

S N O W B I R D S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

ONE MINUTE SHE'D been moving down Central Expressway at forty miles an hour and the next she was stopped, closed in by cars on all sides. I should have known better, she thought, than to take Central. No matter how late it is.

It was cold, of course, bitterly cold. The sky was clear blue in the last light of the sun. A voice on the radio went on and on about the weather crisis, comparing temperatures from April of last year, reciting endless statistics. He had no answers and Marge turned him off.

In the next car up, a little girl in a red party dress leaned halfway out her window. She pointed at the sky and shouted something at her mother. Just ahead another car door opened and a man in a sheepskin jacket and cowboy hat got out to stare at the sky as well.

Marge put the car in neutral and set the hand brake. She rolled her window down, wincing as the icy wind hit her eyes, and looked up. She saw an old-fashioned biplane move across the sky in broad loops and swirls. Skywriting, she realized. She didn't think they did that anymore.

BEWARE, it said.

I don't like this, she thought. With the weird shit she'd learned at the bank today, and the cold, and the traffic, this put her over her limit.

The plane finished a second word: INVADERS.

People up and down the stalled expressway got out of their cars to watch, collars turned against the wind. The plane started a new line with FROM and followed it with THE. Marge smelled the exhaust coming up through the floorboards. She turned her engine off and drummed her fingers on the dash. Finally the party broke up, people rubbing their arms, nodding to each other, getting back into their cars. Marge saw the plane fly off, leaving a completed message behind.

BEWARE INVADERS FROM THE FUTURE.

Probably, she thought, a publicity stunt for some stupid science fiction movie. She failed to convince herself. She wanted to be home, nestled in the couch with a drink in her hand.

It was another fifteen minutes before traffic moved again. Two of the three lanes were stalled, and as Marge finally began to inch forward she could see the reason. Nearly a dozen cars sat motionless in their lanes as the rest of the traffic wound slowly around them.

Accidents? she wondered. Out of gas? Then she saw that several of the cars were still running, thin plumes of smoke trickling from their exhaust pipes. There were no piles of broken glass, no raised hoods, no dented bumpers.

The cars were simply deserted.

ON THE FOURTH TRY Louis got through. He'd been calling every fifteen minutes since six o'clock, telling himself he wasn't worried, but still vastly relieved when Marge answered the phone.

“Have you been calling?” she asked.

“A couple times,” he lied .

“There was a humongous traffic jam on Central. Listen, you want to have dinner or something?”

“I thought that might be nice.”

“Why don’t you just come over. We can do something here.”

“Fine. I’ll be right over.”

Before he left the apartment he turned off the gas space heater and stood in front of it for a second or two, soaking up the last of its heat. About six-thirty he’d felt something hit him, a feeling of uneasiness that had left him weak and nauseated. Even now, knowing Marge was all right, the feeling still knotted up his stomach.

He drove to Marge’s with the car heater on full blast. She answered the door in a terrycloth robe, her hair wrapped in a towel. “Why don’t you get us some drinks?” she said. “Jesus, what a day.”

By the time Louis had the whiskey poured she’d put on jeans and a sweater and sprawled back in her recliner. She wanted to be left alone, Louis knew, or she would have sat on the couch. He set a drink next to her hand and sat down across the room.

“So tell me about it,” he said.

“I don’t know if I want to. It sounds crazy.”

“Try me.”

“Well ... you know the bank has had me running credit checks. Mostly on snowbirds like you.”

“Snowbirds?”

“You know. Northerners who move down here because of the supposedly warmer weather. Anyway. This morning I had a whole batch to process and suddenly I notice, hey, there’s only about four or five different banks listed as credit references here.”

Louis’ stomach clenched hard enough to bring a taste of bile to his throat.

“So far,” Marge went on, “all I’ve been doing is pulling reports off the net. I mean, there’s not really a problem or anything, all the credit ratings are fine, but this business with the banks is bothering me. So I call one of the banks, where I know they’ve still got handwritten records in the basement. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Nothing there. I mean there’s records, but not on any of these folks. Nothing to back up the data on the net.”

“Maybe they got rid of them?”

“Uh uh. No way. So I go to the boss with this and he just tells me to drop it. If the net says their credit’s good, that’s all he cares about.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“Is it? What if somebody is ripping off the net? Shouldn’t I like try to do something about it?”

“Hey. Relax. All you’re going to do is piss your boss off and get yourself fired.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She finished off her drink and said, “You want to eat?”

“I...” A fist of nausea hit him. He blinked, and for a fraction of a second the apartment was gone. He had a fleeting impression of desolation, of cold, of rolling yellow-gray clouds. Then he was back in Marge’s apartment, doubled up and gasping for breath.

“Louis?” Marge was out of her chair. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Must have been those tacos at lunch.”

The couch was solid under his hand again, and his body felt all right. No tingling in the extremities, no signs of heart attack or stroke.

Then what was it? his mind screamed. What the hell just happened to me?

HE LAY AWAKE long after Marge had curled into sleep.

The episode, whatever it was, had left him off balance, wide awake. What he’d been able to choke down of Marge’s meat loaf lay in a cold lump in his stomach.

They hadn’t made love. Marge cared for him, he knew, but there wasn’t much physical to it. I must seem old to her, he thought, though to himself 49 seemed barely middle age. He had a bit of a paunch, his hair was gray at the sides and thin on top. Then again, Marge at 34 was hard and thin from years of dieting and Texas sun, her voice and her temper both a bit brittle. Nothing that special about either one of us, he thought, each of us hanging on because there’s nowhere else to go.

It was just the weather that had him down, he told himself. The weather and the heartburn, or whatever it had been. He put an arm around Marge’s waist and listened to the comforting rhythm of her breathing.

MARGE COASTED THROUGH the morning on autopilot. Something dark and formless had lurked in all her dreams. She’d woken up three or four times frightened and out of breath, unable to get back to sleep for as long as an hour at a time. Outside the office it was gray and bitterly cold, with more snow threatened by afternoon. April blizzards bring May ... what? Mastodons, maybe, for a new ice age.

She was about to break for lunch when the phone rang, jarring her nerves so badly that she banged her knee under her desk. “Marge? This is Cathy, at First Bank in Albany. I talked to you yesterday? Well listen. I did some calling on my own. Trying to run down some of those addresses you gave me yesterday, from the net?”

“Yes?” Marge said, rubbing her knee.

“Well, none of the real estate agents listed have ever heard of those people. They aren’t in any of the old phone books, either. It’s like they never existed at all.”

“That’s weird,” Marge said.

“Isn’t it? I think it’s kind of exciting. I bet it’s the Mafia or something, you know? What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Marge said.

“I’m going to keep checking. If I find anything else I’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” Marge said. “But listen ... be careful, will you?”

“Sure. Gotta go. ’Bye.”

Marge put the phone down. So, she thought. Somebody was tampering with the net. It happened—they caught one or two every year, usually siphoning money. This was different. Who was doing it? And why? Who were these people with no pasts? Where were they coming from?

From the future, her mind answered her. Beware.

She shook her head. Whoa. Don’t go off the deep end, here.

But, she thought. What if the skywriting hadn’t been a publicity stunt? What if somebody else was onto the same thing? She started again to leave for

lunch, and then sat down again. A couple of phone calls. It couldn't hurt.

She picked an aircraft charter company out of the Yellow Pages, and they gave her the names of two companies that did skywriting in the Dallas area. She called the first one and got a tired female voice.

"Yes," the woman said, "we did it. No, I can't tell you what it means. We just did a job, you know?"

Marge panicked and forgot the cover story she'd made up. "Look, this is really important. I have to talk to whoever paid for that message. It's important. It's ... life or death."

The tone of the woman's voice changed. "Then maybe you better talk to the police, hon."

"Why?"

"The guy that bought the ad was killed last night. The cops have been hanging around here all day. What did you say your name was?"

Marge hung up and reached for her terminal. Suppose, she thought. Suppose *everything* ties together?

ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER.

She had seen Louis' number one day and memorized it, cursing herself as a nasty, prying bitch all the while. Let me be wrong, she thought, as she typed in the number and hit `NEWLINE`.

Louis' name appeared. `CORRECT? (Y/N)`

She hit the plus bar. The screen displayed fifteen lines of information. It was all there. First Bank of Albany, the lists of realtors, employers, and credit cards.

He was one of them.

`LOUIS' PHONE RANG` at 4:17. "Louis?"

"That's right."

The voice began to recite a short poem of nonsense syllables. Louis wanted to hang up, but he felt oddly compelled to listen. Then the voice stopped and the world melted away.

It was like the night before, but stronger. His stomach lurched. He dropped to his knees, still clutching the phone. The snow under him was stained with oilslicks and foaming puddles; a freezing wind went right through his clothes and skin.

"Are you still there, Louis?"

"Yes," he gasped.

"Do you know who you are, now?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what you have to do." There was a silence, then the buzz of a dial tone.

`WHEN SHE GOT HOME`, Louis was waiting for her. He sat in an armchair, holding a .22 target pistol. The barrel was lined up with her stomach. Marge felt a sick, scared bravado come over her.

"So it's real," she said.

"Yes. I didn't know about it myself until this afternoon. Somebody called and said some kind of code phrase that brought my memories back."

"And told you to kill me, because I know too much." "I'm supposed to do that, yes."

He was pale, sweaty, and Marge could see the terror in his eyes. Otherwise he hadn't changed. He was the same, ordinary man she'd slept with, and felt

sorry for, and wished she could fall in love with, and hadn't been able to.

"Are you going to? Kill me?" It surprised her that she could say it.

"No," he said. He looked down at the gun, as if he didn't remember where it had come from. "I think it's too late, in any case." He tossed the gun onto the sofa.

"You shouldn't throw guns around," Marge said, wanting to scream with relief. "It's dangerous."

"Dangerous," he said. "We're being sucked back, you know. One at a time. The strain is too much."

"What strain? Back where? Am I supposed to have this all figured out or something?" She sat down heavily on the couch.

"We come from ... about a hundred years from now. I guess there's about a hundred thousand of us. We picked this time because it was the earliest when the net was in operation, so we wouldn't have to waste a lot of time building cover stories. And there's still another lifetime or so before things get bad."

"Bad?"

"There's no energy left. No heat, no cars. The oceans are dead, the rain forests are gone, the ozone layer is shot. I don't know exactly how it happened, but the weather got stranger and stranger and then just ... shifted. A hundred years from now most of North America is under six to a hundred feet of snow, and the glaciers are moving south."

"You think you can imagine it? Try to imagine not being able to bathe because there's no clean water, and if there was water you wouldn't be able to heat it, and if you could there wouldn't be anyplace warm enough to use it."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?" She shrugged. "I guess I do, in spite of myself."

"It doesn't make any difference. I've held on this long, but I don't have much time left. Maybe an hour or two."

"And then?"

"It's like inertia. If you don't change anything, it's not too hard to stay here. But the more improbable your being here becomes, the more likely you'll just—snap back."

"And when people find out what you really are—or even suspect—that makes it worse, right? Like the skywriting yesterday. It snapped some of your people right out of their cars."

Louis nodded. "I saw it in the paper this morning."

"And the weather. Is that your fault too?"

"Yes. It's kind of ironic. The disturbance we made coming back here loused up your own climate. You know, people used to blame the migrating birds for bringing cold weather with them when they flew south. What was it you called us? Snowbirds?"

He stood up. "I'm going now. I can't fight it off much longer. I don't want to be here when it happens."

"Louis..." She reached for him, stopped with her hand on his sleeve.

"You're not even going to remember me, you know. It may take you a day or two to forget, but you will. People who don't really know me, they'll forget right away."

She felt bitter, used, betrayed. "Go on," she said. "Get out of here."

The door closed quietly and she heard his car pull out of the driveway.

"I won't forget," she said.

HE EASED INTO the street, sharp points of pain dancing up and down his ribs. Goddammit! he thought. Goddammit to hell!

The road in front of him flickered, and the houses to either side strobed in and out. It was like watching a film that wasn't framed in the projector. The car ran smoothly enough but his stomach felt like he was on a Tilt-A-Whirl.

He saw a set of abandoned metal furniture on the lawn ahead of him, left out through the long winter and the endless freezing spring. Lawn furniture, he thought. Sweet Jesus!

He didn't want to go back. Damn that man and his skywriting, damn Marge and her nosiness, damn them all to a cold and airless hell. He wrenched the wheel and the car shot over the curb, skidding on the patches of snow and the damp yellow grass. He crashed through the metal table and chairs. Something tore loose under the car as he jammed the accelerator down. He swerved into a mailbox and clipped a white picket fence, then wrestled the car back onto the street, his anger spent.

By the time the car coasted to a stop at the end of the street, the driver's seat was empty.

WANTING LIGHTS AND CROWDS and loud colors, Marge drove through the snow to Northpark. She window-shopped for a while, then stopped to rest at the fountain outside Neiman's, watching three grade-school kids slide down the tile sculpture.

"Hey," she said. "Come here a minute." They stopped and stared at her.

"It's okay," she said. "I just want to show you something."

One of them, a little older looking than the others, sauntered over.

"You want to see something neat?" she said. "See that man over there?" She pointed to a middle-aged man who reminded her of Louis (Louis who? What was his last name?), well-dressed, bundled in an overcoat and scarf. "Go up to him and ask him something for me."

"Ask him what?"

"Ask him, 'Are you from the future?' Then see what happens."

"You're crazy."

"Think so? Try it and see."

The boy laughed and ran away. She watched him tell his friends what she'd said. They argued back and forth, then the smallest of them went up to the man in the overcoat.

Marge found herself holding her breath.

The boy tugged at the man's trouser leg. He had to bend over to listen. The boy pointed to Marge and asked him something, and for a moment the man's eyes seemed to glow with a fierce hostility.

Marge blinked.

Hadn't that little boy just been talking to an older man?

She shook her head. I've been working too hard, she thought. I need to forget all this nonsense I've been worrying about (what nonsense?) and get some rest.

As she got up, three little boys, laughing wildly, ran past her, asking a question of everyone they saw.

Marge pushed open the heavy glass door of the mall and stepped out into a warm April mist.

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