

I Saw the Light

by Terry Bisson

I saw the light. So did you. Everybody did.

Remember where you were the first time you saw it? Of course you do. I was living in Arizona, Tucson, more or less retired. I was throwing sticks. They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but who would want to? There aren't any new tricks, just the old tried and true. "Good boy, Sam," I would say, and he would say "woof," and there we would go again. I used to amuse myself thinking it was Sam who was teaching me to throw, but I don't think that any more. It was night, and desert nights are bright, even with a quarter moon. Sam stopped, halfway back to me, dropped his stick and began to howl. He was looking up, over my head. I turned and looked up toward the moon, and you know the rest. There it was, blinking in threes: *dot dot dot*, twice a minute. On the Moon, where no one had been in thirty years. Twenty nine, eight months, and four days, exactly; I knew, because I had been the last to leave, the one who locked the door behind me.

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Sam's a big yellow mutt; his first name is Play it Again, so I always call him by his last. He was a parting gift from my third ex, who was himself a parting gift from my second. Lunar subcrust engineers shouldn't marry: our peculiar talents take us to too many faraway places. Or to one, anyway.

"Come on boy," I said, and we headed back into the minimally furnished condo I call home, leaving the stick behind—even though sticks are not all that easy to find in Arizona, or for that matter on the Moon.

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The light on the Moon was front page news the next morning—*dot dot dot*—and by the third day it was estimated that all but a tiny fraction of Earth's six point four billion had seen it. UNASA confirmed that the light was not from Marco Polo Station (I could have told them that) but from a spot almost a hundred kilometers away, on the broad, dark plain of the Sinus Medii: the exact center of the Moon as seen from Earth.

I figured there would have to be an investigation, so I made a few calls. I was not really hopeful, but you never knew. I still had a few friends in the Agency. I was hoping that, if nothing else, this light would get us back to the Moon. It wasn't only or even primarily for myself that I was hoping; it was for humanity, all of us, past and future. It seemed a shame to learn to soar off the planet and then quit.

Okay, so it's not soaring: it's more like a push-up, grunting and heaving, but you know what I mean.

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First Contact: strange lights on the Moon: may we have your attention, please. The tabs speculated, the pundits punded, and UNASA prepared the first international expedition since the abandonment of Marco Polo in 20—. I had made, as I mentioned, a few calls, but I hadn't really expected anything. A sixty-one-year-old woman does not exactly fit the profile for space flight and lunar exploration. So imagine, as they say, My Surprise, when the phone rang. It was Berenson, my Russian-English boss from the old days. I knew him immediately by his accent even though it had been twenty-nine years eight months and seven days.

"Bee!?" (Which is what we called him.)

"I requested you as number two for the tech team. Logistically this is a cake walk and age is not a problem, if you're still in shape. There will be five altogether, three SETI and two tech."

"How soon?" I asked, trying to hide my excitement.

"Start packing."

I hung up and screamed, or howled, or whatever. Sam came running. "I'm going back to the Moon!" I said.

"Woof!" he said, jowls flopping; as always, happier for me than for himself.

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Our trip was put together with a minimum of publicity and fanfare. We were due at Novy Mir in less than a week. I wasn't to tell anyone where I was going. Of course, I had already told Sam.

"I'm leaving you here with Willoughby," I said. "I'll be back soon. Three, four weeks max. Meanwhile, you be good, hear?"

"Where are you going, exactly?" My next door neighbor, Willoughby, is a retired FBI agent, a type that both hates and loves secrets, depending on who is keeping them, and why.

"An old lover," I said, with a wink. It was one of my better moments.

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Zero G felt perfectly normal; you don't forget how to fly, just as you don't forget how to walk. I felt ten

years younger immediately. It was great to be back in the Big Empty, even if it meant a night or two on Novy Mir, the sprawling, smelly space station in Clarke orbit.

Bee was the first one I saw when I entered the day room we had been assigned. He was with Yoshi, his old number two.

"I thought I was number two!" I complained.

"You are," Bee replied with a laugh. "Yoshi is number one." Turned out he was leading SETI. His partners were a scowling Chinese biologist named Chang, and a smiling Indian linguist named Erin Vishnu whose mother had gotten pregnant during Julia Roberts' Academy Awards acceptance speech. I didn't learn this until later, of course; at first the "sadies" (as Yoshi and I called them) were very reserved.

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It was a two-day trip from high Earth orbit to the Moon. Bee and I caught up on old times (he had saved my life twice, which cements a friendship) while Yoshi flew the ship and studied the manuals, which she already knew by heart. So did I. I had helped her and Bee run the pumps, extracting environmental samples from buried comet ice, for almost six years at Polo.

The SETI team, the sadies, were the scientific payload. The heart of the matter, as it were. They had been established to deal directly, discretely, and creatively, with any First Contact situation, answerable to no government—not even UNASA.

"No one really thought it would ever happen," Bee told me. "So we have complete autonomy; for two weeks anyway."

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We were just preparing for lunar capture when I got the call from Willoughby—my next door neighbor, remember? It was Sam. He was desolate, disconsolate, wouldn't eat; he just howled—at the moon, of course, as if he knew where I was headed.

"How the Hell did you get through to me here?" I asked. I needn't have. Those FBI guys never let go of their connections. I could hear Sam in the background, whining.

Willoughby held the phone, and I said, "Hang in there, boy, I'll be home soon."

"Woof," was his answer; he was nothing if not unconvinced.

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The light source was about a hundred klicks from Marco Polo, and we crossed over the old station on our recon orbit. I got all teary-eyed, seeing our domes and tunnels, still intact here where the weather runs in billion year cycles; every scratch and scuff in the lunar dust just as we had left it, twenty-nine years eight months and eighteen days before.

Then we saw the light itself as we passed over Sinus Medii. It was coming from a perfect jet black pyramid, ten meters on a side, too small to show up in amateur photos but plenty large enough to have been studied from Novy Mir.

"There haven't been any pictures of this!" I said. "Not even on the internet." Bee just smiled and I realized then that his SETI team had powers that belied their modest size and relative obscurity.

The pyramid was pure black, the only pure thing on the Moon, which is all shades of gray.

It was still throwing light, *dot dot dot*, a new sequence every twenty-seven seconds.

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We set down next to the pyramid in a cloud of slow-settling dust. If we had hoped to be greeted by the aliens when the dust cleared (and we had; hopes are less restricted than expectations), we were duly disappointed.

The pyramid was silent and still, as black as a rip in the Universe. It was still (we confirmed from Novy Mir) transmitting its *dot dot dot* twice a minute, but the light was, for some reason, invisible from our position beside it.

Still teary-eyed, I felt like a dancer; light on my feet, without the creaking that comes with age and miles. I realized that it was not the moon I had missed all these years, but the one-sixth gravity, and of course my youth.

SETI had arranged for a two week stay, so I immediately sunk a probe and hit pay dirt (or ice). The sadies went to work, photographing the pyramid from all sides, while Yoshi and I unfolded the dome and adjusted the environmental to break down the oxygen and hydrogen (for fuel) extracted from the cometary trash imbedded under the lunar crust.

By Day Two (sticklers for tradition, we ran on Houston time) we had the ship for a dorm, and the attached geodesic as a day room and observation dome, complete with fast-plants and a hot tub which also heated the dome and ship. By Day Three I knew I should have been bored. Shouldn't something have happened by now?

"What would you have us do?" Bee asked, "knock?"

"Why not?" I said, returning his smile. I was in no hurry; I was just glad to have a reason to be here, back home, on the Moon. It felt—right. Even Yoshi, an olympic complainer, was not complaining, though her narrow face was not exactly wreathed in smiles. "What about ground control?" she asked. "Aren't they pushing you?"

"There isn't any ground control," Bee said. "Or haven't you noticed?" The SETI mandate was a blank slate, designed to remove First Contact, if it ever came to pass, from the constraints of diplomacy and

politics. The pace of events was their call.

By Day Four Yoshi and I had nothing to do except watch the sadies in their clumsy white suits measure and photograph and analyze the pyramid. I kept my doubts to myself, reluctant to interfere, but Yoshi was never one to recognize such restraints. "Aren't you guys disappointed?" she asked at the end of the day.

"Not yet. It feels right to go slow," Bee replied. He was sitting with us in the hot tub, soaking off the chill that comes with EVAs, even in a suit. "Can't you feel it?"

Feel what? We both looked at him, puzzled.

"The familiarity. I feel it; we all feel it. A feeling that we are in the right place, doing the right thing."

"I thought it was just me," I said. "Being back here."

"We all feel it," said Chang, who was sitting on the floor in his long johns, tapping on a laptop. "We are here to record and evaluate everything. Feelings included. Right, Vish?"

"Right."

"You've got another week," said Yoshi.

"Knock and you shall enter," I said.

"Hmmm," said Bee.

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And knock he did. The next day, at the end of their routine explorations, he reached up with a heavy gloved mitt and rapped three times on the side of the pyramid.

Yoshi and I were watching from the dome.

"I knocked," Bee said to me, as he was unsuited just inside the airlock (we entered and exited through the ship). Instead of answering, I pulled all three of the sadies into the dome, and pointed across the little plain of dust toward the pyramid.

"Damn," said Chang. He all but smiled. Vishnu looked amazed. Bee, delighted. There it was:

A handprint, in bright yellow, against the darker-than-midnight black, halfway up the pyramid.

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The next "morning" the print was still there, and the sadies were suited up early. Yoshi and I watched them jumping clumsily around, stirring up the dust, fitting their stiff gloves against the handprint, waiting for something to happen. Hoping for something to happen.

Nothing did.

Later in the hot tub we were all silent. Outside the dome, we could see the print, bright yellow in the Moon's cruel gray. We felt gloomy and hopeful at the same time. Familiarity had been replaced by a kind of desperate eagerness.

"It wants something," said Bee.

"Maybe it wants a touch," I said.

"A touch?" Chang was scornful.

I ignored him and addressed myself to Bee. "You know, not a glove."

"It's high vac out there," Vishnu reminded me. "We can't exactly take off our gloves."

"But of course we can!" Bee said, slapping the water like a boy. I grinned and gave him five. There were the peels.

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Peels are emergency spray-on suits to be used in case of sudden decompression. Coupled with a "paper" helmet, a peel will give you anywhere from two to twenty minutes to find an airlock or an emergency vehicle—or say your prayers.

I was in fact the only one present who had actually used a peel, after a sudden rockslide collapsed Polo's ag dome. Thanks to the peel I had survived the twelve minutes it took Bee to get to me with a Rover. I could still feel the cold of those long twelve minutes in my bones.

The next "day" (Six) they tried it. Yoshi and I watched from the dome as Bee in his peel and the sadies in their white suits approached the pyramid, Bee in the lead. He was hurrying, of course; there's no other way to moonwalk in a peel. I could feel how cold he was.

They all stopped and stood in a line, right in front of the print. With his left hand Bee grabbed Chang's mitt, and Chang grabbed Vishnu's. Then Bee placed his right hand high on the side of the pyramid, directly over the print.

And it happened.

Something—a lens, a door?—opened in the side of the pyramid, and they stepped through: one, two, three: Bee, Chang, Vishnu. It closed behind them and they were gone.

"Holy shit," said Yoshi.

"Knock and you shall enter," I said. It was another of my better moments.

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Yoshi and I watched the pyramid, wordlessly. Was there air in there? How could Bee survive? After twenty minutes Yoshi began to suit up for a rescue EVA. I was the only one watching two minutes later (twenty-one point four minutes from entry, timed on the sadies' fixed video camera) when the lens opened and the three emerged, stumbling, Bee in the lead. Yoshi opened the airlock for them and they staggered in, Bee falling into my arms. While Yoshi helped the other sadies un-suit, I ripped off his paper helmet and pulled him into the hot tub, which would dissolve his peel. He was shivering and grinning.

Yoshi joined us, feet only. "Why's he grinning?"

"Ask him," I said. I was rubbing one of his feet while he rubbed the other.

Bee was opening his mouth and closing it without making a sound, like a fish.

"It was big in there," he said, finally; still with the goofy grin. "Bigger on the inside than on the outside."

"What happened?" I asked.

"We went in and the door closed behind us. It was dark but we could see, don't ask me why. We took our helmets off ..."

"Took your helmets off!?" Yoshi was offended.

"Don't ask me why. We just did, all of us. Then we stepped forward, all together I think, and saw the light."

"Wait a minute," I said.

"It was like a glow."

"But bright," said Chang, who had joined us. "The brightest thing I have ever seen."

"The next thing I knew I was on my knees," said Bee. "I could feel this hand on the top of my head."

"A hand?" Yoshi was offended again.

"It felt like a yellow hand," Vishnu said, peeling off her long johns; it was the first time I had seen her undressed.

"It was definitely a hand," Bee said. "I could tell it was a hand though I couldn't see anything. I don't think I even looked."

"It was all light," said Chang. "And this feeling. It was a hand on the top of my head."

"It felt so good," said Vishnu, lowering herself into the water. She had the body of a girl.

"Sounds like an acid trip," I said. "Or a three-armed alien."

"What was the communication?" Yoshi asked. "What was said?"

"The feeling was the communication," Bee said. "That was all. Nothing was said. We were just there, all three of us, on our knees, looking into the light."

"With a feeling of ... of ..." Chang gave up.

"I don't like this," said Vishnu, looking down at herself, as if just realizing she was nude. "Shouldn't we be talking about this among ourselves first?"

"It's okay," said Bee. "We can proceed any way we decide is best, and this feels okay, doesn't it? These are our closest comrades here, after a million years of evolution."

Huh? He looked stoned to me.

"So whatever it is, it came all this way to pat you on the head?" Yoshi grumbled.

Bee and Chang just grinned. Vishnu looked troubled. I wondered if she were wishing she had kept her long johns on.

"Maybe it's God," I said.

"It's a they," Bee said, shaking his head.

"More than one," said Vishnu. "Many."

"And they know us," Chang said.

"Yes! That's the communication," Bee said. "They know us, and we know them. That was the feeling, more than a feeling, really. That's what they wanted to tell us."

"They?" Yoshi rolled her eyes. "They called you up here for a feeling? There's no communication?"

"Feelings are real," said Bee. "Maybe that's all it will be. Who knows. The idea behind SETI is that First Contact will probably be something unexpected."

"This is unexpected," said Vishnu. "But not unfamiliar. Very familiar. We have been here before."

"Here?" I asked.

"In their company," said Chang. "Being with them felt good. Better than good. Great."

"Great," said Yoshi, looking disgusted.

"And now?" I asked. "Next?"

"I don't know," said Bee, looking out toward the black pyramid, with its yellow print halfway up the side. "There's something, something else. I guess we go back."

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And so they did. The next "morning" they all went out again, Chang and Vishnu suited and Bee leading, in his peel. They emerged after only twenty minutes this time, with the same lunatic grins.

"It's not like we aren't conscious in there," said Chang, as his helmet came off. "It's more like we're conscious for the first time."

"Right," said Vishnu.

I would have made another acid trip joke, but I didn't want to discourage them. This was, after all, I told myself, the long awaited First Contact, for which humanity had waited a million years or more.

Wasn't it?

"Who are they? What are they? What do they want from us?" asked Yoshi.

"They want to be with us," said Vishnu, dreamily peeling off her long johns. "Just like we want to be with them."

"It's all feelings," said Bee, slipping into the pool beside me. He looked like the Michelin tire man in his foam suit, before it started to dissolve into harmless polymer chains. "But the feelings contain information."

"They sort of precipitate into information," said Chang.

"The feelings *are* information," said Vishnu, nude again. "We are in contact with an entity that we have been in contact with before. And have always wanted to be in contact with again."

"That's the feeling!" said Chang eagerly. "Desire, and the fulfillment of desire."

"Sounds sort of sexy," I said.

"It's a wonderful feeling," said Bee, taking me more seriously than I took myself. "But it's changing, too. There's something else."

"Something dark," said Vishnu.

"Dark how? Dark what?" Yoshi was putting the helmets and suits away, looking annoyed.

"It's too soon to say," said Bee. "First we all need to get some sleep. That's an order."

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"Wake up."

It was Yoshi.

"It's Berenson, he's gone. He's in there."

"What?" I sat up, almost spilling out of my hammock. I had been dreaming I was home on Earth with Sam, trying to explain something to him, about sticks.

"I thought I saw him, in a peel, going in, about five minutes ago."

"Are you sure?"

"I thought I might be dreaming, so I checked. The other sadies are in their hammocks, but Berenson is gone."

"So what do you think we should do?"

Twenty minutes later I was in boots and long johns, spraying on a peel. I shook open a paper helmet, checking to make sure it had two full air cans (twenty minutes). I had thought I remembered the cold and was prepared for the it, but I wasn't. It was insulting, crushing, humbling.

I hurried toward the pyramid. The dust cracked under my feet with that weird squeak of molecules that have never—not by wind, not by water, not by weather—been rubbed together. The *squeak* came up through my bones as sound. I had forgotten it.

I saw Yoshi and the sadies, awake now, watching from the dome. I waved as I ran. I could feel the vacuum slicing my fingertips, like steel knives.

I put my hand against the side of the pyramid, covering the print, and *something* happened. I wasn't sure what. It opened, I went in; it was dark, I was alone.

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I was inside. I didn't know, still don't know, how I got there. Before I knew what I was doing, I was taking off my helmet.

The air smelled like lemons. It was cold, but not Moon cold. The pyramid was larger inside, just as Bee had said, tapering up to a cone of darkness in the center.

And there was a light. Also in the center. It had a kind of substance light doesn't always, doesn't often, doesn't ever, have. It was beckoning; I approached. It all seemed natural, as if everything I was doing was what I had always wanted to do. It felt good; very good. It felt great. The light grew brighter and I fell to my knees, but it was more like rising, really. I couldn't stand but I didn't want to stand. I felt a hand on my head: I knew it was a hand, and I knew what hand it was! I had a million questions, I knew, but I couldn't think, even when I tried. I was so very glad to be here, back here, where I belonged. Where I was glad to be.

I felt a hand in mine. Bee. He was pulling me backward, away from the light, into the cold and the darkness. We were putting on our helmets, Bee and I. We were stepping together across the squeaky surface of the moon, toward the lighted dome, which looked like a zoo, full of puzzled friendly faces, pressed against the glass.

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"Are you okay?" Yoshi asked.

I saw my breasts floating in front of me and realized I was in the hot tub. I laughed. Bee laughed with me. I knew that the grin on his face was a reflection of my own. We were in the water and someone was handing me a cup of coffee.

Joe, they used to call it. A cup of joe. "I'm okay," I said. "I went in to get you, Bee."

"I know, but you shouldn't have. You should have awakened the others."

I understood. It was a break in the protocol. "We know them and they know us," I said. It was like remembering something; it was easy, and yet impossible if you couldn't do it. "They are glad to see us."

"Not exactly," said Bee. "There's a melancholy, too."

"Something very sad," said Vishnu. She was wearing her nightgown and her tiny feet were in the water next to my shoulder.

She was right. There had been a reproach, a disappointment. "I can feel it, too," said Chang.

"Feel what?" asked Yoshi, tapping me on the head with a long finger, like a teacher admonishing a bad student. "Tell me what happened. Now."

"There are just these feelings," I said. "Then afterward, they sort of turn into, not ideas exactly, sort of like memories. Is that what you want to know?"

"I want to know what's fucking happening. And I want you to tell me."

"Don't be hard on her," said Bee. "We're all just figuring it out."

"Figuring what out?!"

"What they want," said Chang. "They love us, they wanted to find us. They found us."

"And we love them!" I said. "That's why we can't see them."

"That's right!" said Bee, looking at me as if I were a genius. "We love them so much that all we can see is the light of our love."

"I hope this is all going in your fucking report," said Yoshi, sounding disgusted.

"They found us again," said Chang. "That's why we are so happy."

"But something is wrong," said Bee. "We have to go back in. Once more."

"And do I get to go?" I could still feel the hand on my head. I wanted to feel it there again, more than anything.

"We'll all go this time," Bee said.

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But we didn't all go. Yoshi had no desire to go; plus, she explained, she felt that somebody had to stay behind and stay on top of systems.

"Designated driver," said Bee, laughing as we sprayed each other. He and I were the only ones in peels. Chang and Vishnu wore suits. I felt I was one of the sadies now, and they treated me as such. Even Chang. We crossed the squeaky dust and held hands by the pyramid. Looking back I saw Yoshi in the dome, looking a little bit abandoned.

Bee hit the print and there we were, inside. I unstuck my helmet and looked for the light. I fell to my knees. "Oh boy," I said when I felt the hand on my head.

Something was wrong. Everything was okay but something was wrong. After a few moments of confusion, we were pushed out the door, holding hands, into the cold. I couldn't remember putting my helmet on, but I was breathing as we hurried toward the lights of the dome.

We were shaking. I was shaking all over. I sat in the hot tub and watched my suit dissolve, like dry ice, leaving no trace.

"Hey, don't cry," said Bee. "I know we're all upset."

"It's okay to cry," said Vishnu.

I was crying.

"What happened?" asked Yoshi. "God damn it, tell me."

"They're leaving," said Bee.

"They don't want us," I said. "They don't want us any more."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"We should all just be still for a while," said Bee. "Come and get in the water, Chang. Vishnu. Claire."

Claire. My parents gave me that name. I hadn't thought about them in a long time. I started to cry again, really hard this time.

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By noon we were warmed and fed—and dejected. "It's over," Bee said finally.

"They're leaving," Chang said. I knew it too. We all knew the same things. The feelings turned into ideas, gradually, like the graphics in a slow web connection. Sooner or later we all had the same pictures in our minds.

"They're disappointed in us," I said.

"I want them to stay," said Vishnu.

"Of course, we want to be with them," said Bee. "But we can't make them want to be with us."

"What in the hell are you all talking about?" asked Yoshi.

"They're leaving," I said. I pointed outside. The yellow print was gone, and the pyramid looked black and forbidding. Closed.

"Explain, damn it."

"The thing is, we knew them long ago," said Bee. As I listened, my emotions were spinning, like dust in sunlight, settling as he spoke onto the table of my mind, in which his voice, like a fingertip, traced his words: "This is not first contact, it is second contact."

And what he was saying, we all knew.

"They were our gods," said Chang.

"Not exactly," said Vishnu. "We were their companion species, their helper. We lived only to please them. We looked up to them."

"Their favorite," I said. "Their pet."

"And they loved us," said Chang. "And they love us still."

"But they wanted more," said Bee. "They set us free so we could develop without them. They put us down on Earth, where we could escape the worship of them that makes our knees go weak and our minds go blank. They wanted a true companion. They thought if they left us alone we would develop into a sentient race on our own."

"And we did," I said, surprised at how much I knew; at the depth of the ideas and images that had been implanted in me. "The light was a test, to see if we had developed enough to leave the Earth and come to them."

"They knew better than to appear among us," said Chang. "Can you imagine the chaos?"

"It might have been great," said Vishnu.

"It was a test," said Bee. "And we did it, we passed. They were so pleased."

"But then disappointed," I said. "Because nothing had really changed."

"It might have been great," said Vishnu, again.

"We still can't see them; our minds still go blank in their presence. We fall to our knees and worship them, and that's all we can do, even now."

"We can't love them less," said Chang bitterly. "How can they expect us to love them less?"

"There's a message for you," said Yoshi.

"For me?" My mind wrenched itself back to the real world. I stood up, dripping. Water drips in long sheets on the Moon. I looked outside and saw that the pyramid was gone.

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"How did you find me here?"

"Haven't we been through that before?" It was Willoughby, my next door neighbor, the retired FBI agent. "The light's gone out, what did you guys do?"

"Put Sam on," I said.

"He won't eat. How long before you get back?"

"A week, probably," I said. "We will have to write a report." I heard a noise behind me; it was Chang in tears.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, we're fine," I said. It was over and I was glad. "Put Sam on."

"Hold on."

Yoshi had joined them in the pool, standing there in her orange coveralls, wet to the knees. They were hugging and crying. I heard a sort of gruff whine.

"Sam, is that you?"

"Woof!"

"Sam, listen carefully. Can you hear me?"

I could imagine Sam looking around, sniffing, trying to locate the face and hand and smell that went with the voice.

"I'll be back soon," I said. "Did you miss me?"

"Woof."

"I'm coming home, and I won't leave you alone again, I promise."

The End

For Hannah

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