

## AS YOU KNOW, BOB OR, “LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS”

by John G. Henry



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The agent: How’s that science fiction novel you’ve been working on coming along? Send me an excerpt from the beginning so we can see about getting it into shape for today’s market.

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The story begins: The phone rang with Bob’s signature tune, so Bill tapped the “receive” button. Bob’s face appeared, looking unusually enthusiastic, since he normally tried to coast through life with minimum effort. “Did you hear about the frozen Lumpia?”

“Not yet.” Lumpia. That sounded important enough for Bill to pause his work and face the phone. “As you know, Bob, frozen Lumpia isn’t nearly as good as fresh.”

“This stuff is! There’s a new process. Meet me in the lobby and we’ll go get some and check it out.”

Bill’s conscience tugged at him. “I dunno, there’s this analysis of the signals from the Eridani Probe that I’m supposed to be running....”

“It’ll be there when we get back.”

“Okay.” Bill stood up, powering down his workpad and heading for the door.

In the hallway he met Jane, a researcher who worked a few doors down. Bill tried not to stare as she crossed her arms and looked at him. “You’re in a rush. Going on some important mission?” she asked dryly.

“I guess you could say that. I’m going to pick up some frozen Lumpia.” Bill hesitated. Jane had the kind of smarts and attitude that had always attracted him, but she had never shown much interest in Bill and had turned him down the one time he had asked for a date. Maybe she would be willing to consider a more casual errand together. “Do you want to come along?” Jane pulled out a money card and checked it, then shrugged. “Sure. Why not? I need to pick up some stuff, too.”

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The agent: This is okay, but I can't sell it. Something's missing. It's not sci-fi enough, do you know what I mean? This is supposed to be happening in the early twenty-second century and there's nothing about the singularity or nanotech or quantum states or cyberspace or posthumans or multiculturalism or complex antiheroes. How can you call that sci-fi? I know, I know, you've told me that when people use tools they don't think about how they work. But readers expect certain things from sci-fi. Oh, and the characters. Those aren't sci-fi characters. Punch them up and make them the sort of characters you see in *real* science fiction. And get some gratuitous sexual content in there.

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The revised story begins: The singularity had crashed and burned in a viral-cataclysm that had destroyed most of civilization and every decent coffee house east of Seattle. Now a complex array of probability states undulated down a fiber-optic line surviving from presingularity days. The electrons carrying the message didn't so much move as they did alter the places where they had the highest probability of existing.

Since the electrons didn't truly exist anywhere, neither did the strange cyber-world in which they didn't move, filtering through an immense alternate reality in which normal physical rules of the macroworld didn't apply.

Entering a complex series of transformational states, the electrons that weren't there interacted with the receiver mechanism, propagating through layered nano-light-emitting-diode projectors to generate a three-dimensional image.

A tune distinct to the originator of the message chimed from the nanomanufactured receiver. It was the First Movement of Genghis Juan Feinstein's folk-rock Hindustani opera, which, William knew, meant the message had to be from Roberto Sigma, the latest in a string of complicated and untrustworthy clone/cyborg hybrids who nonetheless followed their own indecipherable code of honor. William moved his palm over a light sensitive but robust section of his desk to command his virtual workstation to pause in its operations. Now as the stacked image displays created a perfect visual representation of Roberto Sigma, William saw that the enigmatic posthuman seemed happy about something.

"I assume," Roberto Sigma began in the Libyan-Croatian accent he had acquired from his last neural-upgrade, "that you are aware of recent developments in microcryogenics."

William nodded, his own implants from his days as a Special Forces commando during the Betelgeuse incursion activating automatically at the sight of his sometime-friend, sometime-enemy. "As you know, Roberto, cryogenics hasn't yet worked to expectations, especially since several promising lines of research were lost when the singularity crashed."

“Ancient history, William! That is so five nanoseconds ago. I know of a means to demonstrate how well the new process works. It originated in Asia. Interested in meeting me to investigate it?”

William hesitated, his implants jangling internal warnings. The last time he had followed Roberto Sigma it had been into an unending maze in cyberspace from which he had narrowly escaped. But if what Roberto was saying was true, he had to know. “I’ve been working on analyzing signals from the Eridani Probe. It’s been using the new quantum state transmitter to tunnel data through to us at amazing speed.”

“If the signals have propagated through quantum paths, they will still have a probability of existence when you return.”

“You’re right. I’d forgotten about the addendums Jonquil made to the Hernandez postulates back in 2075,” William agreed. He gestured another command over the light-sensitive control pad, ordering his workstation to shut down and watching as it swiftly cycled through functions and closed them before powering off automatically.

William stood, his lean muscles rippling as the commando implants amplified William’s own natural speed and strength. There weren’t a lot of former Special Forces commandos doing astrophysics research, so he tended to stand out during the virtual conferences. William walked across the floor tiled with panels from the Toltec/Mayan revival period, nanocircuits in the panels sensing his movement and sending commands to the door, which slid open silently on nanolubricated rails as William approached.

He slipped cautiously into the hallway and saw Janice from a few pods down, the nanoparticles in her lip gloss making it glow a delicious ruby red. Janice spun to face him with all of the pantherish grace you’d expect from a first-degree black belt, her blue eyes watching William speculatively. He tried not to stare back. At twenty-three years old, Janice was the most brilliant and the most beautiful quantum physics researcher in the entire world. What was left of the world after the singularity crash, that is.

Janice crossed her arms, drawing William’s gaze to the magnificent breasts that led her hetero-male colleagues to speak admiringly of the amplitude of Janice’s wave functions. “You’re in a rush. Going on some important mission?” Janice purred.

“You might say there’s a high probability of that,” William replied. “I need to acquire some samples of a new cryogenic process.”

Janice’s gorgeous eyes narrowed. “Are you talking about the Renz/Injira process? I understand that freezes organic matter in crystalline matrices that preserve cell structure. When it’s returned to normative temperature its composition is perfectly preserved.”

“That’s what they say. I need to find out if it’s true, and there’s a certain item of Asian origin that will give me the answer.” William hesitated, feeling a strong attraction to Janice that had nothing to do with the gluons holding her quarks into such an attractive package. She had once told him that they would never occupy the same space. Did her exclusion principle still apply to him? “Would you like to come along?”

Janice’s eyes glowed a little brighter as her nanovision enhancement implants reacted to her excitement. She reached into one pocket and checked the charge on the twenty-gauss energy pistol she carried everywhere. “Sure. I’d calculated there was a high probability of deflection in my plans for today. It looks like I was right.”

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The agent: Much better! Very sci-fi. But I did notice that the story doesn’t seem to flow as well as it used to. Maybe you can fix that by using some of the real cutting-edge concepts. You know, quantum foam and dark energy and stuff. And try to make the characters a little more exotic. You know. Weird. More science-fictiony. Give it a shot and see if you can clean the story up a bit.

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The re-revised story begins: Wilyam sensed the arrival of a message from his old rival and comrade Robertyne, who had existed in an indeterminate state since an accident while researching applications in the mysterious world of the quantum foam, where literally anything was possible. Waving a hand to freeze his work in mid motion above his desk, Wilyam waved again to bring up the message display.

Particle functions coalesced into a functional framework, emitting radiation on visual frequencies. The familiar features of Robertyne appeared as if he/she were actually looking at him through a window, though Wilyam suspected that Robertyne had actually ceased to exist some time before, and he was really speaking directly to the inexplicable presence that seemed to animate the quantum foam. The image of Robertyne displayed a very human smile, though even when Robertyne had been unquestionably posthuman, he/she had never been easy to understand or to trust. “Have you heard the ripples in the foam, Wilyam? Organic matter from the macroplace you call Asia now exists in a frozen state without flaw.”

Wilyam frowned as the implant linking him to the bare edges of the foam glittered with possible outcomes. He saw himself in a million different mirrors, each one reacting slightly differently to Robertyne’s proposal. “As you know, Robertyne, nothing actually exists, so it isn’t possible to preserve something that doesn’t exist. Previous attempts have produced probability chains that wander off into reduced states of replication quality.”

“There’s something new/old/past/present/future in this perception reference, Wilyam. It represents a low probability outcome of extreme accuracy.”

It sounded tempting to the millions of different Wilyams staring at him from

the could-be's dancing around the implant. "I'm busy analyzing signals from the Eridani probe. We're not sure if they're from our probe or if signals are tunneling from an alternate probe in another reality."

"Then split your probabilities and attend to both and neither. I am everywhere and nowhere, but will center a probability node below here."

"Okay." Wilyam focused on the implant, drawing on the strange properties of the quantum foam to create infinite possibilities. He waved a hand to shut down his work and stood up/remained sitting and continued working.

The door's probability state cycled as one Wilyam approached, going to zero for an instant as that Wilyam walked through.

In the endless hallway beyond, Jandyce from a few stationary states down floated with her eyes closed. She opened them, her eyes glowing blue from the tap implanted in her brain that connected Jandyce directly to the dark energy that filled the universe. Wilyam tried not to stare, knowing Jandyce was tied into cosmic currents none of his probabilities could hope to grasp.

She crossed her arms, drawing Wilyam's observations to the two symmetrical anomalies superpositioned on her chest, both far exceeding functional limits in a way that excited his ground state and also provided proof that dark energy could overcome the pull of gravity. "You're in a rush. Going on some important mission?" Jandyce hadn't spoken, but her voice echoed in his head.

"The foam has found something new. A way to preserve matter in a hitherto unknown way. There's a sample from the human-reality matrix of Asia." Wilyam hesitated as his millions of selves around the quantum foam link swirled in every possible action-outcome sequence. Jandyce and he usually demonstrated weak interaction. When he had once asked her about the possibility of mutual reinforcement, she had informed him that the likelihood of direct reactions between quantum foam and dark energy was infinitesimally small and shown him the Feynman diagram that proved it. But he had long hoped for a probability sequence that could result in entanglement with her. Perhaps, somehow, their wave/particle dualities could constructively interfere in a way that would generate mutually beneficial patterns. "Would you like to come along?"

Jandyce's eyes glowed brighter as the dark energy flowed. Matter swirled as she reached beside her and plucked a patch of darkness from nothing, examining it closely. "The cat lives. I will go, maintaining the proper balance of forces and perceptions."

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The agent: Great! This I can sell. It's pure sci-fi. Nobody could understand what's happening or why these, uh, people are doing whatever it is they're doing. Tell you what, though, it's still a little rough. I mean, how do you explain what's going on? Readers want to know how this stuff works. So how about you polish it a

little, provide some explanations, and give me one more look, okay? Oh, and put the sex back in. You didn't take it out? Well, then make the sex *understandable* again. Make the sex so *anybody* can understand it. Heck, make the whole thing so anybody can understand it.

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The re-re-revised story begins: The great wizard Wil sensed a message from his companion and challenger the Baron of Basi. He waved one palm and the magical mirror on a nearby wall glowed, showing the image of the Baron, who gave Wil a searching look. "Have you heard? From far in the East, that which we have long sought can now be ours. It lies frozen."

"Frozen?" The Wizard Wil gestured again and the fires blazing beneath his cauldron sank to a low glow. "As you know, Baron of Basi, nothing once living survives well being encased in ice."

"The Grand Council has found a way, I tell you! A way we must investigate before the Bane of Dargoth does! That which we desire lies frozen in a state of perfection. Come down from your tower and we shall seek it together."

"A quest?" The Wizard Wil turned a doubtful look on his cauldron. "I have been seeking to interpret certain messages from the stars."

"Surely a wizard of your powers can deal with two tasks at once."

"There is a way," the Wizard Wil agreed. Calling up the proper spell in his mind, Wil summoned an elemental assistant and ordered it to continue his work. He walked toward the door, the earth spirit bound to it seeing his approach and opening the portal, then closing it behind him.

Outside stood the Sorceress Jainere, who sometimes appeared in the south tower of Wil's fortress. Jainere, her eyes glowing with the fires of the powers that lay beneath the world humans knew, sought wisdom in places few dared venture. Now Wil tried not to stare at the beauty she barely concealed behind a few filmy garments, her breasts glowing with a magic older than time that offered the promise of pleasures no man could withstand. The sorceress Jainere crossed her arms under those breasts, smiling enticingly as she saw the reaction Wil could not hide. "You're in a rush. Going on some important mission?" she inquired in a voice that rang like the tiny bells the dancers of Dasiree wore.

"We seek that which was frozen and can be rendered perfect again once thawed," Wil spoke haltingly despite his efforts to resist the spell of Jainere. "It comes from the lands far to the East, where priests and priestesses with skins the hue of the sun have long guarded it." He had desired Jainere for many lives of normal men, but the unpredictable sorceress had always scorned him, declaring that no sorceress could live by the rules of right and wrong that Wil followed. Perhaps if she joined the quest Jainere would finally learn enough about him to desire uniting their powers and their lives. "Do you want to come along?"

Jainere reached down to the slim, bejeweled girdle that hung on her hips in a way that made men's minds go astray, drawing forth the enchanted mirror in which she viewed images of what might be. "Your possible futures are of interest. I will accompany you. It might be amusing."

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The agent: Now that's more like it. Fantasy! There's a big market for that now. It's a lot easier for readers to understand than sci-fi and people seem to be able to relate better to the characters.

I wonder why they don't want to read science fiction as much these days?

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