

GIFT

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If you think nuclear power is a dangerous way to generate electricity, then you obviously have not considered the drawbacks of solar energy!

It was a cold, blustery Wednesday that first time he came into the El Dorado. It was going on midnight and the place was deserted. Even Lucy and Suellen, our two "working girls" had given up for the night and gone home. I recognized him immediately, of course. Even without my photographic memory, I would have known R. J. Cowen.

"Hi," I said, "what'll it be?" I tried to be a study in friendly aloofness. I have always heard that Cowen does not like people fawning all over him. That and the fact that he has been known to leave a thousand-dollar bill for a tip made me keep my distance.

"You know who I am?" he asked. His voice was a low croak and his eyes were bloodshot. I recognized the symptoms. He had the air of a man in the middle of a weeklong bender. His breath confirmed my suspicions.

"You're R. J. Cowen, the sunscreen tycoon," I said. "Care for a drink, Mr. Cowen?"

"Yah," he said. "Uh, a scotch-and-water."

The beverage dispenser served up the scotch with its usual assortment of noises. I retired to the other end of the bar and went back to polishing glasses. He did not taste the scotch at all. He just sat there

and stared into its dark translucence as though hypnotized. I watched him in the mirror for ten minutes, then put the glass down and sidled back to where he was sitting. He did not take notice of me until I was standing across from him.

"Pardon me, Mr. Cowen," I said. "It's none of my business, of course, but you look like you need a friend. Anything I can do to help?"

He looked up with those red-rimmed eyes and sighed. "You say you know who I am."

"Yes, sir."

"Who am I?"

"Some people around this burg say you're the richest man in the world."

He nodded. "Yeah, I've heard that nasty rumor myself. The funny part of it is that it is true. I *am* the richest man in the world. Not only that, I am richer than the next ten candidates combined. What do you think of that?"

I whistled long and low. Not because it was news to me, you understand. Rather because he seemed to expect it.

"Do you know how I got that way?" he asked, before finally taking a sip from his drink.

"Talent?" I asked.

"Like hell! It was luck. That's right. Pure, unadorned, undeserved, and unexpected dumb luck. You want to hear the story?"

"If you want to tell it," I said. Of course, I did not know then what I was letting myself in for.

Cowen drained the glass dry and asked for another. Fizz, whirrr, plopp and I had it in front of him. Remember the Vietnam War? No, me neither. Well, it was one of those brush fire things that went on about forty years ago. Cowen was in college at the time and dropped out to protest US involvement. To hear him tell it, those were the best days of his life. He and a bunch of others traveled around the country in a battered Volkswagen van. They organized demonstrations, burned draft cards, and just generally raised hell.

Then a terrible thing happened. The war ended and Cowen was adrift. He had been one of the hard-core protesters, a real agitator. Suddenly the cause to which he had given six years of his life was gone. His side had won. There was nothing left to fight for. He felt like a knight who trips over the Holy Grail on his way to saddle up his horse. (I hope you realize I am condensing this. By the time Cowen finally got to war's end, it was almost 2:00 a.m.)

After peace broke out, Cowen just drifted. Bringing down a government had been a heady narcotic. Nothing afterwards had been the same. He tried consumerism, environmentalism, and even Eastern religions. Nothing gave him that same feeling of excitement he'd found in the peace movement.

"Have you ever belonged to something?" he asked me while nursing his third drink. "I don't mean the Boy Scouts or the PTA. I mean really belonged, like everyone around you was part of your family. That was the feeling that I had lost. It was what I was searching for."

"Must be a great feeling," I said.

"The best," he agreed.

Eventually his search took him to Los Angeles where he met an old girl friend from the peace movement. She had found a new cause of her own and invited him to attend a lecture on the dangers of nuclear

power.

"You have heard of nuclear power, haven't you?" Cowen asked me. He slurred the name, of course,

but it came out understandable enough.

"Sure," I said. "Used to be what they propelled submarines with, didn't it?"

He nodded. "They still use it on some of the real old boats, the ones they can't retrofit with cryogenic storage modules. Other than that, nuclear energy has no use. Know why?"

"Sunscreens are cheaper and safer," I said.

He slammed his fist down on the bar. "Damned right they are. Now, stop interrupting, I've a story to tell..."

That night at the lecture, Cowen had found another crusade he could give himself over to. For the next several years that is what he had done, heart and soul. He had crisscrossed the country in that same beat-up old Volkswagen, again organizing demonstrations and sit-ins. By 1980, they had the nukes (As

God is my witness, that's what he called them) on the run. In the fall of 1982, Cowen was on the way to

Arizona to join a demonstration outside the gate of the big nuclear power plant there; only he did not make it. He was sidetracked by an accident, the accident that made him the richest man in the world.

He had gotten off the interstate to buy gas for the Volkswagen. (Yeah, cars ran on gasoline in those

days. Cryogen was just a gleam in a few people's eyes.) It was dinnertime and he stopped in a small roadside cafe. The sun was just going down as he finished eating. Apparently, it was one of those sunsets that you can only see in Arizona, so Cowen decided impulsively to go up into the hills to

photograph it. He did not get the picture. What he got was lost. He wandered around in the desert until he topped a rise and stopped to check the small pocket compass he carried with him. He had spent hours wandering around and the car was again running on empty. He turned the dome light on and glanced

down at the compass. It was a good thing he did.

Otherwise, the flash would have blinded him for hours.

"Funny things run through your mind when something explodes just over the next rise." he said to me while popping a peanut into his mouth and dropping a handful of shells on the floor. "I'd been demonstrating against nuclear power for four years and had learned a lot about how it worked. Know

your enemy, I always say. Well one of the first things I had learned was that a reactor could not explode like a bomb. I was not so sure during those long seconds after the explosion, I can tell you that! Mostly I spent the time curled in a ball on the floor of my van with the gearshift lever jamming me in the ribs. Every story I had ever heard about nuclear weapons flashed through my mind. All I could think about

was the face of a little Japanese girl who had been looking up when the Hiroshima bomb went off ... never mind, Joe. No sense ruining your evening by being too graphic."

"Whatever you say, sir," I said. My name is Marvin Agronski, but if the richest man in the world wanted to call me Joe, that was fine by me.

"Eventually I concluded that it wasn't the power plant," he continued, "and that I wasn't dead. The next thought was plane crash! Weren't planes always going down at night in the mountains? Somehow the idea of a few hundred dead strangers lying mangled just over the next ridge didn't bother me as much as that little girl's picture.

"I extricated myself from the gear shift, got back into the driver's seat, and then eased the car up the hill at dead slow to see what was burning. When I got to the top, I found myself looking down into a little hollow filled with scrubby desert trees. Many of the trees were ablaze. I stopped the car, got out, and walked as far as I could before the heat from the fire became too intense. It was bright as day down there."

I leaned one elbow on the bar and began to pick my teeth, nodding occasionally so that it looked like I was intent on what he was saying. He didn't even notice me. He was once more in a hollow in the mountains of Arizona some thirty years ago. Truth was that I could have left the room and he would not have noticed.

"Suddenly a figure walked out of a clump of trees that hadn't caught fire," Cowen said. "He took three steps towards me and collapsed to the ground. I did not have time to think. I just ran over to where he lay face down and rolled him over. That was when I got my second shock of the night.

"I'd whimpered in fright when I thought the power plant had exploded. This time I screamed. Even after all these years, I can still hear that sound in my head. It was a girlish scream. The figure on the

ground was not a man. It was a thing! In fact, it was nothing less than a bug-eyed monster!"

"Are you all right, Mr. Cowen?" I asked, touching him on the wrist. His eyes lost their unfocused look.

"Huh?"

"I said, are you all right?"

"Sure. Why shouldn't I be?"

"You were just talking about bug-eyed monsters."

"That's right," he said, nodding. "I was just telling you about the night I found Thing in the desert. "

"Thing?"

"The bug-eyed monster. Weren't you listening?"

"I must have missed something," I said.

"Well, be quiet and I'll tell you about it."

I shut my mouth. I had probably blown my thousand-dollar tip. Still, when a man has as much money as

R. J. Cowen, you do not call him crazy to his face. Trillionaires are eccentric, not crazy,

He continued his story.

It seems this BEM was purple with slick oily black hair and a mouth that opened sideways rather than up and down. That is, it was on a vertical line rather than a horizontal one like yours and mine.

(Hope you don't mind my paraphrasing some of this. I do have a photographic memory like I said, but Cowen was rambling pretty badly and I think I can make the story a hell of a lot more coherent than he did.)

Anyway, the thing was slightly smaller than a man and resembled a person in gross detail -- that is, it had two arms, two legs, and a head. The only thing was that all its features were not arranged the same as ours. Its knees folded the wrong way and it had too many fingers on each hand. Worst of all, it had eyes that glowed red in the dark.

Cowen was no fool. He did the sensible thing. He turned and ran. Only problem was, he took only two steps before tripping over his feet and crashing down on the hard rocks. It was then that he knew what

real terror was. His system got a jolt of adrenaline that dwarfed the previous two surges. Deep down in his brain, down where the subconscious hangs out, he could feel a sensation he'd never felt before.

The thing had gotten hold of his mind!

"How'd you know that?" I whispered. I don't know why but we had taken to talking in hushed tones. Reminded me of one of those overnight camping trips where you sit around the campfire and tell scary stories.

"How can I describe the sensation?" he asked. "Might as well describe the color blue. I felt like a piano and the BEM was running its mental fingers over my keyboard. First, there was a flash of heat, then clammy cold, and then other sensations in quick succession. I had difficulty breathing, dizziness, extreme joy, and an attack of naked lust, followed instantly by numbing depression. I began to shiver violently while sweat poured from my body and a blazing rainbow of color flashed before my eyes. Those are the words, but they don't describe what I felt any better than a six year old can describe sex."

I was getting interested in this insane story. It was like a fantasy novel. You know it is not real, but you pretend it is for as long as the story lasts. Except this was better. "Care for a beer, Mr. Cowen?" I

asked, hoping to get him off the hard stuff.

He nodded and waited for me to draw the brew.

"What happened next?"

"There was this clicking sound," he said.

"Clicking sound?"

"Yeah, like you hear when someone energizes the phone screen on the other end of the line. Except it was not a sound at all. It was inside my head.

"--Ah, there it is," a quiet voice speaking accentless English said deep in Cowen's brain. "I apologize for any discomfort I may have caused, sir. When I noted your predilection for using one of your grasping appendages in preference to the other, I naturally assumed your brain would be most developed on that side. However, I now see that you are cross-connected and that I've been searching the wrong hemisphere of your cortex for the speech center..."

"--Who are you? --" Cowen asked.

"--Not so much volume, please!" the thing said. "You are an extremely powerful telepath for one who is untrained. You may call me ... Thing. As you can see, I am an alien. My ship is destroyed and although uninjured, I require your assistance. If you would be so kind --"

"Look, I'm a little busy right now," Cowen muttered sarcastically, falling into the lifelong habit of speaking

his thoughts. "Perhaps I could drop you off at a police station. The authorities will know what to do with you."

"--I am sorry, sir. But that is impossible. This planet is under quarantine. That you know of my presence is bad enough. None other must learn of it. You must hide me until my comrades are able to effect, a rescue. --"

"What about your ship?" Cowen asked, pointing a thumb at the blazing fire that was still warming his back uncomfortably.

"--The generators are aflame. In another twentieth of one planetary revolution there will be nothing there but a charred spot of ground. --"

"How long until you are rescued?"

"--No more than a year --"

"A year!" Cowen screamed. "How do you expect me to keep a bug-eyed monster secret for a year?"

"--Perhaps you could hide me in your domicile. --"

"I don't have a domicile. Besides, I have my own life to live. Sorry..."

The burning red points stared at him in silence for a minute. He knew it still had him since he felt no desire to get up and run for his car.

Finally, it spoke. "--I would be willing to pay whatever you wished. --"

"You mean money?"

"--If that is what you desire," Thing said. "Anything in my power as payment for harboring me until I am rescued. --"

Now this was an intriguing turn of events, Cowen decided. That is, if the creature really could pay for hiskeep. He wondered how a shipwrecked sailor would go about bribing a native of a South Sea island into helping him. Would his promises be anything but empty words?

He decided a test was in order.

"Okay," Cowen said. "Make it so the atom bomb was never invented."

"--Changing that which already exists is beyond my power. --"

"Hmmm, I thought so." It was beginning to look like he had gotten the cheap model of Aladdin's Lamp. Not only was the genie offering only one wish, but he was choosy about what that wish could be. "I don't suppose you could get rid of all the nuclear power plants in the world, either."

"-- I could," Thing said, "but such overt action is forbidden by the quarantine regulations. Pure knowledge is more my specialty. --"

"Oh, peachy," Cowen said disgustedly. "If there is anything the world already had too much of, it was pure knowledge. Look at the automobile. If it had never been invented, there wouldn't be any smog, urban sprawl, ugly parking lots, drunk drivers, etc., ad infinitum. If only we had invested all those billions into something clean, safe and inexhaustible -- solar power, for instance."

The sudden insight took him by surprise. It took him a few moments to order his thoughts. Finally, he said, "I've got another wish."

"--Yes? --"

"I want a cheap, efficient means of capturing the sun's rays and turning them into electricity."

"--Is that all?" Thing asked. "We have had such a device since the dawn of our history. --"

"It's got to be as close to one hundred percent efficient as possible. I don't want any of these three percent solar collectors we've been fooling around with."

"-- Of course," Thing said, making it sound like the easiest trick in the world. "Complete efficiency is not possible in the real universe, you understand. However, the energy absorption screen is so close that you will barely notice the difference. --"

"How about cost? If it isn't dirt cheap to produce, the damned oil companies will get control of it like everything else."

"--The cost will be minimal once the factories are tooled up. It should cost less than the material from which your clothes are manufactured. Is that satisfactory? --"

"Right on!" Cowen yelled. Then a dark suspicion crept in to put a damper on his enthusiasm. "How do I know you will keep your part of the bargain?"

"--I must construct a signaling device. I will not begin to manufacture the ... you might call it a radio ... until I have demonstrated my good faith." Thing regarded him seriously once more. "Is it a deal? --"

"It's a deal!" Cowen said.

Suddenly the mental restraint that had kept him from using his legs was gone. He probed deeply into his mind. There was no trace of the strange lethargy of a few seconds before. He was once more in control of his body and his fate.

"Or so I thought at the time," he said, burping noisily in my ear.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"I rented a place in Pueblo, Colorado, and fixed up the basement as a small workshop and living quarters for Thing. I wiped out my savings doing it. Luckily, Thing had salvaged a few hundred feet of gold electrical wire from the wreck before it burned, so we had money to spare.

"We holed up for six months and spent every waking moment on the device. Three months after setting up shop, we had our first working model. I imagine you have seen pictures. Old Mark I is in the Smithsonian now."

I nodded. "I took Hazel and the kids to Washington the summer before last. I remember it because it had your name on a brass plaque on the display case, Mr. Cowen."

"I'd gone out to stock up on groceries. Thing did not eat meat, so he went through a lot of lettuce, carrots, and rutabagas. As soon as I got back to the house, I heard his telepathic call to get down to the basement. There in the center of the table we used as a lab bench was a black void. It was as though I was looking through a square window into the blackness of space. The contraption had two sets of wires running from it. One was attached to a nine-volt battery -- the kind you use for a transistor radio. The other pair ran to a hundred-watt incandescent light bulb. The light glowed brightly."

"That it?" Cowen asked Thing after he'd found his voice again.

Thing rippled his whole body, which was his way of nodding. "--That is it. It absorbs all visible light and everything into the high ultraviolet with ninety-seven percent efficiency. With proper control of our process, we can tune it down to pick up the infrared region as well. --"

"Thus was born the sunscreen," Cowen said, sighing.

He glossed over the next part of his story. It seems that he and Thing worked sixteen hours a day for three months to perfect the screen. In addition, Thing tried to teach him the theory behind it. Cowen had never been much good at science and it was tough sledding. However, they kept at it. Part of Cowen's deal with the alien was that he would learn enough about how the device worked so that he could

plausibly claim to have invented it. In the end, Thing settled on merely giving his human student the cookbook rudiments, the backyard mechanic's explanation, the barest smattering of knowledge necessary

to put up a good front.

By the end of six months, Cowen's patent was pending and he had begun negotiations with various companies for the right to manufacture sunscreens under license. While he traveled with his demonstration model, Thing began to construct his "radio" in the house in Pueblo. Cowen had laid in a stock of canned vegetables and did not see the alien for two months. The sales trip proved profitable. By the time he returned home he had made deals with General Electric, RCA, and Matsushita of Japan. Others were pending, but those three were already modifying their factories for sunscreen production.

"That homecoming was a surprisingly emotional one for me," Cowen said. "Even though Thing was an alien, I'd gotten used to the reassuring feel of his mind touch, the emotional support he gave me when I was feeling low. Moreover, he was as glad to see me as I was to see him. Possibly, he was merely tired of canned vegetables and wanted to get back to fresh. He was an alien, true, but I could not help liking

him. I think he felt the same way about me.

"I was feeling a little down the night of my homecoming. The papers were full of news about a big demonstration the Clamshell Alliance had organized against the Seabrook Nuclear Station. It reminded me that others were still on the front lines, getting smacked with police nightsticks, while I was stuck in Pueblo, Colorado, with a bug-eyed monster. Thing noticed my funk and asked me about it. We started to talk and soon, it had turned into a good old fashioned bull session."

"--A strange puzzle. --" he said.

"What is?" Cowen asked.

" --The human reaction to a problem. Do you attempt to determine your best course of action? No. Rather your first thought is to climb the nearest hill and bay defiance at the stars. Only later does reason come over you. Surely, this is not the most efficient means of finding solutions. --"

"I don't get you," Cowen said, puzzled.

" --You wish an end to the dangers of nuclear power. But are you happy working quietly toward that end as we are doing? No. You prefer to plot confrontation with your enemies. What is this need of yours to 'go public' as the expression goes? --"

"But it's only been four years since Three Mile Island. How long before the next nuke goes haywire, killing a few thousand people this time? We have to keep the pressure on while the public remembers. How else are we going to win?"

"-- As you are winning. By introducing sunscreens and making all other forms of power generation unattractive. --"

"Do you really think sunscreens will end nukes?"

"--Yes. --"

"How can you be so sure?"

"--Because the companies that generate electricity in your society have fixed expenses they must meet. As sunscreens are introduced, demand for their product will fall and they will be forced to raise rates. As rates increase, demand will drop further. It is obviously a situation wherein positive feedback controlsevents, a vicious cycle, a diverging series --"

"Then the utilities will go bust?"

"--The utilities will go bust. --"

"He was right, too," Cowen said, looking at me with tears in his eyes. "Five years after that conversation, the last nuke in America pulled its core and closed down for good. Thing predicted a lot of other things that night -- the end of cities as we knew them, population sprawl, solar farms, the return of cottage industry, the spiraling standard of living. He even predicted the stock market crash of December 1983. Not the date, of course, but the event.

"And with his talk of Depression, I began to have second thoughts about what I had wished into being." Cowen looked at Thing with tears in his eyes. "Have I done right?" he asked. "A lot of people are going to be out of work because of me."

"--Temporarily," Thing agreed. "But perhaps it will help to think of it this way. Electricity is to your civilization what fire was to your distant ancestors. Only your people have surrendered control of your fires to a few powerful individuals. If you desire to warm yourself on a cold night, you must pay for the privilege. --"

"So?"

"--Sunscreens are going to change that. In effect, you have taken the fires of your civilization and given them back to the common people. As long as energy remains inexpensive and readily available, no man may bar another from his source of heat and light. Isn't such a world preferable to your current system?"

--"

Cowen nodded. Put that way it made a lot of sense.

"We talked far into the night, exploring alien concepts of government, religion, and ethics," Cowen said.

"It was the closest we ever came to understanding each other. It turned out to be our last chance to try.

"Thing was rescued at the end of the year. I took him up into the Rockies and a saucer shaped craft floated down from the sky, hovering just off the ground while he boarded, then zoomed off without a sound."

"Interesting story," I said. Only then did I realize I had been holding my breath. I picked up my towel and began polishing the bar once more. "Interesting, but I can't rightly say that I believe it."

"Don't blame you, Joe," he said. He made a face as he tossed off the last of his beer. "The john?"

I pointed back in the corner where the rest rooms are located.

He inched his way off his stool and steadied himself against the bar before staggering in the indicated direction. I bit my lip. What if R. J. Cowen, the richest man in the world, slipped and knocked his brains out against the urinal? I wondered how many lawyers he kept on retainer for just such an eventuality.

I breathed more easily when he reappeared after five minutes. This time he walked with the air of someone who is trying to appear sober. You know the too-too-careful walk. I had a bad premonition that he had just been sick all over my nice clean rest room.

"Doing better?" I asked when he had hoisted himself back onto a stool.

"Better, Joe. Thanks. What have you got back there that's fit to drink?"

"I think you've had enough, Mr. Cowen," I said, expecting him to explode. He obviously was not the type of man used to having people tell him no. However, he didn't. He just sat there and nodded sagely.

"I think you're right, Joe. I just want one to calm my nerves before my chauffeur arrives with the car. Called him from the screen in the hall outside the john. Besides, you want to hear the end of the story, don't you?"

"You mean there's more?"

"There's more," he said, nodding. "Now what have you got?"

"The owner keeps a bottle of forty year old brandy in the safe. He bought it for an investment, but says he'd open it if the right special occasion came along."

"I'm about to finish telling you the rather unique story of my life and that brandy will be the last liquor I

ever drink. How much more special can an occasion get?"

"I don't know," I said, dubious. "Stuff's pretty expensive."

Cowen laughed aloud at that. After a few seconds, I had to join in. Considering whom I was talking to, it was pretty funny. I fetched the brandy from the back room and made a ceremony of opening it.

Then I poured him half a beer glass -- the El Dorado not being that high class a bar, we do not stock brandy snifters -- and set one up for me.

"On with the story," I said.

"On with the story," he agreed, not touching the drink. His eyes got all misty and he continued talking in a quiet authoritative voice that was somehow different from his earlier speech pattern. Before he had just been a drunken bum in expensive clothes. Now he seemed to have gotten some of the steel back into him. He looked more like the captain of industry he really was.

"Not much of interest happened to me for the next thirty years," he said. "Not until about three weeks ago, in fact."

I held my silence. In the last thirty years R. J. Cowen had been married and divorced four times, had half his stomach removed, developed chronically high blood pressure, and had his eldest son killed in a traffic accident. Another child -- a daughter, I think -- had joined a Provincialist commune somewhere in Alaska. Also, in that time his fortune had doubled, tripled, and doubled again. However, if he considered none of that to be of interest, then who was I to argue?

"What happened three weeks ago?" I asked.

"I was lying in bed with a throbbing headache. It was midnight and I lay in the dark, staring up at the ceiling, trying to drift off to sleep. I was just about to succeed after counting my thousandth sheep when a strangely familiar feeling came over me.

"At first I couldn't identify it. It was like seeing red and suffering from double vision at the same time. Except it was not only my eyes. It was as if my whole body had suddenly twinned. I could feel the cool night breeze on my skin at the same time as I seemed to be submerged in tepid water. I could hear the hoot of an old horned owl that lives out back, and yet there was a strange silence in my mind. My mouth tasted of bile. Yet, somehow, I could taste the metallic bite of sulfur too. My thoughts took on a curiously echoic quality, like a telephone line that is not properly damped at the other end. "In spite of the strangeness of it all, I couldn't shake the feeling that this had happened to me before.

"Then it hit me," he said, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper. "It was Thing. He was back."

'What'd you do?'"

"Do? I screamed 'Thing' at the top of my lungs -- both mentally and actually. He did not seem to hear me, which was strange. How was it that I could read him and he could not read me? He was the trained telepath, not I."

"Didn't he say you were a strong natural telepath?" I asked.

Cowen nodded. "I finally decided that was it. I have had these hunches all my life. Some people would call them intuition. Maybe that is my talent showing through. Anyway, whatever the reason, I found myself with a direct circuit to Thing's mind. It must have been his subconscious because I could hear

what he heard, see what he saw, and he did not seem to notice me. Not that it was very clear, you

understand. Mostly I felt sad at something. Only I could not quite figure out what I had to be sad about. I spent the rest of the night trying to contact him.

"By dawn I was exhausted and still hadn't had any luck. He was oblivious to my presence. However, the effort had not been wasted. My link was stronger than ever. I could feel him tugging at me from somewhere to the west. So, I hopped out of bed at first light and fired up my private plane. If I couldn't get him to come to me, I decided I would go to him."

I chuckled. Cowen's private plane is a converted VTOL airliner that he keeps hangered on his estate. Every time he revs up those lift fans, you can hear teeth gnashing all over Williamsport, especially around dawn. However, Cowen owns this burg, and nobody complains too loudly about the noise if it is his or

her landlord making it.

"How'd you find him?"

"I followed the mind touch," Cowen said. "I really can't explain it. It was like having a compass in my head. I would instantly recognize when I drifted off course. Eventually, I found myself headed for the Rockies. It was then that I knew where I was going."

"Where?"

"As I flew over Kansas I got a brief flash of Thing's surroundings. I recognized the clearing where the saucer had landed to rescue him. I had been there enough times to recognize it, even after thirty years.

"I landed the plane about a quarter mile away in another, bigger clearing. Thing must have heard me because I felt his questing thought as I was hovering for a landing.

"--Robert! --" Thing said as he recognized Cowen's mind touch.

"Hello, Thing," Cowen said. "Didn't you hear me calling?"

("He was surprised, Joe. He had not heard me until I was practically on top of him. It was his mind. It was not as fast as it had been. His thoughts were not as sharp either. He was old, Joe. Time had aged him.")

"You're an old man now, Thing," Cowen said as he hiked toward the clearing where the alien sat.

"--Yes, Robert, I am old and nearly past the time when I can be of use to my race. I perceive that you too have aged since last we met. --"

"Why did you come back, Thing?"

"--I am on a pilgrimage. This was the scene of my first great triumph. I have returned to see the effect of my efforts, and perhaps to beg your forgiveness. --"

"Forgiveness, Thing?" Cowen redoubled his speed toward the clearing. Soon he was trotting among tall pines, panting from the unaccustomed exertion and altitude. "Forgiveness for what?"

"--For our terrible ruse. --"

At that moment, Cowen burst into the clearing. There, sitting quietly on a log facing him was a familiar figure. The oily black hair was the same, but the purple skin had a distinct greenish tinge to it. The figure was stooped. All effects of age, Cowen knew without knowing how he knew. The red eyes gazed at him, unblinking as always.

"--Hello, Robert. It is nice to see you again. --"

"Hello, Thing. What ruse?"

"-- Why the sunscreen, of course. --"

"I don't understand."

"-- It is simple. My race has long dominated this arm of the galaxy. We have done so by denying access to the stars for any race we feel we cannot control. It was decided thirty years ago that humans are such

a race. I was the agent assigned to lock you in your cage. That was my mission here. --"

"Locked into our cage?" Cowen asked, "How did you do that?"

"-- By giving you the sunscreen. --"

"That's silly, Thing. The sunscreen was my idea. It was the answer to all of humanity's prayers."

"-- Can you truly say that something was your idea when your mind was under my control at the time?"

--"

"Okay, so maybe you planted the idea there. It was still the best thing to happen to us in the last thousand years."

"--No, it was not," Thing said, sitting quietly and gazing into Cowen's eyes. "You have been tricked. I find that as I grow older and wiser, I have come to regret my part in the affair. I suppose you might say that I have developed a conscience. --"

"But it has been good!" Cowen insisted. "All the benefits you predicted have come true, and more. We have taken the miracle of fire and placed it in the hands of the common man. There has not been an electric bill paid in the United States in twenty years. The sunscreen has given us economic independence."

"--How is your space program, Robert? It was quite a booming thing when last I was here. --"

"It's booming bigger than ever, Thing. We have ion drive spaceships powered by huge sunscreen sails dozens of kilometers on a side. They routinely travel to the scientific outposts on the Jovian moons. That is something no mere rocket could ever do. The radiation shielding to protect the instruments and crew from Jupiter's radiation belts alone masses enough that a rocket couldn't get it out of orbit."

"--Have your ships gone farther out than Jupiter?" Thing asked.

"They launched the Uranus expedition two years ago. That's about it. We are concentrating on the inner planets at the moment. Besides..."

"--Besides, your existing designs are inefficient at that range from the sun because of power limitations. You are marking time until you can design ships with larger collector sails to operate in the outer solarsystem. True? --"

"True," Cowen answered. "How did you know that?"

"--Because that is the nature of the great ruse. In your own idiom, you were suckers. You were concerned about the shortcomings of your existing energy supplies. You perceived coal as being too dirty, nuclear power as being too dangerous, and oil as being too expensive. What you needed was a source of energy that is clean, safe, cheap and inexhaustible. In effect, Robert, you told me your fondest wish and I made it come true.--"

'So?" Cowen asked.

"--So in spite of all their shortcomings, your traditional power sources have evolved along a path of which you are painfully ignorant. Your whole history has been one of developing energy sources of ever-greater density and efficiency. Each time a breakthrough was made, it was in the direction of packing more kilowatts into each cubic meter. --"

"--Left to itself that process would have continued to its inevitable conclusion. Animals gave way to steam; first wood fired, later coal and oil fired. Fission was in the process of supplanting the fossil fuels, and fusion would have followed fission. Finally, at the end of the chain you would have developed total mass-energy conversion and won free to the stars. --"

"I don't understand."

"--A hyperwave generator gulps many billions of ergs in order to warp space around a starship. It must be powered by a miniature sun. What we have done, Robert, is divert you from the path that culminates in the development of that tiny captive star. Instead, we have sidetracked you into the low-density dead end of solar energy. --"

"--Getting power for your industry is simple. If you need more, just unroll a few more acres of

sunscreen. However, the solar flux is a constant at any given distance from the sun. That is easy to forget unless you are designing a spaceship to explore Pluto. Once you have collected the energy that falls on a given area, there is not any more to harvest. --"

"So we just roll out more sunscreen," Cowen said with more optimism than he felt.

Thing sat there for a moment, his red eyes cast down at the ground beneath his feet. "--You quickly reach the point of diminishing returns in space. The extra energy collected is not sufficient to offset the extra mass of the collector. --"

"So, we use sunscreens on Earth and develop mobile sources of power for space."

"--No, Robert. You will not be able to interest anyone else in such a plan. The sunscreen is too cheap, too easy. Why would anyone invest in a new power source when you now have all the power you could ever want at one-millionth the cost? Face it, Robert. We have chained you to a single star and here you will remain. One day humanity will destroy itself, and the problem that you represent will be solved. --"

Cowen sat quietly, not sure what to say. Finally, he spoke. "And you did this to us, Thing?"

A great sadness flowed over him as Thing considered his answer. "--Alas, old friend, I did. I was young and ... you might say idealistic, I suppose. I was much filled with the greatness of my race and our rightful place as masters of the galaxy. I have seen much since that time. I have come to regret my actions, but as I told you so many years ago, I cannot change that which has already taken place."

"Of course you can," Cowen said.

"--No, my ship will return for me shortly after dark. I go home with it, to live out my last days with my guilt. I fear my remaining years will not be many, for it weighs heavily on me. --"

"That was the last word he said to me, Joe," Cowen said, tears once more in his eyes. "We sat in silence all day, just feeling each other's presence, remembering a time when we were both much younger. The saucer came shortly after dark as he said it would, and he was gone."

For some reason, I found I had tears in my own eyes. Must have been something in the air. I wiped them clean as unobtrusively as I could. "Jeez, Mr. Cowen, you sure know how to end a story on the downbeat."

"Why do you think I've been on a three week bender, Joe? I have mortgaged the human race's future. Thing was right. With the perfect energy source already in hand, who is going to invest in some other technology? Look at the government. They have spent their entire energy research budget for

twenty-five years perfecting ever better storage devices to smooth out the day/night cycle of sunscreen power production. The world runs on sunscreen produced electricity or cryogenic hydrogen electrolyzed from sea water by that same sunscreen produced electricity."

"Maybe you could convince them, Mr. Cowen. Tell them the story like you told it to me."

He got a little smile on his face. He looked happier than at any time since he came in the place. He glanced down and seemed to see the brandy for the first time in about fifteen minutes. He picked up the brandy, holding it up for a toast. I picked mine up as well.

"To the human race, Joe," he said. "We're not licked yet!"

"Right!" I said, letting the forty-year-old brandy slide smoothly across my palate.

There was the crash of two glasses hitting the floor, just like in the movies.

The mood was quickly interrupted by the arrival of a big, black turbo limousine out front. Cowen looked at it through the grimy front window and sighed. "Looks like it's back to the old grindstone, Joe. Howmuch do I owe you?"

I hit the total button on the computer and his bill for the regular drinks flashed on the screen. I hesitated about the brandy. Finally, I decided to charge him \$2000 for the bottle. He did not even bat an eye, just peeled off three bills and handed them to me. I gave him his change, which he slipped into the right hand pocket of his jacket. Then he reached into his wallet, and extracted a tenner note. He handed it across the bar to me.

"This is for you, Joe," he said. "For being such a good listener."

I dropped my hands to my sides and shook my head slowly. "No thanks, Mr. Cowen. It is not that I couldn't use ten thousand, because I could. That is more than I make tending bar in a couple of months. However, if I took that tip I would just be your bartender again. I would rather think of myself as your friend. If you do not mind, that is."

He nodded and put the bill back into his wallet. "I understand, Joe. And thanks. I could use a friend." He turned to leave and got halfway to the door before turning back. "I do leave a tip for you, though. A friend's tip."

"Friend's tip?"

"Hot insider news about the stock market. You do play the market don't you?"

"Sure," I said. "Doesn't everybody?"

"It's not common knowledge yet, Joe. In fact, I just made up my mind in your john back there. Sunscreen Labs is going to start a crash program to develop both a total mass-energy converter and a starship hyperwave generator come Monday morning. Thing forgot something. When I was rummaging around in his mind, I picked up a helluva lot of miscellaneous facts. One of them might be just the clue we need. And you can bet your last dollar on one thing, Joe."

"What's that, Mr. Cowen?"

"Sunscreen Labs will be a lot more efficient at finding the answer than the government would. We will make the Manhattan Project and the Apollo Project look like they were run by anarchists. After all, I know where I am going and I am anxious to get there. I want to get out among the stars while both Thing and I are still alive. I want to see the expression on his face when he discovers how I've outsmarted him."

"Right you are, Mr. Cowen."

And right he was!