

First, let me give you the story as I reported it. From the Sunday edition of The New York Times, June 29, 1997:

## Mysterious Fire Destroys Oregon Town

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Portland, Or. June 27, 1997. Fifteen people died as fire destroyed the sleepy hamlet of Bonner Bay on the Central Oregon Coast. The fire, which began in a hotel north of town just after midnight yesterday, quickly became an inferno that raced down the town's main road, leaping from roof to roof.

Residents sought shelter in caves on the town's north end. The caves, accessible only on the beach in low tide, provided a safe haven for nearly 3,500 people.

"We're lucky the tide was out," Mayor Ruth Anderson said. "We're lucky the fire burned out before the tide came in."

Experts believe Bonner Bay's location attributed to the fire's quick spread and its quick end. Bonner Bay was built on a four-mile-long rock ledge between two cliffs. With the ocean to the west, and the Coast Mountain Range to the east, Bonner Bay was isolated. Until 1950, Bonner Bay was inaccessible by land.

"By the time we learned of the fire, the entire bay was aflame," said Joe Roth of the Central Coast Fire District. "We couldn't get into the area, except by boat. I'm amazed anyone survived."

The fire burned out in a matter of hours, Roth said, "because it ran out of fuel."

The fifteen people who died were in the hotel where the fire started. Their names have not yet been released.

Four column inches. Four column inches to describe the experience of a lifetime.

My grandmother was born in Bonner Bay and she retained a home there until she died. The home then became my family's West Coast vacation house. We rented it out most of the year for the additional income, and used it ourselves two weeks every summer. When my parents died, they bequeathed the home to my two siblings and me, and we decided to maintain the arrangement: vacation rental much of the year, with six weeks carved out for individual family time. During my marriage, my wife and I only went to Bonner Bay once. She was a native New Yorker, and the isolation terrified her.

I returned every summer after the divorce.

My two weeks in Bonner Bay ran from June 16 to June 30. This year, conveniently, the two-week period began on a Monday. I have three weeks of vacation at the Times—I've been on staff since 1970—and I usually used two of them in Bonner Bay.

A man could not get farther away from New York.

Bonner Bay was an old fishing community built around the turn of the last century. In the affluent '20s, Portland residents discovered it, and an enterprising businessman built a natatorium on the rock ledge overlooking the beach. Hundreds of homes were built in the small space, and almost all of them were abandoned in the 1930s. It wasn't until the fifties that the tourists rediscovered Bonner Bay.

I wrote it up in the mid-seventies for the Times travel section as a place that time forgot. And, indeed, it

looked like a European fishing village. The nearby mountains had been deforested; the trees used to build the homes crammed side-by-side on the ledge. Because there was no main road, and no need of one, there were no streets. Only houses, packed together like an audience in a concert hall.

Television hadn't touched the community: no broadcast signals could come over the mountains. A local radio station tried to fill the gaps, but its performance barely rated above that of a community college station. Until the highway was carved through the cliffs, the food was either locally grown in the thin topsoil or brought in by ship. I remember childhood summers surviving only on the fish we caught because the local stores had run out of produce and basics before the weekly supply ships had come in.

The Bonner Bay of my adulthood had amenities courtesy of the highway: tiny shops that appealed to tourists; restaurants that specialized in seafood; and two grocery stores, one on either end of town. The town had cable and access to the more powerful coastal radio stations. The culture had finally invaded Bonner Bay.

Sort of.

Every time I drove in, I too noted the isolation. I spent my first nights in the upstairs bedroom still crammed with my great-grandparent's handmade furniture listening to the ocean and nothing else. I missed the sirens and the honks, the shouts and the bustle of the city that never sleeps. My Manhattan apartment with its constant noise comforted me, and it took days of adjusting before Bonner Bay's silence gave me the peace I craved.

On my first full day, to orient myself, I always walked to the caves.

But on June 17th, as I followed 101's curves through Bonner Bay, I noted the town no longer had the peace I remembered.

Everyone was worried—everyone was talking—about the strangers.

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The first hint that something was different were the pictures taped to so many windows. The pictures were usually hand-drawn on 8 1/2" x 11" paper. I had to see the image several times before I realized what it was: a tiny person in a circle that appeared to be floating on the crest of a wave. Even though I figured out the image, I didn't know what it was for. I decided to go to the center of Bonner Bay's universe, to find out what was going on.

The hub of all local activity was the Bonner Bay cafe. The cafe took up two lots in the exact center of town. The original cafe was a shack that still stood even though it had been remodeled several times. It reflected the locals' need to sit and converse in a public place, even in the days when maintaining a restaurant seemed to be a foolhardy idea. Since then, the restaurant had expanded several times, each time absorbing a building instead of adding on. The result was a labyrinthine maze that most tourists never figured out.

Mayor Ruth Anderson usually held court in the cafe, since Bonner Bay had never gotten around to building a town hall. The council met in the cafe on Tuesday nights, and most other local meetings were held there as well. In grand Bonner Bay tradition, each meeting had its own room of the restaurant, and none of the other meetings ventured into it. Mayor Anderson used the original shack which had no windows. That way, the town felt that her meetings were entirely private.

I went in the shack door, marveling, as I always did at the uneven wood flooring and the baked-in smell of coffee. The wood on the walls was so ancient that it was gray and flaking. The tables in this area were

1950s formica, also gray. If it weren't for the plastic faux tiffany lamps with Coke™ painted on them, the entire place would be dark and gloomy.

“Well, if it isn't the big shot,” Ruth said when she saw me. She came and put her arms around me. She was a large woman who was probably in her eighties now. She had been mayor since the early seventies, and remembered my grandmother as well as my parents. Ever since I had gotten work at the Times I had been “the big shot.” “How're you, son?”

No one had called me “son” since I turned fifty. “Fine, Ruthie,” I said. “Mind if I have a cuppa?”

“Naw,” she said. “Slow business day anyway. Not much happening in this town.” And, as if to prove it, she went and poured me coffee herself. The shack truly was her domain. A waitress I didn't recognize stuck her head in the door, but Ruth waved her away.

I took the coffee and sat at Ruth's table. It had been the same one for years: the only wooden table in the place, pushed up against the back corner, a desk lamp on one side, and vinyl chairs on the others.

“What're all the signs, Ruthie?”

She laughed, a sound of great gusto that reverberated through the place. “Leave it to you, kiddo, to notice that right out. When'd you get here, last night?”

“Last night,” I agreed, marveling at her prodigious memory. Bonner Bay may have been small, but it was Ruth's domain, the way that New York City had once been Fiorello La Guardia's.

“You were born to ask questions,” she said, and for a moment I thought she wasn't going to answer me. “Guess I knew that when your father brought you in here with him after the war. ‘How come is this place so dark?’ you asked. ‘ain't they got money for lights?’ And you just a little thing.”

I'd heard that story so many times that I could ignore it with ease. “The pictures, Ruthie.”

“You won't like this, Frank. And you won't print it in your rag.”

“It's not mine, Ruth,” I said, smiling. “And I usually don't print anything about Bonner Bay in the Times. I'm on vacation.”

“Sure as spit,” she said. “You'll go on vacation when you die. If a good story comes up in Bonner Bay, you'll write about it. You done that when we opened the new hotel. You wrote that whole travel article. And you wrote another thing when James bought the Sea Eagle.”

“The travel article was nearly thirty years ago,” I said, “And James buying the Sea Eagle was news to New Yorkers. He was one of Manhattan's premiere chefs.”

“The whole summer we had people trying the helicopter in here to sample his cuisine.” She pronounced it “qwe-zine.”

“Ruthie, that was fifteen years ago. James is dead now.”

“Still,” she said.

“You're not getting off that easy,” I said.

“You won't like this.”

“Since when did you care about what I think?”

She grinned. "On this one, I care what everybody thinks. I'm getting old enough that folks might start considering me dotty."

"No one would consider you dotty."

"Not even if I told you we have a colony of space aliens living in the Sea Nest?"

I laughed. "Not even then." I sipped my coffee, and noticed she hadn't joined me in my mirth. "Ruthie? You can tell me."

"I just did," she said. "We have a colony of space aliens living in the Sea Nest."

I slowly set my cup down, not quite sure if her words were a test or not. I decided to treat her like any other difficult interview: I'd play along. "So then what are the signs?"

"Support."

"As in political support?" I asked, trying to imagine Bonner Bay divided enough to need rallying cries. The locals here kept their political opinions to themselves because they knew better than to start that kind of squabbling. The town was simply too small.

"Physical support," she said, not quite looking at me. "They're different from us."

"Didn't they bring their own life-support?"

"Sure," she said. "But they don't like to use it if they don't have to. So they use our homes as way stations."

"Way stations," I repeated. If she was testing me, this was a good one. "And they're staying at the Sea Nest?"

"Doris let 'em modify the ground floor."

"Does it still flood out?"

"Only in the rainy season," Ruth said. "Besides, it don't matter. They like mold."

"They sound like mighty accommodating aliens. What are they doing here, Ruthie?"

She sighed and sat down. Her chair groaned beneath her weight. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. Don't know why I even tried."

"I believe a lot of things, Ruthie. I haven't said I doubted you."

"Don't have to," she said. "You're playing them big city games on me. Humor the idiot."

"I would never consider you an idiot."

"Nope," she said. "But you might consider me a narrow-minded, small-town yokel."

"Only on a bad day," I said.

"I'm not sure I want to keep talking to you, Frank," she said.

"Sure you do," I said. "You've got my curiosity piqued. I'd like to meet those aliens."

“If you promise me you won't write about them.”

“How can I promise that, Ruthie? If they're space aliens, they're news.”

“That's why they're here, Frank. They don't want no media attention.”

“Those sound like mighty savvy space aliens.”

“You'd be surprised,” she said.

The Sea Nest was a gorgeous five-story hotel built against one cliff face on the site of the old natatorium. In fact, the hotel had used the natatorium's floor plan and foundation. The result was a gothic building with real character: stonework, masonry, and gargoyles hanging off the roof. Its completion had sparked the now-infamous travel article. Ruthie never quite forgave me for that article because it had brought the first wave of out-of-state tourists into Bonner Bay. Once they discovered the quaint little hamlet they had told all their friends.

Bonner Bay had never been the same.

I didn't entirely regret that. I never took full responsibility for it either. I believed that the responsibility truly lay with the owners of the Sea Nest. They wouldn't have built such a large, inviting structure without wanting guests to inhabit it. Too many large hotels in out-of-the-way places went out of business in Oregon. The state had a (deserved) reputation for driving away outsiders.

I found that irony delicious as Ruth and I walked through the Sea Nest's parking lot.

Since it was summer, the lot was full of Lexus, Jaguars, BMWs, and the occasional Geo Metro. The hotel's four-star restaurant and its award-winning wine list had upgraded the clientele from the adventurous of the early days to the wealthy of today. I often thought—privately, because I didn't dare say anything to Ruthie—that the adventurous of those days had turned into the wealthy and that someday the clientele of the Sea Nest would simply die off.

I guess it doesn't matter now.

We bypassed the main entrance and went to one of the lower level doors. Ruthie stopped me before we entered.

“Okay,” she said. “I'm going to prepare you for this, even though you'll think it strange.”

“I think it's stranger that you worry about what I think.”

She sighed. “Humor me,” she said.

I nodded, waiting. Ruth glanced toward the sea. That morning it was a navy blue with patches of green. It was as calm as it gets which, by most standards, wasn't calm at all.

“I don't know the technical scientific terms for what they are. But they're like sea lions. They can be in the ocean and they can be on land. Only they need to do both. They crave something in the salt water. If they don't get it, they shrivel up and start flaking.”

“Flaking?”

“Frank,” she said in that warning tone all women learn by the age of eighteen.

“All right,” I said. “Keep going.”

“The flaking's the reason for the signs. Those of us with signs have salt water baths ready in our houses in case the aliens need it.”

I think that was when I truly assumed she was batty. At this point, she was the only one I had talked to about the aliens. I hadn't seen them yet, and I couldn't quite comprehend houses with salt water baths. Humans didn't do such nice things for each other. We didn't have cigarettes around in case someone needed a fix or additional oxygen in case someone went into arrest. Hell, most of us didn't even have extra soap, and I'll bet we all knew someone who needed that.

“I'm going to take you in,” she said. “Remember your promise. No reporting.”

“No reporting,” I repeated.

She pulled open the door. It was a heavy metal door, rusted on the corners from exposure to the sea air. The Sea Nest never rented out its basement. The old foundation and the rough conditions had led to serious flooding in some stormy seasons, and the owners just felt it prudent to leave the basement alone. I had only been in there once, just after the building was finished. Even then the basement rooms had an old, musty air.

I stepped inside, expecting that musty smell. Instead, I nearly choked that the fetid odor of spoiled sea water and wet animal fur. It flashed across my mind that Ruthie was setting me up. Me and all the other reporters, the ones who had done travel articles on Bonner Bay and ruined its splendid isolation.

The lighting was thin and seventies: thick fixtures done in steel and dark wood that, no matter what the expense, still looked cheap. There was no carpet, only a gray concrete floor, with ancient white water marks. The walls had once been paneled. Some of the paneling remained, peeled and ragged, as if it had been broken off by high water.

The smell got worse the farther inside we went.

“What've you got in here?” I asked. “101 soggy Dalmatians?”

“You know, Frank, the one gift you never had was an effective sense of humor.” Ruth led me through the wide corridor. It felt like night in there, even though it was the middle of the day.

Finally we reached the west side of the basement. Another door had been left open, letting in a thin trickle of sunlight. Through the door, I could see the edge of the rock ledge, and stone steps leading down to the boulder-strewn beach.

“I don't see any modifications,” I said.

“Shush,” Ruth said. She went to one of the side doors, and knocked.

There was some strange rustling and cooing inside. Then the door opened. I could see no one.

“I brought an old friend of mine,” Ruth said to the empty air. “His name is Frank Butler. He owns a house here, and his grandmother was born here.”

I heard some chittering, rather like a high-pitched voice speaking too fast to understand. Then Ruthie added, “Yes, I know he works for the New York Times but he's promised me he won't write about you.”

“Folks,” I said, wanting this charade over with, “if you're as real as Ruthie says, The New York Times will want nothing to do with you.”

There was a bit more chittering. Ruthie stood with her hands clasped behind her back, waiting more patiently than I had ever seen her do. Then it ended, and she turned to me.

“They said it’ll be okay.”

I wasn't sure if I was relieved or annoyed. I usually did well with new things: I was a reporter who traveled endlessly, interviewed people I had never met about topics I had only recently heard of, and yet this new thing was filling me with a sort of silent dread. Maybe it was because I expected to revise my opinion of Ruth afterwards. Maybe it was because I was afraid I would discover I was gullible.

And maybe it was because I had never had an opinion about extra-terrestrials, and I didn't really want one.

I followed Ruthie inside the room.

The room had been modified. The window panes had been replaced with blue-green stained glass, and the light fixtures had blue-green bulbs. The effect was to make the room look as if it were part of a bad sixties movie—or if you squinted, an underwater dump.

The smell was stronger in here, wet fur and stagnant water, so strong that I had to fight to keep my hand from my face.

In the blue-green light, I could see dozens of small furry creatures. They looked like electric shoe polishers, the kind you could order from an elite catalogue. They were oblong, about a foot high, and covered with a thin layer of curly wool. Rather like a shrunken sheep without eyes, ears, or nose.

“Good heavens, Frank,” Ruth said. “Look up.”

“But—” I indicated the ground.

She snorted. “You've seen too many bad movies.”

She had rounded a corner. I followed and ran into more than a dozen naked people. Then I paused and revised my first impression. They weren't people, at least, not completely. They all appeared young. They had two arms, two legs, a torso, a head and genitalia. They also had fins rising from their spine. Their eyes and mouths were completely round instead of oval-shaped, and they had little suckers on the ends of their fingers.

“What's in the other room?” I hissed.

“Their pelts,” Ruth hissed back. Then she said in a normal tone: “This is Frank.”

The strangers rose as a unit. Then I realized they had all been sitting in small tubs filled with half an inch of sea water. The water was particularly pungent. It was green with algae, like an overgrown, dying tidal pool that the sea hadn't reached in weeks.

One stranger came toward me. He was shorter than the rest, with hair the color of sea foam. He extended his hand, and I was about to take it when I heard a whoosh behind me. One of the shoe polishers zoomed through the air past me, connected with the stranger's hand, and covered him from his chin to his ankles. It looked like he was wearing an oddly sewn sweater that covered his entire body.

It also relieved me. I was too much a product of my culture to appreciate nakedness in anything vaguely human.

“You are the reporter,” he said in a high squeaky voice. His lips moved like fish kisses as he spoke, and his eyes blinked in unison with the lip movement. I was amazed I could understand him.

“Well, I'm not just a reporter,” I said. “I am also a person in my own right.”

“Remains to be seen,” he said. “Didn't think reporters were persons.”

“What else would they be?” I asked.

“Unscrupulous money grubbers,” he said with a primness that clashed with his kissing lips.

“Unscrupulous money grubbers are people too,” I said, glancing at Ruth. She was watching me nervously, as if she had just introduced me to the Pope and was waiting for me to declare that I was an atheist.

“You will report us, no?”

I was confused and uncertain for the first time since I was a cub reporter. I hadn't felt this far over my head since I met John Gotti on his own turf.

“I promised Ruth I wouldn't,” I said.

“And you will hold to such a promise?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Then we have no more need of you.” He waved his wool-covered hand. “Let us absorb in peace.”

“All right.” I backed out of the room and walked gingerly through the pelts until I reached the hallway. I had to blink to get my eyes used to the light again. When Ruth didn't follow me immediately, I went outside the open door and stood at the top of the stairs.

The air was brisk with a bit of mid-morning chill. The sea smell was strong and refreshing after the fetid odors of the inner rooms. I checked my feelings like an old man who'd tripped would check for broken bones:

Unsettled? Yes.

Frightened? No.

Curious? Yes.

Frightened? No.

Worried? Yes.

Frightened? No!

All right, I was frightened, and that worried me even more. I almost never got frightened any more. I had lived in New York City too long. I swore at potential muggers and shook hands with mobsters. I had insulted one of the biggest serial killers of the century once, and had shared a urinal with the President and a squadron of Secret Service guys. I'd been shot at, knifed, and my car'd been fire bombed.

Nothing should have bothered me. Especially nothing as mundane as a dirty hotel basement and a lot of creepy looking people.



“What did you do?” Ruth asked. She was behind me. I hadn't heard her coming.

“What did I do?”

“I'd never seen them so rude before.”

“That wasn't a them. That was a him, and he didn't strike me as rude.”

“He's their spokesman. I doubt the others can speak English.”

“How did he learn it?” I asked.

“I don't know,” she said. “Apparently they've been studying us for a long time.”

“Or maybe they're just as human as we are.”

“Frank.” That tone again.

I sat on the top step and patted the space next to me so that she could join me. I wasn't really worried that the creatures would come outside, even though I wasn't sure why.

She went back, put a rock between the door and its jamb, then sat down beside me.

“Have you ever seen them outside that room?”

“Of course,” she said. “I told you they wander through town. With their pelts on.”

“How come they weren't wandering this morning?”

“It's too warm for them. Imagine how you'd feel under all that fur.”

“That room was warm.”

“They weren't wearing their pelts.”

I sighed. The ocean spread before me, now half green and gold, an endless vista of water. “All right, Ruth,” I said, “Suppose I grant that these are aliens. Suppose I give you that.”

“Generous,” she murmured.

“If they are, what are they doing here? If they know so much about us, how come they didn't appear at the White House or the Kremlin or something?”

“The White House isn't by the sea.”

She said that so matter of factly that at first I wasn't sure if I had heard her correctly.

“What does the sea have to do with it?”

“They came out of the sea.”

I turned to look at her. She was staring at the ocean, her nose and cheeks red with wind, her gray hair mussed.

“Their ships can't land on our ground,” she said. “Something about pressure and movement and density and stuff I didn't understand. Their ships are like bubbles. They float on the sea's surface.”

“And these guys swam ashore?”

She shook her head. “The bubbles dropped them off and then went out to sea. They’ll call the ships when they need to go back.”

“So they chose Bonner Bay specifically,” I said. “Why?”

“I told you,” she said. “Because it’s isolated. They don’t want coverage. They just want to learn about us.”

“And you believe that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she asked. “Why is it more normal to doubt them? Is mistrust so common in your life now that you can’t accept a miracle when you see it?”

“You think they’re miracles?” I asked.

“Hell,” she said. “I think a sunset is a miracle. What do I know?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It bothers me.”

“Take them for what they are, Frank.”

That surprised me more than anything. “What are they, Ruthie?”

“A gift,” she said. “A gift from the sea.”

“I hate anonymous gifts,” I said. “They always have strings.”

The next few days were weird. Beyond weird, really. Different and difficult for reasons hard to pinpoint.

I liked Bonner Bay for its clear blue summer skies, its cool breezes, and its lack of pretentiousness. In a way, my visits to the town were attempts to return to my boyhood—not my actual boyhood which was as confused and difficult as anyone else’s—but those perfect boyhood moments when the air was warm, school was out, and the day felt full of possibilities. Possibilities and Tom Sawyer freedoms. Bonner Bay had that for me, with the ocean and the isolation, and those blissful moments when I would realize that the town would always remain the same, no matter how many personal computers people owned, or how many channels they could receive.

Bonner Bay would remain Bonner Bay.

Until this year. In those days, the aliens—which I took to calling them, like everyone else—appeared all over town. They walked every square inch of Bonner Bay, heads up, pelts on, greeting locals as they passed. Tourists stayed away from them, treating them like Bigfoot’s cousins—something to cross the street to avoid. But the locals were intrigued and proud that these creatures had chosen Bonner Bay as a refuge, and they did all they could to accommodate the creatures’ needs.

I ran into a number of the aliens. And, unlike the tourists, I didn’t cross the street to avoid them. I went out of my way to say hello.

No alien ever answered me. They acted as if they couldn’t see me.

And nothing I could do changed that.

They didn’t spoil my vacation—Bonner Bay was still as calm and peaceful as ever—but they did ruin the

possibilities of it: the Tom Sawyer/glimpse into my boyhood part. They constantly reminded me it was 1997, and that I was a man closer to dying than to his boyhood.

They also kept me from relaxing. The reporter part of my brain, the part that had enabled me to write several award-winning series on managed care, New York politics, and the mob's control of garbage service, wouldn't shut off. I couldn't believe these guys showed up to enjoy Bonner Bay's isolation. I was certain that there were more isolated places in the world. I knew of at least two in North America: one in the Idaho Mountains which, granted, had no ocean, and one in Alaska that had no roads. It bothered me that they didn't go to Seattle or San Francisco or Miami, some large city on the ocean, where they could be even more anonymous than they were here.

The fact that they could speak the language, even though they had just arrived, bothered me too. I had seen enough sf flicks to be suspicious of that. If they learned quickly, well, that frightened me. And if they had known it in advance, well, that frightened me too.

It also bothered me that I spent so much time thinking about them. After all, I couldn't write about them. *Aliens Arrive in Bonner Bay!* would never be a headline in Times no matter how accurate the story.

So I tried to ignore the aliens, as they ignored me.

And that worked.

For a while.

Until the night they woke me up.

My bedroom in my grandmother's house was at the top of the stairs, on the right, facing the ocean. The room was large by most standards and could fit two double beds and a cot easily. As children, my siblings and I shared that room. After my parents died, my siblings usually used the master bedroom on the first floor when they visited. I, however, could not break the old habit, and returned to my old room to sleep with the ghosts.

That room was alive. It creaked and moaned and moved ever so slightly in any wind. The constant roar of the ocean filled it, and always, on the first night of my arrival, I couldn't sleep, listening to the quiet sounds, letting them greet me after too many months away.

But by the middle of my visit, I would sleep sounder than I had in years. So when I awoke to a bright light and a chorus of voices, I at first thought it a dream.

The light had the intensity of a train's headlight on a moonless night. The voices were eerie, the whispered memories of an erased cassette. And the smell of wet fur was thick and pungent, a live thing that encased and enveloped me.

I never had odors in my dreams.

I sat up. A dozen aliens filled the room. One held the light—or seemed to hold the light—directly on me.

I held a hand over my face, blocking my eyes. "It's considered rude in our culture to invade a man's home and wake him up."

"You are Frank Butler?" The voice was androgynous and yet high-pitched.

"Last I checked."

“The reporter?”

“State your business,” I said, bringing my arm down, “and get the hell out.”

The speaker came toward me. Its pelt was dark black, so dark that it absorbed the light. “I am—” the name sounded like a sneeze “—and I too am a reporter. I wonder if we could ‘let's make a deal?’”

“You learned our language through television transmissions,” I said, finally realizing, with a bit of relief, how they had learned to speak English.

“Is that not what the transmissions were for?”

I shook my head. “Get the damn light out of my face. Then we'll negotiate.”

I couldn't imagine them wanting to negotiate with me. They hadn't wanted to speak to me all week.

The light lowered. The full dozen wore pelts of different colors. They glistened in the brightness. This room hadn't seen so much light since the turn of the century. Cobwebs graced the corners, and the flowered wallpaper, which I had thought unchanged in all the decades I'd seen it, was peeling near the top of the window.

“We wish to ‘let's make a deal,’ Frank Butler.”

“I got that. What kind of dealmaking do you want with me?”

The alien tilted its head and its entire pelt moved. “We too report. We believe information the center of all things. We will trade information with you.”

This was a switch in attitude. But my reporter's instincts, never fully off, knew something was up. I wasn't going to give any information until I knew exactly what was going on.

“Trade information?”

The spokesalien nodded gravely. “We will let you be our contact to the earth. You will have our ‘Breaking News Exclusive!’ We will subject three of our number to your scientists. We will give interviews, meet your leaders, and allow you and people of your choice to visit our crafts.”

Complete flip-flop. Despite the warmth in the room, I was cold. “What do I have to do in return?”

“Take us to the illegals.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. It felt sleep grimy. I resisted the urge to pinch myself. “The ‘illegals’?”

“Yes. You are the reporter. You will know where they are. We have located their crafts in your sea. Their beacons led us here. You are the reporter. You will know where they are.”

My brain was slowly kicking in. “And that's what you base your assumption of knowledge on? My profession?”

“And your passion for knowledge. This story will earn you great—moneys—will it not?”

Maybe. If I fought it through the Times editorial staff. If I was willing to risk my reputation to do so. If I was willing to run to a less reputable news agency if the Times changed its mind.

“How come you can't find them?” I asked, stalling. “You found me.”

“We have studied this town. Your presence here has been a comfort and a distraction. We did not know when we chose this pueblo that it would have an information gatherer in its midst, however irregularly.”

“And that's bad?”

“It adds an element of living dangerous,” the alien said.

“Oh.” I frowned. “What are illegals?”

“You have met them,” the spokesalien said. “You have seen them.”

“How do you know?” I asked, not sure if that question gave me away or not.

“Because you are not shocked to see us.”

Ooops. Had me there. I grinned. “It's the middle of the night. You're a dream. I expect anything in my dreams.”

“You are awake,” the spokesalien said.

“I'm not sure of that,” I said. “How can you be?”

It turned and conferred with an alien near it. Their language sounded like sneezes, coughs and hiccups. Somehow, in the midst of all that hacking, I came to believe in them.

Aliens.

Weird creatures from outer space.

And I wanted nothing to do with them. I wanted them out of my grandmother's house.

The alien turned toward me. “Will you help us?” it asked, apparently deciding to ignore my dream discussion.

“What are illegals?” I asked. “Drugs?”

The alien tilted its head the other way. Its pelt shone blue. “You have them,” it said. “We have heard on your new transmissions. Illegals. Those who cross the wrong border.”

“Illegal aliens,” I said. “But they're illegal in the country they arrive in, not in the country they have left.”

“So, if our people land here, then they are illegals, no?”

I had never thought of that, but I suppose it was true. I had been culturally conditioned to think that any visitors from outer space would be treated differently than Mexicans trying to cross the Rio Grande. I suppose it depended on what numbers they arrived in, and whether or not the government believed they could be of use to the country.

“I thought you wanted them because they were outlaws in your country,” I said.

“No.” The creature sneezed and others sneezed as well. I hoped it was a gesture of disgust and not some alien virus. “We want them because they have broken the great taboo.”

“The great taboo?”

“They have left the blind.”

It took me a minute to realize that analogy came courtesy of the Discovery Channel. “You're observing us and they ruined the experiment?”

“Yes,” the alien said. “They have decided to take the experiment a stage farther than mandated.”

“Seems you have too,” I said, not believing them. “Especially considering the offer you just made me.”

The alien's pelt fur rose and fell. I guessed it to be an alien shrug. But I might have been wrong. It could have been annoyance. Or an itch.

“This experiment has already been contaminated,” it said. “More will not hurt.”

“Then I don't understand why you need them.”

“We do not need them,” the alien said. “We must charge them. Interfering with information is punishable by death.”

“Serious charge,” I said. “Here information is free, and anyone can tamper with it.”

“So you believe,” the alien said, sounding as if it did not.

I was a bit rattled. Not by its skepticism, although that surprised me too. But by the charge of death. We never took information that seriously here. In fact, as I got older, I found myself getting disgusted with my own business. No one cared about the facts, only the facts, ma'am. They cared about the scoop, only the scoop, sorry if it's wrong, folks. At the Times we tried not to fall into that, but we did, more and more, in a stuffy, snobby, elitist sort of way.

So if I gave those smelly pathetic creatures up to these smelly seemingly more powerful creatures, I would sign the first group's death warrant.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I considered it. After all, I was a practicing journalist. I had to make my money.

But I loved my job at the Times. And, as an editor there said to me just the week before as we casually discussed the possibility of reporting creatures from outer space: “Frank, aliens could bomb the White House, and we'd report it as ‘Unidentified bomb destroys U.S. Capitol.’ We can't publish anything that smacks of tabloids until we've got five years of documentation from national science centers and confirmation of the flight path from NASA. And maybe we couldn't publish it then.”

These creatures would have been better off if Bonner Bay's resident reporter worked for the Inquirer.

“Sorry,” I said. “I can't help you.”

“Can't?” the alien asked. “Or won't?”

I fluffed my pillow, preparing to go back to sleep. “Can't,” I said. “You're a dream, and I've never seen creatures like you before. If the aliens have taken over Bonner Bay, no one has told me about it. Better go invade someone else's sleep.”

“You do not wish for the fame we offer?”

“Nope,” I said. “I'm surprised I'm even dreaming of it.”

“You are a fool, Frank Butler,” the alien said. “You do not know what you have done.”

Well, I know now.

Two nights later, I woke up to find myself in the sea caves, along with the rest of Bonner Bay. Some were nude, some weren't, but we were all wet, and we were, horror of horrors, smashing tidepools. The tide was out, and the caves were empty, and we were all confused. To add to the mess, all the housepets from town were in the caves as well. Dogs, cats, iguanas, houseplants, aquariums filled with fish. If it lived in a house, it was in the cave.

Unless it was an alien creature.

None of them were inside.

I hate thinking of this: The noise, the screams, the confusion. Waking up in the dark and the cold and the noise, not knowing how we got there, or why. Only Ruth seemed serene.

She said the aliens did it.

But she didn't know which ones.

She also organized us. Climbed onto a rock and shouted until she had our attention. She said there had to be a reason they hid us in here, and she said we would proceed slowly, in an orderly fashion, to the mouth of the cave.

It took five volunteer firefighters and a local bouncer to enforce orderly. But we went, lemminglike, to the mouth. I was with Ruthie at the head of the group. Fortunately, the two of us had chosen to wear pajamas that night. I'm not sure I wanted to see Ruthie nude.

When we got to the opening, we saw a bubblecraft, hovering low. It released several small bubbles of light, and when they landed, they turned into fireballs.

I cannot describe this in any more detail. I refuse to look any closer than this.

It was ugly.

The balls engulfed the city in a matter of moments. Ruthie and I, as well as several members of the volunteer fire department, had to restrain others who were trying to get to their homes. The entire town went up as if it were gasoline soaked kindling.

And the aliens went up with it.

Fifteen dead.

I had killed them anyway, along with the town.

And I didn't even get my story.

The last few months, I've been thinking about retiring. My editor says it's a grief reaction, triggered by losing my childhood home. But I think it's more than that.

I think I've lost my edge. I'm just not interested any more. That little spark, the one that made me investigate things, is completely gone. I could work a desk or even get promoted, assigning stories, making others do the running. But I don't want to.

Two ideas keep going through my mind:

One of them is the spokesalien's.

One of them is mine.

Information, in this society, is not free, no matter how much we like to pretend it is. It is paid for by corporate sponsors, from the ads on the TV News to the ads up front in the Times. It has rules and prejudices and traditions that defy the pure pursuit of knowledge.

And anyone can taint it.

Anyone.

Including a reporter, unwilling to stake his reputation on a difficult story.

I erred. I know I did. And the only reason I know it is because of the lost property as well as the lost lives. I didn't care about the lives. They were smelly, dirty, and alien. And, shameful as that is, it's my truth.

But I could have saved them. Or at least tried. If I had agreed to that Faustian bargain with the spokesalien, I could have gotten those pathetic creatures out of that basement, told the Inquirer—The American Journal—anyone who would listen that these creatures were about to be murdered.

It might not have saved them.

But it might have.

And it certainly would have saved Bonner Bay.

I cannot even return there now. No one can. Geologists have ruled the site unsafe for building. Too unstable. They claim to be glad the town is gone.

I'm not. A bit of heaven disappeared with it. Heaven I thought tainted by a few pelts, by a few signs. Heaven I hadn't realized I would miss.

Until now.

And with it went a bit of my soul. The part that like to reveal facts, to search for truth. My truth.

I found my truth.

And I hate what it revealed.