

Small World

Ronald R Johnson

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DEDICATION

To the memory of

Charlotte Runnels

who encouraged me long, long ago

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Reference is made to the following works:

G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Allen W. Wood, ed., H. B. Nisbet, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Preface, p. 20.

“Valley Girl,” by Frank Zappa and Moon Unit Zappa, from Frank Zappa’s 1982 album *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*.

Francis Thompson, *Hound of Heaven*, John F. Quinn, ed. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), lines 1-4, 25-29, 178-179.

Deep Throat is based on the character of the same name in Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President’s Men* (New York: Warner Books, 1976), pp. 73-75, including the incredible detail about the note on p. 20 of *The New York Times*.

Woody Woodpecker was a cartoon character created by Walter Lantz. He became famous in the 1940s but is still around in 2017 and will probably live to terrorize the Professor for years to come.

I would like to thank my wife Nancy and daughter Emily for their support, which they have each expressed in ways big and small over the years.

1 RUMORS OF MY DEATH

Okay, you win.

I'll start by talking about how I died.

Whether I like it or not, that's what everybody wants to know. "You're not Dak Blayzak," they say. "We saw him die on the Internet."

As a respected journalist, I try to stay out of the stories I'm reporting, but on this one I failed miserably. I should've admitted I was dead right from the start. When you hold back on something like that, people just won't let it go.

You have to understand, though, that I'm touchy on this subject. My critics have long accused me of *making* news rather than reporting it. They quote me as saying, "The point is not to tell the story; it's to change it." For the record, I never said that. I said I want to be wherever big changes are taking place. It's never been my intention to bring about those changes myself.

In this case, however, I admit that my very presence changed everything. But I didn't mean for that to happen. And I certainly didn't plan on dying.

As everyone knows, I was on the moon, in the rugged South Central Highlands, doing an exposé on the Clayborn Clone Community. I had done some pieces on the community's founder, Carl Clayborn, years earlier.

Clayborn's parents were wealthy geeks who wanted to give him a competitive advantage over the *hoi polloi*. Instead of just having a baby the old-fashioned way, they did some genetic engineering, and Carl was born with significant mental endowments. He put those gifts to use immediately, but not in the way they expected. Even as a child, he set out to kill them and inherit their fortune.

He didn't succeed, so at the age of eleven he turned to the study of law, and at twelve he took them to court. He argued that their genetic tampering gave them a greater obligation to him than would otherwise have been the case. His superior abilities cried out for full expression—and for that, he needed large sums of money. He won a huge settlement, which he quickly multiplied through clever investments. By the time he reached the age of maturity, he was worth billions.

But it wasn't enough. He didn't just want to be rich. He wanted to rule the world.

Not that he cared about politics—that slow, plodding process that never accomplished anything. He didn't just want to oversee the world; he wanted to rule it with an iron fist.

"In me," he said, "the actual has become rational, and the rational actual." He had borrowed the phrase from the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, but he felt that Hegel only partially understood it. "He would've cried tears of joy if he had met me," Clayborn liked to say.

Taking advantage of his superior intelligence and abundant resources, Carl Clayborn hatched numerous schemes to bring about world domination. Each one failed, and for the same reason each time: because he couldn't get along with his accomplices. He expected them to recognize him as the supreme leader, but egos always got in the way. As Clayborn saw it, there was only room for one ego. His.

It would take an army to achieve his goals, but he couldn't depend on anyone but himself. The conclusion was obvious. He must create a society of Carl Clayborns: a community of clones.

Cloning himself was no problem, but he needed wombs. He didn't care about their quality. Genes were the thing; the womb was just a temporary housing. So he hired surrogate mothers—"wombs for rent," he called them. He treated the women poorly and paid them little. He didn't even know their names. But when he suddenly had thirty screaming babies on his hands, he realized he needed to keep the women on the job, at least for a while. All of them hated working for Clayborn, but several of them bonded with the infants and tried to give them the love they so desperately needed. A few even tried to teach the kids manners.

Clayborn was horrified. "Slave morality!" he said. "'Pleases' and 'thank yous' will be irrelevant in the society I'm building!"

But he couldn't stop them, because he had problems of his own. By this time, he was wanted for tax evasion and several other crimes, and he kept having to run from the authorities. He took the children with him, but he needed the surrogate mothers to look after them. He gave the women strict childrearing instructions. Some obeyed him; others didn't.

When the boys were twelve years old, he was ready for the next phase of his plan. Over the past several years, he had quietly built a domed village on the moon, where no nation currently had jurisdiction. He fired the surrogate mothers and took his sons with him to his Utopia in the Sky.

That was nine years ago. And now, for no apparent reason, I received an urgent invitation to tour the compound and report on the progress of their community.

I had interviewed Carl a few times throughout his insane career, and we had last met at a secret rendezvous site just before he left on his lunar adventure. I still don't understand exactly why he agreed to talk to me. He wasn't interested in Public Relations. I think he just wanted to brag. He had eluded the authorities of seven countries and was now on his way to a futuristic city-under-glass that he himself had designed and paid for. In the years that followed, there would be many other lunar cities, but his was one of the first, and he was clearly proud of it. He was also proud of his young clones. He called them out from a back room and made them stand at attention.

Thirty young versions of himself, twelve years old, ripe for indoctrination.

I hadn't heard from him in nine years. And now I received this invitation.

My editor, Norton Dodge, said it was a trap.

"Good!" I told him. "I like walking into traps."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. And Naif likes it too, right Naif?"

Naif was my cameraman. His name was pronounced 'Knife,' but don't let that fool you. He was useless in a fight, since he was always holding a lens up to his eye. Chaos could be going on all around him and it wouldn't faze him; the show must go on. He was the best camera guy I ever had, but he went a little overboard. I tried to have a heart-to-heart talk with him once—just once—and I realized he was taping our discussion.

"Put that thing down!" I told him.

He wouldn't do it, so I grabbed it out of his hand. He immediately put his thumb and forefinger together to simulate a lens, and held it up to his eye.

"That's an addiction," I told him. "You should see somebody about that."

But he never did.

I don't mean to say he had a camera strapped to his face at all hours of the day and night. It's just that he reached for it at the slightest

provocation.

So now I turned to Naif, who was not taping at the moment. “Dodge says it’s a trap. What do you think?”

“I think he’s right,” Naif said.

“Want to go anyway?”

“Of course! I can’t wait to see how those kids turned out.”

“They’ll all be twenty-one now,” I said, and Naif laughed.

“Just waiting to abduct us!”

I nodded. “And use us to take over the world.”

“You’re both crazy!” Dodge said.

“But it’ll make a great story,” I replied. “And that’s why we’re the Number One investigative team on the Internet, right Naif?”

“Take that, Fru Phillips!” he said.

Fru is my nemesis. I have a lot of respect for my other competitors but I’ve got nothing but contempt for Fru. He sends people to spy on me, and just when I’m about to report breaking news, he shows up. If he had ever demonstrated any initiative of his own, I’d be willing to give him credit, but that guy’s a fake. He’d be completely unknown if it wasn’t for me. Don’t get me started.

Anyway, Naif and I decided we’d better get to the moon before Dodge could stop us. So Maggie, my personal assistant, booked us a flight to Space Station Beta and armed us with phony passports. I was Andrei Popov and Naif was Faisal Kahn.

“Where does she come up with these names?” Naif asked.

“I don’t know,” I told him, “but Fru will have a tough time trailing us. That’s all I care about.”

We had no trouble getting past security at the spaceport, and we boarded our flight unrecognized. Of course, my fake moustache and glasses probably helped.

The airbus arrived at Station Beta an hour after liftoff. Once there, we picked up the private shuttle Maggie had reserved for the second leg of our trip. We had no pilot; the shuttle was programmed to take us to our destination. Good thing, because I don’t drive, and I certainly don’t fly space ships.

2 THE ONE THAT IS MANY

Naif and I had already visited the moon a number of times, especially recently. Increasing numbers of people are moving there these days, and there are lots of good stories developing. It's like the Oregon Trail.

On our first couple of trips, Naif thought the moon lacked visual appeal.

"Everywhere you look, there's gray dust and black sky," he said. "Viewers want color."

But over time, that had changed. Yes, there was still a lot of gray, but there were also pockets of color. A number of pioneer settlements had been established on the moon, and under each of those domes were biospheres mimicking earth's atmosphere: blue skies, green forests, and buildings of various colors. Each trip we took to the moon was more interesting than the previous one, as new settlements were always opening and others were under construction.

The Clayborn Clone Community was situated far from all the others, just as Carl had planned for it to be. He knew where future growth was likely to occur, and he set up camp in an entirely different direction. Although there was a lot of traffic when we left Station Beta and headed toward the moon, all other vehicles had broken away from us hours ago. Clayborn had sensors watching for intruders, and he probably knew we were coming long before we got there. Nobody else ever went where we were going.

At last the shuttle made its descent, and Naif started taping.

The compound looked like a little town under glass. Inside were rolling hills, a farm, a library, a residence hall, a lake, tennis courts, a space observatory, and an open-air theater.

As our shuttle approached, a computerized voice demanded to know

who we were and why we were there.

“I’m Dak Blayzak from the Global News Network.”

“Visitors are not welcome.”

“I have an invitation. I’ll send it to you.”

I did so.

“This is not official,” the computer voice told me.

“That’s your problem, not mine. Someone from inside sent it to me.

Do you deny that?”

No answer.

“Hello? Can you confirm or deny that someone from your community sent me that message?”

There was a long pause, and then the voice said, “You will proceed to Entrance A-1. Your craft will be piloted remotely. When it has landed, you will await further orders.”

“I’m not too good at following orders.”

The entrance was a pressurized glass tunnel. We sat inside it for so long, Naif and I wondered if they were ever going to let us all the way in. Finally our shuttle lurched forward and we were inside the dome. We flew over a spaceport and an adjacent hangar filled with one-man space pods.

After hovering a moment, we came to rest on the landing pad.

The door of our shuttle was opened by the computer, and a wheeled rectangular robot, about five feet tall, came up the ramp. “You will follow me. Do not deviate from the path.” It pointed a ray gun at us.

“Very subtle,” I said. “You ready, Naif?”

“Always.”

“Okay. Show time.”

The main building was a short walk from our shuttle. It was architecturally unique, with a style unlike any on earth. Leave it to Clayborn not to borrow from previous architects; he probably considered their work inferior to his.

As we crossed the courtyard, we could hear voices whispering from all directions.

I looked around this way and that. Naif did the same thing with his video camera. But there was no one in sight.

We approached the main building but were not allowed to go through the front entrance. Instead, we passed through a back door that was incredibly narrow. It seemed to have been built for robots, not people.

Once inside, our guide led us down a long, curved corridor. The walls

were lavender, with quotations in numerous languages strung along them. I couldn't read any of the quotes, but I was sure that all the residents could.

Watching the robot gliding ahead of us, I got an idea. I texted Naif a message and he nodded.

"I'll tell you when," I said.

The corridor opened onto a large vestibule. It had a glass ceiling, and sunlight streamed in. There were paintings and sculptures which I had never seen before but which seemed as good as any I had ever seen in the world's art museums. I assumed that they had been produced by Clayborn's offspring.

Naif and I tried to take it all in, but the robot warned us to keep up.

We entered a narrow hallway so dark that I couldn't even see our guide. Fortunately, the robot made a humming sound, so I just followed that.

The hallway emptied out into a circular room. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I turned to our guide. "A chapel?"

A soft blue light illuminated everything. Thirty chairs were arranged in a circle, each one reclined backwards to draw the eye upward. There, in the ceiling, was an aperture, and within its center was the earth, floating in space. Around the opening was the inscription: "One day... this will be yours." We were not permitted to sit in these chairs; we were left standing in the center of the room, waiting.

From the moment we entered the sanctuary, I heard a strange sound that I could not at first identify. It came from everywhere, and it was like a gentle breeze, but when it increased in volume, I realized that it was a chorus of male voices. Scores of young men in blue robes stepped out from the shadows of the room, singing a song without lyrics—an otherworldly succession of complex chords, sliding almost imperceptibly between dissonance and resolution, dissonance and resolution. Then they began to sing words. Although there was still no recognizable melody, the song now took on a hopeful tone, and there was a kind of question-response interplay among the voices:

In us...
(In uuuuuussss...)
The Rational...
(Rash-un-uuuuulllll...)
Has become Actual...
(Ack-shoooo-uuuuulllll...)
And the Actual...

*Has become Rational...
(Rash-un-uuuuuullll...)*

Now the voices sounded jubilant as they sang, at last, in a conventional melodic structure:

*We are The One That Is Many...
The Many That Are One!*

Then came the wordless conclusion, which sounded suspiciously like the Sevenfold Amen. When the last chord faded, the young singers filed out of the room without a word.

This was our only chance.

“Now!” I told Naif, and we both slammed into the robot, knocking it on its left side. The flap to the ray gun was pinned down, and the box-shaped robot was unable to get back up on its wheels.

“You will stop!” it said, almost pleadingly. “You will go no farther!”

Motioning to Naif, I hurried after the retreating clones. We reached the vestibule in time to see the young men escaping through several doorways at once. Just as we were about to overtake the last of them, I noticed an emaciated old man in a hoverchair just inside one of the doors. It was Carl Clayborn, and there were tears streaming down his face.

“Help me!” he said, extending his hand in my direction. “Save me!”

But before I could get near enough to speak, all the doors slid shut and everyone was gone.

Three rectangular robots appeared from adjoining hallways and surrounded us, aiming guns at us. “You have abused our hospitality. You are now our prisoners.”

3 BE OUR GUEST

I'm not sure how many hours passed. We were locked in a small, plain room with a bunk bed and a tiny adjacent bathroom. It wasn't a bad place, considering we were under arrest. To our surprise, we had Internet access and could call for help if we wanted to do so, but we decided to wait it out. We had a story to cover, and we didn't want to leave until we were finished.

At one point, I was pacing and thinking while Naif had his eyes closed on the bottom bed. (That was the one time when Naif could be sure to set his camera aside, by the way. He didn't sleep with his camera, in case you were wondering.)

Suddenly we heard chimes.

Naif opened one eye. "What was that?"

They played again. This time I recognized the melody: it was the Clayborn Theme Song we had heard in the chapel earlier: "The One That Is Many."

"Sounds like a doorbell," Naif said.

"In a jail cell?" But I found a button near the door and pushed it. One of the clones entered quickly, shutting the door behind him.

"We have only a moment," he told us. "I disabled the cameras, but it won't take the others long to discover the problem and fix it."

Naif and I looked around the room. "*What* cameras?"

"You must listen carefully," he said. "Your lives are in danger as long as you stay here. I have arranged to smuggle you out—on one condition. I'm coming with you."

"We just got here," I said.

Naif reached for his camera and started taping. The clone turned away from him nervously. "Make him stop," he pleaded. "They'll kill me if

they find out.”

I signaled for Naif to put the camera away, and the clone relaxed slightly.

“Who will kill you?” I asked.

The chimes rang again.

“It’s them!” he said. “I’m doomed!”

The kid’s eyes searched the room frantically, then he dived under the bed.

Naif and I looked at each other. I pushed the button and another clone stepped in, closing the door behind him.

“We don’t have much time,” he said. “I disabled the cameras, but someone will fix them in a matter of minutes.”

Naif smirked at me.

“You’re not safe here,” the clone said. “I’m going to help you escape, but only if you take me with you.”

I frowned. “Why do you want to leave?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Life is so dreary here,” he moaned, “and everybody’s so ugly.”

Naif cleared his throat. “But doesn’t that make *you*—?”

The chimes rang again.

The kid started to scramble under the bed before I could warn him. Then he stopped and whispered, “Blackey?”

“Be quiet and get in,” said the first clone. “You want us both killed?”

“Aw, they won’t kill us. They’ll rough us up, maybe, but—”

“Just climb in and keep quiet!”

I pushed the button and another clone entered. This time I shut the door myself.

“We have to be quick about this,” the boy said.

“Why?” I asked. “You disabled the cameras, didn’t you?”

He stared at me. “Yes, but—”

“But it won’t be long until someone finds out, is that it?”

The kid was at a loss for words. “Uh—”

“What do you say, Naif? It would sure be nice if someone would help us escape from this place, don’t you think?”

“I can do that,” the kid said eagerly, “but only on one condition.”

“Right. Join the crowd.”

“Huh?”

Two heads stuck out from under the bed. “Smiley!” the first clone said. “Do you wanna get us all killed?”

The latest clone was stunned. “Blackey! Gabby! What are you guys doing here?”

“Having a slumber party. What do you *think* we’re doing?”

The chimes rang again.

“Any room under there, guys?” Smiley asked.

“Just be quiet and climb in.”

I pushed the button and another clone entered. This one was bald.

Neither of us had a chance to say anything before the voices under the bed cried out, “Good lord, Harry! Get in here and shut that door behind you!”

Harry looked around, confused. “Blackey? Gabby?”

“Keep your voice down,” said Blackey. “Do you want to get us all killed?”

He stumbled in and I shut the door.

“Hi, Harry,” said another voice.

“Smiley? Where are you guys?”

“Under here.”

He crouched down and shook his head in disbelief. “What are you doing under there?”

Naif butted in. “The real question is, How many more of you will fit?”

Harry rubbed his jaw. “Are you here for the same reason I am?”

“That depends,” replied Gabby. “Are you sick of seeing your own face looking back at you?”

“I’m sick of everything,” Harry said. “The food, the regimentation, the song...”

Everybody groaned. “The song! Every day! Can’t we sing something else once in a while?”

“Hey!” Smiley protested. “I wrote that song! And it would sound a lot better if Gabby would stay in tune.”

Gabby looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t even realize it. ‘Ack-shoo-UUUULLLL. Rash-shun-UUUULLLL.’ Right there, you go flat every time.”

“I do not!”

Blackey nodded. “It’s true. It nearly drives me crazy.”

“I’m afraid I have to agree,” said Harry. “I’d say you were tone-deaf, Gabby, but we share the same genetic makeup.”

All the clones laughed except Gabby.

“I never knew anybody else felt the same way I did about that,” said Smiley. “I always thought I was alone.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve never felt free to criticize anything around here. I didn’t think anyone would be receptive.” He paused a moment. “It’s kind of nice.”

There was an embarrassed silence, then Gabby broke in. “I do not go flat!”

The chimes rang again and everybody froze.

“I’ll hide in the bathroom,” Harry offered.

I pushed the button and another clone invited himself in. He ran around the room nervously, looking for something.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I’m looking for the cameras. I’m sure there must be some.”

“What?” I said. “Didn’t you disable them first?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how.”

“But he makes an amazing cheese soufflé,” said a voice from under the bed. Everybody laughed.

Harry stepped out of the bathroom. “Cook?”

“Harry! What’s going on?”

Harry shrugged. “Apparently great minds really do think alike.”

4 CLONE CONFAB

So now we had quite a little party going. The boys were enjoying themselves so much, they lost track of time. This was the first chance they had ever had to air their grievances.

They talked about the song again.

“Can’t we jazz it up a little?” someone asked. “I’ve been working on a Big Band arrangement.”

Smiley was indignant. “It’s meant to be worshipful. If you jazz it up, you’ll ruin it.”

Another clone interrupted. “Liturgy is for people, not people for liturgy. I say let’s jazz it up.”

But then they moved onto other subjects, like their desire to escape from the community.

“It’s really the Old Man’s fault,” someone said.

“Oh, wake up. He doesn’t make the rules.”

“Not anymore. But he started the whole thing.”

“He was naïve, that’s all. He didn’t realize there would be power struggles among his children.”

“I disagree,” said another. “I think he intended for us to battle it out. He just didn’t realize they’d turn on him, too.”

Then they began to talk somewhat cryptically about one clone in particular whom they all feared, but they avoided saying his name.

“Things have settled down now that he’s eliminated his rivals.”

“He killed *them*,” said Blackey. “He’ll kill us, too.”

“Technically, he didn’t kill them. He put them in an ingenious trap and they killed themselves by trying to break out. They’d be alive today if they had had more patience.”

“But they hadn’t been fed in days. How much patience can a man

have?”

My curiosity got the better of me. “Who are you talking about?”

They were all silent a moment, then Harry answered. “His name’s Clarence, but he calls himself ‘The One.’”

Everybody looked disgusted.

“It’s a travesty!” said Blackey. “A desecration!”

Gabby explained. “We’re *all* ‘The One,’ you see. We’re ‘The One That Is Many, The Many That Are One.’ That’s our community identity. For any individual to claim that HE is the ONE AND ONLY One is like spitting on all of us.”

“And he gets away with it through fear and intimidation.”

“And murder,” Blackey added.

Cook looked thoughtful. “Sometimes I used to think the Old Man considered *himself* ‘The One.’”

Others nodded. “The way he talked sometimes, I, too, got the impression that he thought of himself as ‘The One’ from which ‘The Many’ sprang. But that’s not the concept I grew up having.”

Enthusiasm spread around the room. “Exactly! Sometimes it was an almost mystical experience picturing myself as part of something bigger than me. Each of us is connected to each... and to all!”

“I’ve felt more than just elation,” said Smiley. “I’ve had a profound sense of responsibility. As we sing my song and look up at the earth—so beautiful, so vulnerable—I want to cradle it in my arms.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve always imagined us going back there... spreading out... all over the globe... and using our superior intelligence to care for the world.”

“I’ve thought that, too!” said Gabby. “I believe it’s our destiny to use our skills in the service of mankind. And no matter what happens, from this day forward, we’ll have each other. We’ll always be One.”

Silence fell over the group as they pondered that thought.

Without chimes or any other warning, the door opened and a powerful-looking clone entered, flanked by two other clones.

“It’s him!” the group whispered.

He stood there a moment, then turned to his henchmen. “Lefty... Righty... clear the room.”

Like an explosion, the group blasted out the door *en masse*, leaving The One and his henchmen alone with Naif and me. Naif grabbed his video camera.

The One approached me and looked me over, but he spoke to his henchmen rather than to me. “They’re a disease,” he said. “They’ve infected our culture. I tried to quarantine them, but it wasn’t enough.”

“Should we kill them now?” asked Lefty.

He considered that suggestion, then shook his head. “No... not yet.” He circled me again, thought a moment, then left the room with a martial step, his henchmen following close behind.

It had been a long day, and Naif and I decided to get some sleep. But as I climbed into the top bunk, I heard a signal from my phone. It was a message from Deep Throat.

Deep Throat was the best informant a journalist could have. I had never met him, and I wasn't sure who he was, but he had helped me on many occasions, providing invaluable guidance. He only gave me information on “deep background,” meaning I could never quote him, not even anonymously, but his advice was always helpful and his information was always completely accurate. To know the things he knew, he must have been highly placed in government circles. I would've loved to meet him face-to-face, but we had an understanding. When he had information, he would leave a message on page twenty of my digital *New York Times*. I had no idea how he got access to my paper, but I was always glad to hear from my friend, and I programmed my phone to ding me whenever there was a message.

Here's what he had for me today:

Forget the clones. A better story is breaking on the far side of the moon. Here are the coordinates.

I stared blankly at the screen for a moment. He knew where I was. Surely he also knew that I was being held captive, yet he was urging me to leave. It didn't make sense. But when I thought about it, I realized that Deep Throat was never wrong. So I sent the coordinates to our shuttle and instructed it to be ready to take us there as soon as I boarded. The shuttle responded affirmatively. Then I drifted off to sleep.

5 A LOT OF FUSS OVER A LITTLE PILL

The next morning I found an attractive e-card waiting in my email inbox.

“Naif, look at this!”

It was from the clones. “We had a lovely evening,” they said, and they added their electronic signatures.

“A thank you card!” said Naif, taping. “Somebody raised those kids right.”

I nodded. “Their surrogate mothers did. Or some of them, anyway.”

There was a postscript telling us that they had spent the night gauging the moods of others in the community, and there were even more clones who wanted to leave. They also attached a long letter, catching us up on what had been happening in the community the past nine years. It was a frightening chronicle of power struggles, of various subgroups trying to intimidate individuals to join them, of brainwashing and even torture, and yet of the resourcefulness of each individual who found ways to resist.

“I can’t believe what those boys have been through,” Naif said, still taping.

“And survived,” I added. “They don’t seem the least bit disillusioned.”

I was particularly struck by the lessons Carl had tried to teach them. I knew he had formed secret organizations in the days before making the clones, but one group in particular had continued on without him. They called themselves “The Kindred,” and over the years they had gained key spots in all major governments. Carl was proud of them, even though they had betrayed him, and he kept tabs on them through the Internet. In recent years the in-fighting had become especially nasty, and many

members of the organization seemed to be losing hope. Carl told the clones the time might be ripe for them to return and take over the organization.

I turned to Naif. "Have you ever heard of this group?"

He shook his head. "I guess that's why they call it a secret."

I kept reading. The boys said they were forced to do daily drills, fending off attacks from robots armed with laser guns and other weapons.

"Aerobics with a purpose," said Naif.

The door opened and three clones rushed in.

"Dak!" said the first. "We've got to move quickly. The One has made his decision. He wants you dead, but he's got to make it look like an accident."

"Right!" said the second. "And there's only one way to keep him from killing you."

The third nodded. "We've got to convince him that the accident has already happened."

Naif and I looked at each other warily. "How are you planning to do that?"

The first clone held up a little pill.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "You want me to swallow the Juliet?"

Like the potion used by its famous namesake, the Juliet is a pill that puts a person into a comatose state almost indistinguishable from death.

"I don't want to die," I said, "even if it's only temporary."

The three of them started toward me.

"Naif?"

I turned toward him, but of course he was taping.

I wanted nothing to do with it. Aside from the fact that you feel exactly like you're dying, there are other drawbacks, like the possibility that people will think you really are dead, throw you in a hole, and cover you with dirt.

I remembered the case of Cochran Hull. He took the Juliet to escape execution. It worked, but he regained consciousness during his own autopsy. Fortunately for him, he lived for less than a minute—just long enough to see some of his organs in plastic containers.

"Nope," I said. "No deal."

The three of them tried to force me to take the pill. "Cook made it. He's also a chemist, you know."

I balked. I don't know chemistry, but I've heard that an inexact measurement could kill a person for real.

"Don't worry," they said. "We have superior intelligence, remember? Besides, Cook added a little jalapeno to give it a festive flair."

I refused, so they held me tight and stuffed it in my mouth. I spit it across the room.

“We’ll hold him,” two of them said. “You go get it, Gimpy.”

Ka-BOOM ka-BOOM ka-BOOM ka-BOOM.

He picked it up and blew on it. “Ten Second Rule,” he said. Then he ran back.

Ka-BOOM ka-BOOM ka-BOOM ka-BOOM.

They jammed it back in my mouth. I spit it across the room a second time.

“Would you cut that out!” they said.

Gimpy sighed and went after it again.

Soon it was back in my mouth. They were pinching my lips shut and stroking my throat when The One and his henchmen entered the room.

All four of us gulped in unison.

“So it’s true!” said The One. “They made a death pill and forced him to swallow it. What a bunch of geniuses. Lefty... Righty... induce vomiting!”

The clones stood between me and the thugs. With a flourish, they pulled clean, white gloves out of their pockets.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Lefty said.

Two of the clones stepped forward and lightly slapped the thugs’ cheeks with their gloves. That was all it took. The four combatants hurried out to the vestibule and donned their fencing gear. The duel was on.

6 SIBLING RIVALRY

Gimpy led me out to the action and urged me to stay out of the way. Naif was busy taping.

Suddenly, clones appeared from all adjoining hallways. They were already suited up in fencing gear, each one sparring with an opponent. The sound of clashing foils filled the hall.

Into this bedlam came Carl Clayborn on his hoverchair. At the sight of him, everyone stopped.

He was beaming. “Boys! Boys!” he said. “I have an announcement to make. Come closer.”

The clones took off their fencing helmets and formed a circle around the Old Man.

He appeared about ready to burst. “You know, of course, that I was genetically engineered—that I was born far superior to other humans. You also know that you are exact replications of me—that you are superior in exactly the ways in which I am superior.”

The clones nodded and looked around at each other, their curiosity building.

“What you don’t know is that, when I was creating you, I had a brief lapse of self-indulgence.” He paused to chuckle. “My *intellectual* gifts were quite sufficient to pass on to you, but I always wondered what I might have been like with certain physical enhancements. I decided to try a little experiment... just once. His intelligence... well... there were complications... but his body! That turned out magnificently! I’ve been hiding him from you, but now his time has come.”

The clones looked worried.

The Old Man could not contain himself. “Boys,” he said, “meet Sumo Carl!”

A door slid open and a massive version of the clones came flying out at high speed. His face was similar to theirs, but he was monstrous, and all muscle. He wore only a loin cloth.

Lefty and Righty hurried forward to stop him. With a single effortless move, he knocked their heads together and dropped them on the floor, unconscious. All the other clones stepped aside, and Sumo Carl headed straight for The One. He tried to flee, but the big guy picked him up and held him over his head.

The One shouted, “Computer! Activate ‘End Game’!”

Sumo Carl dropped him as robots of various sizes and shapes rushed in from all corridors and began shooting ray guns. In an instant, all the remaining clones joined together as one. Some pulled out a metal device that resembled a catcher’s mitt. Jumping and diving, they caught the death rays that were ricocheting around the room. Others had what looked like TV remotes; they made the robots incapable of emitting rays. Almost as suddenly as the commotion had begun, it stopped. Then all the clones turned toward The One.

“Computer!” he said. “Activate ‘Plan B’!”

Each robot now produced a circular saw and began chasing the clones. I didn’t know the Old Man’s hoverchair could fly that fast. Even Sumo Carl ran for his life.

After a moment’s confusion, several of the clones began wielding thick clubs. They leaped and whirled around the robots in a graceful dance, now smashing a metallic arm off, now knocking a robot on its side, now bending one’s arm so that it sawed itself in two. Somebody handed Sumo Carl a club and he put it to good use, sending robots flying in all directions. Within minutes, all of them were disarmed.

Still holding their clubs, the clones surrounded The One and shouted in unison:

*We are The One That Is Many...
The Many That Are One!*

“Listen, boys,” he said nervously. “You don’t want to injure me. We’re all One, remember?”

They considered his words carefully, and one-by-one they dropped their weapons. Then they leaped on him and started pounding him with their fists.

While this was happening, doors opened and some familiar faces flooded the vestibule.

I turned to Naif. “Can you believe this?”

He kept filming, but he laughed and shook his head.

It was The Cavalry. Or at least that's what Naif and I called them. They always showed up when we needed them most. It never seemed to matter where we were. When we got in too deep, The Cavalry came in to save us. We didn't know who they were, but we assumed they were government agents. We called their leader 'The Guy' because we didn't know his name.

The Cavalry got down to work pulling the boys off each other, and The Guy came over to me.

"You okay, Dak?"

I opened my mouth to answer him, and then it happened. Without a word, I fell to the ground—dead.

Naif was too busy filming the action to notice. The camera picked it up, but only in the corner of the screen. That's what made viewers suspicious: they could see me clutching my heart and falling to the ground, but nobody explained what was happening. And when the camera panned away to zero in on the clones, viewers got the impression that they weren't meant to see it. To complicate matters, Naif submitted the piece with his own commentary, since I wasn't around to narrate afterwards. That made viewers even more wary.

A lot happened in the next several minutes. A few of the clones put me on a stretcher and carried me to my shuttle. After making sure that I was comfortable, they hurried back to join the others. The Cavalry was sorting out the good guys from the bad—no easy task in a crowd of clones—and the Old Man was telling them how proud he was of them.

"This is the day I've waited for," he said, fighting back tears. "You've passed the test. Now let's oust these interlopers and prepare to rule the world!"

The Guy pushed a button on the back of the Old Man's hoverchair and it dropped to the ground, immobilized. The clones all laughed. Then they went around doing a strange sort of handshake in which they gripped each other's upper arm. As each one reached out to a buddy with his right, he was grasped by another on his left. They went around the group so that each one greeted all the others. "The One That is Many," they murmured again and again as they passed down the line. "The Many That Are One."

"Hey," Naif said, lowering his camera. "Anybody seen Dak?"

A few of the clones escorted Naif out to the courtyard just in time to see my shuttle as a tiny dot, flying away in the distance. Then Naif remembered: last night I had given the shuttle the coordinates I had received from Deep Throat, and I had told it to take off as soon as I boarded. In obedience to those instructions, the shuttle was now carrying my lifeless body to the far side of the moon.

7 AN UNINVITED VISITOR

Very few people have property on the moon's far side. It takes a special kind of person to want to live there, because you can't see the earth. Land is cheap, but there's not a lot of interest.

The shuttle flew to a spot far from any human habitation and came to rest outside a single prefab cabin. The man who lived there had to wear a spacesuit if he ventured out, and he had done that only once since his arrival two months earlier. But after some hesitation, he put on his suit and approached my shuttle.

The outer door opened, letting him into the initial entryway. Once that door closed and the entryway had become pressurized, the inner door opened. He let himself in.

The lights were off, and at first he couldn't find a living soul on board. He took off his space suit and tried to figure out what to do. Then he noticed my lifeless body...

Waking up from the Juliet Trance is like being propelled at high speed through a tunnel, face first. Most people come out of it screaming. I gave more of a shout.

I opened my eyes, but everything was blurry. I was in my shuttle—I could tell that much—but it wasn't moving. It was on the ground. And the lights were off.

I was sweating. My mouth was dry, head spinning.

“Naif?”

There was no answer, and yet I sensed I was not alone.

“Hello?”

Someone moved toward me.

“Who is it?”

In the darkness, I could see the outline of a man.

A man with a gun.

I strained my eyes to see, but he was in the shadows. Then he took another step forward.

As soon as I saw his face, I knew I had interviewed him once. Who was he? My mind was cloudy, but I forced myself to think.

“Insanity is a gift...”

I could hear the gunman saying it. He spoke with a fake British accent. He said “shhedule” instead of “schedule.” I remembered that much about him, and those words:

“Insanity is a gift...”

Yes... he had said that on camera. What was the rest of the sentence?

Then I remembered the interview... or that part of it, at least.

“I almost went insane once,” he had told me. “Unfortunately, it didn’t last.”

My disgust must have shown, because he had looked at me impatiently.

“You think it’s a curse to go insane, I suppose. You’re mistaken. It’s a gift from the gods. All the great thinkers of the past were madmen.” He appeared lost in thought for a moment, and then he added, “Madness is the only appropriate response to the postmodern world.”

Naif had slowly zoomed in on his face, as if to let our viewers see what a madman looked like up close.

Trying to hold my spinning head steady, I now said to the man with the gun, “You... you’re that professor.”

“Then you do remember,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” I told him. “It’s coming back slowly.”

He was a linguist. He had spent his life studying a language that no longer existed. It had been forgotten even by scholars—until now. He spent much of his career reconstructing it.

“Nobody cares,” I told him.

Now I could see *that* part of the interview vividly. I always like to rattle my guests. They’re supposed to rise to the challenge, but in that moment I could see he didn’t know how. He looked shocked, as if I had reached over and slapped him in the face.

“What’s the point?” I had said on camera. “Why study a language that nobody in the world uses?”

His face turned bright red. “I don’t even know how to answer that,” he said.

Naif let the camera rest on his face as we sat there in silence, but I

was thinking, *If you can't speak in defense of your own life's work, then how do you expect anyone else to understand?*

One of my education sources had suggested I do a piece on him. The Professor had been kicked out of Harvard because he wouldn't play by the rules. Under the old tenure system he would've been untouchable, but times had changed and the Professor had few friends among the faculty. His ousting hadn't provoked much of a scandal, but it was still somewhat unusual. I interviewed him to see what it was all about.

His colleagues at other Ivy League schools all spoke well of him. They said he had done something incredible in his field. But students hated him. He was boring, pompous, thin-skinned, and had no sympathy for them. They said his grading patterns were unpredictable. They petitioned the Dean, who investigated and discovered the Professor on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Your grades are overdue," the Dean said.

The Professor shrugged. "Give them all F's."

"We can't do that!"

"Give them all A's, then. What do I care?"

So the Professor was shown the door. I interviewed him shortly afterwards. Some of his friends were hoping that he'd acquit himself publicly and perhaps build on that to get another teaching job, but we didn't get far into the interview before I knew better. This man was a mess. I even handed him a couple of simple questions and he treated me like I was stupid. The end result was a freak show.

After we ran the interview, he left a message on my video mail. He was opposed to leaving such messages, he said, but it was his only alternative. He strongly protested the way we had edited the piece. He accused me of chopping up our conversation into tiny bite-sized platitudes which no longer remotely resembled what he had said.

"Human intelligence is an organic whole—if and when it is exercised, and in your case I'm sure it is seldom. If you ask a thinking man a question and he gives you an answer out of the depths of his soul, you must take what he says in its fullness. You can't cut pieces out of it without doing damage to the entire thought. The pieces by themselves mean nothing."

Well, maybe so, but that's the way a journalistic interview works. If a person doesn't want to play by those rules, he shouldn't agree to be interviewed.

I concede that an edited interview is only an incomplete report of a much larger discussion, but I do not agree that a shortened version can't do justice to the original. The key to good editing is to interpret the original interview in a fair and balanced way. If the journalist

understands what the subject was trying to say, he's justified in cutting the interview to make it fit the time constraints. I understood the Professor perfectly well. I just wasn't sympathetic. And I guess that came across on the screen.

I'm not sorry about anything we put in that report. Every word of it was true, and nothing was taken out of context. I admit that Naif shot a lot of close-ups of the Professor's long fingernails, especially when he used them to clean out his ears while he was talking. He also did a brilliant 360-degree pan around the Professor's head to show his unique haircut (apparently the Professor liked to put a bowl over his head and snip away with scissors at anything that stuck out the bottom). But that was just good camera work that helped convey an image of the man.

A month or two before Naif and I visited the moon, I learned that the Professor had gone there himself—to the far side, to live as a hermit. He would never have to look upon the earth again, for the far side of the moon always faces away from Planet Earth. I felt a twinge of guilt when I heard the news, and I wondered if I was part of the reason he had turned his back on the human race.

But now I was alone with him, and he was holding a gun on me.

8 THE PROFESSOR AND THE BURLAP SACK

I glanced at the gun momentarily and looked away—then I stared at it. “Where did you get that?” I asked.

He seemed surprised by the question and pointed the gun at his own face. “What—*this*?”

“It must be a couple hundred years old!”

“What does that matter?” he asked.

“Does it even work?”

“I can assure you it is quite deadly.”

“Care to bet on that?”

“Now listen, you,” he said. “Show some respect or I’ll—” The sentence hung unfinished for a long, embarrassing moment.

“Is that what this is about?” I asked. “Respect?”

He was going to ask me what I meant, but then he stopped, nodded, and grimaced. “I see. You think I’m here to settle an old score.”

“Aren’t you?”

He puckered his lips angrily. “You must think I’m some sort of crackpot.”

I didn’t answer immediately. “You’ve entered my shuttle uninvited,” I finally said, “and you’re holding me at gunpoint. I guess I don’t know what else to think.”

He looked at the pistol a moment and, with a sigh, placed it on the table between us. “I couldn’t have shot you anyway. It would’ve ruined everything.”

“Damn right,” I said, picking up the weapon. “This is a pressurized cabin. Do you know what would happen if a stray bullet hit one of the walls?”

He shrugged. “I’ve never cared about technology.”

“Well, if you’re going to live alone on the moon, you’d better start caring or someday you might do something stupid.”

He bristled and seemed to be searching for an appropriate comeback, but gave up.

I opened the revolver. “Hey, you didn’t even load it!”

He shrugged again. “I told you... it would’ve ruined everything if I had gone through with it.”

I gave him back the gun. “What’s this all about?”

He inhaled quickly like I had just ripped a bandage off a wound; then he exhaled slowly, hissing through his teeth. I expected him to answer me when the hissing stopped, but instead he inhaled and exhaled all over again. Finally, I broke in. “Professor!”

“All right, all right,” he said. “You’ll ridicule me—but I have to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

He inhaled again. “I have discovered proof that we are not alone in the universe.”

Oh brother.

“What kind of proof?” I asked.

“I have received a message from an alien race.”

“And you want me to relay this message to the public, is that it?”

“No,” he answered crisply. “That’s not it.”

“What a relief.”

“Your celebrity status means nothing to these aliens, nor does it mean anything to me.”

“Then what do you want?”

He looked at me hard, the corner of his mouth forming a malevolent grin. “The earth and all its inhabitants will be destroyed in ten days unless we do what the aliens have commanded.”

“We?” I asked.

“You and me.”

This made no sense whatsoever. “And what are—we—supposed to do?”

“There is an extra-terrestrial living on earth right now. No one knows that he’s an alien. You and I have ten days to find him. If we succeed, the human race will be spared. If we fail—”

“Okay, I get the picture. Where are we supposed to look?”

“He could be anywhere on earth.”

“Super. Do we know anything about him?”

“His name is Basil.”

I bit my lip. “An alien named Basil. Okay... any last name?”

He shook his head.

“So,” I said, “you and I have until—” I thought a moment “—until the 24th to find somebody named Basil. No last name. No description. Could be anywhere. If we don’t find him, we’re all toast. Anything else I should know?”

“Yes,” he said, watching my reaction carefully. “One more thing.”

I waited, but he just kept watching me. Then he walked to the corner of the room and picked up a burlap sack.

“Where do you find this stuff?” I asked. “Who has burlap anymore?”

Bringing the bag back to his seat, he pulled out a metallic object, tubular in shape, about two feet long and an inch or so in diameter. On its face was a screen like the old LED monitors of the late twentieth century. At each end was a kind of handlebar. It looked like a metal rolling pin.

Reverently, the Professor began to pass it over to me.

“What is it?” I asked, reluctant to take it.

He stopped, placed it in his lap, and sat back. “It is a communicator. This is how the aliens have transmitted their thoughts to me. It was buried not far from here, probably several thousand years ago. I uncovered it earlier today.”

“And how did you find it?”

He smiled. “This was the final chapter of a drama that has been unfolding for most of my life. My research—what did you call it on your program? Arcane?”

Esoteric. But there was no point in quibbling.

“My ‘arcane’ research led me to the discovery that aliens had visited the earth, somewhere in the Fertile Crescent, several thousand years ago.”

I sighed impatiently. “This is an old, boring story.”

“That’s what I thought at first,” he said, “until I discovered fragments from an ancient Sumerian text telling about an encounter with an alien. Naturally, the author of the text referred to him as a divine being, but it is quite clear that the visitor was merely an alien from another planet. The text said that there would be another visitation again someday, when men had begun to populate the moon. I found all of this mildly interesting, of course, but I was quite taken aback when I read a passage that described, in detail and with complete accuracy, the place where I have been staying here on the moon’s far side.”

“How can that be?” I asked. “This side of the moon is never visible from the earth.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “That was what impressed me. So I went to the place that was described in the text, and I found this.”

He handed the Communicator to me.

“Hold on to each end,” he said, “and watch what happens.”

I thought about it for a moment, and then I gave in. As soon as I gripped the instrument with both hands, hieroglyphs appeared on the screen.

9 UNCLE WOODY

“What the—” I said, backing away from it.

“I will accept that as an apology,” he said triumphantly. “You really did think I was making it all up, didn’t you?”

“So you’re telling me that... when I grabbed onto that thing... it was like I had picked up a hotline to somebody Out There, and those hieroglyphs were their way of saying hello?”

“Something like that,” he said. “Remember, their original communication with humans was carried out in an extinct Sumerian tongue. Naturally, they think we still speak that language. So, to accommodate us, they’re communicating in those ancient symbols.”

I processed this information. “What were they trying to say to me?”

“I was unable to read it,” he said, “but if your case is anything like mine, I presume they were offering you a clue about how to find Basil.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m all for that. Let’s try it again.”

Once more, I held onto both ends of the metallic bar. This time the Professor looked at it, mumbled something, and returned to his seat.

“What is it?” I asked.

He stroked his chin. “It would appear that things are going to be a bit more complicated than I had supposed.”

After a moment more of silence, I pressed for an explanation.

He sighed. “I had thought that you and I were to search for Basil alone. At first I had believed, perhaps naively, that the aliens had chosen me—only me—to save the human race. When they mentioned you, I was quite surprised.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” I said. “Why me?”

“Yes... ‘why you’ indeed. But try as I might to persuade the aliens that you and I could never work together, they insisted that I contact

you.”

“So you packed up your gun and came looking for me.”

He shook his head. “I never had to do that. You came to me. I don’t understand why.”

“I’ll explain later,” I told him. “At any rate, now you’ve found me. So what did the Communicator say to me just now?”

The Professor looked crestfallen. “Apparently you and I are not going to find Basil by ourselves. When you held the Communicator, it told you the name of a person whom you must contact.”

“What for?” I asked.

“It’s not entirely clear, but I assume that, at some point, this procedure is going to lead us to Basil.”

“You assume...”

“Yes,” he said. “Evidently that’s the plan.”

I sighed. “Okay. Who do they want me to contact?”

“Let me see it again,” he said.

I held the handlebars of the Communicator, and the message appeared again on the screen.

“There are two characters,” he told me. “The first refers to one of your kinsmen of the generation just preceding yours. An uncle, I believe.”

“All right,” I said. “That should be easy. I don’t have many uncles.”

“The second character is difficult to translate. It is adjectival in its suffix but seems to refer to a fibrous material of some kind. A wood-like substance. ‘Woody,’ I suppose would be the proper translation.” He thought about it a moment and then said, “I believe they’re trying to tell you to contact your Uncle Woody.”

We looked at each other for a moment. “Well, that’ll be hard,” I said, “considering I don’t have one.”

“Oh dear,” he replied. Then he added, “Perhaps it’s not an uncle of yours, but of mine.”

“Okay. Do *you* have an Uncle Woody?”

“No.”

I gave him back the Communicator. “So what do we do now?”

The Professor was absorbed in his thoughts. His eyes narrowed, and he spoke barely above a whisper. “I remember something, long repressed... I was very little... virtually a toddler...there was a stuffed animal... a red bird with a demonic laugh... I was frightened and tried to get away but they kept putting him in my face! He laughed at me! The more I cried the more he laughed in my face! I will never forget that awful, mocking sound:

““Heh-heh-heh HEH hooooo!
““Heh-heh-heh *HEH* hooooo!!”

“And then, like a Gatlin gun:

““Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

“I screamed in fear and rage, but he just kept laughing in my face:

““Heh-heh-heh HEH hooooo!
““Heh-heh-heh *HEH* hooooo!!
““Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!””

The Professor pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. “I still break out in a cold sweat when I think about that Woody Pecker.”

Then I remembered. I hadn’t given him another thought since the day I fired him, a dozen years before. But now I could see him standing there, cameras rolling, as he told his audience, “Do it for your good ol’ Uncle Woody!” I turned to my staff and we threw up our hands. People throughout West Michigan loved this guy, but my staff and I hated him and wanted him off the air. He was my science reporter, but he was the corniest guy I had ever known. On this occasion, he was giving his usual boosterish speech, urging his viewers to attend a science fair at a local high school. “Come on out and see what these young people have accomplished. Do it for your good ol’ Uncle Woody, okay?”

One day he went too far. He wore a t-shirt on-air with the logo of a local company that had repeatedly refused to sponsor our program. He was giving them free air-time—an endorsement—and I fired him. My staff and I broke out the champagne afterwards. I received some angry mail from viewers, but it was worth it. Woody Wilson was out of my life for good. I never looked back.

“Not him,” I muttered. “Anybody but him!”

The Professor emerged from his reverie. “Hm? What did you say?”

I considered my alternatives a moment. “These aliens will destroy the world, you say?”

He nodded. “And all its inhabitants.”

I mulled it over. I hated that guy.

“Are you sure I’m supposed to contact this person?”

“Do you know who it is, Mr. Blayzak?”

“I think I do.”

“All I can tell you is this. Whoever ‘Uncle Woody’ is, we need him. He’s the next piece of this puzzle. He’ll take us one step closer to finding

Basil and preventing disaster.”

“Well,” I said with a laugh, “I’ll look him up. But don’t get your hopes up about that last part. He’s pretty good at bringing disaster upon himself.”

10 THIS I WAS NOT EXPECTING

We took my shuttle back toward earth and stopped at a black market station to exchange it for another one. I didn't want anyone to track my whereabouts.

The new shuttle was an MV-500 series family van, capable of driving on roads as well as flying. It reminded me of an old RV camper with wings and rocket power. It wasn't stylish but it was roomy, and that's what I needed. I didn't want the Professor breathing down my neck the whole time.

During our descent through the earth's atmosphere, the Professor went to the back of the shuttle to use the facilities.

As soon as I was alone, I pulled out my phone and Skyped Naif. He answered immediately.

He was back on earth already. He had bummed a ride with The Cavalry.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I can't tell you right now," I said. "I'm checking out a story with the Professor. Remember him? Long, dirty fingernails? Lives on the far side of the moon?"

"Oh, that guy. What kind of story?"

"Not sure yet. I'll let you know when I figure it out."

"Well, Dodge is having a fit about you. He doesn't like being the last to know something. Can't you tell me where you are?"

"Sorry, but the Professor says No. I'm allowing him to think I'm his hostage right now. Could turn into something interesting if we play along."

"Whatever you say, Dak. But you *have* heard the rumors, right? You know what people are saying about you—"

I was mad. “Not that hair plug thing again! What’s it going to take to convince people—”

“No no no,” said Naif. “Not that. This is much bigger. Everybody’s looking for you. All the major networks and the smaller ones, too. For some reason, people think you’re de—”

The Professor was coming. “Gotta go,” I said, turning off my phone and hiding it in my pocket.

The Professor was upset when he rejoined me. “Curse those engineers! I almost flushed myself into space!”

Something had been on my mind, and I wanted to ask him about it. “Professor, what do they have against us? Why do they want to destroy us?”

He gave me a strange look. “I don’t think that’s their intention. But I wish they’d be more thoughtful of the end user.”

I was confused. “Who are you talking about?”

“Who are *you* talking about?”

“Your alien friends. Why do they want to destroy the world? Do they not like us, or is this some awful, twisted game they’re playing? ‘Find Waldo or Die!’”

“His name is Basil, not Waldo.”

I rolled my eyes. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t get the joke. I just thought you’d appreciate the historical reference.”

He sniffed. “I can’t understand why you would want to make light of something like this. It’s no laughing matter.”

“I’ll tell you the truth, Professor, and this time I’m not joking. I feel like we’re committing treason. You should turn that Communicator over to the US government.”

He was shocked. “Why?”

“Because a foreign power is threatening our world. They should’ve known enough to contact the proper authorities, but since they didn’t, it’s up to you and me to follow protocol.”

“And why do you assume that the US government constitutes the ‘proper authorities’?”

I shrugged. “Fine. Then take it to the United Nations. Some government agency. Haven’t you ever seen the old movies about foreign invaders? They always say, ‘Take me to your leader.’”

“I’m an expatriate,” the Professor said. “I don’t have a leader.”

I shook my head. “You really have turned your back on the human race.”

“I’m not ashamed to admit that,” he said. “I no longer have any sympathy for this planet or its inhabitants. And I don’t recognize its political leaders as authoritative. Neither do the aliens. They’re dealing

directly with me... and now with you. We either cooperate with them or we'll be responsible for the consequences. As much as I hate humanity, I don't want the lives of trillions of people on my conscience."

"Nobly spoken," I said. "I'm sure you'll earn the undying thanks of the whole human race."

"I don't want it," he replied.

"Once again, I was joking. I've gotta remember not to do that with you."

West Michigan's population exploded in the first half of the twenty-first century, during the Second Civil War. Eager to escape the hostilities, a few million people left big cities all across the country to move to Holland, Michigan, a place where old-fashioned community values were still on display. There, on Lake Michigan's eastern shore, architects erected a futuristic skyline that made both Milwaukee's and Chicago's seem behind the times. Of course, that was exactly what all those people were trying to get away from, so now they moved inland. In less than ten years, the entire western half of Michigan became one big mass of contiguous suburbs where people tried against all odds to revive the small-town way of life.

My first big break in the news industry took place in the West Michigan Megaland, about twenty years after the population explosion. I took over as anchor and bureau chief of the local GNN affiliate, WKNR. I was young and cocky, and I was determined to be noticed. I wanted to be where the action was, and if West Michigan prided itself on its small-town values, then it was my job to shake things up.

Woody Wilson had been around for a long time when I took over. He was the science reporter, but I called him our pseudo-science guy. He looked just like Albert Einstein—an image he cultivated intentionally—and he was extremely personable. People loved him, but I wanted him out. I was striving for an edgier news program, and I wanted our segments to go viral on a regular basis. It wasn't all investigative journalism, although that was my stock-in-trade. We did think pieces, too. But everything we did had to be relevant to a global audience, and Woody Wilson did not have international potential.

When I fired him, I was surprised by the number of viewers who protested. Thousands. I really didn't think there were that many hicks left in the Megaland. Of course, I didn't let them sway me, because I never considered Michiganians (or Michiganders, as some of them called themselves) my true audience base. I was from Cleveland, and I relied on

viewers from all over the country and the world, and they didn't let me down. By following that strategy, I became GNN's number one investigative reporter. I didn't let guys like Woody Wilson stand in my way.

So now here I was, sitting voluntarily in a shuttle, moving at high speed toward a reunion with the man I had fired.

I tried to imagine how he would react. Would he turn us away with a snarl and tell us never to darken his door again? That's what *I* would've done if he had shown up at *my* door, but that didn't seem like his style. I considered it more likely that he'd invite us in but he'd be curt. I could accept that. My preference, however, would be for him to act like nothing had ever happened between us. I'd explain our errand in a businesslike manner and he'd comply with our wishes. The more I thought about it, the more I hoped that it worked out just like that.

The shuttle was slowing down now, descending to street level. We were in an old-fashioned neighborhood. All the houses were at least a hundred years old. Mid-twentieth century. Very behind-the-times. The Professor should have felt quite at home.

We stopped in front of a dumpy little ranch-style house on a quiet street. There were strange gadgets in the yard and on the roof: cameras, telescopes, solar panels, satellite dishes—all jerry-rigged.

We climbed out of the shuttle and hurried to the front door.

"Let's do this as quietly as we can," the Professor told me.

I rang the doorbell, and Woody answered. He had hardly changed at all. He still looked like Einstein. There was no sign of recognition on his face, but he greeted us with a warm smile.

"Hello, Woody," I said. "Do you remember me?"

Suddenly he did, and he was elated. Throwing his arms around me, he gave me the tightest bear hug I've ever had, lifting me off my feet.

"You're alive!" he said, jumping up and down with me. "You're alive!"

This I was not expecting.

11 THE TINKERER AND HIS TOYS

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the Professor staring in disbelief.

“Edna!” Woody cried. “Look who’s here!”

Woody’s wife hurried to the door. She was a roundish woman, the kind who must’ve always looked like somebody’s aunt, even when she was thirteen.

“Mercy!” she said in a shrill voice. “Dak Blayzak! You *are* alive!”

The Professor glanced nervously at the surrounding houses and whispered that we should get inside before others took notice.

Soon we were in their living room. I introduced the Professor, but Woody wasn’t paying attention.

“Dak! I’ve become an inventor since I retired!”

So he *retired*, did he?

“Let me show you what I’ve been working on!” he said, and he led the Professor and me downstairs to his basement. There were machines everywhere, some only partly completed, with wires sticking out of them.

He picked up a saxophone that had an electrical cord coming out of it. The other end of the cord was attached to an old-fashioned wall socket.

“There’s no other tenor sax in the world like this one,” he said. “I rigged it up myself. If you make a mistake, it corrects you with a little zap. Just a small one. Nothing serious. If you make it a second time, it zaps you a little harder, and so on. It’s harmless, but it teaches you not to make that mistake again, let me tell you!”

He brought the instrument to his lips and began to play. He was doing fine until he missed a sharp. “Ouch!” he said. “I’ll try again.”

He replayed the passage and missed the same note. “OWWW!”

He laughed. "It really does drive the point home. This time I'll get it right."

He didn't, but after he missed the note he did stop playing. With the instrument still in his mouth, he stared straight ahead. His eyes became bigger and bigger.

"Woody?"

After a moment of silence, I walked up to him and stared in his face. A wisp of smoke was rising from his hair.

"Woody!"

The Professor yanked the extension cord out of the wall, and Woody shook his head vigorously. "Guess I'll have to turn it down a little."

"We're wasting time!" the Professor told me.

Woody walked over to a dart board on the wall and detached one of the darts. "Here's another one of my inventions," he said. "It's a Smart Dart. If someone invites you to play, you can join in worry-free, even if you couldn't hit the side of a barn. It's programmed for circle recognition."

"Will it hit the bull's-eye?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. Since the target has circles inside of circles, the dart has to make a choice. I haven't told it whether to prefer the outer or inner ones. I honestly don't know whether it will choose big or small circles. Let's see what it does."

Just as he threw it, the Professor bent over to grab his burlap sack. The dart veered sharply to the right and attached itself to the Professor's hind quarters. He bellowed pathetically.

"Looks like it prefers big ones," I said.

The Professor was not amused. "The future of the planet is at stake, and we're playing children's games!"

Woody turned to me. "What's he talking about? And what's he got in that bag?"

"The hope of the world!" the Professor said.

Woody gave me a look that spoke volumes.

"Better humor him," I said. "He's armed."

The Professor held out the Communicator.

"What on *earth* is that?" Woody asked.

"It's not *from* earth," the Professor told him. "It's from another world."

Woody looked at me again, this time with dismay.

"It's a communication device," the Professor continued. "It has warned me about an impending catastrophe. We have a chance to prevent it, but we need your cooperation."

Woody balked. "Who's 'we'? And what do you want from me?"

The Professor sighed. “I was quite content to save the world myself, but this device told me I needed the assistance of Mr. Blayzak. When *he* inquired of it, it told him to contact you. Now we need you to consult it.”

Woody turned his back on the Professor and paced the length of the basement. On his return, he stopped and glared at me, then turned to the Professor. “I don’t play with Ouija boards.”

The Professor was so angry, he couldn’t speak.

“Woody,” I said, “I didn’t believe it either. I’m still not sure what I think about it. But this man is a professor—I can vouch for that—and he and I are looking for somebody. I know it sounds strange, but we have reason to believe that you can help us find him.”

“What’s his name?”

I glanced at the Professor but decided I’d better field this one myself. “All we know is that his name is Basil.”

Woody waited, but that was all the information I had. So he paced again, then came back to me. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I don’t know anyone named Basil.”

The Professor’s patience was running out. “That’s not the point. We don’t know him, either. But the Communicator will help us find him if you cooperate.”

Woody bristled. “What do you want me to do?”

I tried to speak soothingly. “We just want you to hold onto the device with both hands. A message will appear on the panel, and the Professor will read it. There’s nothing to it.”

Woody shook his head. “Neither of you are making any sense.”

“Probably not,” I said, “but I’ve never known you to refuse something new. Why don’t you just give it a try? It won’t zap you.”

“I’m sure it won’t,” he said. “That’s not what worries me.”

“What’s the problem, then?” the Professor demanded.

Woody looked him right in the eyes. “The problem is that you’re a quack, and I don’t cooperate with quacks.” He turned to me and added, “And you should know me better than that.” Then he marched to the corner of the room and stood with his back to us.

12 IMPOSTOR

The Professor looked at me and I shrugged. Then I got an idea.

“Woody,” I said, “I’m asking for your help figuring this guy out.”

He still had his back to me, but his head cocked slightly, so I continued.

“Somehow, when I held onto that Communicator, it told the Professor about you. He had never heard of you before, but the Communicator mentioned you by name. I don’t know how that’s possible. Maybe you can figure it out.”

“Oldest trick in the book, Dak. Psychics do that kind of thing all the time. They get you talking until you volunteer the information they’re looking for.”

“I don’t know, Woody. I can’t figure out how he did it. If he really is a quack and this whole thing is a hoax, I need your help to come to the bottom of it. If he’s wrong, let’s prove him wrong together.”

Woody turned in my direction slightly. “You had me worried, Dak. First I hear you’re dead, then you turn up with this Svengali person—”

The Professor exploded. “How dare you!”

“But if I can help you, Dak, I’ll do it. I’ll show you that he’s an impostor. And if I do, do you promise me you’ll walk away from him and stop listening to his lies?”

“I promise, Woody.”

That was all it took. “Okay,” he said. “Hand it over, Doc.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” the Professor said with a snarl. “I have to read the message that appears on the monitor.”

“See, Dak? He won’t relinquish control. That’s your first clue. If we don’t do it his way, it won’t work. Pretty obvious, don’t you think?”

“Fine,” said the Professor, handing him the Communicator. “Take it.

But you won't be able to read it."

"Of course not," said Woody. "Neither can you. But you put on a good show."

Woody took the Communicator and brought it over to me. "Now watch," he said.

He grasped each end of the device and we looked at the monitor together. Some strange pictograms appeared on the screen.

Woody was mildly surprised. "Is this the same message it showed you?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "Mine was different."

"Interesting..." He turned to the Professor. "How'd you make this thing, Doc?"

"I didn't, you little—" The Professor stopped himself. "You're holding a mystery you'll never understand."

"Hmmm. So, Dak, I suppose the Professor here is the only one in the world who can decipher this code, is that right?"

The Professor's hands tightened into fists. "It's an ancient Mesopotamian language that was lost to history until I reconstructed it. No one else has mastered it yet."

"Of course," Woody said with a smile. "Of course."

I decided to help the Professor out before he became violent. "Woody, I did a segment on this guy months ago. Several noted philologists told me that his work is genuine. He's eccentric, but his credentials are impeccable."

Woody spoke sympathetically. "Now, now, Dak. Be strong."

"We're wasting time!" the Professor said, stomping over to us. "What does the Communicator say?"

"*You tell me, Doc.*"

The Professor looked hard at the monitor a moment. "The first character refers to an exceptionally intelligent boy."

"Hmpf!" Woody said, grinning at me. "See how this works? You've probably told him about my volunteer work with young people."

"We didn't discuss that, Woody, but I do remember that you used to be a mentor."

"Yes, I was a local celebrity, and bright kids came to me in droves. I always encouraged them to think scientifically in every aspect of their lives. I considered it my civic duty, passing the love of science on to the next generation. Anybody who's heard of me knows about that, Dak. Your Professor here has done his homework, I'll give him credit for that."

The Professor looked again at the monitor and muttered. "Oh no."

"What's the matter, Doc?" said Woody.

The Professor glanced at me and grimaced. “Now it’s trying to convey the name phonetically. It says, ‘Lem... lem... lemma...’” He stared at me helplessly. “You can’t possibly understand how difficult this is.”

Woody laughed. “Notice what he’s doing, Dak? He wants us to finish the word for him. Let’s just see what he comes up with on his own.”

“Lemma-uhnn.”

Pause.

“Lemma-un-juuuuh...”

He took a deep breath and started over: “Lemma-un-juh-ullll...”

Another long pause.

“Lemma-un-juh-ullll-oh...”

He tried again:

“Lem... un... jullll... oh...’ ‘Lem... un... jullll... oh...”

At last the Professor looked solemnly into Woody’s eyes and announced, “The boy’s name is Lemon Jello.”

Woody handed the Communicator back to the Professor and paced the room several times. Then he rejoined us. “I know a Velvet Brown. I’ve met a Chandra Lear. I’ve even spoken with a Jack Daniels. But I do not know anyone named Lemon Jello.”

I turned to the Professor. “Could there be a mistake?”

He waived at the Communicator. “Would *you* like to try?”

Woody walked to the foot of the stairs and called to his wife. “Do I know a boy genius by the name of Lemon Jello?”

There was no reply, and Woody grinned at us triumphantly. Then his wife shouted back, “Do you mean L’Monjello?”

Woody stiffened thoughtfully. “L’Monjello! Black kid... Really short for his age... Smartest little guy I ever met... Everything he did was brilliant... I promised to help him on a project, but I couldn’t. He kept badgering me about it, but I didn’t even know where to start. I never had the nerve to tell him... What was he trying to do? I don’t remember... I never got back to him... Poor kid. Must’ve broke his little heart...”

“Woody.”

He tore himself free from his reverie and looked at me.

“Where is L’Monjello now?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I lost track of him years ago.”

“Do you remember his last name?”

“Parker,” his wife shouted from upstairs.

Woody and I faced each other a moment, and I didn’t have to say a word.

“Okay, Dak. I’ll look him up. But you better keep the Professor in the background or that kid will never cooperate. He’s too smart to fall for

this.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Falling for it?”

Woody was thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t know how Svengali wrangled it out of me, but that doesn’t matter. I promised little L’Monjello I’d help him, and I didn’t keep my promise. I’ve been meaning to do something about it for years. It’s time I stopped saying that. Help me find him, Dak, and I’ll make it up to him somehow.”

He stared off into space. “Little L’Monjello... Poor kid!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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