

## How It Feels

By Robert Reed

PAULINE

My one day was pretty much great. Alien possession is kind of fun, really! The Glick-Pick had been orbiting us for a full week, and the stories were seeping out about secret deals being made with the government. “Cultural diffusion agreements,” sources called them. We would get fancy new technologies, and the aliens got to rent human bodies. That's how the Glick-Pick learned about new species, I guess. Of course when I heard that news, I was pretty much like everybody. Scared shitless. I kept imagining these wormy things pushing in through my rectum, slithering up my spine, then building little houses inside my brain. But actually that's not how the Glick-Pick work. Really, there's nothing gross about it. What they do, they slip through your scalp while you're sleeping. Eight or nine of them at a time, usually. I don't know why. But you sleep right through the business, and if there's anything weird about your dreams that night ... well, it's not their fault. They've practiced this stuff for a million years. They're professionals. Really, the aliens know how to treat a person. Better than a lot of the men I've known, I could say.

Anyway, after that first week, I'd convinced myself that there wasn't much to worry about. The odds of being possessed weren't even one in a thousand, I kept hearing. Which made it pretty unlikely that I'd ever be picked, or that I'd ever see anybody who was.

But the thing is: The Glick-Pick had a thing for women.

More often than not, young women.

And who'd guess that their favorite young women were single ladies with a passion for body art and beer and boys and parties and more beer, and sometimes waking up in a strange guy's bed?

Don't get me started. There's reasons, and they're not your particular business. What matters is that they found me where I was, and I never felt them get inside me. I was having some bad dreams—not too uncommon after my kind of night—and then all of the sudden, I was awake. Only I wasn't. You know? My eyes were open, and I was seeing out of them. Down my ears came this half-choked snore from my date. I could feel the sheets on top of me and something wet down under my foot, and that's all I'm going to say about that. But honestly, it wasn't me who climbed out of bed. It wasn't me who forced me to get up way before dawn. That just never happens in my life. On tiptoes, they made me walk around, dressing myself with last night's clothes—my slacks and shoes, and for some reason, his shirt. Then they felt my pain, and because they're really good hosts, they let me take a long pee before we slipped out the door.

For the first couple, three hours, we just walked and gawked. And I mean We. There were nine of them. Each had a name, and I learned their names, except they weren't names like people have. I guess when you don't normally have a body—when you're just a bunch of impulses and opinions streaking through a neural network—you don't need sayable names. But there were definitely nine of them, each with its own voiceless voice, and it was the ten of us that walked hard until midmorning, watching the people around us and always talking among ourselves.

I felt good. Really. The last few days had been pretty wicked, but they took care of me. It was like a little holiday. When I got hungry, they led me into this great breakfast place on Market, crowded and loud, and I ate my fill of waffles and ostrich bacon, and then they put me back on my feet and out the door. But I hadn't paid, I told them. I tried to go back, but they didn't let me. One after another, they explained that the bill would be taken care off, that if the restaurant put in a voucher to the government, the restaurant would be happy. Besides, everybody in there could tell I was possessed. That or they just weren't paying attention.

And that's another neat, unexpected part of being possessed. People knew. Looking into my face, total strangers could see that something was wrong. Was eerie, and different from other people, and intriguing enough to make them stop and stare.

When I finally dropped by my apartment, sometime in early afternoon, my roommates asked flat-out, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong," my mouth said. But not me.

"Bullshit," they said. "What the hell pills have you been eating, Pauline?"

"But you aren't talking to Pauline," they heard.

Then the two of them laughed like crazy. "Oh, God," they said. "Oh, shit! Look who the Glick-Pick plucked!"

I took a long shower. My hosts had this mothering-thing for smelling good, which is why I blew our water-ration for the entire day. Then they dressed me in my slickest black gown and an old pair of hiking boots, and while they were doing my hair, my roommates drifted in, and with this nervous little voice, Serena asked if they could go out with us. Their treat. "That would be lovely," one of the Glick-Pick said. So we went out together, the twelve of us. It was like a walking news conference. One of my roommates would ask some big question, and the aliens would do their best to answer it. Then the other roommate would ask something else, or maybe just reword the same question, and another alien would answer, again using my mouth. My voice. "Where's your home world?" "Where else have you gone?" "How long have you been traveling?" "Really, that long?" "Did you ever have real bodies?" "And what did those bodies look like? Do you remember?"

These were all old questions, and the Glick-Pick got pretty bored. So they started asking their own questions. About Serena. About Glory. About their childhoods and schools and boyfriends, and what they did to help the economy and nation-state, and what they wanted for their future.

People just love talking about themselves.

Finally, Serena interrupted their questions. It was evening. We were eating dinner. And out of the blue, she asked, "Do all of you feel what Pauline feels?"

Before we could answer, Glory asked, "Can you make her do anything? Anything you want?"

That was a big question, and the Glick-Pick answered together. "She is ours," they promised, their voices purring along together. "If we agree on a specific act, she will do it."

By the way, I didn't mention this: My roommates are real shits.

The little bitch Serena smiled at us and said, "All right. So make Pauline strip naked."

"We will not," the aliens answered.

"Right here, right now," said Glory. She's a big plain girl with a big smart mouth. "Strip, or we won't believe you. We'll think Pauline's faking, and you know what happens then?"

The Glick-Pick remained silent, probably trying to guess the future.

"Pauline's name isn't on the lease," said Glory. "If we think she's a phony, we'll shove her out on the street."

It wasn't much of a threat. I mean, what were the odds that those two bitches would go through with their threat? And there's another thing: The aliens had gotten to know me, and they must have sensed that I wouldn't mind all that much. Stripping, I mean. So what if it was a four-star restaurant and our fire-and-ice-cream dessert had just stopped burning? That's why they got me up on top of our table. They made sure everybody in the place was staring, and waiting, and I took hold of my gown's straps, and then it was as if I was losing my balance. They handled my body that smoothly. I half-fell, half-knelt, and one of the aliens said, "Glory, give me your hand, please," and when she reached up, on instinct, the Glick-Pick used the steak knife from my plate, cutting her dress down the back.

I wish I could have laughed then. But I can laugh now, just thinking about those big flabby tits flying. In all the confusion and applause, I left. We left, minus my shitty roommates, and of course without paying any part of that monstrous bill.

They took me walking again.

When my legs started hurting, I stopped and sat on a little flight of stairs. After a while, this older guy came past. He looked at my face, at my gown and my boots, and after he passed, he turned and came back again. On his third pass, he asked, "Are you?"

"Are we what?" said my mouth.

"Jesus," he said, smiling in this big shy way.

He was good-enough looking for being in his forties. He said his name was Jim, and he was a huge admirer. "How many are you?" he asked.

"Nine," said my mouth. "And Pauline."

"Hello, Pauline," he said, his voice soft and impressed. "Hello, everyone."

Everybody said, "Good evening."

Then with a shaky hand, he pointed. "I live up the block. I would be honored ... honored ... if you were my guest. For a little while, maybe?"

A voice said, "Yes."

We walked a couple, three blocks and then up into a nice enough apartment. Jim had a huge stock of liquor, and after a group consultation, the Glick-Pick decided on an imported beer. Watching from a distance, I was sure Jim just wanted to poke my body, having his fun with these aliens. But instead he sat down on the opposite chair, and with a big grin asked, "Will you teach us how to build starships?"

"Negotiations are underway," my mouth said. "The final terms have not been reached."

"Sure. I can understand that." He gulped and sat back and then sat forward again, sweaty elbows on his trembling legs. "But I've heard ... read ... that we've purchased one of your tricks. Something that helps to enhance the intelligence in anything alive."

"Perhaps," said the Glick-Pick.

"It's a really neat machine," he claimed. "Am I right about this? The human mind—any mind—is capable of huge feats of memory and intelligence. It just takes time to learn and to solve complex problems. But by supercooling our neurons in some special way ... we'll be able to accomplish twenty years of learning and thinking in just one afternoon...."

"Is that the truth?"

A voice said, "Perhaps."

Another voice said, "Perhaps not."

"Sure. I understand. You can't talk about it yet." Jim nodded and stared at his own feet. Then he said, "When you leave us ... are you going to take any of us with you?"

The reply was a sip of beer, and otherwise, silence.

"Because I'd leave my body behind," Jim told us. "If that's what it took to travel between the stars." Then he sighed and straightened, saying, "I've always had this feeling. It's my destiny. Going to other worlds, I mean."

The Glick-Pick made my body stand up.

"It's rather late," one of them announced. "Would you please find us a cab?"

"Oh, sure."

"And thank you for the fine beer," another voice added.

"You liked it? Really?"

"Rather well, yes."

The aliens didn't usually take people for more than sixteen hours, and my time was running out. Talking just to me, they asked where I wanted to be when I regained control. Meanwhile, Old Jim had waved down a cab and was explaining things, handing the driver—this half-terrified Indian man—a couple gold bills. Then he said, "Good-bye, my friends," with this weepy little voice. "Until later, perhaps."

The driver heard an address, and he took us roaring down the street, watching us in the mirror as much as he watched the traffic. We pulled up in front of a different apartment building. The aliens got me to the front door and rang the buzzer. My old boyfriend was home. His name was Samson, believe it or not. Dumb as shit, and strong as shit, and a pretty fair lay, if you happened to catch him sober. Samson's stupid voice came across the speaker, asking, "Why would I want to see you, bitch?"

"Our apologies," the aliens said together. "Pauline informed us that she wishes to be with you tonight."

"We?" Samson blubbered.

The guy's never been confused for being smart.

"Pauline?" he cried out. "Are you really possessed?"

One of the Glick-Pick said, "For another few minutes, yes."

The door buzzed.

The ten of us climbed way too many stairs.

Samson's door was hanging open. He stood in the middle of his little place, watching my face. Measuring me. Then again, he asked, "Are you really possessed?"

"Possession is an inadequate word," they replied. "We have entered into a temporary symbiotic

joining—"

"God, shit. You are!"

I'm not telling you what happened between Samson and me. You don't want to know. Okay? Let's just agree that it was awful, and he's a selfish abusive prick, and guys like him should be tied up and floated out to sea, with all the world's trash stacked on them.

"We wish to jump into you next," a voice said.

He gulped. "What's that?"

"We will establish a temporary symbiotic joining with you," another voice promised. "If you would, please. Lie down now, please."

"What? On the sofa?"

"Or the floor," the voice said. "The floor might be better."

Samson couldn't help himself. He dropped hard enough that the floor shook, and then he had to ask, "Like this?"

"No," someone said. "On your belly, with your hands behind your back."

"This way?"

"Pretty much."

And then my eyes found his old softball bat waiting in the coat closet, and with my hands, somebody got a good tight grip on the handle, and somebody moved me into the middle of the room. I won't tell you who. I never will. But whatever's the truth, everybody got what they deserved, and isn't that what really matters?

SERENA

Why Pauline? That's what I don't get. I mean, if anybody wants to experience the Glick-Pick more than me, I don't know who that is. But Pauline's just this spoiled party-girl with a fondness for ugly glow-in-the-dark tattoos and these little brass chimes punched through her nipples, and other places too. She doesn't know anything about aliens. If something's past the reach of her skin, she doesn't care. I mean, it just seems like such a silly waste. All those light-years crossed, and who do they jump inside? This body full of STD nightmares and who knows what kinds of self-absorbed thoughts, too.

Last week, when the astronomers first saw the starship, I knew it was important. Nobody else in our apartment understood. Glory, always the skeptic, said it was nothing. Just some lost space junk, or something. And Pauline didn't give it even that much thought. She sat down to watch the news with us, but only because she didn't have anywhere else to be. She'd just broken up with Samson. Again. I know she didn't care about some little smear of light moving out near the Moon. I had to explain it to both of them. "It's not just something that we've seen," I said. "There was a signal, too. A couple weeks ago, from farther out in the solar system. I read about it ... last week, I think. Anyway, the signal was powerful, and it was aimed straight at us."

"What signal?" Glory asked. "I hadn't heard about any signal."

"This one." I got my plasma running a search, and the long screen offered up a hundred thousand sites

talking about nothing else. I pulled up a likely one, showing them the same graph that I remembered from last week. At a certain narrow frequency, for about two minutes, something had screamed at the Earth.

“So what did it say to us?” Glory asked.

“How would I know?” I growled. “But they're working on it right now. You can believe that, for sure.”

Those next days were crazy-busy, for me and everybody else. New pictures of the starship were released every few minutes, taken by amateur astronomers around the world. A hundred news networks were interrogating experts and people on street corners. Of course the government was fighting to keep everything secret, and there were all these fake little stories about lost Chinese boosters and whatnot. But you can't keep the truth quiet. Not with the big stuff, at least. On the second day, when the secret meetings started up in Washington, we heard. Or when those hackers stole an image from one of the Pentagon spy-eyes—the famous picture showing a neat little teardrop not much bigger than a little car, all black and slick and orbiting just three hundred thousand miles above our heads. And then it was late on the third day, and we learned that the aliens were slipping inside human beings, and their name was the Glick-Pick, and they said they were happy to meet us and very advanced but completely friendly, and they were here to learn and to teach, and our world would soon be a much nicer place.

I was thrilled. How could anyone not be thrilled? Glory finally realized it was all true, and even Pauline took a sort-of interest in what was happening. She actually helped us scan the web, waiting for any breaking news. Of course she'd occasionally remind us, “Samson is such a fuck,” and little lessons like that. But generally, she was quiet. She sat in her chair with her old notebook, and Glory and I shared the sofa, working with our notebooks. Anything of interest went up on the plasma, and we just soaked it all in. The history of it. The whole amazing, wonderful story.

On the fourth day, when the press interviewed the Glick-Pick, the three of us along with a few billion of our closest, dearest friends sat watching, and listening, crazy and thrilled with it all.

The aliens had claimed that woman from Los Angeles, that blond with those beauty-contest looks. As soon as the Glick-Pick took her, they used her mouth to call the local televisions, newspapers and webcasters. Cameras were sent. Then the networks began to pay attention to this odd little press conference. The woman was wearing a simple skirt and a man's blue dress jacket. Smiling at the world, she spoke with a flat slow and obviously smart voice, explaining, “Eight of us are temporarily residing inside this willing host. We will do her no harm, nor will we harm any other person during our brief stay.”

“Is it true?” one reporter shouted. “Are you called the Glick-Pick?”

“Glick-Pick is one of many names we employ,” they answered. “Its advantage is that you can pronounce it—”

“What do you look like?” another voice blurted.

A voice with a slightly different cadence explained, “In the strictest sense, we have no appearance. We have no true body and nothing that resembles a face. Each of us, in essence, is a set of coherent impulses interwoven with elaborate quantum anchors, and we are capable of traveling through almost any neural network, and for brief journeys, through empty space.”

Hearing that explanation was a bit of a shock. Pretty California women don't usually command that kind of vocabulary, which is probably why nobody spoke for a long moment.

The aliens broke the silence. Another one of them, or maybe several of them, explained, “We began as you are, as finite souls imprisoned in corporeal bodies. But our technologies have allowed us to escape

what is mortal, and our souls are vast and ancient, and hopefully a little wise, too."

"How old are you?" I muttered.

Half a dozen reporters asked the same obvious questions.

"By your count, a little more than a million years old."

"No shit," Pauline said, finally acting impressed.

"How many of you are there?" somebody cried out. "Onboard that little ship of yours ... how many...?"

With the flat voice, the mouth said, "A few more than two trillion souls. Approximately."

Another huge silence took hold.

Then a scared voice somewhere back in the crowd asked, "Are you going to conquer us now? Is that the plan?"

"Never," they replied in an instant.

"Why should we believe you?" another doubter asked.

"Yeah!" Glory muttered. "Why should we?"

"What is true, is true," the Glick-Pick pointed out. "But what you believe is your choice to make, and we can only hope to prove to you that you should trust in our endless good will."

Arms lifted high.

The young woman's hand pointed.

"Do you believe in God?" a reporter wanted to know.

A brief pause was followed by the perfect answer. "We believe in many wonderful things."

With a grumble, Glory asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I said, "Quiet."

Another reporter asked, "Exactly how many human beings are you going to take over?"

"Only a few," the aliens promised. "A chosen few."

"Chosen how?"

The pretty face showed the barest hint of a smile. "There are many criteria. But first of all, we want souls who are open to the possibilities—"

"I'm open," the reporter interrupted. Then he stepped forward—a little old guy with an angry face under his little toupee. "Take me. Come on!"

With a calm, dismissive voice, the Glick-Pick told him, "No thank you."

Everybody laughed. At the press conference, and around the world.

Then somebody else asked, "But what happens when you give up your hold on her? Is this woman going

to recover—?"

"Perhaps we should demonstrate," was the reply. Then the pretty face blinked a few times, and the smile brightened, and a distinctly different voice laughed, nervously admitting, "You know, I don't like audiences."

Obviously, this was a different person. Her hands shook. Her voice shook. She answered a few questions, assuring everybody that she had always been conscious and she felt wonderful, then and now. When asked why she was taken by the Glick-Pick, she shrugged and admitted, "I don't know. I heard stories about these possessions, and I thought to myself ... I thought that wouldn't it be neat, if it happened to me ... you know...?"

I knew what she meant. Exactly. Sitting in our little living room, on the tiny sofa with Glory beside me, I shut my eyes and imagined the top of my head opening up like a door. Practically begging for the aliens to join with me.

"They're clever," said Glory. "I'll give them that."

I opened my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean shrewd." Glory laughed, explaining, "She's an appealing spokesperson. If you're planning to announce your presence to the world—"

"Shit," said Pauline.

Our roommate was watching the press conference, but there wasn't anything happy about her. She wasn't seeing what anybody else saw. She was so consumed by her own little life, she had to flip the bird at the screen, and with a furious voice—a screaming voice—she said, "He's got a blond like her. That's who he's screwing now."

Samson. Again.

"You know," Glory began, ready to say something calm. Something rational.

Pauline threw a look at her, shutting her up.

On the plasma, the woman was saying, "I don't really like talking in public." Then she laughed, her perfect teeth shining at us.

"Bastard," said Pauline. "Prick bastard."

The aliens had arrived, but she plainly didn't give a shit. Her old boyfriend was the only thing that mattered. Which made it all the worse when the Glick-Pick, for no sane reason that I could see, decided to set up housekeeping in her bitter little mind.

SAMSON

I've gotten to the point—don't take this wrong, please—but I've gotten to where I want to ask every woman, "Are you crazy? Are you on medication, or should you be?" I don't want to have anything more to do with unstable girls. I don't care how mean that sounds. It's just not worth it. Not in the long haul, it isn't.

Like Pauline. Our honeymoon lasted a good three months. We had our fun. But when you can see things coming to an end, what's the point in waiting? That's my thinking. Pauline wasn't the same girl anymore.



She looked the same, sure. Black hair worn long and this long body kept strong with weights and nerves and God knows what kind of pills, and she still had her famous glow-in-bed tattoos, plus those metal chimes meant to be hooked up to special batteries, pumping current into her special places. All of that was fun enough. But then I started noticing how she never had anything good to say about anybody. Not her roommates, and never my friends. Plus she wasn't wasting much time complimenting me, either. Which is why I broke up with her that first time. Neither of us seemed that happy, and so why not put things on ice?

Well. Ice melts, and time makes you stupid. I know that's one of my problems. I don't remember things as well as some people do. A week passes, and a month, and I find myself remembering what I liked about the people I don't see anymore. And forgetting all the things that bothered me.

That's my excuse for letting Pauline back into my life. At least for that second ride, I blame being forgetful.

And the third time? I don't know. I was lonely. I was horny. This is a big city, but everybody's a stranger, and finding women worth dating can be tough. Personally, I don't like drinking. I don't like bars or the clubs. Which was another thing wrong with Pauline. The girl wasn't happy unless she had a beer somewhere close. Dating her was rough on my liver. So I broke up with her that second time, and after a week or so, I asked this woman from work out for dinner. It was nice enough, and she was pleasant enough. But nothing would come of it. I could tell that much even before our dessert came. She started talking about the Lord and His place in her life, and I found myself feeling nothing. Not angry. Not really even sad. Just empty and a little stupid, wondering why I'd ever let myself feel anything like hope.

Later that night, when I got home again, Pauline was sitting on the front steps. She looked like she'd been crying, which was different. Which was kind of neat, really. She'd given up her tough-as-nails attitude, at least for a few minutes. She told me that she was sorry. She was going to get real help with her drinking and the pills, but she needed somebody to lean against now. And I was her only hope. Which was sort of nice to hear. Who wouldn't like to have themselves described that way? So I let her come upstairs, and for the next three days, Pauline was wonderful. Funny and sweet and a joy to be with. But then all of the sudden, smack in the middle of things, she climbed off me and made these angry little fists.

"What's the matter?" she asked me.

Nothing was the matter.

"Why aren't you hard tonight?"

I was. I mean, I'm not a machine, but I was doing all right.

"What? Did you screw her today?"

"Who?" I asked.

"That blond bitch. Did you?"

"What blond?" But finally, I was beginning to figure things out. "What? Did you follow me the other night? You saw my date—?"

"I don't follow people," she told me. "But yeah, I happened to spot you and the bitch."

But she had been following me. I knew it sure as I knew that for the third time, we were finished.

Never again, I promised.

Then early the next day, I heard the news. Everybody heard it. Something unknown had moved into orbit, just a few days after some big mysterious signal was heard down in Australia somewhere. Governments everywhere were claiming that they knew nothing, they hadn't made contact with any aliens, and there were perfectly reasonable explanations for what people were seeing. But what would you expect from our leaders? Of course they wouldn't give out any important secrets. Deals were being made. The world was going to change. It was such enormous news, and so of course, I took a full week of vacation time. Just to watch the news programs, the Web. Hunting for every little thing about the Glick-Pick.

The possession business was the best part.

I didn't think it would happen to me. But I could hope. There were a couple times, in the middle of the night, when I wondered if I was feeling them starting to slip inside me. But if they were, they didn't make themselves obvious. Which is something plenty of people thought of before me. That the aliens might be inside all of us. And not just eight or nine of them. But thousands. I mean, if there's a couple trillion of them inside that little teardrop ship of theirs ... and if they wanted ... I think plenty of them could ride around inside our big, stupid heads....

You know why more women get taken than men?

As a rule, women aren't as dangerous as men.

I think that's the big reason.

This is going to be so great, I think. All the new technologies are going to make us better. Happier. All of that.

I want to be smart.

If I can, I want to be so smart that nobody can fool me again. I want to know what to do in every complicated situation. And sure, I want to travel to other worlds and live for a million years, and maybe find some nice alien girl who isn't as bizarre as human women can be.

That's what I was thinking when Pauline showed up. Except it wasn't really Pauline. I could tell that when I looked at the security monitor. I could hear it in the sound of her voice. She looked and acted, and talked, exactly like every other one of the Glick-Pick that I'd seen interviewed in the last few days.

Of course I let her up.

Them up, I mean.

When would I get a chance like this again? And when they asked to jump inside me ... well, I didn't have to think twice about that! I got down on my floor. I put my hands behind my back. And then, too late, I saw her holding the aluminum bat, and I realized that the aliens had left her. Maybe while she was walking up the stairs, they let her go.

I'm fuzzy about what happened next and then for the next couple weeks. But when I finally woke up, feeling woozy and pretty much confused, I asked my nurse, "Am I smart now?"

She smiled and said, "I'm sorry. What'd you just say?"

"Was the operation a success?" I asked. I knew time had passed, and I'd been hurt. Badly hurt. But I was feeling better now, which was why I asked, "Did you put alien implants in my head? Huh? Am I going to be a genius now?"

With a sad look on her face, my nurse said to me, "Honey. Trust me. Nobody on this little planet is anything like a genius."

## GLORY

I know how this sounds. Don't believe me, if that's what you want. But from the beginning, I had a feeling. An intuition. This nagging little voice whispering warnings between my ears.

With straight pins and a waiter's shoelace, Serena fixed my dress to where I could walk out in public without being arrested. And after we paid the bill, we ran home. Fast. I wanted a shower. But of course the damned aliens had used up our water rations scrubbing down Pauline, which meant that I was pitted out as well as pissed. So what I did, I went into the kitchen to find comfort food, and Serena started for the living room. Right then, I heard the plasma screen light itself up. Its standing orders were to come on whenever there was big news. But what wasn't big news these days? While I was banging in the cupboards, I heard a new voice, a man's voice talking slowly and carefully—a boring voice, I thought—but as if she was catching fire, Serena called out, "Get in here! Right now, right now!"

Two days before, on the sly, NASA had pulled one of its cookie-cutter probes out of storage, programmed it in the afternoon, and launched it in place of the scheduled game-channel satellite. Somehow, they'd kept the mission secret. At least we couldn't remember any rumors. What their suit-wearing spokesman was describing was the probe's trajectory, except when he was thanking this department or that bureau for their tireless and considerable help, and when the chart behind showed how the probe met up with the alien starship, he repeated what every other expert had been saying for the last week. "This is a small object. Smaller than the average living room, for example. Because of its size, its low albedo and the distances involved, earthborn images have proven inconclusive. As we reported to you yesterday, the infamous 'teardrop image' is nothing but a digital fabrication. An elaborate, tasteless joke. And again, I would like to remind everyone in this room, and everyone watching...." He paused for a moment, shaking when he considered the enormous audience watching only him. "I remind you that much of what has been reported and repeated over these last few days is false. Plainly and simply false. Through misunderstandings and wishful thinking, every lie and good-hearted rumor has circled the globe, been embraced as the honest truth, and been impressed on the public's conscious."

He was a tall, ordinary looking man. A scientist and a project administrator, and now the voice of authority. He paused once again, for the briefest moment. Then he reported, "Sixteen minutes ago, we received these images of the unidentified subject. The flyby itself lasted nearly forty seconds. In total, there are nearly five hundred images. All have been posted. These are the best." He vanished, replaced by a black screen dotted with little stars and something larger. We saw an oblong smear on which stood some kind of girder or strut. I felt my heart kick, watching the images change. One by one, we were pulling in close, and then with a firm, fatherly voice, the invisible speaker told us, "We know the object's origins. We are quite certain. The main body is a small asteroid or piece of comet. What fooled us—temporarily, I should add—was the rest of the object. Both radar and spectrographic analysis were modified by what is clearly an artificial object. A manufactured object. An object whose origins were mysterious until moments ago."

Serena leaned forward on the sofa. But I had a feeling, which was why I began to lean back.

"Four years ago," the speaker continued, "the Japanese launched a robotic probe that was designed to study near-Earth asteroids. Contact with the probe was lost early in the mission. The probe was assumed destroyed. But as you can see, the rumors of this machine's death were greatly exaggerated."

On the screen was a black chunk of tar and rock, and like a starving mosquito, the robot clung to its

prize.

Instantly, hundreds of reporters were shouting questions.

The spokesman responded to the loudest of them. With a disappointed voice, he said, "Yes, the purported alien signal. Well, as was mentioned many times during these last days, that signal has some intriguing features. But it originated in an entirely different portion of the sky than that occupied by the supposed starship. And it was a very brief signal. And it was observed by only a single radio telescope. Why the starship and signal need to be related phenomena ... well, that's a proposition without evidence. And if I were to vote, I would tell you that our initial analysis holds: The signal originated either from a small, undiagnosed equipment failure, or much more likely, a subtle glitch in the software package used by the telescope to interpret signals."

"What?" Serena gasped. "I didn't understand any of that."

I didn't quite understand. But the heart of his speech was easy to see. "He's telling you there's no such thing as the Glick-Pick."

She straightened her back and said, "Bullshit. What about alien possessions?"

She didn't mention Pauline, I noticed.

Someone in the reporters' pool made the same point. Weren't the Glick-Pick walking our streets right now? The government man nodded, and then offered his ready answer. "I'm not a psychiatrist," he allowed. "But I've been in close contact with every appropriate medical expert. I don't believe that mass hysteria is the only answer at our disposal, but it is a viable explanation. Another, I'm afraid, is simple ugly duplicity. Go back to the beginning: Rumors were spreading through the press, the Internet, and almost every private conversation. The aliens were taking over human bodies, it was claimed. And then suddenly, conveniently, an out-of-work actress holds a press conference, skillfully merging the rumors into a semi-coherent whole. Through design or by simple wishful thinking, she gives these mythical aliens a voice, and a noble purpose, and a performance that we can believe in—"

Serena muted the screen.

I just sat there, listening to her scream about how this couldn't be true. This was just an elaborate government smokescreen, and how could so many people get fooled by lies, and she wasn't any simple fool. "They're just trying to keep everything secret," she assured me. And herself. Looking at me, panting from her runaway emotions, she finally asked, "What do you think, Glory?"

I said, "Pauline."

Serena blinked and said nothing.

"Really," I said, "what do you think was happening with her?"

For a long moment, Serena held her tongue. What she wanted was wrestling with what she wanted to believe, and what finally came out of her mouth was pretty much inevitable.

"No," she allowed, "Pauline was faking it. I can see that. But all these others ... at least some of these other people ... they've got to be genuine...."

I didn't make a sound.

"What are you thinking, Glory?"

That I always understood this was going to be nothing. That it seemed too easy, and way too goofy, and I was embarrassed for every little believing sound that I'd made over the last few days.

"Glory? What do you really think?"

"I think our dear Pauline had all of this planned out."

"She pretended to be possessed? What, as a joke? To get noticed? Is that why she did it?"

"And she got a free dinner, too," I muttered. Then the voice between my ears was talking again, and I shivered, saying, "Let's just hope. You and me. Let's hope that's all she wants from this game."

JIM

She was the most wonderful thing ever to come into my life, and I couldn't let her get away. So after she left in one cab, I waved down another. I told the driver, "That's my wife. She's got my medicine in her purse. Can you just kind of follow her wherever she's going?"

"Where is the lady going?" my driver asked, his Caribbean voice singing each word.

"I don't really know," I admitted.

"Ah, that kind of wife," he said, nodding knowingly. "I understand."

A red light stopped us. But I could see her cab pull up along the next block, and then her cab was empty again, looking for a new rider. I had mine stop, and after giving the driver a fat tip, I started hunting. Which building did she vanish inside? I didn't know. Walking back and forth, I felt excited and very happy, and then as time passed, I realized that I wasn't happy at all. I was miserable, lonely and sad, and I couldn't remember being any other way.

By then, I had the girl's destination narrowed down to two buildings. Nobody else was out. It was a little peculiar for a Saturday night, but I didn't ascribe any great meaning to my solitude. I went out into the middle of the street, gazing up at the lit windows. Sometimes a figure moved behind blinds, but nobody looked right. And then someone emerged from another building—not one of my choices—and I realized it was her. It was her, and just by watching, I knew she was the only entity walking down the stairs to the sidewalk.

"Hello," I called out.

She hesitated, just for a moment. In the glow of streetlamps, she seemed quite exotic and mysterious. I liked her long black hair. I liked the she-lion glowing on her bare right shoulder. When she didn't smile, I thought maybe she didn't remember me from before. But aren't the possessed supposed to remember everything they see and say? And then just like that, she gave me this little smile, and breathed deeply a couple times, and with a shake of the head told me, "They're gone. They're out of me."

"I know. I can tell."

Which seemed to please her. She smiled again and pulled her arms around her waist, as if chilled, and said, "Hey, Jim. I wouldn't mind another one of those fancy beers."

There weren't any cabs just then. We began to walk, and she shivered, and I gave her my jacket to wear on her shoulders.

"You spilled something on your dress," I observed.

She looked down at the splatters, and then she looked at my eyes. "For an old guy, you're kind of handsome."

"Thank you."

Then after a little while, I asked, "What did it feel like? Having the aliens inside your head, I mean."

She didn't exactly answer my question. Instead, she pulled my jacket in close, thinking hard about something. Then with a quiet little voice, she asked me, "Do you ever wonder?"

"What about?"

"Maybe all of us have these things inside us. These little souls. Know what I mean?"

I couldn't quite understand her.

"Souls," she repeated. "Whenever you think, or move, there's not just one of you deciding what to do. It's three of you, or nine of you. I don't know how many. But it's definitely more than just one voice in your head. Think about it, Jim. Doesn't it make sense?"

I had no idea what she was saying, but I was thoroughly intrigued. "Do you mean there were other Glick-Pick who came to Earth?" I guessed. "They visited here long ago ... when we were apes or cavemen ... and they built colonies right inside our heads?"

She didn't answer, nor did she even seem to hear me.

"That's why we're smart, and human," I continued. "The aliens are still inside us ... like mitochondria—?"

"Like what?" she interrupted. Then she seemed to almost laugh at me, adding, "That sounds like an old movie. I don't mean that at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that we've got different voices. Different ways of thinking. Some tell us, 'Yes,' while the others say, 'No, don't.'"

"Is this what the Glick-Pick told you?"

She pulled her hand out from under my coat, taking hold of my hand. Then with a little shake of the head, she said, "Some of us are missing some of these voices. Who knows why? They're born that way, or they just never hear the voices. Which is why they end up being dangerous people. You see what I'm saying?"

I had a pretty young woman on my arm, and so of course I said, "Sure. I think I understand."

"Do you feel sorry for them?"

"Who? The ones missing pieces of their soul?"

That made Pauline laugh. Then she pulled me close, practically forcing me to grab her breasts, and still laughing, she explained, "No. I'm talking about the poor bastards weighed down with all those extra voices. The voices that keep telling them, 'You'd better not do that.'"

"Don't you feel a little sorry for those hen-pecked shits?"