

## Neutrino Drag

by Paul Di Filippo

I know why the Sun doesn't work the way the scientists think it should.

Me and a guy who called himself Spacedog fucked it up back in 1951, racing our roadsters in a match of Cosmic Chicken out in space, closer'n Mercury to hell itself.

I never told a soul about that last grudge match between me and Spacedog. Who'd've believed me? Spacedog never returned to Earth to back my story up. And no one else was there to witness our race anyhow, except Stella Star Eyes. And she never says anything anytime, not even after fifty years with me.

But now that I'm an old, old guy likely to hit the Big Wall of Death and visit the Devil's pitstop soon, I figure I might as well try to tell the whole story the exact way it happened. Just in case Spacedog's car ever maybe starts eating up the Sun or something worse.

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I got demobbed in '46, went back home to San Diego and opened up a welding shop with the few thousand dollars I had saved and with the skills the Army had generously given me in exchange for nearly getting my ass shot up in a dozen European theaters from Anzio to Berlin. Palomar Customizing, Obdulio Benitez, proprietor, that was me. I managed to get some steady good-paying work right out of the holeshot, converting Caddies and Lincolns to hearses for the local funeral trade. The grim joke involved in this arrangement didn't escape me, since I still woke up more nights than not, drenched in sweat and yelling, memories of shellfire and blood all too vivid. If any of a hundred Nazi bullets had veered an inch, I would have already taken my own ride in a hearse—assuming any part of me had survived to get bagged—and never been here building the corpse wagons.

One of the first helpers I hired at my shop was this high-school kid, Joaquin Arnett.

You heard me right, Joaquin Arnett, the legendary leader of the Bean Bandits, that mongrel pack of barrio-born hotrodders who started out by tearing up the California racing world like Aztecs blew through captives, and then went on to grab national honors from scores of classier white-bread teams across the nation. By the time he retired from racing in the Sixties, Joaquin had racked up more trophies and records than almost any other driver, and fathered two sons to carry on his dream.

But back in the late Forties, all that was still in the future. I hired a wiry, smiling, wired kid with skin a little lighter than my own, a kid with no rep yet, but just a mania for cars and racing.

Joaquin got his start picking up discarded car parts—coils, magnetos—and fixing them. He had taught himself to drive at age nine. By the time he got to my shop, he'd been bending iron on his own for several years, making chassis after chassis out of scrap and dropping flatheads in front, fat skins in back and deuce bodies on top. Once he got his hands on my shop's equipment, he burst past all the old barriers

that had stopped him from making his dreams really come true. The railjobs and diggers he began to turn out in his off-hours were faster and hotter than anything else on the streets or the tracks.

Joaquin had been driving for the Road Runners and the Southern California Roadster Club since 1948. But when 1951 rolled around, he decided he wanted to start his own team. He recruited a bunch of childhood buddies—Carlos Ramirez, Andrew Ortega, Harold Miller, Billy Glavin, Mike Nagem, plus maybe twenty others—and they became the Bean Bandits, a name that picked up on the taunts of "Beaners!" they heard all the time and made the slur into a badge of ethnic pride.

When Joaquin first came to work for me, I was driving a real pig, something the legendary little old lady from Pasadena would've turned her nose up at. An unmodified '32 Packard I had picked up cheap before the war, which had subsequently sat on its rims in my parents' garage for five years while I was overseas. I plain didn't care much about cars at that point. They were just transportation, something to get me and Herminia—Herminia Ramirez, a distant cousin of Carlos's—around town on a date.

But working side by side with Joaquin, watching the fun he had putting his rods together, was contagious. The customizing and racing bugs bit me on the ass, one on each cheek, and never let go. Soon on weekends and nights I was elbow-deep in the guts of a '40 Oldsmobile, patching in a Cadillac engine that was way too much power for the streets, but was just right for the dry lakes.

The Bean Bandits, you see, raced the cars they created at a couple of places. Paradise Mesa, the old airfield outside the city that was our home track, and the dry lakebeds of El Mirage and Muroc. There the drivers could cut loose without worrying about citizens or cops or traffic lights, focusing on pure speed.

When I started running my new Olds—painted glossy pumpkin orange with black flames, and its name, *El Tigre*, lettered beautifully across both front fenders—first in trials with the Bean Bandits and then against drivers from other clubs, I found that my nightmares started to go away. Not completely, but enough. That sweet deal alone would have hooked me on racing forever, if all the other parts of it—the sound, the speed, the thrills, the glory—hadn't already done the trick.

The real excitement started when we discovered nitro. That was nitromethane, a gasoline alternative that did for engines what the sight of Wile E. Coyote did for the Road Runner. At first we thought nitro was more volatile than it actually was, and we carried it to meets in big carboys swaddled in rags. "Stand back! This could blow any second!" Scared the shit out of the competition, until they got hip to nitro too. And eventually, when we discovered the shitty things pure nitro did to our engines, we began to cut it fifty-fifty with regular fuel. Still, plenty of extra kick remained, and nitro let us get closer and closer to the magic number of 150 mph with every improvement we made.

I remember Joaquin boasting to me one day, "Papa Obie, soon enough we're gonna be as fast as them damn new UFO things people are talking about."

I don't feel like I was ever a real card-carrying member of the Bean Bandits. I never wore one of their shirts with their silly cartoon on it—a Mexican jumping bean with sombrero, mask and wheels—and I never lined up at the staging lights known as the Christmas Tree with them in any for-the-book races, just the unofficial drags. The main thing that kept me out of the club—in my own mind anyhow—was my age.

When I left the service I was already twenty-six years old, and by 1951 I had crossed that big red line into my thirties. Joaquin and all his buddies were a lot younger than me. They liked to tease me, calling me "Papa Obie" and names like that. Not that they ever discriminated against anyone, on any basis. Mostly Hispanics, the Bandits had members who were Anglo, Lebanese, Japanese and Filipino. They

would've took me on in a heartbeat. But my concerns weren't the same as theirs. They had nothing in mind but kicks. I had a business to run, and was thinking in a vague way about marrying Herminia and settling down.

Still, I hung out with the Bandits a lot and never felt like they held me at arm's length. Practically every weekend in 1951, you could find me behind the wheel of *El Tigre*, hauling ass down three dusty miles of dry lake bottom trial after trial, the nitro fumes making my eyes water and nose burn, smiling when I beat someone, scowling when I got beaten and already planning refinements to my car.

Yeah, that was my routine and my pleasure all right, and at the time I even thought it might last forever.

Until Spacedog and Stella Star Eyes showed up.

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That Saturday afternoon at Paradise Mesa the sun seemed to burn hotter than I'd ever known it to shine before, even in California. I had gone through about six cans of Nesbitt's Orange Drink between noon and three, a few gulps used to wash down the tortillas we had bought at our favorite stand on the Pacific Coast Highway on our way up here.

At that moment, Herminia and I were sitting on the edge of one of the empty trailers used to transport the more outrageous hot rods that couldn't pass for grocery getters, trying to get a little shade from a canvas tarp stretched above us on poles. We were the only ones facing the entrance to the dragstrip. Everyone else had their heads under hoods or their eyes on the race underway between Joaquin and some guy from Pomona. Joaquin was running his '29 Model A with the Mercury engine, and the driver from Pomona was behind the wheel of a chopped and channelled Willys.

That was when this car like nothing I had ever seen before pulled in.

This rod was newer than color TV. It looked like Raymond Loewy might've designed it fifty years from now for the 1999 World's Fair. Low and streamlined and frenched to the max, matte silver in color, its window glass all smoky somehow so that you couldn't see inside, this car skimmed along on skinny tires colored an improbable gold, making less noise than Esther Williams underwater, but managing to convey the impression of some kind of deep power barely within the driver's control.

I had gotten to my feet without consciously planning to stand, tossing my last cone-topped can of soda, still half-full, onto the ground. Herminia was less impressed, and just kept slurping her Nesbitt's up through a straw.

I think now that might have been the instant things started to go wrong between us— when Herminia didn't register the magnificence of that incredible car.

This Buck Rogers car pulled up a few yards away from me, and then doors opened, one on each side.

And those damn doors just seemed to disappear! All I could think was that they had slid into the body of the car faster than my eye could follow, like pocket doors in a house.

The driver stepped out first, followed on the other side by the passenger.

From the driver's side unfolded this lanky joker well over six feet tall. He wore a wild Hawaiian shirt with a pattern of flowers and ukuleles and surfboards and palm trees that seemed to form hazy secret images where they overlapped and intersected. The shirt hung loose over a pair of lime green poplin trousers. Huaraches revealed bare feet, but sunglasses concealed his eyes. He had Mitch Miller facial hair—Big Sur bohemian mustache and unconnected chin spinach—but his head was otherwise hairless. And then there was the matter of his skin.

I've always heard people say that someone had an "olive" complexion, and usually what they mean is that the person they're talking about is dago-dark. But in this case, it was really true. All the skin I could see on this guy was a muted dusky green, kinda like dusty eucalyptus leaves.

While I was still trying to get my mind around both the guy and his car, I caught sight of his passenger.

Back in the Army, I used to truly dig this girlie cartoon the thoughtful brass produced for us dogfaces. "Ack-Ack Amy" was the name of the character, and the artist—I made a point of remembering his name—was Bill Ward. Man, could he draw stacked babes! Even on paper Ack-Ack Amy seemed so physical—although I doubt there had ever been any real gal built like her—that you could almost feel her in your arms. Especially if it was a lonely night in your foxhole.

Back home, I ran into Ward's stuff again. He was doing this funnybook where the gal was named Torchy, and he had only gotten better at drawing. Torchy was Ack-Ack Amy times ten, more woman than any six regular gals rolled together.

The woman who got out of the strange car could have been Torchy's va-va-voom fashion model sister.

Her hair was chin-length, colored platinum, with a flip. Milk-white skin contrasted with her boyfriend's jade tint. Her nose was pert, her lips lush and lively and her jawline was honed finer than the cylinders in a Ferrari. Thinking back, I certainly didn't notice anything funny about her eyes from that distance. Mostly because I was so knocked out by her body. That body—oh, man! She had firm, outthrusting boobs like the nosecones on a Nike missile, a rack that Jane Russell would've have killed for, and they were barely concealed under a blue angora sweater which molded itself to every braless curve. (The sweater was long-sleeved, but she wasn't sweating that I could see, even in that heat.) Pink treader pants lacquered her sassy rump and killer legs, and a pair of strappy high heels in crocodile leather raised her almost as tall as her companion.

My heart was threatening to throw a rod. Herminia finally noticed my reaction, and immediately got huffy. She sneered at the newcomers, especially the woman, said, "*Que puta!*", then returned to her soda, slurping up the last of it with exaggerated rudeness.

I covered the distance between me and the strangers in about five long bounds.

Once I got up close to them, I noticed three odd things.

The shell of the car was cast all in one piece, and was too thin to hold any concealed doors. It didn't look like any metal I had ever seen either, more like plastic.

The man's bare head featured concentric circles of bumps on his skull, just under his scalp, like somebody had buried a form-fitting waffle-iron grid underneath his skin.

And the woman's eyes had no pupils. In place of the expected little human black circles stepped down against the hard sunlight, her irises were centered with sparkling irregular golden starbursts.

My first impulse was to inquire about his appearance, but I couldn't figure out how to do it tactfully. And then the moment when I could have passed, as he stuck out his hand for a shake. I took his paw, and although his grip was strong, his hand felt all wrong, like it had been broken and reassembled funny. Then he spoke.

"Zzzip, *guten*, chirp, *bon*, zzzt, hallo! Name Space, skrk, *chien*, zzz, *perro*, no, zeep, dog! Name Spacedog is. Here to, zzzt, race I am."

The guy's crazy speech was studded with pauses and wrong words. Weird noises—buzzes and clicks and grinding sounds, some of them almost mechanical in nature—alternated with the language. He reminded me of a bad splice job between a tape of an argument in the U.N. cafeteria and one of that new UNIVAC machine at work. But I can't continue to imitate him exactly for the rest of this story, although I can hear his voice today just as clearly as I did fifty years ago. Just remember that every time I report Spacedog's conversation—some of which I only puzzled out years after he had vanished—all those quirks were part of it.

"Well," I said, trying to maintain my cool, "you came to the right place." I was dying to get a look under the nonexistent hood of his car. And the furtive glimpses of his dashboard that I was snagging through the open door were driving me insane! There were more dials and knobs and buttons and toggles on that panel than any car had a right to feature. And some startling missing parts: no steering wheel or pedals!

But all thoughts of engines vanished when I realized Spacedog's girlfriend had come around to our side of the car. And now she stood close enough to me for my breath to stir the fuzzy fibers of her sweater.

"Obdulio Benitez," I said, and put out my sweaty, trembling hand. She took it with her small dry palm and delicate fingers and smiled brilliantly, but said nothing.

Spacedog spoke for her. "This Stella is. Crypto-speciated quasi-conjugal adjunct. Exteriorized anima and inseminatory receptacle."

I couldn't make heads nor tails out of this description, but my brain wasn't working properly just then. I felt like a million buzzing bees had flowed through that ultrafemale handshake and now swarmed in my veins.

Stella continued to smile broadly, without speaking. I couldn't manage to get out a single word myself.

Very reluctantly, I released Stella's hand and tried to focus on Spacedog.

By this time, all the other Bandits and competitors and spectators had come over to see who these visitors were. Excited murmurs and exclamations filled the air at the unexplained mirage of the weird car and its occupants. All the guys were putting themselves in danger of severe whiplash, jerking their heads back and forth between Stella and the car, while the women huddled in a tight knot of suspicion and jealousy, growling and hissing like wet cats. I beamed what I hoped was a reassuring glance at Herminia, but she didn't accept it. In her midriff-knotted shirt and Big Yank jeans, she suddenly looked bumpkinish to me, compared to Stella's sophistication, like Daisy Mae next to Stupefyin' Jones, with me some poor wetback Little Abner caught in the middle.

Finally Joaquin shouldered to the front of the crowd. Doffing his helmet—a football player's old leather

one he had stuffed with asbestos pads—my little buddy said boldly, "So, *amigo*, you're probably here to drag."

"Yes! Probability one! Speed-racing most assuredly Spacedog's goal is! Burn longchain molecules! Haul gluteus! Scorch the planetary surface! Bad to the osteoclasts! Eat my particulates, uniformed societal guardian!"

I could sense that everyone here wanted to ask Spacedog about his green skin. But this was exactly the one question nobody in the Bandits would ever voice. After all the prejudice we had experienced, and our unwritten club law of no bias against any race, we just couldn't make an exception now, no matter how strange the guy's coloration was. Spacedog had come among perhaps the only bunch of racers in the whole country who would never broach the topic of his origins.

And today I wonder just how accidental that arrival was.

The closest Joaquin could come to the topic was a mild, "So, where you from?"

Spacedog hesitated a moment, then answered, "Etruria. Small node of Europa. Earth continent, not satellite. Stella and Spacedog Etruscans are. Speak only old tongue between ourselves."

Here Spacedog unloaded a few sentences of wild lingo that sounded like nothing I had ever heard in Italy. Stella made no reply. All the listeners nodded wisely, mostly willing to accept his unlikely explanation.

"No racing in Etruria. Must to California for kicks come."

Joaquin made his decision then, speaking for all the Bandits. "Well, *pachuco*, Paradise Mesa is racing central in this neighborhood. Let's see what you and your crate can do."

Spacedog clapped his hands together like a five-year-old at the circus. "Most uptaking! Stella, alongside kindly Oblong Benzedrine, please wait."

I didn't know what was harder to believe: my good luck in being nominated as Stella's companion, or what I saw next.

Spacedog hopped into his car and picked up a stretchy helmet like a thick bathing cap. The cordless device was studded with shiny contacts on the inside—contacts that matched the bumps on his head. He snugged the helmet on, and suddenly disappeared from view: the mysterious car doors had rematerialized out of nowhere.

Quiet as smoke, the Flash Gordon car wheeled off then as the crowd parted for it, angling across the lake bed toward the Christmas Tree lights that marked the starting line. By the time all the spectators were properly arrayed, Joaquin had pulled up in his own car.

Joaquin hazed his hides while getting into position, sending up smoke from his tires and exhausting mind-blowing billows of nitro fumes. Very cool and intimidating. But Spacedog, invisible behind his smoked glass, didn't choose to play up his own engine power at all.

The lights worked down to green, and the cars were off.

Spacedog crossed the finish line before Joaquin had covered a third of the distance. Nobody even got

Spacedog's elapsed time. The guys with the stopwatches just couldn't react fast enough.

Joaquin came to a stop halfway down the track in an admission of total defeat I had never seen before.

I turned my head to gauge the reaction of Stella, standing close by my side.

Although she continued to smile, the starry-eyed woman showed no extra emotion, as if the outcome had never been in doubt. She just radiated a kind of animal acceptance of whatever occurred.

Within the next minute, the two drivers had returned to the starting line. Spacedog disappeared his door and emerged from his car.

"Victory! Spacedog *über todo!* More race! More race!"

Well, that was a challenge none of us could refuse.

Over the rest of that afternoon, as the sun sank and reddened, we threw everything we had against Spacedog and his supercar. Or, to use the nickname that the crowd was now chanting, "UFO! UFO!" Useless, all useless, like lobbing softballs to Micky Mantle.

When it was my turn to pit *El Tigre* against the UFO, my heart was in my throat, despite the certainty of failure. What if by some fluke I was the one to beat him? What would Stella—I mean, Herminia—think of that?

Needless to say, I didn't beat him.

Finally, after Spacedog had whipped our collective ass six ways from San Diego, we called it a day and broke out the *cerveza*. Spacedog made a funny face when he first tasted the beer, as if he had never encountered such a drink before. But soon he was downing cans of Blatz like a soldier just home from Korea.

After suitable lubrication, Joaquin broached the question uppermost in all our minds.

"What's that car run on, 'dog?"

"Neutrinos."

"You mean nitro?"

"Yes, nitro. Excuse tongue of inadvertent falsity, please."

Joaquin pondered that revelation for a while, then said, "Custom engine?"

"Spacedog himself engine grow."

We all had a laugh over that, and quit pestering Spacedog. We all figured we'd have a good long look at his engine before too long.

Especially once we had made him the newest member of the Bean Bandits, a solemn ceremony we duly enacted a half hour later.

One arm around Stella's wasp waist, Spacedog raised his beer in a toast when we were done.

"Liquid token of future conquests hoisted! Leguminous reivers hegemony established is!"

We all cheered, though we weren't quite sure what we were endorsing.

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Well, the exploits of the Bean Bandits during the next few months of that long-ago year of 1951 should have been engraved in gold for future generations. But instead, hardly any records were kept. That was just how we thought and how we did—or didn't do—things in those days. Who had time to write stuff down or even snap a few pictures? There was always another tire to change or mill to rebore. Nobody knew that the kicks we were having would someday become the stuff of legend. We just lived for the moment, for the roar of the engines and the satisfaction of leaving your opponents in the dust.

So that's why, search until you're blue, you won't find any pictures of Spacedog and his four-wheeled UFO. Which is not to say you can't get a lot of the surviving oldtimers to talk about him. Nobody who was around then is likely to have forgotten the scorched path he cut through the California racing world. Anybody who ever saw that car of his soundlessly accelerate faster'n a Soviet MIG would never forget their jaw-dropping reaction.

Up and down the state, we raced against a dozen clubs and blew all their doors off. The Bandits had been hot shit before Spacedog, but now we were unbeatable. Soon, we knew, we'd have to go further afield for competition. Out to Bonneville Flats first probably, then off to some of the prestige Southern tracks. (Though how a bunch of beaners would fare down in the Jim Crow South was something we hadn't considered.)

Everybody in the club was ecstatic, especially Joaquin. To be on top of the racing world, that was all he had ever wanted. It didn't matter that he wasn't personally behind the wheel of the top car. As long as Spacedog was a bona fide Bean Bandit, Joaquin could bask in the shared glory.

As for Spacedog himself, I've never seen anyone so hepped-up all the time. You'd think he was earning a million dollars per win. I remember one time after we won every heat against a crew from Long Beach, Spacedog drank twelve cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon and stood atop the roof of his car reciting some kind of Etruscan poetry that sounded like a vacuum cleaner fighting against ten coyotes and losing.

And me, I felt pretty good too. But in my case, it wasn't the racing that made me happy. It was having Stella Star Eyes hanging on my arm.

I never knew whether Spacedog really wanted me personally to watch his girl, or if my good fortune was just an arbitrary thing. Did he pick me for some special reason, like because I was the oldest, most responsible-seeming guy in the Bandits, with a steady girl of his own? Or would the privilege and duty of minding Stella during the races have gone to any guy who Spacedog happened to meet first?

This question bothered me a little from time to time, but mostly got lost in the sensual overload whenever I was side by side with Stella. Race after race I squired her around, fetching her drinks, finding her the best vantage for viewing Spacedog's triumphs. Standing within inches of her, I became lost in the



heavenly geography of her knockout body, my mind turning all hazy with dreamy lust. Something about her silence magnified the sheer animal attraction of her incredible physique. Whenever it came time for me to climb into *El Tigre* and run my own races, I had to practically tear myself away from her.

It was difficult, but for all those months I never acted on my desires. The code said not to steal the girl of another Bandit. And if Stella was feeling anything for me, I never saw any evidence of such feelings.

Stella was always polite and aboveboard. She never gave me any come-ons or randy signals, never flirted or teased. Her lack of speech of course had lots to do with maintenance of her proper behavior, as well as mine. Kind of hard to hit on someone if they can't answer your pickup line. But of course words aren't everything, or even the main thing in such matters, and I was pretty sure even by her body language that she felt entirely neutral toward me.

As for Herminia—well, things had cooled off considerably between us. She didn't come to meets anymore, and we only saw each other about once a week, usually for a movie and a burger and a kiss goodnight at her doorstep. Her cousin Carlos asked me what was wrong between us, and I couldn't really explain. Hell, it wasn't like I was even cheating on her. I was just keeping the foreign girlfriend of one of my fellow clubmembers company during the time he was busy racing.

I don't know how long I would have gone on in this crazy white knight, blue balls way without making a play for Stella. But matters were taken out of my control one day when something really quite simple happened.

Spacedog's UFO ran out of fuel.

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All the Bean Bandits had traveled out to Paradise Mesa for a race against some guys from Bakersfield. Spacedog and Stella were slated to arrive separately from the rest of us. From what we could learn from the secretive, twisty-talking, green-faced Bandit, he and Stella didn't live in San Diego proper, but somewhere on its outskirts. Where, exactly, no one ever had learned. That was just one of the lesser mysteries surrounding Spacedog and his woman. But because we wanted to respect and humor our winningest member, we didn't push it.

The sleek UFO hummed through the gates on its golden tires. All the Bandits and the hometown crowd raised a rousing cheer at the sight of the unbeatable dragster, and a shiver of despair passed like a chill breeze through the Bakersfield boys.

But then the unexpected happened. The miracle car that had never even burped or stuttered before seemed to ripple and shimmer in a wave of unreality, as if plunged into an oven made of mirrors. Then it rolled feebly to a halt halfway to the starting line.

The doors did their vanishing trick, and Spacedog hurtled out, followed more calmly by Stella. The man's face beneath his omnipresent sunglasses and rubber helmet was two shades greener than normal, and he clutched in his hands a black cylinder a little bigger than a beer can. He hustled toward us, yelling wildly in Etruscan. As he came close, I could see that the cylinder had a hairline crack running jaggedly down its length.

Spacedog got a hold of himself enough to switch to his peculiar brand of English.

"Cataclysmic tertiary release! Subatomic bombardment! Unprecedented, anomalous, undetected! All fuel lost! How Spacedog race now?!? Racing Spacedog's life is!"

We had never actually got a chance to inspect Spacedog's engine all these months. One thing or another always intervened, and he seemed reluctant to give us a look. Another matter we didn't push. This sight of this tiny removable fuel chamber was the most detail we had gotten so far about the workings of his supercar.

Joaquin clapped a comradely arm around Spacedog, little young guy acting like a father to the older, bigger man. "Calm down, calm down, *chico!* Let me see that."

Spacedog hopelessly tendered the cylinder to Joaquin, who inspected it and glibly said, "Hell, we'll have this crack welded in a few seconds, then we'll refill it with nitro. Where's the intake valve?"

Looking as if he wanted to tear out his nonexistent hair, Spacedog wailed, "Nitro, nitro! Your nitro not my fuel is! Not nitro, neutrinos! All those once handily contained now blasted spherically above and through your planet and racing away toward Oort Cloud."

Nobody knew what the hell he was talking about. Joaquin persisted anyhow.

"Suppose we weld this here chamber—"

"Noncoherent heat to fix eleven-dimensional gravitic storage modulator? Why not just big rock apply!"

"No need to get huffy, 'dog. Don't you have a spare?"

Spacedog instantly went placid, faster than any normal person would've. "*Verdad! Mais oui!* Back at mother—Back home! Fully charged with particles of powertude!"

"No problem then. We'll just have someone drive you there to pick it up, and you'll be back to racing before you can say 'Jack the Bear.' "

"*Nein!* Spacedog alone must go. No accompaniment needed or possible. Perimeters of defensive illusion not breached must be!"

"Oh ... kay. Who has a street machine they can lend Spacedog?"

"He can take *El Tigre.*" The words were out of my mouth before I knew they were coming.

"Oblong! *Mi companero!* Spacedog your primitive pride and joy will kindly treat. Back in the shortest span!"

Joaquin shook my hand and said, "Thanks, Papa Obie. I know you don't let just anyone drive your buggy. But we need Spacedog to win today."

"Sure. No sweat." I followed Spacedog toward my car and handed him the keys. He slipped easily behind the wheel, toyed with the shift and the pedals, then cranked the engine.

"You sure you're good with driving this kind of car? It doesn't work by helmet, you know ...."

"Downloading scripts even as we speak. Finished! Haptic prompts all in place! *Adios, mon frère!*"

He roared off then in a cloud of dust, faster than Korean Commies retreating before MacArthur's troops.

When the air cleared, I saw Stella left alone in the crowd.

I hurried to her side.

I don't think Spacedog meant to leave her behind. In fact, in retrospect I know he didn't. But he was just so jazzed about racing that he forgot all about his woman. It's an oversight not a few hotrodders have made.

Stella was showing more emotion than I had ever seen her display before, but unfortunately it wasn't the good kind. Her usual smile had been replaced by a fretful grimace. She was kind of twitchy all over, and her jagged unnatural pupils were changing shape and size like the neon chaser lights at Google's.

"Hey, Stella, what's the matter? Don't worry, the old Spacedog will be back soon. And he actually looked like he knew how to drive my car, so he probably won't get in no accidents. Don't worry about nothing. You need a drink? Come with me and we'll grab a couple of cold sodas."

I walked the jittery woman over to where I knew a cooler of drinks waited, on the far side of one of the car trailers. The races had already begun, and everybody who wasn't tinkering with their machines or driving was busy watching. Stella and I were totally alone for the first time since we had met, and Spacedog was accelerating away from us.

I bent over, fishing for two bottles of pop from the cracked ice. "You like grapefruit? All I see here is Squirt." When I straightened up with the drinks and turned to face Stella, I nearly died.

She still wore her blue angora sweater, but she had stripped off her pants. Her bush blazed as platinum as her hairdo.

Now she lunged at the waistband of my trousers, and I dropped both bottles to fend her off.

"Stella, no! We can't! Not here!"

She wouldn't listen. Her hands fastened on my pants and popped the top button. The sound of my zipper unladdering sounded louder to me than the engines a few hundred yards away.

Stella leaped up and wrapped her legs around my waist, and suddenly there was no more possibility of resistance. I was harder than Egyptian algebra, all the stifled lust of several months coming to a head.

I grabbed her boobs as she wriggled her pelvis to fit me into her wet heat, and despite my enthusiasm and hers I nearly wilted.

That was no sweater Stella always wore. Her torso was covered in blue fur. I had twin handfuls of shaggy tit, like grabbing a combination of Lily St. Cyr and Lambchop.

But underneath the short fur they were still the most incredible boobs I had ever handled.

I pivoted around to brace Stella's back against the side of the trailer, and in less time than it takes to tell we finished the hottest, wildest, most surprising knee-trembler I had ever dared to imagine. She never made a sound the whole while.

No one caught us. When it was over and I had stopped panting, we dressed again and rejoined the crowd.

Spacedog returned from his mission in under an hour. With the replacement fuel source installed in his car, he rejoined the field and proceeded to whomp Bakersfield ass.

Finally, around sunset, he came triumphantly to where Stella and I waited for him. But as soon as he got within a few feet of us, Spacedog somehow knew. He threw his arms toward the sky and wailed.

"Ruined! Polluted! The imprinting of my gyno-symbiote all shattered! Now either Oblong or Spacedog must die!"

.....

Behind the wheel of *El Tigre*, heading south out of San Diego toward Ensenada in early darkness, following the tail-lights of Spacedog's sleek UFO down the highway, I felt a crazy mess of emotions. Shame, fear, pride, anger, happiness—I could hardly begin to sort out my feelings. Sure I had betrayed a friend. But I hadn't made the first move. His girl had jumped my bones. And what a jumping! But was she responsible for her own actions? Was Stella simple-minded? Had I taken advantage of a beautiful moron? And what part of Italy grew girls with blue fur and starry eyes?

I tried to dismiss all these confusing questions by concentrating on the road. I didn't know where we were going, but I was honor-bound to go there.

Back at Paradise Mesa, the Bean Bandits had held an impromptu court to decide how the affair between me and Spacedog would play out. (I confessed everything up front. Stella, natch, stayed silent through the whole debate.) Spacedog, as the affronted party, had gotten to call the tune.

"I this *cabron* challenge! Cosmic Chicken the trial!"

Joaquin wore a sad and solemn look. "I don't know about that, 'dog. Playing chicken usually ends up with someone getting killed. We don't want any heat from the cops. That would spell the end of the Bandits."

"No worry. Not here ritual of the Chicken enacted. Distant place, only Oblong and Spacedog present, no witnesses."

"Well, whatever's gotta be." Joaquin gripped both our hands. "May the best Bandit win."

I didn't relish playing Chicken with Spacedog, especially at night. But I owed him something for my betrayal of his trust, and this was the method of payment he had chosen.

Halfway to Ensenada, in the middle of nowhere without a sign of civilization around, Spacedog flipped on his turn signal, then pulled a left offroad. His headlights, then mine, illuminated an empty field.

Empty for the first second or two of our arrival. Then a giant lighted hatch opened in mid-air about twenty feet above us. From the lower edge of the hatch a corrugated ramp extruded itself to the turf, and Spacedog drove straight up it and into sheer impossibility. *El Tigre* was right behind him, but the car must have been driving itself, since my brain was frozen in disbelief.

We came to a halt inside a vast vaulted hanger, full of strange machineries and stranger smells and a couple of smallish spindle-shaped craft that looked like the Air Force's worst nightmares.

I climbed out of my car to join Spacedog and Stella.

"This thing is a spaceship! A *real* UFO! You two aren't from Italy at all! You're aliens!"

*"Verdad, traitorous companero* of yore. Now must you the limits of your primitive worldview finally acknowledge. But surely Bandits one and all already knew as much."

I considered Spacedog's words. "I guess we all did. But we just didn't want to admit it. So long as you were winning races for us, it didn't matter."

"Understood. And I too the boat did not wish to rock. Too much fun I was having! Spacedog not welcome on home world any longer. Too oddball, too flippy, too wild! Only racing with new friends my sole *raison yo soy*. This big secret, not to be broadcast. But you not ever return will, so consequence of my telling nil."

"Let me off this thing, Spacedog! I didn't agree to this!"

"Too late. Observe."

Some kind of deluxe TV screen on a nearby wall flared into life. The whole stinking Earth, small as a cloud-wrapped custom blue gearshift knob, barely registered in a lower corner of the star-filled image.

"Where are we heading?"

"To the hottest track around. Your primary."

"Primary what?"

"Your Sun, your Sun!"

I slumped back against my car. "We're going to play chicken against the Sun?"

"Correct."

"Would you at least tell me why we have to do this?"

Spacedog indicated the hangdog Stella, who looked as if she were suffering from the worst kind of hangover combined with a bad case of the flu. "My exteriorized anima you have psychosomatically contaminated. No longer bonded to me alone, but now partly to you she is. With the death of one of us, she whole will restored be."

There was a lot more talk about entangled muon pairs and hormonal tipping points and morphic resonance and quantum brain structures and the various telepathic alien animals that Stella had been constructed from, and how she had panicked once Spacedog's mentality passed out of contact and how she had fastened on me as his replacement. But I wasn't paying any attention, because all I could focus on was Spacedog's eyes.

He had removed his sunglasses to reveal some kind of chrome robot eyeballs in place of natural ones. Now he levered up the hood of my car, and his eyeballs telescoped out of his green face on flexible stalks to examine hidden parts of my engine.

"Impossible to retrofit. Must dissolve and grow new one."

He went to a cabinet and found what appeared to be a spray can and a silver egg. He sprayed *El Tigre's* engine that I had labored so many hours on, and the whole thing just crumbled into sand. Then he dropped the egg into the empty space, sprayed that from the same can—only after twisting the nozzle—and closed the hood.

"New powerplant ready by time we Mercury pass. Now to control room for much-needed sustenance."

We three rode some kind of antigravity chute up to the bridge. A ring of TVs showed a dozen different outer space views that sent my brain deeper into a tizzy. The view that really flipped me out was the one that displayed our Sun. That raging furnace swelled even as I watched, and soon filled the whole screen. Then the magnification dropped a notch, and the hellspot was small again. But the whole cycle just kept repeating: swell, diminish, swell, diminish—At this rate we'd be there in no time.

Spacedog and I sat down in some kind of chairs that squirmed around to accommodate our butts. Stella moved half-heartedly about, assembling some kind of space food. I guess I ate, but I don't really remember. Nobody said anything until Spacedog spoke. His manic manner had faded to a thoughtful cast.

"Resistance to Stella by any hominid inseminator futile is, Oblong. This I admit. Also my complicity and unforeseenness in leaving her behind under your exclusive care. And yet our duel in the Sun must still take place. Regrets profound, *lo siento mucho, pero que sera, sera.*"

"Likewise, I'm sure."

In no time Mercury hurtled by us like a forlorn piece of grit under the wheels of a dragster. When the spaceship finally stopped, Spacedog told me we were just one million miles from the Sun.

On the TV down in the hanger, the Sun boiled and lashed like an insane beast. Giant prominences erupted, whipped the vacuum, then collapsed back into the white-hot speckled chaos of the surface. Heaving clouds of colored gases shimmered like Gypsy Rose Lee. The scene was like looking into Satan's flaming asshole itself.

I drew my terrified eyes away to focus on the new engine under the hood of *El Tigre*. A featureless irregular silver blob, the mechanism floated, unattached to any drive train or controls.

"This neutrinos eats. Not from small container source used on Earth, but taking from ambient flux put out by Sun. Think of ramscoop on hood of your car. Power from neutrinos used to warp spacetime geodesics and propel vehicle. Much higher speeds reached out here."

"And how do I control it? I don't have head bumps to run a helmet like you."

"Neutrino drive now interfaced to your standard controls. Pedals, steering wheel, shift."

"So, I assume we both race toward the Sun till one of us burns up?"

"Not so. Contest over too soon if heat a factor. Protective fields surrounding your car absolutely resistant to temperatures of over ten billion kelvins. Sun only one million tops."

"Then what's the danger?"

"Gravity. Drive not powerful enough to overcome Sun's pull. Too close, and trapped forever you are, lost in the turbulence of convection zone. Death when limited oxygen supply in car runs out. Quite painless, actually, with unique scenic surroundings."

"So the first one to chicken out actually survives and wins Stella."

"Yes. But then victor also number one coward fake hotrod, full of *merde*, and must forever live with undying shame."

I considered for a moment. The alien logic was all twisted, with the "chicken" getting the girl. But then the matter of honor hit home. My mind ran back to the war, when I had nearly bought the farm a score of times, sticking my head up out of the foxhole to snap off a few rounds, rather than be thought a coward. Maybe Spacedog's logic wasn't so twisted after all.

"With any luck, both of us'll die. Let's rumble."

Stella had been left back on the bridge. I climbed behind the wheel of *El Tigre*, and noticed a small TV screen that looked like it had been grown somehow right onto my dash. The tiny TV lit up, showing Spacedog in the cockpit of UFO.

"Shields on," said Spacedog, and instantly our two vehicles were surrounded by glowing transparent bubbles of force.

"Actual photons not permitted to truly pass through shields to your eyes. Exterior conditions reconstructed based on information hitting shields, then result displayed on inside of bubble. Sophisticated simulation, all virtual but highly accurate."

The hull hatch opened, air puffed away, and the car we called the UFO zipped out. Tentatively I pressed the accelerator and *El Tigre* responded like a charm.

Outside the big ship, we aimed our noses at the raving furnace of the Sun. A virtual set of Christmas Tree lights appeared on the inner surface of my shields and began to work down to green.

I didn't wait, but tromped down when they turned yellow, shooting ahead of Spacedog.

Even if I had to cheat, this was one race between us I was going to win. Or lose, depending on your point of view.

All the fear and resignation and dismay I had felt inside the ship had been burned away by the awesome

sight of the Sun and realization of the unique chance I had been given.

No one on Earth had ever pulled a drag like this, a neutrino drag. Behind the wheel of the most souped-up car ever, I was blasting down God's own blacktop, toward certain glorious death and a place in racing legend.

Assuming Spacedog was honorable enough to report back to the Bandits.

"You'd better tell Joaquin and everyone else about me winning!" I yelled at the TV screen.

"Factual impossibility! Spacedog to perish here! You chicken out will!"

I looked out my side window and saw that Spacedog had pulled up even with me. "Never!" I yelled, then shifted up.

I noticed then that my speedometer had been recalibrated—into fractions of lightspeed, according to the new label—and that I was hitting point oh one.

This race was going to be over pretty damn fast.

"Entering fringes of photosphere now, coward! Turn back!"

Although my cockpit was cool, I was sweating buckets. The enormous tendrils of the Sun coiled around us in slow-motion horror, arcs of fire big enough to swallow the whole Earth.

I put *El Tigre* in third gear.

"I your shadow am! Cars equal, no outrunning each other!"

"Then join me in hell, Spacedog!"

And at that instant some force yanked my nose ninety degrees off course. I spun my wheel uselessly, screamed and swore, but all to no avail.

"Ha-ha! Spacedog wins! I satisfied die! Oblong, listen! Ounce for ounce, the human body hotter than the Sun burns!"

And with those enigmatic words, he flew on straight for the heart of the star.

*El Tigre* exited the photosphere at right angles to its entrance path. And there was the big ship, guiding me back inside along some kind of invivisible attraction beam.

Stella had pulled me out of the death race.

Me, not Spacedog.

She entered the hanger once it had filled with air again. I climbed out of *El Tigre*, exhausted and numb.

But when I saw her restored to her old vivacious ultra-Torchy magnificence, I just couldn't feel down.

She came into my arms and we made love right there, her gorgeous ass resting on the flames painted



across *El Tigre's* fender.

. . . . .

We sunk the spaceship—including *El Tigre*, the one item that really hurt me to lose—in the Pacific a mile offshore, more by accident than on purpose. Stella kind of knew how to pilot it, but not really. The swim nearly killed us, and I guess we were lucky to escape alive. We made our way back to San Diego and the old scene: my business, the Bandits, a very frosty Herminia. We tried to fit back into the old routines, but it just didn't work out. I had lost my taste for drag racing, and working as a plain old mechanic on cars just didn't make sense any longer. Besides, although Joaquin and the Bandits never said anything outright, I knew they all thought I had killed Spacedog to get his girl.

And of course in a way I had.

Stella and I moved to San Francisco and opened up a coffee shop. We called it "The Garage," and decorated it with fake posters and lame souvenirs no real hotrodder would have ever approved of. But Stella drew customers like money draws lawyers, and we did well.

I didn't have any regrets about surviving. I knew I had been prepared to run that solar race to the deadly finish line, and that only Stella's intervention had stopped me. The mystery of that one decisive act of hers immediately began to bug me, once we were home safe. Pulling my ass out of the solar fires represented the most initiative and individuality she had ever exhibited, before or since. Was she acting like a loyal slave simply to preserve the "master" she had most recently bonded with? Or did she really love me and prefer my companionship over Spacedog's? After a few years, this question really began to obsess me. I couldn't get the answer out of Stella in words of course. But one day she spontaneously took up a pen and some paper and drew me her reply.

The rough but vivid cartoon showed Stella entering some kind of Buck Rogers device and being melted down to slime, while from a second chamber a different woman emerged, to be welcomed by Spacedog with open arms.

Evidently, Stella feared being traded in for a newer model companion, like a car with too many miles on it. She knew I'd do no such thing.

With that mystery off my mind, the only thing I still worried a little bit about, off and on, was the fate of Spacedog's UFO.

After some thought, I figured that the powerplant inside the protective forcefield was still sucking down neutrinos, and that Spacedog's suffocated corpse was hauling ass in tight orbit around and around the Sun, or was maybe even stuck at the center, doing Lord knows what to the way the Sun worked.

When the astronomy guys began talking in the Sixties about the Sun not making enough neutrinos to fit their theories, I knew my hunch was right.

But what can I do? All this took place fifty years ago, and Earth's still around, right? A little hotter on the average, sure, but everyone agrees that's due to all the chemicals in the atmosphere, not the changing Sun. It's just that I want to tell someone, so that the information survives after I'm gone. I can't count on

Stella carrying the knowledge forward. Oh, sure, she hasn't aged one iota in five decades, and she'll probably be around for another century or two. (You should see the envious looks I get from guys as she pushes my wheelchair down the street. I hope she fixes on a nice young fellow when I kick the bucket.) But in all that time she's still never said a word. I don't think she's got the kind of intelligence that needs or uses speech. So I can't rely on her.

And I can almost hear Spacedog say, "*Verdad, companero!* Every racer ultimately all alone is!"

The End

—The author would like to acknowledge Leah Kerr's *Driving Me Wild* (Juno Books, 2000) as an important source of information on the history of hot rodding.