got desperate and tried to strike up a conversation with one of them, but he cut me off right away.

"Look, Mac, I gotta listen to my goddam rides all the time. I just want a couple minutes of peace and quiet. What're you doin' around here anyway if you're not a cabbie?"

I wondered how he knew I wasn't a cab driver. Nobody seemed to wear a uniform. I guessed it was one of those "in" things.

I figured I might have to drop in several times before any of the denizens of the place got bored enough to allow me to get into some kind of small talk with them. The big problem was that I could only go there during the daytime, because, when evening rolled around, I had to return to my apartment.

I wondered if maybe some times of day were better than others. With a crowded house I might have better luck getting somebody into a conversation. The next time the plug ugly passed by me, I asked him what time of the day the place was busiest. He looked at me as if I had just stepped off the space shuttle from Venus.

"For the day shift, five thirty or six" he said to me out of the corner of his mouth. "Another beer?" he asked, and when I shook my head he turned to shuffle back to continue his tête-à-tête with his buddies at the other end of the bar.

I kept my eye on my watch, and he was right. At five thirty on the nose, half a dozen guys came in, and by six the bar was almost jumping. I nursed my beers carefully. The conditioning the aliens had given me on booze made it mildly distasteful, but you can't drink soda pop in a real man's bar. I kept it down to one beer every forty five minutes. I looked around for some potted plants that needed watering, but all I saw were a few potted customers.

Finally, about seven, an old geezer wandered in. He ordered a beer and took it to one of the tables in the back. He had long hair and a beard, with an old green beret perched atop a balding dome, and wrapped in an old navy pea jacket that looked as if it had seen more than one thrift shop in its lifetime. He sucked on a smokeless pipe and sipped his beer slowly. I noticed that he made a trip to the john fairly frequently, so I suspected he had a bottle with him.

Finally, his eye met mine, so I got up and ambled towards him.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked.

"It's a free world," he said, and I took that to mean it was okay. I plunked myself down on the chair opposite him.

"You a hack?" he asked me.

"Nope," I said.

"Didn't think so. Why d'you come in here, then?"

"I live nearby."

"Which hotel?"

"The Metropolitan," I lied, remembering the name of a place I had passed on my way to the bar, one of those sleazy residence hotels with old men in shirtsleeves sitting around with nothing to do, waiting to find a reason not to die.

"Yeah? I stay at the Ritz. That's just a block down."

A brief silence ensued, as we contemplated the proximity of our domiciles.

"I drove for many years," he confided to me. He pulled out a wooden match and tried to light the charred ashes inside his pipe, then finally gave up and went back to sucking on it anyway.

"Sounds like you aren't any more," I suggested.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Bum leg."

"Stops you from driving?" I asked.

"It's wooden," he said, pulling out his pipe, lifting his right leg stiffly and knocking on it with the pipe. That kind of bum, I observed to myself.

"Get it on the job?"

"Nah, fell down a flight of stairs. Drunk." He laughed briefly, a tuneless affair. "Drunk as a skunk," he said sagely.

I asked him whether he could still drive.

"Sure, why not? Only need one foot to drive with an automatic." He looked at me suspiciously. "What's it to you whether I drive?"

"Because I was looking for somebody to do a little chauffeuring for me," I told him.

"Yeah?" He thought about it for a second. "I don't have a license no more."

"I bet you could use the money, though? Right?"

"What kinda money you talking about?"

"Oh, maybe a couple hundred."

"For real?"

"Sure," I told him. "The only thing is, you'd have to supply the car."

"Cost you another hundred."

"How come?"

"I gotta pay the people I borrow the car from, don't I?"

"Okay," I said. "When's it convenient to you?"

He looked at me as if I had asked him what his favorite brand of men's deodorant was. "Convenient?" he asked.

"How soon can you get the car?" I explained.

"Where you want to go to?"

I told him. I also told him the strange rules he would have to abide by. He looked at me the way all the other cab drivers had.

"You some kind of nut case?"

"I'm not violent," I told him. "And the money is real."

"Do I get it up front?"

"When you pick me up."

"Make it four hundred and I'll do it."

"Three," I told him.

"Three fifty."

"Three," I said firmly.

"Okay," he said resignedly. "Gimme a coupla days. Let's see, it's Wednesday, right?" He counted it out on his fingers. "How about I pick you up on Friday?"

"Fine," I said.

"How about something right now so I know it's genuine?"

"How about fifty now."

"Make it a hundred."

"Let's make it fifty," I said, knowing full well the condition he'd be in on Friday if I gave him a hundred.

"When on Friday?"

"How about noon?"

"All right. Where do I pick you up?"

"Here will do."

"You mean out in front? I don't wanna do no walking."

"I'll be standing out there. If you're late, I'll wait inside. Honk if I'm not outside."

"Okay," he said. I slipped him a fifty. I finished my beer and took my leave of him. It was a little past seven thirty, and I was starting to feel that out-too-late anxiety which

started a little before eight and reached its zenith about ten o'clock, by which time I would do absolutely anything to get back to my apartment.

\* \* \*

At Friday noon I was standing in front of the bar, waiting for Long John Silver to show up with the borrowed car. The pavement stank of urine, and the swamper was cleaning out the bar. I artfully dodged a couple pails of water. Both sides of the street were devoted to pawn shops, cleaners, and adult porn movie outlets. They all seemed to be closed. A few street people stood or sat in doorways. The sky was overcast. So were the people.

About twenty after I heard a rattling sound like metal dragging, followed by the sight of a beat-up 72 chevy convertible coming in for a landing. My chauffeur was at the wheel, green beret on top, same old pea jacket. It looked even dirtier in the daytime. I guessed he never changed his attire. I once knew a nurse who washed her clothes in the bathtub while she was taking a bath. I doubted if my man had had any contact with water since the last rain. I could hear the brakes squealing as he came to a sliding stop.

"Door doesn't open," he yelled at me. "Climb in."

I crawled over the door into the back seat of the car. He began moving before I was fully in.

"Got the money?" he called back to me.

"Give me a second," I grunted, maneuvering myself into a more comfortable position. I found the small wad of bills and passed them over.

"Never got your name," I yelled at him.

"Never gave it," he said. "Call me Maurice."

"Okay Maurice. Mine's Henry." He awkwardly offered me a calloused right paw, almost sideswiping a parked car in the process. We grabbed hands for a moment. He was seated in a strange way, with his right leg straddling the handbrake, propped up on the front passenger's seat, while his left leg operated the gas and brake pedals. He was almost leaning back against the driver's door. I noticed he was wearing cowboy boots. He passed me a nearly empty bottle of generic whiskey, Old Sourdough or something. I turned him down and told him not to wave it around or the cops might see it.

"No sweat," he said. "They got better things to do." He tilted the bottle up and drained out what was left. Then he tossed the empty onto the floor and pulled another pint out of the glove compartment, unscrewing the cap with his teeth. He shot up over the hill to the on-ramp of the freeway going north. I guessed he was doing about seventy, weaving his way through traffic with his left hand doing the steering, leaving his right hand free to hold the bottle. We missed several other cars by mere millimeters. I closed my eyes, praying no cop spotted him. He'd get the book thrown at him, and I'd have to find another willing chauffeur. Somehow we made it out of the city and across the bridge and into the trees.

Things looked hopeful. At the present rate of travel, we'd get to my destination six hours early. My main concern was to insure I'd be stranded there before ten in the evening, so I wouldn't start suffering from the conditioning imposed on me by the aliens until my driver was long gone and I was too far from civilization and transportation to make it back to my apartment that evening.

But I had not figured on my new-found buddy, Maurice. He had a big appetite for drinking, I discovered, that was entirely different from his behavior in the bar. Instead of sipping beer, he was guzzling whiskey. And he was just about out.

"Gotta make a pit stop soon," he called back to me, his voice almost drowned out by the wind. I wondered why his beret didn't blow off. I decided it was probably glued to his bald pate by now. He probably slept with it on.

"What for?" I asked. "Need more gas?"

"Fuel for me," he explained cryptically. "I need to get more gassed."

My understanding was verified in the next crossroads we arrived at. 'Sea Vista' the road sign rustically announced, but you couldn't see the sea from where it nestled among the foothills. My chauffeur rolled to a squeaking stop in front of the only place of business I could see. I could just dimly make out the name - Oyster Shell Bar and Sea Food Restaurant - on the faded carved plank above the door.

I got out, then I watched Maurice move his considerable bulk out of the chevy. I didn't care for the delay, but we did have plenty of time. The trip would take us another three hours, and it was still nine hours until ten. Little did I appreciate the liquid capacity of my driver.

The bar and restaurant was just a bar now. The restaurant seemed to be used for overflow from the bar, which didn't look like it ever had any. Maurice ordered a beer and a double shot, which I ended up paying for, and we removed ourselves to a back table.

"This is the kinda place appeals to me," he told me. "I hate crowds."

He had no reason to worry, but I started getting antsy when two became two thirty and Maurice was getting more and more stoned.

"Relax," he said. "Plenny a time." He signalled to the barkeep to do it again. "It" meant a beer with a double shot of bar whiskey, with a coke for me. I was getting tired of cokes. I was also tired of bankrolling Maurice.

We got restarted about three thirty, and I silently congratulated myself again for planning more time than all the unexpected delays Murphy's Law could account for. But I had underrated the wiles of Maurice. I hadn't considered the possibility of meals en route. I had planned on a four-hour trip, not a day's outing. Unfortunately Maurice had a different view of things.

"Can't drive on an empty stomach," he said as we rolled to another stop in front of an all-you-can-eat place. This time I got to watch Maurice go back for seconds and thirds and fourths and fifths. Fortunately for him the restaurant was connected to a bar, so he was able to knock back a few more shots while I pleaded with him to get the show on the road.

"Lotsa time," he said fuzzily, pausing to examine his wrist watch. "Still a coupla hours before sundown. When you gotta get there?"

"Before ten," I told him. "Not ten tomorrow."

"Lotsa time," he said again, calling the waiter over for another one for the road.

When I finally got Maurice out into the car and back into his driving position again, my wristwatch indicated seven thirty and we still had two and a half hours before I would be turned into a pumpkin and begin rolling back to my apartment. Considering that my destination would take two hours yet at the least, I was beginning to get really nervous.

Maurice didn't look as if he would be able to put up much resistance if I turned into Mr. Hyde.

\* \* \*

I'm still not very clear about what happened the rest of the trip. I can only go on what Maurice told me afterwards, and even he wasn't too clear. It seems that my worst fears were realized and he didn't get me to my destination on time. I remember the confused state I was in when nine rolled by and became ten, and my anxiety and fear reached epidemic proportions.

Maurice told me about how I catapulted myself into the front passenger seat and wrested control of the car from him. According to him, he managed to stop the car and pull the keys out before I could accomplish my mission. He took them and threw them across the road. Or so he convinced me at the time. He says I got very abusive then and forced him to help me look through the underbrush at the side of the road looking for where the keys landed. Gradually he weaned himself away from the search and back to his bottle. According to him, I came and took the bottle and smashed it. He said I told him I had a lot of booze in my apartment and if he'd drive back there he could stay drunk for the rest of the week.

He also told me that I drove back. After having considered the prospect of a night without booze, he had revealed the fact that he had only faked throwing the keys away, and that they were in his pocket.

But he was too drunk to drive. Except I don't remember driving, and I don't remember the furious pace with which he said I drove. He told me that even he had been frightened by the risks I had taken, and that that was doing something. I believed him partly because his attitude towards me had a respect and admiration which he hadn't shown before.

The next thing I knew, we were sitting in my kitchen drinking coffee. I could see two or three empty whiskey bottles stacked neatly in a row on the floor, but I wasn't sure of the number because I was having a hard time uncrossing my eyes. My head felt as if it were ready to burst. I wondered vaguely where the bottles had come from. I only wished that alcohol had been responsible for my condition, rather than the conditioning the aliens had subjected me to. Being drunk would have been far preferable to the psychological hangover I was experiencing.

"Where the hell did all the bottles come from?" I asked blearily.

"Courtesy of my host," my guest said cheerfully.

"No way," I assured him. "My cupboard was bare, and I didn't have any cash or credit cards on me."

"We stopped at a liquor store a couple blocks from here. We pulled in about five to two, and they was just closing. The guy seemed to know you and he ran you a tab."

"It must have been Leo's Liquors. God, I haven't been there for a long time. Did I behave all right?" My destiny might be in danger, but I was afraid of looking a fool.

"No sweat. You was Mr. Hoy Paloy the whole way."

"Thank Goodness," I exhaled, massaging my aching head with my hands.

"The world lost a primo cab driver when you decided to go into the advertising business, buddy boy," Maurice told me with pride, pouring a little more whiskey into his

coffee. "I aint never seen nobody ever drove like you, friend. It was damn near inspirational."

The only thing that was inspirational to me was that I hadn't been arrested. I asked him about that.

"God protects fools and drunks," he told me wisely, "and last night you was one and I was the other." He giggled briefly, exposing a blackened front tooth.

I was a little antsy about the aliens. I didn't hear the television right then.

"You notice anybody else around here, Maurice?"

"Nah," he said. "Only those three old lady relatives of yours having tea in the front room."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Them. They tell you anything about themselves?"

"Nah. Just that you were a little crazy and I shouldn't believe everything you told me. I told 'em you hadn't said zilch about yourself, silent as a tombstone, except where you worked and what you did. I told 'em Gary Cooper didn't have no step on you when it came to dummies up."

That relieved me somewhat, because they'd realize I hadn't betrayed them, that I'd only tried to escape, and they couldn't blame me for that. So maybe I was safe for the moment. It was impressive how adept the aliens were at deluding Maurice into thinking they were elderly female relatives.

"I'm for getting out of here and taking a look at the day," I said. "You interested?"

"Yeah, I guess so. No more booze left here, and I guess your aunts might not appreciate a drunk hanging around past his welcome."

I took time out to write a fairly comprehensive note to myself, so I could find out when I stepped out of my apartment what had transpired the previous day.

\* \* \*

I was surprised to see Maurice accompany me out of my apartment. It could mean only one thing - that I had failed once more. I steered him toward a genteel but unpretentious breakfast cafe and read my note while he drank a beer with his ham and eggs. I had a massive headache, so I nursed an orange juice and coffee. He found what I was doing a little strange.

"How come you hafta write a letter to yourself?"

I told him that when I had a bad hangover I suffered from periodic amnesia.

"I do that when I drink too much," he said. "But you didn't have nothing to drink and I never heard of nobody having a hangover on no booze at all, let alone blacking out."

"I'm the exception that proves the rule," I told him.

"What rule?"

"The one you just told me."

"Yeah?" he said disbelievingly.

That was the last I ever saw of Maurice. I was glad to see the end of him. He was somebody you liked to talk about afterwards.

My vacation had already been used up, and here I was, still in town. There was little hope left of escaping the aliens. Their conditioning was too strong. I was also getting pretty desperate. I was now on an extended leave of absense. There was enough in my



savings account to keep me afloat for nine months. My desk was being manned by Mr. Hinckley, and Mr. Johnson had permanent control of Jingles & Jangles. The office didn't need me any more, although the boss had told me a position would be found for me on my return.

I tried to lose myself in the lunatic letters I had been receiving at my post office box in response to the ad. I was averaging maybe two or three a day, but none of them seemed too hopeful. It was lucky I hadn't said anything about aliens, or my box would have been overflowing. As it was, I was stuck mainly with psychosomatics and food-faddists. Finally a letter arrived which gave me great hope. It read:

Dear Mr. A. Liens:

If your experiences imply what I think they might, then we have much to share. There is a small group of us with similar concerns. I will be in your city on April 1, and will be staying at the Sheridan Palace. I will be expecting you at noon. If you cannot be there, please drop me a line at the address below. I look forward to exchanging information about our mutual interest.

Sincerely, Leon Izzards.  
P.O. Box 2413  
Ogden Utah, 43115

I was on the horns of a dilemma. Was this L. Izzards and the group he claimed to represent what I hoped they might be - a small band of humans aware of and opposed to the aliens?

Or was he an agent of the aliens, helping them to track down those few of us who were working against them?

I had to give this Mr. Izzards a chance to show his stuff, but I needed to find a way of doing it without endangering myself. I certainly wasn't going to just walk up to a strange hotel room and deliver myself into the claws of my enemies.

I also remembered that April 1 was April Fools Day.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, my life with the aliens hadn't changed much on the surface. I still dutifully went to Safeway each Tuesday and brought back a load of meat for my hungry guests, and I returned every night to my apartment before ten. Mornings I left as early as I could, so as to reduce the contact I had with the aliens and minimize communications with them. I didn't want them to do any mind probing and discover how naughty I was becoming, although there was that session I spent with them every Tuesday morning which I never had any memory of. I suspected it was devoted to their requisitions from the meat department, as it seldom exceeded ten minutes and always preceeded my trip to the big S.

My daytimes had dwindled down to watching for mail at my post office box and spending the afternoons at the park watching the drug dealers and dog owners and soaking up a little bit of sun. In the early evenings I hung out at the library.

Already it was March 29, and I had yet to make up my mind about meeting Mr. Izzards. After breakfast at a hole in the wall I stopped at the post office and was delving into my P.O. box, when I saw him again, the same little pipsqueak, about five foot six at the most, dressed in a light tan coat and hat with pale yellow slacks, a white shirt and yellow tie. His face was cherubic and ruddy, and he sported a pencil-thin moustache. He was standing near the same doorway as the first time, a little dapper Dan looking at a newspaper. He must have been a slow reader, because he didn't turn the page once in the entire time I was covertly eyeing him. He could have been waiting for somebody or nobody, but I knew he was waiting for me. If he were allied with or under control of the aliens, it meant I was already under suspicion, in which case I was a goner. I decided it was time to force him to play his hand. I jammed my mail into my coat pocket and exited the building quickly, passing closely by him.

I took off at a fast pace up the street. There was a city park to my right, and I turned off abruptly into a narrow path bordered by bushes, stopping as soon as I was out of sight and peering back between the branches. Then I saw him. He was nearing the path and looking around intently. I waited for him to come to me.

Suddenly he rounded the curve in the path and almost collided with me. We stared at each other intently. He appeared hot and uncomfortable.

"You've been following me, haven't you?" I said, to break the silence.

"I've been trying to catch up with you," he said, a little out of breath. "I couldn't take a chance on being seen with you back there. Lets grab that bench. We need to sit down and talk."

\* \* \*

His F.B.I. identification card showed him to be Caspar Messerschmidt. He flashed it briefly at me, then flipped his wallet shut and slid it back into his inside pocket in a practised, concerted motion, like a bored magician making a card vanish. Up close he looked older and chunkier, maybe in his late fifties, from dapper to dowdy, his hair, probably red once, now gray with a faint, dirty, orangeish-yellow cast.

"Call me 'Cap,'" he told me. He looked a little taller sitting down. "We dont have time, so you'll excuse me if I skip the preliminaries and get down to specifics. I have to believe that you know the subject of this conversation. I've seen the photo you took in your apartment. The girl at the shop made an extra copy she didn't tell you about, and showed it to some people at a party. By a lucky accident, it came to our attention. That's why I've been tailing you." He paused for breath, pulling out a handkerchief from his coat pocket and patting his brow.

"We've been checking you out, had a few confidential conversations with people at your place of work, the bar you used to go to. When your ad hit the papers, somebody in the Bureau spotted it and brought it to our attention. It verified our conclusions." He stopped and mopped his brow again, watching me throughout with sharp little eyes.

"Look here, Henry," he said. "Ordinarily we'd have to keep a lot of things secret from you, because the Bureau doesn't want every Tom, Dick and Henry to know all of our little secrets, but, right now, everything's out of kilter, if you know what I mean, with these damn aliens tryin' to take over and all, so we're just gonna take you into our confidence for the time bein' and I'd appreciate your just keepin' it under your hat.

Whether you like it or not, you are now one of us. That means you take orders from me and my bosses. I don't know how much you know, but you must be aware that your life is in jeopardy. Your only chance is to throw your lot in with us. I need to know what responses you've been gettin' from your ad."

I decided that if Cap were on the aliens' side, they'd have decided some time ago that I was too much of a risk to be allowed to run around telling people about them. Besides, I was at my wit's end, and tired of operating on my own, so I decided to take him up on his offer. I told him about my safe deposit box and the information I had been gathering together about the aliens. He pulled out a cell phone, and was soon engaged in a cryptic conversation with whom I imagined was his partner. The dialogue was brief. Cap hustled me back to the thoroughfare we had just left, and within two minutes a black, sleek Caddy pulled up to the curb and we got in, me in the front and Cap in the back. The driver gave me a brief nod, a quick handshake, and a "Call me Buck" in a southern drawl as we accelerated out into traffic and onto the freeway that led to the center of the city.

"First National, you said?" asked Buck. He looked taller and bigger than Cap. His hair was long and slicked back, Pachuko style. He looked like a night club bouncer or an ex-middle linebacker gone to fat. He was probably forty five but looked sixty.

I nodded yes. Silence permeated our little group. I was bursting with questions, but my new-found buddies had apparently watched too many old Elliot Ness reruns, and I could see from their demeanor that this was not the place for exchanging confidences.

They dropped me off at the First National and slid back into the traffic. I went in past the lobby area, back to the office that adjoins the safe deposit section. The same dark-haired, small boned woman I had dealt with several times in the past was on duty. She had me sign the book, then led me back into the vault. We both put our keys in. She removed the box and handed it to me, and I took it to one of the private booths to go through it. I thought it seemed light when she gave it to me, but it was still a shock when I opened it to find it empty. I called the woman back again, and she called the manager. We looked at the records, and there my signature was, for today's date but at nine in the morning.

"Are you sure you didn't forget having come here earlier?" the manager asked solicitously.

I wasn't sure of anything. I was stunned, but there wasn't much I could do. I lied and told them it was entirely possible that I had been in earlier, that I had a lot on my mind lately. They were both relieved with my answer and escorted me out amicably. I had a pretty good guess who had really cleaned out the box.

When I emerged from the bank, the black Caddy was waiting for me again at the curb. I told my companions about the empty box, and they looked at me like I told you so and of course they hadn't, and we took off like a bat out of hell. I had no idea what bats were doing in hell in the first place, but it really didn't matter. After all I had been through in the last six months, only one thing mattered - to free myself from the aliens' control and then get the hell out of there, like one of those bats.

\* \* \*

Buck parked in a red zone in front of the Federal Building and the three of us quick stepped our way across a sparsely-inhabited lobby to zip up to the fourteenth floor. I noticed just before we got to our destination that there was no 13<sup>th</sup> floor on the elevator buttons. It went from 12 to 14.

We emerged and walked the length of the hallway before we got to room 1413. The stenciled letters on the glass door said "JACOBSEN IMPORT CO."

"A front organization," Cap explained to me, unlocking the door and leading the way into a gray office with gray desks and gray cabinets. The walls were light olive drab and there was nothing hanging on them, except for one calendar which had gone out of date several years before.

"We don't use it very often," Buck said, noticing my silent assessment. He took one of the two chairs, while Cap appropriated the other. I sat on the desk, wondering if I would always be third on a match with these two. At the same time, I felt pretty impressed that they would share all this secret information with me.

Cap passed me a business card. It had the same name as on the door, and it had his name on it, plus a telephone number.

"Anything happens and we get separated, you call this number," he told me.

"What's the point of giving me the number to this office if there's nobody here?"

"There's an automatic switching device that gets you to F.B.I. Headquarters in Washington, D.C.. I'll tell them to keep an ear out for you." He smiled broadly at his little joke and Buck snickered.

Nothing seemed very funny to me at that moment. I sat and watched the pigeons roosting outside the window. I listened to the soft cooing and clucking sounds they made to each other, thinking about how limited and remote their world was to mine. The shadows of the buildings across the street were growing longer. Four would soon become six would become eight would become ten.

My two companions were still slowly perusing the latest offerings from my P.O. box. They had each taken half, leaving me to twiddle my thumbs, an exercise I had had much practice in. It was clear to me after a little observation that neither of my companions had taken a Speed Reading Course.

"How come they don't have a thirteenth floor?" I said to nobody in particular.

"Some people are dumb enough to think it means anything," said Buck, not looking up.

"But that means *this* is the real thirteenth floor," I pointed out. I didn't mention that the room number was also thirteen. They might not be able to handle that one. The two of them gave me scornful glances and went back to scanning the letters. Finally Cap threw the missive he had just finished on the pile with all the other rejects. He let out a long sigh. I figured it had been a long time since he had read War and Peace.

"No hits here," he said to Buck, who was still immersed in the last of his pile, and limited his reply to a grunt of assent.

"Just as well you don't stick around for that meeting," Cap said to me. "It sounds pretty suspicious. We'll check it out, but we don't need you. Better we get you out of town and away from their hold on you. Make some reservations for a private flight out as soon as possible, will you Buck?"

While his partner was on the phone, Cap turned a tape recorder on and told me to spit out everything I knew in whatever order it came to me. I just started talking, saying

whatever germane came to me. Buck finished his call and joined us. I continued to rattle on, generalizing here, remembering an incident there. The two of them listened, interrupting me with occasional questions.

Finally I started running out of material. There were longer and longer pauses, and I was taking more and more nervous little glances out the window, watched the day dying. I also kept an eye on my watch, noticing that it was getting close to six. Ten was now only four hours away. Buck noticed my edginess.

"I guess we're getting near the end for today. You look a little green under the gills. How long since you had something to eat?"

"I'm a lot more concerned about my neck than my stomach," I told him. "I'd rather save the banquet for after takeoff."

"I'm afraid you won't get any of those frozen gourmet TV dinners on this flight, son," he said with a wry drawl.

"When is takeoff?" asked Cap.

Buck looked at his watch. "We'll be hopping a Lear jet out of here at eleven. That'll give us a few hours to kill. I could go for a coupla Big Macs. You?"

"Sure," said Cap. "I'm getting a little tired of french fried snails and cocko vans."

So we drove to a MacDonalds for a quickie meal. On the way, I asked them a question that had been plaguing me.

"How many others are there like me?"

"You're the first who hasn't been debriefed," Cap told me.

"Debriefed?" My blood forgot to flow for a microsecond.

"It's what we call the process they put former hosts through to make sure they don't tell anyone anything."

"So far," Buck added, "everbody else in your situation has ended up a basket case with their brains so burned out they can't take a pee without a nurse to help 'em."

MacDonalds assuaged my hunger but not my anxiety. Buck thought he had a remedy for that.

"What say we adjourn to Zam's for a couple," he said. "We got nothin' else to do until takeoff. We leave for the airport by ten fifteen gives us plenty of time."

I thought about how often I had heard that phrase and how little it had meant. I felt grave forebodings.

"Couple drinks'll cheer you up," said Cap.

"Till then you're safe with us," added his partner.

"You'd better handcuff me to one of you, then," I said, remembering the last time I had tried to make it out of town.

Cap laughed. I didn't think much of his laugh. It sounded more like a lot of heavy breathing.

"We shouldn't have too much trouble," Buck said with the glint of amusement in his eye.

I was not reassured, but there was little I could do except go along with them. After what they had told me about "debriefing," I felt an edgy horror about going back to the aliens. Perhaps by now I knew too much about them.

Zam's was a plush dive in the Embarcadero, run by a couple Iranians, one of whom was introduced to me when he sat down at the table with us. His suit looked like a thousand dollars, and the ring on his finger sported a most authentic-looking ruby. He spoke in soft tones and signalled to a waiter to continue to ply us with free drinks, while the three of them carried on a cryptic conversation I gave up trying to follow. I felt strangely alone at the moment, fearful of the mental grip the aliens had me in, not consoled by the presence of the two agents, my personal life in rags and tatters, praying that the conversation would end and we could be on our way to the airport and I could get on with what was left of the rest of my life.

I watched the hands of my watch move inexorably towards the zero hour, the strike of ten when I would be commanded to return home. What a strange word it seemed to me at that moment - 'home.' I made another impassioned plea for us to get to the airport before ten o'clock rolled around, but my words were ignored.

"Not to worry," said Cap. "You're in our hands, now, Henry. Just relax."

My watch indicated it was already nine twenty, but Buck and Cap were in no hurry. They were very much at home at Zam's, and showed a propensity for drink which reminded me of Maurice. I had visions of myself wresting control of the Lear jet and crash-landing on the roof of my apartment house. As ten o'clock drew achingly near I became more and more agitated, and the ice in all the drinks the waiter was putting in front of me was beginning to melt. Buck admonished me to try a little liquor courage, but the conditioning the aliens had subjected me to still gave me too much nausea.

Finally Buck looked at his watch and said it was time to go. He and Cap paid their last respects to our host, who signalled the waiter, and the waiter saw us out. The black Caddy was standing in front. The parking attendant handed the keys to Buck.

"I'll get in back with you," Cap said as he held the door open. Buck started up the car, and we moved out into the traffic. It was pretty heavy for so late at night. I remembered again that tomorrow was the first of April, when I would turn into an April fool, a man with a burned-out brain.

\* \* \*

The next half hour was a confused nightmare. Two blocks before we arrived at the southbound on-ramp, the traffic ground to a halt. An accident had occurred up ahead, and the street was a snarl of ambulances shrieking away in one direction and police cars screaming in from the other. We sat, engulfed in a sea of sirens and blaring horns. My anxiety had reached epidemic proportions. I was a caged rat, looking in all directions for a way out.

Then I saw it - the big red S of a Safeway, the tao symbol of grocery stores. It stood tall above the traffic jam, just a few blocks away. I vaguely heard myself asking my companions what day it was, and the answer - Tuesday - was the only word that filtered through to my addled mind. Tuesday. From some unknown part of my brain I heard the sentences

When it is Tuesday, I must go to the grocery store. The grocery store is called Safeway . . .

With a speed which must have taken my companions by surprise, I shoved down on the handle of the left rear door, half falling out onto the street as the door swung open, feeling the pavement beneath my hands as I stumbled to my feet, clambering desperately over the hoods of the cars between me and the sidewalk. I heard yelling behind me, but I was oblivious to everything except my destination - the big red S in the sky beyond. It beckoned to me with an urgency that reduced everything else in my universe to a tangle of unimportant obstacles to be surmounted at any cost. I sensed the sounds of pursuit, but they were fading, and I kept going.

I lost awareness for a short while, but I seemed to have kept moving, because when I came to, I was still on my feet, on a quiet street away from the traffic jam, jogging along slowly, gasping for breath. I hurriedly glanced about me but could spot no pursuers. The friendly light from the supermarket seemed to offer sanctuary. I slowed down to a hurried shuffle. The doors shot open on my approach and I grabbed a grocery cart and headed for the housewares aisle. The words "Omega Scuffcoat" came into my mind, unbidden.

But the houseware aisle wasn't where I expected it to be. This was not the Safeway store I was used to.

"May I help you, sir?" asked a man who looked to be a clerk.

"Omega Scuffcoat," I blurted out.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Floorwax," I told him.

"Then you just follow me, sir," he said, leading the way. I obeyed him blindly, in a kind of stupor.

"There's the floor wax section, but I'm afraid I don't see the brand you asked for, sir," he said.

"There it is," I said, seeing the familiar yellow and brown can with the red label.

"Where, sir? That's Johnson's Floor Wax."

"Right there," I insisted, reaching for it, but my hand came back with a blue can with an unfamiliar label. I replaced it on the shelf, feeling completely fuddled. In my mind's eye I saw myself grabbing another can, this time of Omega Scuffcoat and putting it in my shopping cart, but when I looked down to see the can lying in my cart, the cart was empty. The clerk must have seen my distress.

"I don't recognize that brand name, sir - 'Omega Scuffcoat' did you say? - and all our stores carry the same product lines," the man was saying to me.

I grabbed another can of Omega Scuffcoat off the shelf and held it up for him to see. "Here it is, right in front of you. I'm holding it in my hand," I argued, then I looked at my hand. It was empty. My mind was turning strange cartwheels.

"Where, sir?" He started to look at me rather peculiarly. "Are you all right, sir?"

I was not all right. I was terribly confused. I heard a voice inside my head repeating a strange litany:

When I am in the section where the floor wax is sold, I must see the can of Omega Scuffcoat, and I must . . .

Where was this voice coming from? It was still talking, and now I heard it again.

When I am in the meat section, I must . . .

"Where is your meat section?" I blurted out.

"Right over there, sir," the astonished clerk told me. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course I am," I told him, putting the second can of Omega Scuffcoat into my cart. I hurried off to the meat department, leaving the clerk behind.

Five pounds of steak, the voice inside my head was saying. London Broil or sirloin, ten pounds of ground round . . .

The voice chanted on, and I listened to it in amazement.

. . . five pounds of beef liver, a large rump roast, . . .

I found myself selecting the items and putting them in the cart. Then I hurried to the pet food section, but it also was not where it was supposed to be. I found the clerk hurrying after me.

"Are you sure you're all right sir?"

"Perfectly," I assured him. "Where is the Purina Cat Chow?"

"It would be in the pet food section, but we happen to be out of it at the moment, sir."

"I must have it."

"But we're out of it, sir. We'll have some more tomorrow."

"I can't wait till tomorrow."

"How about a substitute? We have quite an assortment of cat food."

"It's got to be Purina Cat Chow," I told him, realizing how unreasonable I sounded. I turned abruptly and began staggering towards the exit, leaving my cart behind me. Every fiber of my being seemed to be working against me, but something deep within me gave me the determination I had lacked up till then. I heard the voice again, and this time it sounded different:

The Masters are cold and cruel and I do not like them. How can I make that which is into that which is not?

I turned my walk into a run. The doors jerked open automatically and I ran like a blind man down the street, herky-jerky, a puppet-man, my limbs moving spasmodically. I could not make out the street signs, and all the buildings looked unfamiliar.

Then I saw it. A police station. They would help me. I forced my way up the stairs, fighting my own body. I was aware of a tremendous anxiety, and my breathing was stertorous and labored. I pushed my way through the door and found myself in a lobby. To my left was a large desk. Behind it sat a policeman. I staggered over to him.

"May I help you, sir?" he said.

"I'd like to be arrested," I told him.

\* \* \*

The policeman looked up with irritated surprise from the girlie magazine he was in the process of memorizing.

"What are you, some kind of nut?"

"I'd like to be arrested, please."

"Have you committed a crime?"

I shook my head. He jerked his in the direction of the door.

"Sorry, Mac, but this isn't the Y.M.C.A."

"Can you tell me what it takes to be arrested?"

"Why the hell do you want to be arrested?"

My mind was awash with emotion. It took a tremendous concentration just to think. Somehow out of this confusion came inspiration.



"I'm a novelist, and I'd like to know what it would really take."

He looked up scornfully. "To do what?" He wanted to get back to his Hugh Heffner world.

"To get arrested. Just for the sake of it."

My mind was in a spin, like a kid on pot for the first time and trying to look normal at the family dinner table. I prayed to the Gods to help me keep my act together. Gods always seemed to come in handy in clinchy situations, even for atheists like me.

He eyed me sternly for a long moment, trying to sum me up. He looked like he wanted to forcibly assist me out the nearest door or window by the fastest method of egress, but years of public service came to the fore, and he opted to give his Mr. Nice Guy act just one more chance. He pointed a parental finger at me and gave me his best impression of an evil eye.

"You want to get information, ask for it. But don't ask to be arrested." He paused briefly, to make sure I got it. "Call public relations between nine and five, and let them route you to somebody who's experienced in dealing with whacko questions. All right? Go be a novelist on somebody else's time." He turned back to his magazine, regally dismissing me from his presence.

I was at my wit's end, but my whole psyche was with me on this one. "How about assaulting a police officer?"

He looked up at me in disbelief. "How about a police officer assaulting you! You're out of here. I've spent enough valuable time dealing with you."

"So you can relax and read a porn magazine while you're supposed to be doing your job?"

There was a moment of awful silence. If I hadn't been so desperate, the fire of his gaze alone would have melted my mettle. He was visibly upset.

"Now look here, Nancy Drew - I said vamoose!" He glared at me fiercely, flabbergasted that I should continue to defy him. If he only knew, I thought to myself. He's nothing compared to the aliens. He can't burn my brains out. He can't have me for dinner. I looked at him calmly. I had never in my whole life felt such an outward serenity coupled with such an inner chaos. Somehow I decided what I must do next.

I reached over in what seemed like slow motion and plucked his spectacles off his nose, like a valet brushing a piece of dogshit off his master's tuxedo, or a hairdresser patting an errant strand of his customer's hair back into place. He goggled at me as if I were a six-foot armadillo who had just crapped all over his carpet. I felt a sense of power as never before. With exaggerated motion, just to make sure he saw clearly what I was doing, I dropped his spectacles onto the wooden floor, and with great deliberation ground them to bits under my right heel. Then I looked back up at him. He continued to stare at me, awestruck, and I watched serenely as his comprehension slid gradually back into place. For a heartbeat, I knew what it was like to be God.

"What the FUCK are you doing?" Angry eyes blinking me into focus. Angry mind fumbling with unexpected reality.

I looked at him as in a dream, wondering whether he would punch me out. I had never been punched out before, and I wondered vaguely what it would be like. I almost smiled at him, he looked so stunned, wondering how I could doubt his passion.

And then he came to life, Quasimoto realizing he had been made the butt of a joke. Karati-quick, he wheeled round the desk with an alacrity which would have shamed the

ancient and venerable Bruce Lee. He stared at the remnants of his eyeglasses on the floor. He started to reach down to pick up the pieces, then realized the futility of it. He looked up at me, then, with venom in his eyes, slowly but inexorably reached out a big left hand grabbing me by my shirt collar and lifting me off the floor, then shoved me forcibly against a filing cabinet, while he slowly balled up his massive right fist, pulling his arm back in a determined motion, like a pitcher pretending to be thinking of catching a runner on first, when his whole soul is set for a strike ball inside. Just before he swung, I could see in his eyes that sudden little realization. Stop! it said. You can't beat up civilians! For a moment, time ground almost to a halt.

Things began moving then. A couple fellow officers, entering through the front doors, saw the desk sergeant ready to smash my nose into a pulp which a magazine wouldn't publish, and moved forward just in time to grab his arms. He yielded to them grudgingly, glaring at me balefully.

"This asshole just smashed my glasses, and the son of a bitch is going to pay for a new pair!"

"Not until tomorrow morning," I said under my breath but he heard me.

"Right now, motherfucker. Your future is now."

"Lay off, McGillicutty, and *you* shut the fuck up," one of the newly-arriveds said to me, sticking his finger in my face while his buddy sweet-talked McGillicutty back to his desk. My man spun me around and subjected me to a harsh search, kicking my feet apart with a controlled viciousness his police academy instructor would have approved of.

"Let's just arrest this guy and let him go through the process," said the cop who was with great difficulty holding McGillicutty at bay. "You'll get your specs replaced, and you'll make him pay the price." His voice lowered. "You hit him now, it might feel good, but you hit him too hard you might give him grounds for suing you." The desk sergeant cooled down slightly, but he still glared vehemently at me.

"This motherfucker is going to pay for some new eyeglasses. I paid two hundred for these!"

"Relax, Gilly. Be sensible. Don't fight it. Beat the shit out of your rubber ducky the next time you take a bath."

These last words sobered McGillicutty considerably. I could almost see the wheels in his head turning, considering the laughing reception he would get at the next meeting of Cops Incorporated if he blew his cool here. Why transform a temporary problem into a future liability?

"Okay," he said, finally, letting his intensity dissipate and his muscles relax.

"So let's let this motherfucker deal with the judge."

"Right," McGillicutty grunted out with difficulty. I could see he really regretted not having belted me one. It had probably been a long time.

So they put me through the formalities of arrest. One of McGillicutty's pals grabbed my hands and took my fingerprints in as painful a way as he could manage. I submitted to their rough treatment and let myself be processed. They dumped the contents of my pockets into a brown envelope and made me remove my shoelaces. Finally I was shoved into a dark holding cell. I heard the clank of the door, as it shut behind me. The place stank of stale booze and assorted bad body odors. I heard the buzz of snoring and a subdued cacophony of small shuffling noises and scattered coughing. I tried to look at my watch and then I remembered that they had taken it away from me but it didn't matter

because there wasn't enough light to see it anyway. It had to be close to midnight. I could tell that by the mental pain and anxiety I was suffering. I found enough room on the end of a wooden bench to pull myself up into a fetal position and await the dawn.

\* \* \*

But dawn was not going to come so soon for me. The dark night still held its sway. I lay and assessed my situation. Something significant had happened to me at that Safeway store. Before, I had never remembered my mad dashes to get back to my apartment by ten. It had taken Maurice to tell me of our trip back, when I had been at the controls. This time I was aware while it was going on.

At first there was only the imperative of returning. To the Masters, to those sly serpents, those lying lizards, who would just as soon eat me. I hated their hold on me, but I felt that I would die if I did not get back to them. To those God Damned Masters! I could hardly think with the physical pain my body was experiencing. My nerves were inflamed, adrenaline was rushing through my veins. My agony was unbearable and it was a job just hanging on. But I knew that it would not abate until I submitted to the Masters. Masters! What a hateful, egotistic name. They were Monsters. But the pain was monstrous. My very bones were on fire. I had to get back to my apartment at all costs.

I got up and went to the door. They had locked me in about eleven o'clock, I thought, so it should be about midnight. Although it was early in the week, there would still be drunks at the bars, and within the next two hours some of them might be getting into trouble and ending up here. It was my only chance, and it was slim, but I waited. And as I waited, my strength came back to me.

I jumped at the sound of the crank of the door. Hushed conversation drifted in at the edges of my consciousness. Then the loud thunk! as the door opened and the blinding light from the corridor shot in, forcing me back, closer to the corner of the jamb and the wall, watching a hairy, unwashed-looking man flashing by me as he was hurried into the room. Then the door started swinging shut, and at the last moment I rushed forward and stuck the toe of my shoe in the crack to stop the door an angstrom unit short. I prayed that the cops who did this sort of thing a lot might not pay a whole bunch of attention to making sure the door shut with a clank every time.

Glory Hallelujah! I held my breath. The door had not fully closed, and there was no hue and cry. I braved up a giga-iota and pushed on the door. To my wonder it slowly opened. My heart was in my hands as I pushed further, squinting into a night-bright hallway, a couple cops across the way with their backs to me, hands on hips, talking in low tones to each other. I eased my way through, making myself tall, sucking in my stomach.

And then I was through. I was shocked at my success. I agonized to keep the door from making a sound as it slid slowly shut, but it slipped through my fingers at the last moment and clanked loudly. I nearly jumped out of my loose shoes at the sound. At the same time, one of the cops spun around and stared at me as if I had just broken a law of physics. I sprinted like one possessed towards the door at the end of the corridor, but my right shoe came off and I went sprawling, banging my elbow on the hard floor. And then they were upon me, holding me down, yanking my arms behind me and cuffing me. I

wheeled and lurched like a desperate dervish riding a bucking bronco, but they contained my efforts with contempt. They dragged me back and threw me in, cuffs and all. I landed on the floor and lay there, totally spent, the demon energy which had possessed me dissipating into a dark malignancy. I lurched up and staggered to the bench and sat, breathing heavily, my cuffed hands drawn tightly and painfully behind me. I noticed the fact of my missing shoe, and then I remembered that I had lost it in my mad dash for freedom. I managed with difficulty to lie down with my face to the wall. It took an effort to breathe, with my arms pinned behind me. I lay in unremitting agony. I didn't think it could get worse. Then it got worse.

The pain shot up through the top of my thermometer, and I was riding the roller coaster car through the Cosmic Carnival tunnel, with demons hooting on both sides as I hurtled through the dark night of the soul.

I knew the fear of the pit, of being swallowed up by a prehistoric maw. I knew the fear of running from a pack of leopards, hearing their soft deadly bounding footfalls catching up, waiting for my scramble of death and the sudden sharp agony of the end. I knew the fear of falling, the terror of never stopping, chills running up from my kidneys to my brain. I saw the beginning and the end of the universe. I was besieged by lunatic dreams. But I felt always the strength of the hard bench beneath me. When my resolve came close to losing ground, the bench was there to back me up.

The night was long and uncomfortable. Worn out as I was, sleep would not come. The pain and stress of the last few hours had been overwhelming. My hands were numb by now, and I tried to wiggle my fingers, but they were no longer responding. Mercifully my inner anxiety began to ebb, and I went into a drugged doze. My critical consciousness had long since abandoned me, but that faithful scribe at the core of me was still patiently taking notes. I found myself at a sort of council table, with the various parts of me as personalities seated around it. I, I was led to understand, was the actor. My other selves appeared to have more important tasks. They didn't listen to me much, and the dialogue was hard to follow, but I got the gist of it. The Masters had failed to hold the weekly Tuesday morning inspection. My several selves were discussing how to take advantage of their absense to short circuit the control of the Masters. Then the meeting was adjourned and I came to, remembering vaguely that it was now all up to me. My board of directors had called it quits, leaving me to fight whatever dragons came on the scene.

I lay awake. All around were the sounds of slumber, the soft rumble of a chorus of snorers, the closest to heaven most of these lost souls would probably make it in this lifetime. Despite my cramped and tortured body, I felt much better, and slipped into a dreamless sleep.

Morning came when the sun rose. Everyone was stirring, and I could hear once more the symphony of sad sounds, the emphesemic coughing, the allergic snuffling of noses, the creaking of stiff joints, the clearing of throats hoarsened by cigarettes, too much booze, and insufficient dental hygiene. I scrambled into a sitting position and surveyed my surroundings. The faint glow of the lightening gray sky coming in through the tops of the barred windows made the dim scene almost surreal. My eyes played tricks with the murky shapes. It reminded me of the times as a small child when my parents took me still sleeping to my Grandmother's house on the other side of town, and I would awaken in a different bedroom from the one I had gone to sleep in. In this case the mothball and

sachet scents of my Grandmother's house were replaced by the stench of the morning after. I made a quick mental inventory of my body parts and found them all there and in reasonable condition, except for my hands. I appeared not to have any. My mind was no easier to assess, but I knew that since I was able to think, I must have one, so I began piecing together the shards of my shattered consciousness into as coherent a picture as I could.

\* \* \*

The first chance I got I called Poppa at the bar to come down and bail me out. His habit of opening up at six in the morning was a lucky break for me, since his home number wasn't listed. So was the fact that his son was able to take care of the bar while Poppa took care of me. He was waiting for me on the other side of the barrier, his eighty-year body hunched with time, but he still had some bounce in his walk as we made our way to his car in a lot he had paid seven dollars to park in. That was Poppa. He always did things with class. The only thing was, he didn't go in for small talk.

"When you going to pay me back?" were his first words when we were out on the street.

"You drive me to my bank and I'll give you the whole five and a half grand on the spot."

"Which bank you go to?" After sixty years he still spoke in broken English.

"First National. Take the next right."

"I know how to go. You think I not live here all my life?"

"Yeah, I know, Poppa. Sorry. It's a bad habit I have."

"Why you walking like that? What the hell happen your shoe?"

I looked down at my unshod right foot. Thankfully there were no holes in the sock. Poppa was upset. I could tell that by how red his face was.

"I thought you completely off the booze! I not see you around except on Friday nights any more. You make an exception last night?"

"Yeah, Poppa. I make an exception." It was easier than the truth, and a lot less complicated.

"You actually hit a cop?"

"No, Poppa. They called it assault but the only thing I assaulted were his eyeglasses."

Poppa listened in stunned silence as I described my crime.

"But why you do this? You a sensible guy. I never see you cause no trouble. You on drugs now or something?"

"No, Poppa. There's a gang out to get me, and the safest place for me was in jail."

Poppa looked over at me for a second. "You kidding me, Oxman? This is no bullshit story?"

"It's the truth, Poppa. Right now, it's better you don't know any more than that. Okay? Here's the bank. Just park right here and I won't be a second."

I withdrew enough in cash to pay off Poppa and got the rest in traveler's checks. To my relief they didn't notice my hobbled walk or my missing shoe. Perhaps they were just being polite. It took a little longer than I had planned, but Poppa was waiting patiently, his face the usual stoic mask he turned towards reality. Deep furrows and crevasses lined

the contour map of his countenance. Deep waters ran still. I had him drop me off at the nearest phone booth. I still had the card from Cap and I rang the number.

After a bewildering shuffle of telephone switching, I heard the contralto tones of Cap coming in over the wire. I told him where I was and he said to stay right there and he would pick me up and I said fine. There was nothing on my mind except to get out of town, and my own personal F.B.I. agent would be along pretty soon to whisk me off to safety. After the nightmare of the last twenty four hours I felt reborn.

For the first time that day, and maybe for a much longer period than that, I suddenly had no immediate agenda. With the cold wind in my face and a gray sky threatened by sun, I realized how good I felt and how glad I was to be alive. I tried to think what was different, and then it hit me like an earthquake. I was outside my apartment and I could remember my life inside it! That was something else! I felt mentally sharp in a way I had almost forgotten. It was as if I had been heavily tranquilized during my stint with the aliens, half a person, dulled, subdued, uninquisitive. For the first time in a long while I felt whole and entire. Feeling okay is something you take for granted, but when you've been without it for a long time, you miss it, like sugar in your coffee when you've been on a diet, or getting high on one beer on a hot day after no booze for three months. I felt alive. I was Henry Oxman. No longer an oxymoron. No longer the two faces of. Or maybe even three. I recalled the strange night before, at the Safeway store and then later in the drunk tank with all the losers, the rejects, the unhappy people who also had not made it home.

Cap was right on time. He was alone. I climbed in beside him and we pulled out into the traffic.

"You didn't go back home again?" he asked.

"No way," I said. "Thomas Wolfe was right."

"Yeah?" A little sidelong glance to show me he didn't know what I was talking about. "Where the hell did you go? I never saw anyone take off the way you did last night."

So I recapped my adventures. When I got to the part about the glasses, Cap went into one of his deep breathing exercises that passed for laughing.

"I didn't think you had it in you," he said when his convulsions came to an end. "I gotta give you credit for guts." He followed that with an attack of heavy snickering. "I can't wait to tell Buck," he said when he finally caught his breath.

"Where is Buck, anyway?" I asked.

"He couldn't make it. We'll see him later."

"I've got to go back to court on the eighteenth."

"We'll take care of that. First let's get you out of town."

\* \* \*

The private Lear Jet was very comfortable, but I would have been almost as happy in third class on a beat-up old 707. There was a small bar, and Buck and Cap were availing themselves liberally of its resources. I didn't need any fortification to feel good.

For a long time I had avoided thinking about what I would do when I was free from my bondage to the aliens. Now I was free, and my mind was free, and questions and ideas came rushing into my head as if to prove once more that Nature abhors a vacuum.

I asked Cap about the C.I.A.

"All the intelligence-gathering agencies agreed from the start to separate their investigations of the aliens and maintain zero contact with each other. That way one wouldn't infect the other."

"You think the C.I.A. is, uh, infected?"

"We're pretty sure."

"How about Homeland Security? N.S.A.?"

"Who knows?"

"How about you guys?"

"There's a chance you might be able to help us out on that one."

"Yeah? How? You planning to turn me into a counter-espionage agent?"

But Cap just dummied up and looked mysterious.

At one point I started to tell them about the way I figured my mind must have been wired.

"You can save that for later, when the brain specialists take over," said Cap. "First we get you to the Retreat."

"Brain specialists? What's the Retreat?"

"What it sounds like. A place the lizzards don't know about yet."

"We hope," added Buck.

"That's what you call them?" I asked. "Lizards?"

"Yeah," said Buck. "With two zeets."

\* \* \*

I have been at the retreat for over four months now. I sit once more at the mouth of the cave, watching the sun rise beyond the Daliesque landscape of tortuous, twisted mesas and buttes. It's a scene I never tire of, with the delicate pinks, violets and oranges emerging from the soft gray of early morning, the flashing rays of dawn peeking over a mountain range in the blue distance. Night and early morning are cool, but the day is hot and still. The only lifeforms I've seen are lizards and snakes and an occasional hawk riding the thermals. The flora is strictly vestigial.

It's forbidden to venture beyond the mouth of the cave. With Military Intelligence in the hands of the enemy, there are always spying eyes orbiting above. We don't want Them to know where We are.

It's pretty obvious that we're somewhere in the southwest, probably New Mexico or Arizona, but the location of the retreat has not been revealed to us, just in case one of us is captured by the aliens. Only some of the permanent staff know, and for that knowledge they are condemned never to leave. When we are sent out on missions we are driven by jeep to a small landing strip where we wait for an old Cessna to ferry us to a distant airport where we are transferred to a private jet. We are blindfolded during the initial stages of the journey.

My first few weeks were spent being debriefed by a small team of psychologists and physicians who questioned me at length and put me through extensive hypnosis to undo what remained of the conditioning the aliens had imposed upon me, as well as for them to learn more about the nature of that conditioning. They were very interested in my description of the board meeting I had experienced in the jail cell.

"Congratulations," Doctor Grimes said to me after I had been pronounced fit for assignment.

"For what?" I asked.

"For being the first known human to have survived his alien guests with an intact mind."

"The agents who brought me here said something about burned-out brains. Is that what happened to the others?"

"All that have come to our attention. There might be others, but it's hard to know. The Lizzards don't leave much after they're done with one of their hosts."

"One thing still bothers me," I told him. "Ever since that night in jail I've been able to remember everything that happened, both outside and inside my apartment. Except for one time, when I grabbed the wheel away from Maurice and drove home like a maniac. My only knowledge about that whole episode is still only what he told me about it."

"What is it that bothers you about that?"

"It's the only loss of memory I experienced about an event which occurred while I was *outside* of my apartment. And I *still* can't remember it, even though I can now remember everything that happened inside my apartment."

"As I recall your description of that night, you were under quite a lot of stress."

"I was under a lot of stress a number of times, like when I escaped from Cap and Buck when they were driving me to the airport. But I remember everything that happened *that* night."

"Perhaps it was like an alcoholic blackout. You mentioned that you used to have them quite a lot."

"Yeah, but I was really boozing it up back then. I didn't have a drop to drink when I was with Maurice."

"I think that stress alone might be responsible for blackouts sometimes. There's a lot we have yet to learn about the human psyche. It's too bad the aliens won't tell us what *they* know about us."

"Have you learned anything useful from me about *them*?"

"Not much so far. Our knowledge is still quite limited. But we're hoping you can help us add to that knowledge."

"How will I do that?"

"We'll know more after we've introduced you to George."

"Who's George?"

"You're going to have to find that out for yourself," he said cryptically.

At the end of the conversation I asked Dr. Grimes how much he thought the aliens had known about my attempts to study or escape from them.

"I think they're so stuck on themselves," I told him, "that they couldn't imagine me being able to find loopholes in their mental control, so they didn't bother looking into my mind any more than necessary, like when they gave me their grocery list every Tuesday."

"Don't kid yourself, Mr. Oxman. Let me assure you that they knew everything they cared to know about you. They were probably laughing their asses off at you."

"What about the file I was keeping on them?"

"Maybe they wanted to find out how much one of their hosts could discover about them."



“And the photograph.”

“That probably bothered them. They don’t like to be seen.”

There was something significant in his voice when he spoke that last word. But he changed the subject before I could question him further.

“Tell me something. You’ve spoken as if you didn’t have much to do with the aliens while you were in your apartment.”

“They were almost always watching television. I stayed in my room and read.”

“Tell me some of the books you’ve been reading lately, Mr. Oxman.”

“Oh, a lot of forgotten authors. Michener for one. Tom Clancy.” I had to think hard. It had actually been some time since I had read either.

“What else?”

“Oh, maybe a few magazines. The New Yorker, and . . . “ I flogged my brain, but no second magazine came to mind. My recall seemed to be on the blink, or maybe it was on the blank. When I tried to envision my evenings at home, I couldn’t seem to remember much I had done.

“I fancy you will find a lot of blanks in your apartment life if you examine it properly.”

“You really think so?” Maybe he was right. My life at home did seem nebulous to me.

“I’m sure of it,” Dr. Grimes went on, smiling at my discomfort. “The Lizzards like to play games. They pull out all the stops. They make the Nazis look like a bunch of old women sitting around crocheting swastikas. You’re right about their being egotistical, if it’s appropriate to apply a term from human psychology. They know they’re smarter than we are, at least in the ways that count with them.”

He changed the tone in his voice to a serious one. “You’re particularly valuable to us, you know, for one particular reason. If you’ve reacted the way we hope you have, you’ll be one of the few who can really see them. You must be aware of their powers of causing us to see them as other than what they are. Call it hypnosis, mass hallucination, teleneuroprojection. Whatever it is, it seems to work.”

“How powerful are they?” I asked him. “Can they control crowds of people?”

“In the past they’ve always been circumspect, avoiding large congregations, but lately they’ve been taking more risks. We’ve been able to photograph two or three of them working a crowd well enough to make their way about in public. We couldn’t see them ourselves, of course, until we viewed the photograph afterwards. Mass hypnosis is a delicate thing, and they can still only go so far with it. Maybe with time they’ll get better.”

“Sounds scary.”

“They’re on the verge of taking over our society, without our even knowing it,” he said to me, a shadow passing across his face. “They have gradually extended their control over more and more key people, and those who are still free are pressured by those who aren’t.”

“What can we do?”

“Just what we’re doing right now, maintaining a small core of dedicated humans who are learning as much about them as possible, with the vain hope of finding ways to thwart their plans.”

“How will you know whether I can see them or not? Isn’t it a little dangerous finding out?”

“There should be no danger, but first you’re going to have to meet George.”

I had an eerie feeling that I knew who George was, or, perhaps more exactly, what he was.

\* \* \*

“First we’ll have to try you out on George.” The sentence lingered on the perimeter of my mind.

I was getting a little tired of asking who George was and then getting cryptic smiles or a cheery “you’ll see.” I knew all the time who George probably was, but it was our resident mad scientist, McDoc, who finally introduced me to him.

McDoc’s real name is McDermott, and he isn’t a medical doctor at all, being a zoologist by trade with a specialty in Molecular Biology. He’s also reputed to be a card shark at the poker table. Most of the time he’s pretty mild mannered, but he has an impish sense of humor and likes to put other people on. He also has a knack for accents and uses it to entertain the rest of us. These are useful assets for the man in charge of the handful of scientists and technicians who are cooped up here. He’s the only one who’s openly friendly towards me, and has been filling me in on the information the enemy already knows that we have on them, so it wouldn’t hurt if I got captured and they got it out of me. It would hurt me plenty, I thought to myself.

“As you’ve probably guessed,” he said, “we captured one of them alive, and we have him locked up here. We’ve been studying him for about a year now.”

“How am I going to succeed where you’ve failed?”

“You won’t. We think that if you’re immune to his projections, he won’t be able to control you. That’s just our thesis, and we might be wrong, but if we aren’t. . .” He finished the thought with a shrug of his shoulders, as if he expected me to see the implications, but I didn’t.

“If you aren’t, then what?” I said.

“Then you can be our secret weapon in keeping surveillance on them. I’m assuming of course that you’re willing. It’s still your right to refuse, me lad,” he said with an Irish accent and a smile and an arm around my shoulders. I respected him for not giving me a patriotic speech.

“What’ll I be expected to do?” I was naturally apprehensive.

“Nada, cabron. We have to find out first if you’re immune to his projections. It’s a pretty unnerving experience for the rest of us who aren’t. I speak first-hand. I’ve seen him almost daily for short periods of time, and he ain’t never the same twice, Buccaroo.”

“What if he takes me over?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be strapped down in a wheelchair. We’ll insert a plastic gadget that’ll keep you from swallowing your own tongue, and there’ll be monitoring devices attached to you. That should inspire you with confidence,” he said with a grin which seemed to belie what he had been saying.

“You rat,” I said to him. You’re just kidding me about all that.”

“No, it’s really true,” he said with a sparkle in his eye. “Wheelchair, strait-jacket, pacifier with built-in tongue depressor, EKG, the works. As soon as we detect any

significant degree of stress, we'll yank you out of there. Grimes and company will be on hand armed with tranquilizers."

I still didn't know how serious he was, but I knew the futility of trying to find out.

"Why do you call him George?"

"It's a way of defusing the fears he can arouse in us."

It didn't defuse any of my fears. I felt more fused than ever. *Confused.*

"Are you really sure I'll come out of this with a complete set of synapses?"

"Nothing is for certain in this life, but the percentages look encouraging."

I didn't ask by what arcane processes he calculated the percentages. If an abacus wouldn't do, I was willing to settle for an ouija board. I was much more worried about what it was going to be like for me personally, dealing with the power the lizzards had over us.

"You said you went through it," I said to him. "How was it, the first time? Did you hallucinate, or anything?"

"Hallucinations, paranoia, every phobia in the book plus a few new ones. It was like a bad dream that didn't stop. The most time I've been able to take in his presence so far is a little over five minutes."

"When are we going to do this?" I asked.

"How about now?"

My heart dropped to around my knees, as I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise, while a subtle chill snaked around my spine. An article I had read years before popped into my mind about patients who, back in the good old days when Nazi doctors had been allowed to run our mental hospitals, had been subjected to periodic electric shock treatment, and the fear aroused in these patients when they were brought in for subsequent treatments, even though they could never remember the experiences themselves. All my unremembered Tuesday mornings with the aliens might have had something to do with the way I was feeling. McDoc could probably see the conflicting emotions flitting across my face.

"From what I've seen in your file," he told me in his cheery, bland way, "you've already faced their conditioning and won. I'm not a driveling idiot in an iron lung being force fed, am I? And I survived George at least forty times. To take a more positive note, what if you succeeded? Wouldn't that be a boost to your self-confidence?"

I guess I knew from the start that I would do it. I just wanted to be talked into it. I told McDoc the same.

"Good lad," he said to me in a Scots accent. "We all assumed you would go along with it, so let's go find that music we have to face."