

TO THE VECTOR BELONG . . .

By Robin Wilson

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A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN whose broad shoulders stretch orange coveralls with “ALAMEDA COUNTY JAIL” stenciled on the back hunches over his shot glass of Black Label and prints liquid circles on a scarred Formica bar top as he ponders the deaths of the two who have preceded him. “Some kind a internal screw-up. A flitch? But what they told us was, in penetrations of Category I societies like this it’s just as likely to be some little thing like the goddamn packaging as anything else,” he says to fake Lindstrom.

“Glitch,” says Lindstrom. “Not flitch. Go on, tell me about it.” He has sprawled patiently for nearly four hours on the end stool at the dark bar, his back propped against a stub of wall. He is gangly and so fair he looks ghostly in the gloom, hair blond enough to be almost white. Much of it is. He is twenty days away from retirement after more than thirty-five years in the Department of Justice as a Contract Agent, mostly under cover of one depth or another.

“Glitch.” repeats the young man, whose name sounds to Lindstrom like Al or maybe Earl. “Well, it couldn’t have been something that simple,” he says. “The other guys never even got started.”

Lindstrom nods encouragingly, as if he understands what the young man is talking about. He is good at friendly interrogation, elicitation, but he has a reputation as a loner, a little eccentric, sometimes hard for desk people and supervisors to deal with. He gets results but he is not an inside guy, has never been seriously considered for Civil Service status.

On this late Tuesday afternoon in early January, two years into the 21st century, he feels his sixty-one years. His back aches and so does the knee he racked up kicking away a CS canister in Grant Park in 1968, and there is a sore spot high on the left side of his ribcage from the little Dan Wesson .38 they insisted he carry; a matching spot on the right side where a Guardian Model 412 audio pickup and transmitter is about to run out of battery.

The young man is Lindstrom’s prisoner, technically a deportee under Section 1103 of Chapter 75 of Title 18 of the United States Code but actually the first genuine, honest-to-God extraterrestrial anyone outside supermarket tabloid fantasy has ever encountered.

The dim saloon is empty, the bartender and two regulars flushed out hours ago to tell their stories in excited voices to the frenzied crowd of journalists and video paparazzi beyond the police lines. It is a dreary old establishment located for more than sixty years on the street level of the Port of Oakland container ship pier at

the foot of Ferro Street. At a little after five PM the light outside is already fading into soft Bay chill. Only an occasional siren or police whistle penetrates the neon buzz of an Anchor Steam Beer sign above the cash register and the soft susurrus sung by all old industrial buildings.

“What do you suppose was the problem?” prompts Lindstrom again.

“Jesus, you study your ass off,” says the alien, who speaks an amazingly fluent American English with no accent. “Master two, three languages right down to the last idiot, pick up on gestures and folkways and history and culture, and then it’s something dumb like the goddamn packaging that can give you away.”

“Idiom, Al. Not idiot,” says Lindstrom, who has raised children and corrected them and whose fascination with the young man is only a little tempered by his fatigue. He is also a little worried that his involvement in this case will bring him too much exposure. He has all his life thrived on anonymity, living a fresh cover story with nearly every new assignment, and because of his frequent posting from one bureau in Justice to another, his hold on a federal pension is not as firm as he might wish. Bureaucrats achieving notoriety are invariably punished one way or another by their bureaus.

“Id-i-om,” chants Al mechanically, his young man’s mind still engaged by the excitement of his perilous passage. “We got miles of tape and film and even aerosols the remotes collected so’s we’d get the smells right and know a fart from a flower and by God we learned it all to about point nine nine nine, and then it’s the goddamn packaging or something else indigenous that’s equally dumb that you gotta do right. We could handle most of it in training, I mean, like the first pop-top beer can. I had practice with the damn thing at the academy although my hands, you know, when I first got there my hands were a little weak from the amputations, but I could handle it.

“And I could deal with a bunch of coat hangers, which aren’t exactly packaging, but just about as big a pain in the ass to someone who’s never seen one before. But boy, the shrink pack stuff, until you know it’s supposed to be broken you can spend a hell of a time poking around, trying to find the tear strip or button or pry point or whatever, trying not to let on to anyone that you haven’t, you know, opened a million of the things, and screw up the whole tamale.”

He stops abruptly and drains his glass, setting it back on the bar with a clink and shaking his head, aware suddenly of his own volubility. “But then none of it mattered.” He pauses to examine his empty glass, puzzled. “This is an overt penetration and I guess I could of showed up dressed in ergli-chicken feathers with a bone in my nose and it wouldn’t have made any difference.”

“Not tamale,” says Lindstrom. “Enchilada. It’s an idiom from the Watergate affair thirty years ago, back in the seventies. The whole enchilada.”

“Yeah, we read about that.” Then, chanting: “The whole en-chil-ad-a” to Lindstrom’s nod of approval.

“Okay, Al,” says Lindstrom, picking up on Al’s confusion about his preparation. “Why such elaborate training? How come all the preparation so you could pass for a native, and then whacko! you drop naked as jay bird on the busiest dock in Oakland at damn near high noon with half of Northern California looking on?”

“I don’t know, Jake. I’m just damn glad I made it and didn’t — uh -abort,” said Al. “That’s what happened to the last two guys. Got down and out and got to severance when the mother told them the time, but then they couldn’t get the — uh— shell open fast enough to save their aaa and she had to withdraw them”

“The mother?” said Lindstrom.

“Yeah. How we, how I got here. The mother—” He broke off, at a loss for a description of the indescribable. “Uh — I guess, think of an ovipositor on a, like a bug, only it works across space, I guess, and—uh — sort a time.”

Lindstrom has only a dim grasp of the concept. Someone on the other end of the wire would dig up. an expert.

Aware of their listeners, he drains his glass and says: “And so here you are. Just for the record, let me ask one more time why you’re here. Who are you and what’s your mission, Al?”

Al shrugs. “Shit, Jake. I’d tell you if I could. I got this memory goes back maybe eight, ten hours, and then except for training and the academy it’s zeppo. I guess I know I’ve been this” — he points a thumb at his chest — “only since the time at the academy, but I don’t remember anyone else I’ve been.”

Jake nods and does not bother to correct “zeppo.” He is not going to learn what he is now convinced Al doesn’t know. “My people are going to get antsy if we don’t show pretty soon,” he says. “Any little thing would help.” He half refills each glass, emptying the square bottle. “Little things can mean a lot,”

Al sips and prints three circles interlocking. “Yeah, I know that one. And little things come in big packages and how little we know and little old New York and O little town of Bethlehem and —”

“Al.” Lindstrom cuts him off quietly.

“Okay. But can you imagine what it’s like? All those — uh — I guess years in the academy? Getting your own language and culture and biography wiped and

practice, practice with new stuff? Getting the littlest finger on each hand cut off just because polydactylism has only a five decimal point occurrence on this planet? Go through all that shit and then blow the whole thing because of some last minute glitch in the process? Can you imagine what it must have been like for the two guys who didn't make it? All that loneliness for nothing? Can you see why I feel so great to make it okay into this system?"

"I been wondering about that," says Lindstrom, actually wondering why a man in custody in a bar ringed with enough firepower to subdue the Malay Peninsula would consider himself to have been successful in his mission, whatever in the unimaginable name of God that was. "The extra finger. You mind if I ask you something personal?" He is now tired beyond the point where he much gives a damn, and as usual under such circumstances, he is feeling antic, wants to give the listeners out in some command center, probably a van over in Alameda, something to think about. It is the kind of thing that over the years has prompted comments from his superiors about attitude.

"Shoot."

"If they hadn't of cut it off, what in hell would the sixth little piggy do?"

Al looks blankly at his miniature sea of circles for a moment. Then, "Oh! Yeah! 'This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home.'"

"Yes," says Lindstrom, "and the last one, the fifth one . . . ?"

"Right," says Al, "and me with a sixth finger that doesn't fit the rhyme." And then in a high pitched version of his mechanical chant of memorization, he sings, "Wee, wee, wee, I can't find my way home." He pauses. "Wherever that is. Jake, what happens next? I mean to me?"

"Don't know."

There is, Lindstrom notes, a tilt to the brow over the alien's left eye, the blue one, that he believes connotes wry amusement at this minor imperfection in his amazing adaptation to a strange world. This guy, thinks Lindstrom, is well schooled, like Japan is prosperous. But why?

On their way out they pause in the men's room and Lindstrom relieves himself of the afternoon's drink. It is an awkward maneuver to perform one-handed, but his left wrist is now cuffed to Al's right. Although they had matched consumption drink for drink, Al has no need for relief, nor does he show any sign of intoxication. Lindstrom wonders idly if this results from alien physiology or simply the third of a century difference in their ages. Time is also a great stranger, he thinks. Twenty-five-year-old Jacob Lindstrom, the Berkeley dropout going under cover for the Justice Department task force on the 1965 Viola Liuzzo murder down in Selma,

is just about as alien to the retiring lake Lindstrom as the guy on the other end of the cuffs, who continues to chatter, eyeing the men's room fixtures with curiosity. Strange versions of familiar things fascinate: round doorknobs in the United States; handles in Europe. What in hell do urinals look like where Al comes from?

Not everyone has fled the building for the police lines; in one of the booths behind them, an exuberant flatulence sounds. In another, a Hispanic voice says: "¡Hey, que?" The perpetrator responds in a strained voice, "¡Esta musica!" and both occupants laugh in throaty gasps. Al laughs too. Spanish must be one of his languages, thinks Lindstrom. He shakes himself and thinks of the sheer weirdness of the day, his participation in an event of historical importance—the first alien contact!—acted out in a seedy Oakland bar and set to the music of elimination.

He zips, rinses his hand, and leads his prisoner out to the little Ford electric with the red INS logo parked in the bar plug-in. The Chief Federal Marshal has gambled that a long unstructured and recorded debriefing will get them maximum information on the alien; they were in the saloon a long time. The car battery had been low to begin with and now it takes everything off his debit card to pay out the charge.

He toggles on and the line of Oakland policemen parts for them—Lindstrom notes they are now reinforced by California Highway Patrol officers and, he is sure, federal units somewhere off in the darkness—and forms an escort for them up the deserted Nimitz Freeway. Beyond them are the TV cameras with their low-light, long lenses recording them in detail and a news-hungry populace that will have Al for dinner every night for weeks. And probably me too, Lindstrom thinks.

And then Mars lights flicker as far ahead as he can see across the Bay Bridge toward the temporary isolation facility on Turk Street where he is to deliver Al. Nothing has so home in on him the enormity of the event as the fact that the Bay Bridge has been cleared of traffic during rush hour. As he drives, his passenger avidly peering into the approaching canyons of San Francisco, Lindstrom thinks about his pension and his precarious position.

How in hell am I going to get out of this one?

JUST AFTER lunch the next day, Wednesday, Lindstrom stands at a lectern before a dozen scientists in a darkened room in what was once the Saks Fifth Avenue store in the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto. Here the Stanford Research Institute is housing the just-formed Extraterrestrial Task Force, already referred to by its staff as "ET-EF." A few people wear white or green lab coats. Lindstrom has the only necktie. In his left hand is a control button; in his right a laser pointer. On the screen behind him is a brilliantly illuminated full-figure video freeze of Al nude, side and front. His musculature is spectacular, bordering on but not quite unhuman; there is a thoroughly human look of embarrassment and resignation on his face.

“I represent the Immigration and Naturalization Service,” says Lindstrom, “and I have been asked to report to you on the disposition of the extraterrestrial that we have in custody.

“As you may know, Al or Earl is the fifth extraterrestrial reported anywhere in the world. Two have been noted in Third World settings — in Indonesia and Brazil— and both have disappeared, or at least evaded custody. Three have been found in the Bay Area since early December. Two have returned almost immediately to the organism or device which brought them, which we’ve been calling the doughnut. This is a toroidal biological mass that we have been unable to inspect closely enough to know much about. In each case, the doughnut appears without traceable access a hundred meters off the western extremity of an Oakland pier at an altitude of two meters above the decking. When the doughnut reaches the end of the pier, the — uh — alien drops to the deck encased in a placenta-like material and engages in a rapid series of actions to free himself. In the first two incidents spaced about a week apart, some sort of failure occurred and the alien disappeared in a fairly messy manner back into the center of the mass.

“As you have seen from video coverage,” Lindstrom continues in the stilted lecture room voice he acquired during a teaching stint at the FBI academy when it was still in Quantico, “this mass dilates and then contracts around the alien and then disappears, leaving no trace other than what we suppose are metabolic by-products which I understand are now under analysis here along with other manifestations of these — uh — visitations.”

There are mutterings of discontent. “Cut the crap,” says someone. “We know all this stuff,” says another. The team leader stands dressed in a white lab coat at the front of the room to the side of Lindstrom’s podium. She is a slim woman in her early thirties with gray-streaked hair and the grim, no-nonsense face of the experienced clinician. She frowns at her staff and holds a hand in front of her to wave them into silence.

Lindstrom continues: “Our newest alien,” he waves his pointer at the screen, “is the first one to make a successful — uh— visit. I have personally debriefed him at length, and although I have formed some opinions about him and am impressed by the quality of his preparation for survival here, I have not been able to elicit any information bearing on his mission or intentions. Some four hours of tapes of that debriefing are now available to you for further analysis.

“Pending a determination by the court, we have the alien in custody and will convey him to the State Medical Facility in Vacaville, where he will be held on a warrant issued pursuant to the Alien and Immigration Act of 1957.” There is a chorus of expletives. The frown and the hand again.

Lindstrom continues: “I know you had hoped that he be turned over to you

today for further study, but that does not now appear possible until the judge has acted on one of nearly two dozen petitions of habeas corpus. Accordingly, I have been asked to provide the Extraterrestrial Task Force with this statement.”

The room buzzes with anger. “What do you mean Vacaville?” says one bearded man. “How’d they get to the front of the line?”

“What do you mean not possible?” says another.

“What kind of cooperation ?” asks the team leader in the white lab coat.

Lindstrom ignores the questions. He has been instructed to limit his comments. He clicks the switch in his left hand and the lights go up as the image on the screen disappears. He refers to a clipboard and says: “This concludes my formal report to you as ordered by Judge Matsuko pending the habeas corpus hearing on Monday next.”

It is 10:30 on a sparkling Thursday morning. Lindstrom and Janet McCatters, who is Chief of the Criminal Division in the West Coast headquarters of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and Lindstrom’s boss, walk the mile and a half across town from their offices on Sansome to the San Francisco Federal Building on Turk Street. Worried as usual about her weight, McCatters has persuaded Lindstrom to walk. “Besides, it’ll give us a chance to discuss the Al case.”

Lindstrom understands. Although INS has nominal responsibility for Al, the United States Attorney has the power, and that makes the Deputy U.S. Attorney on the case everybody’s superior and McCatters wants to make sure Lindstrom knows the score. She cautions him as they walk up Market: “Word I get is Washington wants out of this business. Like all the way. They’d like someone — anyone — to get a habeas and take the guy off our hands.”

“Maybe,” says Lindstrom, eyes locked straight ahead, “someone’d like to pry Al out of Turk Street even before we get him moved and that’s why we got three guys doing an ABC tail on us.”

McCatters, who is not without street experience, does not look back, does not search for reflections in store fronts. “After all that TV, they got you made,” she says. “Could be another bureau or one of the networks or for God’s sake the people from Disney or the Chinese or McCann Erickson or . . . Who doesn’t want to get their little paws on our guy?”

“Yeah. Whoever. It’s big bucks for the Movie of the Week bunch and big reputations for all the cut-and-sew guys in the labs. I guess after yesterday I’m a celebrity, get my fifteen minutes of fame.”

They pass a line of newspaper racks. "Third Alien Lands in East Bay," reads the San Francisco Chronicle headline. USA Today's is "California's Mystery Alien: Army Mobilizes." The Enquirer promises an exclusive report on alien sex in San Francisco.

As they cross Powell, she says: "The three questions are, what's he here for and why such elaborate preparation and how much of a threat does he pose, that's one. Who's going to get first and maybe only crack at him, that's two. And three's what'll the ones who don't get to play do about it and who'll they do it to."

Lindstrom nods. "That's six questions, Janet. As to number one, whatever he's up to, there isn't much covert about it. He doesn't know why'n hell he's been so elaborately trained for what turned out to be a pretty public entrance. I think his mission's as big a mystery to him as it is to us, and unless he's the advance guy for the invasion of the body snatchers or carrying some kind of virus that turns us all into the killer tomatoes that eat Chicago, I'm damned if I can see much threat."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'll worry about the other questions," says McCatters. "It's C.Y.A. time and I don't want the Service to take the fall when everybody who owns a pint of printer's ink tells everybody else what the U.S.G. did wrong."

Lindstrom takes her arm as they skirt a noisy raghead protest at Taylor and Eddy. She does not object to his hand and what others might take as chauvinism, which is one reason why Lindstrom likes her, enjoys working with her.

"What I don't understand, Janet," he says, "is why you're so worried about weight. You look really fine to me." She is a substantial woman in her early-forties, big but not fat, a comer who has steadily progressed in the bureaucracy without excessive dishonesty. Lindstrom trusts her and she him.

"Thanks, Jake," she says. "You're probably just horny like the rest of the senior citizens I got working for me."

She stops at the dull gray entrance to the Federal Building and this time puts her hand on his arm. "Jake," she says quietly. "You know why you're on this case, don't you?"

"I'm not civil service?"

"Yeah. That, and you're a real short timer."

"Expendable?"

"If something goes wrong and we let the fuckers, yeah."

A secure elevator takes them up to a high ceilinged office in the Justice

Department suite. Tall windows let cool morning light in to fight with the fluorescents.

They are perfunctorily greeted and seated by Arnie Goldschmidt, the Senior Deputy U.S. Attorney. He is a plump, pink man in his forties from Little Rock whose curly red hair and cherubic face belie what Lindstrom, who has worked with him before, has described to his wife as the loving kindness of a Great White. “Jesus God,” Goldschmidt says in a quiet, conversational way, directing his attention to McCatters, “Lindstrom does himself proud on this one and now you want the whole goddamn U.S. Government to take a dive with the Ninth Circuit. I am no way gonna stand up on my hind legs in front of Skinner or Matsuko or whoever judge’s got the duty and tell them the U.S. Attorney and the INS and the whole fucking Justice Department’s gotten religion and been, you know, bom again and now wants to fight habeases like a case of jock itch and keep custody of what’s gotta be the biggest pain in the ass since the Madonna kidnapping hoax just because the arresting agent’s afraid the allen’s gonna get picked to pieces if we don’t keep him bottled up somewhere.”

Lindstrom can’t help admiring Goldschmidt’s use of language to express his power.

“You know’s well as I do,” the attorney continues, “that we got no real policy direction on this shit with the extraterrestrials. State Department’s taken a bye and shipped the whole friggin’ issue to the U.N. where it’ll sit in the Security Council until I’m back in the hills breeding razorbacks, and Hopkins is a Truly Great Attorney General who all of us in the field admire to distraction but he hasn’t got balls enough during the first senatorial election year in the 21st Century to stand up to the President and State and tell ‘em this is not solely and exclusively an internal security problem for the U.S. and A., and so we and everybody else in the Department are by God stuck with your Al or Earl or whatever the fuck’s ‘is name until he’s sprung on a habeas and gets the hell outta our hair, and as far as I’m concerned the only real question is who takes delivery and how fast can we get him there.”

McCatters waves her hands in front of her blouse, palms down, as if pushing burning oil away from water she’s abandoned ship into. “Come on, Arnie,” she says. “I know’s well’s you do someone’s going to eventually get our guy. But Lindstrom, we — Christ, the service— is just trying to get your office to slow down a little. The Pentagon’s convinced Al’s the 21st century equivalent of the yellow peril and screaming at the boss in Washington who is not even a little reluctant to let me know of his discomfort, and everybody in the goddamn intelligence community and NIH and NSF is hollering for a sample of this or a little piece of that. That bunch of media creeps in L.A. are going to court this morning to enjoin us for a press conference. Jeez, if I had two or three extraterrestrials I could saw ‘em up into one ounce baggies and retire a rich woman. What is this, the third? And every time one of these guys shows up and even before we try to grab ‘era they get sucked back

into that goddamn disgusting thing that brings ‘em and takes ‘em away, and other than a little blood and skin frags from number one and all that goo from number two we’ve got shit to report to Defense or Langley or the project down in Palo Alto.

“We fully appreciate,” she continues, looking to Lindstrom for confirmation and getting a nod, “that you only got eleven-oh-three to work with. You can’t make an Enemy Alien case without a Hostile Power, you can’t make Request for Asylum without Clear Endangerment, but any way you look at it, we don’t get a judge to go along with a Hold for Deportation order and one of these outfits takes our guy out of custody, whoever gets him is going to be top dog and every other outfit is going to be after our ass for letting the one that got him, get him.”

Now Goldschmidt is really enjoying his clout. “Forget it, Janet. This is my call and I’m calling it. I want this yahoo off our hands and out of Turk Street by close of business Friday and I don’t want a ration of crap about it, either.

“Anyway,” he says, supporting his delicious exercise of raw power with irrefutable logic, “If we had a Hold for Deportation, what the hell would you enter in Line 16, ‘Nation of Origin’? Where you gonna deport him to?”

Janet is silent. The audience is over and they rise to leave. Lindstrom asks, “You got a surveillance order on me, counselor? On AI?”

“You nuts Lindstrom? You seeing things? If you’ve picked up an escort, it sure as hell ain’t Justice’s.”

Lindstrom has no reason to believe or disbelieve the answer.

That night sleep evades Lindstrom, and because they have been married for thirty-five years and lovers for thirty-seven, it evades Jan, too. “This alien thing?” she says after a while of darkness in their small house in the Berkeley Hills.

“Yeah. But ‘alien’ doesn’t sound right. This is an interesting young guy and probably more human than I am. Trained to a T. He’s smart and funny and likable. Made me want to pet him like a puppy. Could have melted into the population without a hitch except he arrived like he was advance man for a Michael Jackson revival. God knows what he’s here for. Maybe to subvert the republic or ravish our maidens or prepare us for conquest by rapacious hordes of bug-eyed monsters, but somehow I don’t think so. I spent a whole afternoon with him, and he’s a nifty young guy. Reminds me a lot of . . . “ Lindstrom stops suddenly, once more at the precipice of grief, obeying their unvoiced agreement.

“It’s okay,” says Jan softly. “I know what you mean.” They both regularly encounter young men about the age Tom would have been now, and even after ten years, neither can help thinking, Hey! You’d be my Tom if

They are silent. The pain of loss dulls to loss remembered but never goes away, and a dead child is always a child. They embrace and kiss and separate. It is a time for loving not love-making.

But the embrace cheers Lindstrom, pulls him from the passivity of regret into thinking and scheming, where he is happiest.

“Thing is, babe,” he says, sitting up against the headboard and turning on the bedside lamp so that he can look into her pretty, lined face, “every scientist, politician, do-gooder, religious nut, and storm door salesman in the country is after the guy, not to mention producers for 500 cable and shopping channels. Any one of them can damage him. Together they’ll tear him to pieces.”

“How about Uncle Sugar.?”

“The U.S.G.’s even worse. Hell, the bureaucrats don’t want any part of him. He is a number one headache. Doesn’t matter what Al’s purposes are, if he has any. Whatever he does, someone’s not going to like it and they’ll blame the government for not preventing it. And whoever gets control of Al, whatever that custody agency does, they’re going to piss off some other agency with powerful political friends.”

“And so you’re stuck.”

“So far, yes. Know what Janet told me? Wegot Al because when they had that interagency conference after the second one didn’t make it and slopped goo all over that Oakland dock and they were arguing over who was going to take on the press and Washington and all the little old ladies with blue hair, she lost the toss.”

“You lost the toss.”

“Yes, I guess so. But hell, I never even had the coin in my hand.”

“Call in sick.”

“Bug out, you mean.” Lindstrom gives it some thought. “Yeah. If I had any sense I’d do that. Let someone else worry. One way or another, someone’s going to get hung out to dry on this one, and a guy who’s a couple of weeks from retirement and no Civil Service protection—whoeee! I’m almost an un-person already.”

Jan rolls up on her elbow to look into his face. “But you’re not going to fade on this one, are you.” It is a statement, not a question.

Lindstrom is slow to respond. After a moment he slides down beneath the covers, as if ready to burrow into sleep, and his voice is soft, muffled. “Can you believe us— me— worried about a goddamn pension? Where’re the kids we were.* Christ, we bought as much of the establishment as we could handle without yorking

just so we could do something in civil rights. Now I feel pompous when I think about doing something just because it's — well -right!"

"If you start singing 'You and Me Babe' I'm going to yolk," says Jan.

Lindstrom surfaces. "You and me all fight. You remember the Soviet defector we baby-sat in that rotten old farmhouse outside of Culpepper for a couple of months back in '68?"

"Yech! Boris the Ever-Erect Defector!"

"Well, if he's still alive he's probably still in custody somewhere and still industrial-strength horny. But I'm sure he went totally ape years ago. Remember how everybody wanted a piece of what they thought he knew? They locked him up with a bone key and threw it to the dogs and debriefed him six times a week. He was making up stuff to satisfy whatever agency was in town even when we did our hitch there, and every new case officer and Special Agent in the business cut his interrogation teeth on him. He maybe was a shit but I felt sorry for the guy. Imagine what'll happen to an AI; his secrets are probably in his body chemistry and internal organs." Lindstrom reaches up to turn off the bed lamp. "I can't let something like that happen to a — well — to AI."

"How do you know he isn't dangerous? Maybe he's got some kind of super powers you don't know anything about."

"Yeah. Well."

"Well?"

"Well, hell. He's just one guy in orange coveralls sitting in an isolation cell in Turk Street. He's no Superman and he hardly snuck into town. Whatever put him here sure made enough ruckus doing it. He called it 'mother' and said it was something like an insect laying eggs. So what's he going to do? Turn into a giant horsefly? Lead a revolution? End Western Civilization as we know it? Shit, I hope so. I'm ready."

"Hey, babe, take it easy. I just asked."

"Yeah, and you're right, of course. I gotta think about that, but I also have to, you know, do what seems right "His voice trails off. Then: "What do you say, Jan. You ready for another adventure?"

"When did the last one end?"

She thinks back about Berkeley in 1965 and the civil rights movement and a dozen different safe houses and as many identities and the long tired time in the '80s

when no cause seemed any better than any other cause, but one way or another they had taken a hand in almost anything that helped the losers of the world, despite — or maybe because of— Jake’s employment. At least no kids to put into the equation now; Ellen grown and gone, and Tom

“What do you have in mind?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Something. Well, you know, with or without a pension, retirement looms. We gotta make some changes anyway” Lindstrom is trying to convince himself as much as Jan.

“Sure, babe. I’m with you.”

“Pack up the old kit?”

“First thing tomorrow.”

They subside in a slow drowse into sleep. He does not worry Jan about the Chew with government plates parked down the street, and she sleeps with an arm across his chest. But sleep continues to evade him because no plan he can formulate — at one A.M. anyway — seems feasible, and then his sense of the ridiculous kicks in and he dozes off comforted by the thought that he will probably once again be able, somehow, to improvise when the situation is right, and then he dreams of himself, pensionless and penniless, playing a concertina at the Powell Street cable car turntable, Al, chained, scampering among the tourists with a tin cup.

THE TEAM leader in the white lab coat at the ET-EF briefing is named Estelle Lemos. A physician and research geneticist, she has assigned herself to collect the more extensive secondary samples for the biochemical workup on the alien, and she has asked to accompany Lindstrom on Friday as he transports Al from Turk Street to the Vacaville Medical Facility. Her lab coat replaced by a belted red silk raincoat, she is quite pretty sitting on the passenger side of his motorpool ‘01 Plymouth with the custodial rear seat as he drives up the Peninsula on the Bayshore Freeway from Palo Alto. Lindstrom is surprised at her good looks. She had seemed thin lipped and hard, older somehow, at the ET-EF session.

“I appreciate your letting me ride along like this,” she says. “I really want a good look at our specimen.”

“Specimen?” Lindstrom is put off by the word.

Lemos notes this. “Sorry. That’s the biochemist talking. Let’s face it, most of us in the test tube and genome-mapping racket come to think of people as a sort of a pipe with sphincters at either end and a lot of auxiliary systems designed to fill it up and empty it at regular intervals. Occupational hazard.”

Lindstrom nods as he takes the off ramp onto 7th. “And A1 is a new kind of pipe?”

“Sure. And frankly one we can examine a little more thoroughly than, well, usually.”

“How so?”

“Well, we’ll start with new blood and urine samples like I’m going to take this afternoon, and then a little tissue {or biopsy, and then we’ll get a blue sheet permitting in vivo surgical examination of an experimental animal . . . “

“What do you mean experimental animal.?” Lindstrom interrupts.

“I know it sounds, well, crude and maybe unfeeling and I wondered when you told us about the habeas corpus hearing. The word in the lab is that’s just a holding action until our genome report is in on the first samples we took Tuesday night. It will show that your specimen is human only up to about the 99th percentile.”

“Sure. So?” says Lindstrom. He slows a little for the turn onto Leavenworth.

“But that also means that your guy is something less than human, that he’s, you know, somewhere in that last percentile. He’s different from human and a couple of critical DNA sequences will prove it.”

Lindstrom understands at least most of the implications of this. “Then the ACLU and all the other habeas petitioners are out of the picture,” he says.

“Right,” says Estelle Lemos. “Wrong corpus, and so you’re out too and any other agency with authority over people. From now on it’s the Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes for Health and the Research Protocol Committee for Experimental Animals at Stanford University and for all I know the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.”

She sees Lindstrom, eyes fixed on the rear of a truck ahead, shaking his head slowly as if to deny her words. “Hey,” she says. “We’re not going to butcher your A1 or Earl. Just find out what makes him tick.”

Lindstrom does not like what he is hearing. His worst fears lie in what Lemos is telling him. The system is going to make another victim.

As he pulls into the underground garage at the Turk Street facility, he says: “Maybe, Dr. Lemos — maybe you ought to wait and see A1 for yourself.” He is surprised at how his voice rises as he adds: “He is not, you know, some fucking hamster!”

Her mind is on the research plan she will be devising. “Oh, yes. Of course,” she says absently.

She stays in the car as Lindstrom signs for Al, who greets him with smiles and chatter and a flood of good-natured questions. He once again reminds Lindstrom of a puppy, which — he realizes— is a bit true of most young men when they are not preoccupied with one of what stress psychologists refer to as the four F’s — fight, flight, food, and eroticism.

Down in the garage, Lemos leaves the car long enough to stand and shake hands with Al, who is then confined in the rear seat, behind steel netting, as the three of them set off on 1-80 across the Bay Bridge for Vacaville: Al is in fresh orange, this time bearing the letters “USM” for United States Marshal.

But he is suddenly, uncharacteristically mute. Something very strange is happening and as Lindstrom wheels the car through the 1-80 interchange and up the ramp onto the Bay Bridge, he tries to puzzle it out. His introduction of Al to Lemos in the underground garage produced what started as a perfunctory handshake but extended into a lingering one and an accompanying look of stunned bemusement in the two. He will later describe the moment to Ian as “like two people in one of those high-key photographs advertising perfume or designer jeans and me playing the idiot nightingale imported from London to give the scene some class.”

He weighs his impression of the tough, vaguely cynical woman he has spoken with that morning against what now looks like a love-struck schoolgirl sitting beside him, her torso twisted under the seatbelt so that she can stare raptly back through the netting into one green eye and one blue eye staring just as fixedly at her. He first concludes that all young people — for him, anyone under, say, forty-five — are crazy, victims of their glands. But then he rejects the shallow, comic strip ease of that assessment and returns to worried uncertainty. He glances sidelong at Lemos but can read nothing in her profile but fierce concentration.

Lemos finds herself in emotional turmoil. She is stupidly, irrationally, foolishly, unequivocally in love or lust, she does not know which, with a strange less-than, more-than man and she cannot, either as a mature woman or a scientist, abide the excess of unreason it has so suddenly injected into her life. At the same time there is this soaring exhilarating overwhelming rightness to what she now thinks is coming her way.

The motorpool Plymouth soars across the Bay, suspended between the insubstantialities of sky and water, its 2.99 human beings equally suspended, each in his own intriguing purgatory of confusing emotions.

Oh my God, thinks Lemos, it must be pheromones or something. But she rejects this.

And then, because she was recently on the cusp of recovery from a disappointing love affair, she thinks: rebound, that must be it. But she rejects this explanation too. She cannot take her eyes away from Al's.

"Jake," says Al, his ebullience softened into something almost like a whisper. "Something's happened. I think I got an idea about "In the rearview mirror, Lindstrom can see that Al's gaze remains fixed on Lemos. " . . . the mission. I think maybe I know what I'm going to do here."

"Oh?" says Lindstrom. "I think I'm with you on that, Al." They are on the downgrade, approaching the Nimitz Interchange. Lindstrom is catching on, understanding, and he doesn't really need Al to explain.

Lemos, too, begins to realize that she is experiencing the alien's defining power, the remarkable capacity lying in that one percentile of difference, and that her profound erotic reaction explains his mission.

"Jesus Christ, Lindstrom," she gasps finally, suddenly aware that she has been holding her breath, "I — we've got to do something!"

"Yes," says Lindstrom, adding up his observations and seeing in Lemos's expression confirmation of his wild surmise. It is, he thinks, improvise time. "But are you game for what may be a pretty rough time? I mean for you personally?"

Lemos needs no further explanation. All is now clear. She is silent for a hundred heartbeats, almost until the approach to the University Avenue exit. Then, shudderingly, she says: "Yes."

Amid a chorus of horns and squealing brakes, Lindstrom cuts viciously across four lanes of traffic to the off ramp, neatly losing the gray van that had followed them across San Francisco Bay.

He says to Lemos: "What kind of stuff do you need to mix up something that'll pass for that goo they found on the Ferro Street pier? I'll give my wife a call."

He thinks: Ravish our maidens, eh? And he grins for the first time since Tuesday morning as he reaches for the car phone.

Because in Lindstrom's thirty-six years of government service, McCatters is one of only two or three fellow employees still alive he thoroughly trusts, he calls her via a 7-Eleven pay phone he has rigged temporarily for remote and tells her how and where they can meet, a place he can countersurveil. Absolute trust is beyond him.

They sit drinking espresso on a verandah at the Breakers in Santa Barbara, the surf boiling a hundred yards to the south in the morning sun. She finds Lindstrom

almost unrecognizable. He looks twenty pounds heavier, although she realizes this is all clothing and strategic padding, and his hair is very long, a dun brown shot with streaks of gray. He walks with a limp, which — when she expresses concern — he explains is the result of half a plastic clothespin in the instep of his left shoe. She knows that any physical defect will crowd out other details in a description of him. It is early March, two months after the last alien landing and Al's subsequent disappearance during transport, six weeks since Lindstrom's retirement.

"Your checks coming through all right?" she asks.

"Yeah. God bless electronic deposit."

"I don't want to hassle you, but — you know — I get curious. Hell, I just wanted to know how you're doing."

Lindstrom sips his coffee. "People getting nosy?" he asks. "Anybody giving you a hard time?"

"Not really. I caught a lot of hell when Al took off, but it was mostly for show. The folks in ET-EF tried to find some link with that Dr. Lemos of theirs, but no one could come up with anything and I guess she's keeping in touch during her leave. The boss was tickled pink to be done with the whole thing and of course so's that asshole Goldschmidt. And there was enough of that goo around the site outside Vacaville where you reported you lost him that Arnie's been able to shrug and say a few unpleasant things to the media about all of us but more or less put the focus on the mysterious ways of aliens."

"Good."

"So what are you up to, Jake? You handling retirement okay?"

"Oh yeah. You know how it is. Working yourself and your family into a new identity is pretty much a full time job for the first couple of months. And then Jan and I are getting ready to be grandparents again."

"Your daughter? Ellen isn't it?"

"No. Our son Tom. I don't think you ever met him. It's his wife Estelle who's expecting and we're kinda looking after things while he's — uh — on the road." Lindstrom knows he is not fooling McCatters and that's okay. He owes her some truth in return for a lot of first-order protection.

McCatters, who has read and revised Lindstrom's full 201 file and knows about Tom's death ten years ago, knows what Lindstrom is up to, knows that there is risk to all of them. But because she has been long in law enforcement in an increasingly dysfunctional society and because she feels wearied by the status quo,

and above all else because she trusts Lindstrom, she has altered the file to bring Tom to life again.

She nods. “You must be excited.”

“Yeah. We’re, like, pretty eager to see what she produces.”

“I just bet you are,” says McCatters.

* * * *

Robin Wilson is another F&SF veteran whose byline we haven’t seen for a while. He spent the last few years finishing his term as President of California State University, Chico. He is now President Emeritus and Trustee Professor at California State University, Monterey Bay, a new campus being established on what was once the site of the U.S. Army’s Fort Ord

About the story, he writes, “It has seemed to me that fantasy— and especially the branch of it doing business as science fiction — has always manifested itself in two principle modes. Mode one is stories about familiar people in weird but understandable worlds (20,000 Leagues Under the Sea) and mode two is stories about weird but understandable people in familiar worlds (Visitor from a Small Planet). Of course, these are ends of a spectrum, but because I’m pretty interested in writing a gloss on our times I tend toward the latter more than the former, although this story is really about familiar people whose world has grown weird on them and they come to realize it when a weird guy comes along . . . “