

THE GRIFT OF THE MAGELLANAE

By Robin Wilson

What would mild-mannered Mr. Wilson know about grifting? Read on and see.

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ALTHOUGH BOBBY JUNCO has never taken much note of tales of UFOs, of extraterrestrials skulking on mysterious errands, he does not long doubt that the two creatures who show up one April morning in his Manzanita Street storefront office are just that.

His first glimpse of them sparks a phrase from his beginnings in show business, when he was still a kid doing summer road company Shakespeare thirty years before:...none of woman born. But it takes him a while to accept the evidence of his senses.

“I mean,” he says early that afternoon to Marianne Kusic in the Downtown Diner, “they looked sort of human, even kinda — uh — cute I guess. Maybe five feet tall, tops, great big wet-lookin’ eyes like on all those little dolls and animals you got, real bushy eyebrows that kinda wiggle a lot, little pointy ears sticking straight up, couple of holes for a nose with — urn— whiskers kinda like a cat’s, little tiny mouths without hardly any lips and what looks sorta like a snake’s tongue when they talk. I mean they were weird.”

Marianne sets his hamburger and fries on the damp counter between them. Tall in starchy peach, blonde hair up, a pencil inserted above her left ear, she is wary of Bobby’s wild tales, even wilder schemes. The son of a roustabout and a short-lived tattooed lady about whom he has only fragmentary— albeit colorful — memories, he has spent nearly all but the last five of his forty-eight years in show business, mostly carnivals. He feels at home in a world of humbug and illusion that she does not think she can share, which saddens her. She believes Bobby loves her — as she does him — but she despairs that she can take a hand in those enterprises which seem so much a part of him.

“So what were they wearing?” she asks him.

Bobby shakes his head: “Christ, I don’t know what they had on, babe. They were — uh — kinda furry with some kinda plastic here, some shiny stuff there.”

“Were you scared? I sure would’ve been.”

“Well, for a second there I figured they were carnies working somebody’s show, couple of freaks the guys down at The Wet Spot had sicced on me, and then I took a good look. And you know what, Marianne? By the time I wound up here in the boonies, man and boy, I’d been with B & B and then Sanders Bros.

Amusements what? Thirty-five years; And before I started doin' advance, I was ride jockey for the Tilt-O-Spin, steered for the Monte table, was a barker for Mr. Lifto, hyped every sideshow exhibit they had. I mean your two-headed calves and your fat lady and your human goat and the geek bit the heads off of live chickens — all that shit, and I never, never saw anything like these two.”

“So what'd you do?” Marianne can linger a little with her lover; it is a quiet Tuesday and most of the noon-hour crowd is gone.

“Mouthed off smart,” Bobby says ruefully. “Like I sometimes do. Couldn't believe my own eyes “

“How come? What'd they want?” Bobby's uncharacteristic admission of folly intrigues Marianne, and there has been some excitement that day, during the breakfast rush, route drivers, couple of deputies, talking about strange lights over Gavilan Mountain, sounds in the night. The line boss out at the Crooked J Ranch said he glimpsed a couple of somethings alongside the road as he was driving into town.

“I couldn't believe it,” continues Bobby. “One of them said they were looking for...” His voice trails off, lost in his own disbelief.

“What? What'd they want?”

“I swear it said — representation, for God's sake. They were looking for someone who could tell their story to the world.” His voice dies, a terminal case of chagrin.

“And....?”

“Dumb. Without thinking anything but blow out those wise-asses at The Wet Spot, I said, ‘You people want Roswell, New Mexico, not Granger City, California. You go on up to the next corner there, that's Shasta Avenue, hang a left, and then it's about thousand miles southeast.’“

“So what'd they say?”

“Nothing. Looked at each other a second, turned and went out. By the time I got my brains back in my head and realized I'd kissed off the best gift ever fell in a flack's lap and got up off my dead ass and went out to the sidewalk, they were gone. I mean, it couldn't of been five seconds, but they were just plain gone!”

Bobby takes a bite of hamburger, chews thoughtfully, swallows, adds: “Gotta be some kinda Scotty thing, beams 'em up.”

“And this was this morning? Like just a couple hours ago?” Marianne is now

truly intrigued. “There were guys here talking about weird stuff.” She gives a brief account of reports in the morning rush hubbub, lights in the sky, strange sounds, unsettling sights.

“Ah, jeez.” Bobby can only shake his head. “They gotta be the real thing, and I blew it.”

But he has not blown it; the two creatures reappear at his little ten-by-twenty office again late that afternoon. When the bell over the door jingles, he looks up from his computer, where he has PageMaker running and is putting together a new menu and window card for the Mother Lode Restaurant, and there they are again, standing in front of the arched letters on the open glass door that say, ROBERT JUNCO ASSOCIATES. PUBLIC RELATIONS - ADVERTISING - VINYL SIDING.

The golden-fur one lisps, “Rothwell doesn’t have what we want.”

“Ith too commerthial,” says the one with reddish fur, who differs also in the round lumps on its upper torso which Bobby takes for breasts, although there are three of them and they are arranged vertically.

Elated by this reprieve from his morning’s blunder, Bobby rises to his feet all smiles, ready to accommodate anything: “Come in — uh — folks. Sit down! Tell me how I can help you.”

Red fur shakes its head in a very human manner, and it occurs to Bobby that maybe they can’t sit, perhaps their bodies don’t bend that way. How could you tell?

Gold fur swivels a fanny pack around to its front — an ordinary maroon nylon one that has “SierraCraft” embroidered on it in white and fishes out a wad of bills with one richly fingered hand. “Thith is for you,” it says. “You have a photographic devithe?”

“Camera? Gee, sure.” Bobby accepts the wadded bills without counting. However much it is, it is enough. “I got a pretty good Canon SLR I use for scouting shots. I don’t do glamour or porn, although I know a guy...”

“We want you to make a picture, prove to humans we are real and we have come in peathe,” gold fur says.

“Hey, not a problem.” Bobby has the camera in hand, inspects it. “I got twenty exposures left on the roll. But why’n’t you let me set up a press conference, Elks Lodge, maybe the high school gym? Photo op?”

“No,” says gold fur sharply, “and only a thingle exposure!” Then with some very human hesitation in its voice it says, “We do not want to rithk appearanthe — ah — in vivo — until...our peathful presenth here...in thith thythtem is — ah — more

fully accepted.”

“No peasant with pitchfork,” says red fur.

Bobby shrugs. “Okay, you’re the customers. Why’n’t you and— uh the mister here, why’n’t you stand over there, in front of my sign. And here’s a copy of today’s Granger City Post & Review. Why’n’t you hold it in front of you, yeah, open like that, and I’ll make sure it’s in the picture and they’ll go nuts down there at the Post & Review.”

And nuts they do indeed go down there at the Granger Post & Review, but not the way Bobby hopes. He tells Marianne about it that evening, early in one of his increasingly more frequent nights with her in her battered old doublewide, all that remains to her from twenty years of marriage to an over-the-road trucker who spun out three years before on the downgrade leading to the Grapevine on 1-5 just north of Los Angeles, most of the state to the south.

“They said the picture was cool but hadda be a fake,” he says, standing at the sink counter, an onion in one hand, paring knife in the other. “Beautiful shot, these two little aliens standing there lookin’ at each other with those big eyes, copy of the paper spread out. You can count on one of their hands seven fingers showing, for God’s sake.”

“And they wouldn’t run it?” Marianne delights in her time with Bobby—better than any evening of her marriage — even though her hopes for their relationship are more bitter than sweet when he takes off into one of his grandiose schemes.

Bobby chops the onion with short, vicious strokes. “Oh they’ll run it all right. Paid me fifty bucks for it. But they’ll run it as a big ha-ha. Feature editor said she thought the aliens were real cute. Cute! for God’s sake. Wanted to know how I’d come up with it. Her boss said it’d be a great gimmick for taking the steam outta what the Air Force over at Hanner Field’s calling public hysteria.”

They are comfortably domestic in their evenings together, although after a day in the diner Marianne doesn’t want anything to do with standing at a stove. And so Bobby usually brings a pizza with him or cooks up one of his half-dozen regular dishes, and she showers and puts on something kind of thin so all the stuff she is still proud of at forty-two will show through a little, and sits at the tiny kitchen table while he works. Every inch of kitchen wall not occupied by a door or window or the sparse cabinetry bears shelves and whatnots loaded with ceramic figurines a la Dresden and Hummel and furry creatures from Disney and Steiff, a childless woman’s collection of cute and cuddly kitsch.

“But the people at the paper, they don’t believe the picture is for real?” Marianne asks.

“Sonsabitches think I had to of faked it, just ‘cause I, you know, did carny

posters and handbills all those years and got pretty good doin' art and layout and stuff with the computer. Said I was trying to make a buck outta whatever it was happened last night, those lights and sounds you said they were talking about in the diner."

Bobby pauses for a rare sip of introspection. "Eddie Bruscoe, the publisher down there?"

"Uh-huh. He comes in the diner sometimes."

"He said I was nothing but a scare artist trying to diddle a bunch of foolish people who thought they saw something."

"Well, Bobby hon, you have pulled some swifties..." Marianne's voice holds the lilt of logic.

"But I have this great photo!"

"Yeah, and you had pretty good pictures of that guy two years ago, looked like Elvis..."

"I never said it was Elvis, did I?" Bobby's voice holds as much pride as defense.

"...and then last August, that whatchamacallit, that abominable snowman, that yentl..."

Bobby laughs ruefully. "Well, yeah. You got me there. But it was a swell photo. Shot of that llama from out at Acker's farm and the gorilla scanned in from Life magazine and a couple of hours with Photoshop..."

"...so it isn't all that much a wonder they didn't go for it down at the paper," continues Marianne.

"You're saying I lack, like, credibility?"

Marianne assumes the arch tones she imagines appropriate to society matrons: "Well, my dear, you do rather have that reputation."

Bobby's shoulders slump in acknowledgment of an unpleasant truth to which he is no stranger, and for the moment wordless, he dumps the onion shards into hot grease along with two small rib-eyes.

Every rodent and cockroach within a nine-iron shot of the doublewide's range vent rejoices at the promising odor.

The aliens are back early the next afternoon, the one with the bumps on its front waving that morning's Granger City Post & Review in an all-too-human gesture of displeasure. Bobby has already seen the front page, which carries his photograph of the two under a subhead: UFOS? AIR FORCE SAYS LIGHTS NOT THEIRS. The caption under the photo is, "Local Man's Photo of Aliens? Cute, But We Think Not!"

"The newspaper quethtions our exithtenthe!" says Bumps. "Did not you exthplain? Did not you tell them that we are the Magellanae and have come in peathe?"

"Jeez," says Bobby apologetically, "I tried. But they didn't believe the photo was the real thing. Too easy to fake something like that."

The two look at each other, their eyebrows semaphoring madly. Then the being with the golden fur once again fishes around in its SierraCraft pack and withdraws another bundle of bills. "We are now prepared to rithk animothity and hold a preth conferenth in order to convinth humans we are real."

Bobby is overjoyed. A press conference! He smells some real money. He will have to come up with a contract; exclusive representation. And he will need to do some fast advance publicity, promote a crowd. "Great!" he says, retrieving his camera, looking for the fresh roll of film he has been wise enough to buy. "Let's get lots more photos. For the advance stuff."

"No!" says gold fur, its eyebrows squirming like injured caterpillars. "The time is past for mere photographth! Please make thuitable arrangementth. Make them thubthtantial. Cotht is not a conthideration. We will return in one day to learn your plans."

This time when they leave they do not bother to go out onto the sidewalk. Right there in Bobby's office they shimmer and shrink to a pair of dots and depart with a moist and vaguely embarrassing sound.

THAT EVENING the cockroaches and rodents rejoice once more as Bobby perfumes the trailer park with his preparation for another evening with Marianne. She is happy enough to see him two nights in a row. She thinks he is a handsome man — if just a little short for her — and she knows that in the thirty years since he reached his majority, he has been single once more frequently than married. Their relationship has been evolving comfortably toward permanence, a consummation she much desires, although her doubts about their future are now heightened by his most recent venture. While unlike most in Granger City, she truly believes Bobby's tale about the aliens, she fears her belief may be love trumping reason.

But there it is. She knows that Bobby will not change, that if they are to become in some sense one, she must alter what she is, a bumpkin, her lifetime spent

in the vast, sparsely populated high cattle-and-timber country of Modoc County, far up north where California and Nevada shoulder Oregon. If she can do it, accept Bobby for what he is, join in with him in what he does, it will be worth it. They have something going: she knows, for example, that it is not sex, certainly not delight in his own cooking, that brings Bobby back to the doublewide so swiftly, so often, but the need for counsel, and maybe that is even better than any of those other ingredients in a relationship.

“So what is it, hon,” she says, this dinner hour still in her starchy work clothes, a fugitive strand of yellow hair down one cheek, one hand wrapped around a bottle of Sierra Pale Ale before her on the kitchen table. “The aliens?” Behind her head a rack on the wall holds three white plates she ordered from the Franklin Mint; they display large-eyed children costumed as Santa’s elves.

“Yeah.” Bobby stands at the counter once more, chopping blade in hand, something savory bubbling on the range. “They showed up again this afternoon. They were pissed that the picture didn’t prove to the guys at the newspaper that they weren’t, you know, bogus.”

“Well I’ll tell you,” Marianne says, “the photo didn’t convince much of anybody at the diner this morning, either. That line boss? Guy said he saw some kind of things out on Gavilan Road early yesterday? He took a lot of razzing.”

“But he did see something didn’t he?”

“Who knows? Now he says he could have been still half asleep or there was something splashed up on his windshield.”

“My photo didn’t convince him? Any of them?”

Marianne is slow to respond. “No,” she says finally, and her voice holds something. “They all liked the picture, thought those things were cute, but”

Bobby turns from his surgery on a frozen chicken breast. “What? What aren’t you telling me? What’re people saying about my photo? About me?”

Marianne takes a long pull on her beer, swallows, shakes her head, sighs. “Aw honey, they’re laughing, calling the whole thing another one of ‘Junco’s buncos.’”

“How...” Bobby’s voice catches. He peers at her from under impressively chiseled eyebrows, repeats: “How...about you?”

“Ah, not a doubt, hon.”

Wordlessly, Bobby returns to his chicken breasts. He draws, quarters, and thinks deeply. He shreds scallions, chops carrots, dices tomatoes, thinks even more

deeply. “Thing is,” he says after a while, “now they say they want me to lay on a humongous press conference to demonstrate they’re the real McCoy.”

“Oh Bobby, that’s wonderful. That’s what you wanted isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but now I’m not so sure. I know I’m not exactly a rocket scientist, but I been hustling shucks a long time, and these two aliens, I think they been...using me.”

Marianne says, “Well, sure. They been paying you too, haven’t they?”

“Yeah, big bucks.” Chicken and grease sputter and Bobby raises his voice: “The thing that pisses me is, I don’t think they’ve been paying me for what I can do as a, you know, a P-R professional, but for what I haven’t done, for what I am.”

“Which is?”

“A scare artist! A con man! A double dealer! A flim-flam man!”

“Aw, hon “There is sympathy in Marianne’s voice along with the acknowledgment of truth.

The sputtering chicken subsides and so does Bobby’s voice. “They’re right, and I’m not ashamed of it. I been doing the dipsy-doodle since I was a little kid. If I’d of, you know, had the family, had the dough to go to college, I’d of ended up in one of those big agencies, doing TV ads for cars or stuff to keep people’s false teeth in, or maybe big-time, politics, things like that.” Bobby looks off into space, into the great what-might-have-been: Batten, Barton, Durstin & Junco. “Hell, I’m not ashamed of what I am, I just thought I was better at it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I got my pride, haven’t I? I’m a bullshitter, and you shouldn’t oughtta be able to bullshit a bullshitter. But they been bullshittin’ me, those two aliens. If they’d of wanted to prove they were for real, they’d of had me do a press conference right off the bat like I told ‘em. But nooo! All’s they wanted was a single picture, one lousy photo, which they knew damn well everyone’d assume is a fake ‘cause it’s so easy to do.”

Bobby lets that sink into Marianne’s mind. And his own. And then more sure of his supposition he continues: “The way I figure it, they or things like them have been around here a long time, since at least that business down in New Mexico in the late forties, early fifties. Long enough anyway to have the language down pretty cold, talk like a couple of professors. But they been keeping it as secret as they could, only every once in a while some bunch of ‘em have an accident or something and people see things. Then they got a problem with the cover-up. Then they got to get

to somebody or kludge up some records that prove it was all some kinda dummies being tested or some kinda experimental plane the government didn't want to let on about."

Marianne nods solemnly. "They must've learned a lot about us from all those people they've kidnapped, one time or another. I saw a thing about that on the Fox Network..."

"Yeah. And like night before last. I bet something went wrong and these two local ones accidentally let out some sounds and some lights, and whatever beams them up or down beamed them down alongside of the Gavilan Road for a minute, where that rancher saw them."

"So?" Marianne is honestly puzzled. "If what you figure is right and they're busting their butts to keep their being here a secret, why do they want you to, like, publicize them? That doesn't make sense."

Bobby turns away from the stove to look at Marianne, to project his seriousness. He has an impressive shock of iron-gray hair combed back from the low V hairline of a teenager. Over his customary short-sleeved white dress shirt and inevitable red bow tie he wears a filmy black apron they bought for her on one of their weekends of R&R in Reno. Embroidered in gold across its front is, HOW DO YOU LIKE THESE MELONS?

"So?" he says. "So these aliens are rocket scientists, they are smarter'n hell. They've just about run out of cover stories, so this time these two came up with a new gimmick. Figure they'll go public in a kind of little, controlled way, and make sure the way they go public, nobody'll believe they are real. Like those controlled burns the Forest Service does. Make a little fire so there's no fuel left there to feed a big fire."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they found a guy to front for them who'd be the least likely guy to get anyone to believe anything he said and then they talked him into saying it. With one lousy photo for proof. That anybody could of faked up."

"Oh," Marianne says, her voice small. She is beginning to better understand how Bobby's mind works. And the aliens'.

Bobby turns back to his chopping board, slices something, and says, his voice low, "Christ, they even shilled me with that crap of actually going down there to Roswell, coming back in a couple of hours — which you could only do if you had some kinda rocket ship — saying it wasn't right for them."

Marianne says, "Had you pretty interested then, when they came back like

that, didn't they."

"You got that right." Bobby again turns and, smiling ruefully, gestures with his knife. "And they knew just what they were doing. After that Elvis thing, the Yeti, the business with the gold mine shares out on the flats, that drilling for the geothermal project — which by the way I still think would've worked — after all that over the past couple of years, I'm the kiss of death for P-R around here. I know that now, which is why I'm stuck doing prepress for Rotary Club certificates and restaurant menus and furniture ads and selling your occasional siding job... And these two aliens, they're clued in enough, sharp enough, to know it."

"How can they know that much about you? About Granger City?"

"If they can beam stuff up and down, they can beam up what people are talking about. People in bars, the diner, league night out at Alta Lanes, Friday nights at the Elks. I'm not exactly a secret around here." There is a faint note of pride in Bobby's voice.

"Okay," Marianne says, "but why do they want you to do more for them now?"

"Cause after that caption in the paper they figure maybe some people're convinced that they're bogus, that what people saw Monday night was some kinda natural thing, aurora borealis, Air Force screw-up, whatever. But not quite everyone's bought into it. It'll take just a little more. Like I say, those aliens, they're not dumb. They just want a little more insurance."

"Like what?"

"Well let's get real. If they really wanted to convince people they're, you know, genuine, they woulda had me arrange a news conference first thing like I wanted to. Let a whole bunch of people see them, not just good old unreliable Bobby Junco. But they didn't. They set me up with that photo that everybody figures is a phony. And now they're setting me up again."

"By asking you to do a press conference? Ah..." Marianne's pretty face brightens with the sweet realization that she can indeed think just as deviously as Bobby after all. Maybe there is hope for their union! "I got it! You arrange it and then they're a no-show, right?"

"Bet the farm, babe. I use what little bit of credibility I got left, round up the newspaper people and maybe Channel 12, the sheriff's office — and then the aliens, they don't appear. Or — if it was me doin' the scare — I'd wire a bunch of cash down to some booking agent in L.A., set it up so that when old dumb Bobby Junco and town bigwigs and the press and maybe the president of Rotary are all gathered together at the high school gym in breathless anticipation, a taxi pulls up and a

goddamn midget in a fur coat gets out and says, 'Where's Junco? They tell me he's got another gig for me.'"

"They aren't that smart," says Marianne, laughing at the image in spite of herself.

"No, but they're smart enough."

"So what are you going to do? I mean, you could tell them you're going to do the press conference and get a bunch more money up front, and then just not do it. What could they do, sue?"

Bobby shakes his head firmly and turns back to his cooking. "I may be a scam artist, babe, but I'm no crook. Far's I know they haven't done anybody any harm. They want to keep their being here quiet and they pay me to help them do it, then by God that's what I'll do. I just don't want to be conned into doing it."

Bobby scrapes chicken chunks into a frying pan and turns back to face Marianne. "What I gotta do, babe," he says, "is figure out how to satisfy the customers and make something good for me — for us 4 too."

Marianne says, "Hey, hon. We — I — don't need anything more. I mean we — uh — got enough money." The uncustomary plural pronouns please her.

Bobby's voice is barely audible above the sound of sizzle: "It isn't just the bucks, babe."

"You want to, like, get back at them?"

"No way! Gettin' back at someone is something no good stammer ever, ever does. It's more..." His voice hangs in a shrug.

"Yes. I understand," Marianne says, her knowledge of the man growing along with the new discoveries about herself. "You want to be the one does the bullshitting."

In his office the next morning Bobby has yet to solve the puzzle for scamming the alien scammers when the publisher of the Granger City Post & Review telephones and hands him a key. "Junco? That photo we bought from you? It went out on the wire and we got a request for it that, you know, we'd like to honor just as a favor to a sister newspaper. How about another fifty bucks for — ah — world rights?"

The crap detector in Bobby's brain sounds its alarm, all neurons go to full battle stations. "A sister newspaper Mr. Bruscoe?"

“Well, a chain, actually.”

“Maybe the wire service itself?”

“Yeah, maybe...” There is mixed greed and disdain in Bruscoe’s voice. “They tell me... It turns out that some of our people think those goddamn freaks you faked up are — ah — over-the-top — ah — cute.”

Bobby’s imagination is now hypertextual. He sees grand new possibilities that enormously excite him. But he has great experience at pokerfacing deals: In a matter-of-fact tone he says, “Well, I had other distribution plans, but I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you have first North American for — uh — let’s say seventy-five percent royalties back to me on the first five grand, eighty-five percent beyond that.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I bet you’ve got McClatchy and Knight-Ridder and Scripps-Howard.”

“Okay, goddamn it. Done.”

“And I want credits saying ‘Robert Junco Associates’ on every print.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“And let ‘em know I got plenty more. New stuff comin’ out every day!”

Elated, Bobby breaks the connection and immediately telephones Marianne at the diner, something he almost never does. “Hey, babe,” he says, “I need a favor.”

“Sure, hon.”

“And I think what I’ve got goin’, well, it ought to get us a lot more than some weekends in Reno. Might get me outta the siding business, you outta that diner.”

Marianne again likes the “us” but experience has taught her wariness. “Lib-oh,” she says. “What do I have to do?”

“Can you take off for a little while after the lunch rush? Go by your place and pick up some of those things you got on the shelves in the kitchen, in the living room, those dolls, little bears, animals in bonnets, and bring them over here before two o’clock?”

“You mean my Hummels? Steiffs? The Disney things?”

“Whatever. Anything you figure is, like, ‘specially — uh — cute.” Bobby

can't remember when he last used that word prior to his first description of the aliens the day before. He is uneasy with it.

"Well..." Marianne can't keep the hesitancy out of her voice. And then she thinks, maybe this is where we put ourselves together. "...well, sure, hon. Two o'clock? I can make that."

"Good. `Cause that's when the aliens'll be comin' by again."

MARIANNE ARRIVES with two bulging shopping bags, and as she carefully unwraps and places figurines on every surface not encumbered with the tripods and light stands and photo and video equipment Bobby has spent the morning gathering, Bobby relates his exuberant new syndication ideas.

She thinks she is beginning to understand where he is headed and she is down to her last two favorites — a six inch Disney Pooh and a winsome little Dalmatian puppy— when she hears a liquid pop! and the two aliens appear. The red one glares at her from under frantic eyebrows, says something muffled and irate, and begins to shrink back down to a dot, but the golden one remains, and the red one, after a moment of indecisive pulsing, swells again to reality.

"We relied on your dithcrethion," it says angrily to Bobby, its eyebrows alive. "Who is thith perthon?"

Bobby spreads his hands, palms down, quelling waves. "She's, like, my thignificant other," he says, unaware of the lisp he has briefly contracted. "She's gonna help me set things up so's we can launch the big old press conference you folks said you wanted."

"Your plans are complete?" the gold one says.

"Yes sir! We work it right, we'll have everybody in town in the high school gym. Mayor, city council, county board of supes, sheriff, Rotary president, Channel 12, the reporters from the P & R, the guy from FM 97.1. Be the biggest show they've had around here I bet since Ronald Reagan stopped by when he was runnin' for Governor."

The two exchange a glance and the squirm of an eyebrow. "Exthellent," says gold fur. "You have done as inthtructed." It deposits another thick wad of bills on Bobby's desk, next to a fuzzy statuette of the Lion King. "We need now only to know the time of our appearanthe."

Bobby studiously ignores the money. "Yeah. Sure. But that kinda depends on how long it'll take me to get all the take here processed." He waves a hand to include the photographic equipment. "I can't get all those busy people together without a lot of, you know, advance promotion. Some kinda teaser."

“More pictures?” red fur says, eyebrows a-flurry.

“We inthithted no more pictures!” gold fur says.

“Gotta have ‘em,” Bobby says. “For the hype. For the spiel. For the come-on and grabber to get the people into the tent, in a manner of speaking. Trust me on this. I know what I’m doin’. We get a good spread of pictures, you two posed the way my friend Marianne here’ll show you, like some of these — uh — statues she’s got here, and we’ll do SRO at the high school.” He pauses, looks expectantly, sinks the barb: “Gotta have a big build-up for your — uh — triumphant appearance, right?”

The two aliens faced each other, their tongues flickering, eyebrows busy. Bobby guesses, if he could read eyebrows and tongues, they’d be saying whatever is alien for “The Higher They Rise the Farther They Fall.”

And then, with a lift and drop of what Bobby takes for shoulders and a quick, dismissive wave from an outspread nine-fingered hand, gold fur says, “We acquiethe.”

Marianne, fully into her new role as shill, alert to what Bobby is up to, jumps forward with the Lion King figure in her hand, and with a country girl’s natural courtesy and deference says to gold fur, “Sir? You want to stand a little like this guy here, you know, your — uh — chest out a little, head up, look over at the camera?”

And as gold fur complies and Bobby begins snapping furiously, Marianne retrieves the Dalmatian and directs red fur, “Ma’am ? You want to cock your head a little? Like this little feller here?”

After an hour every cassette and reel is filled, and the two aliens, obviously fatigued, wink out in their last flatuous exit.

“So,” Marianne says, gathering her Steiffs and Disneys, “now what? We’re not gonna go ahead, set up the press conference thing, are we?”

“Nah,” Bobby says. “We can deliver what our clients need without goin’ through all that, screwing up my reputation worse’n it is now.”

Marianne nods. She is now in synch with Bobby, understands him utterly, sees where he’s going. “You’re turning them into, like, fairy tale creatures, right?”

“Virtual aliens is what I’m thinkin’ of callin’ ‘em. Load all these images into the computer, software I got, I can crank out stuff for months, sell it to some of the syndicates, Mattel, Disney, maybe do a thing with McDonalds, Burger King.”

“Ah,” Marianne says. “You make some bucks but they get what they want `cause if they’re, like, comic strip characters, nobody’ll believe they’re real anyway, right?”

“Not too shabby, hey babe?” Bobby is doing a little shuffle, fingers snapping in triumph. “After all, who’s gonna try to get a light from Rudolph? Who’s gonna see Doc about a rash? Who’s gonna really worry about the big bad wolf?”

“I’m with you,” says Marianne with equal triumph, grinning as she gathers a pair of CDs from atop Bobby’s littered computer and fans them behind her head, like ears. “M-I-C” she chants happily, her other hand describing a slow arc in the air, her life as close to fulfillment as she can imagine. “K-E-Y.”

An old valve opens and floods Bobby’s mind, the grainy twelve-inch black-and-white on his mother’s dressing table in their Vagabond 22 footer somewhere probably in Ohio or Indiana, and he joins Marianne in the chorus.

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By Robin Wilson

What would a mild-mannered university President Emeritus like Robin Wilson know about grifting? Well, Mr. Wilson recently gave your humble editor a walking tour of his California hometown of Carmel. Around the corner from a tavern owned by Clint Eastwood, we happened to see a fender-bender occur. As the ensuing drama (starring the hostile driver and the earnest witness) began to unfold, Robin checked his watch, nodded, and said, “You probably think it was easy to arrange such entertainment/or our guests.”