

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

by BUD WEBSTER

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Illustrated by William Warren

Any job needs the right people to do it, and conventional qualifications are not necessarily the best way to pick them.

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So what's the verdict, Bubba?" The voice, although not unquestionably electronic, had a distinctly nonhuman timbre. It emanated from a small, flat box, rather like an Etch A Sketch, propped up against a particularly ugly lamp made from a small stuffed alligator. "Are we going to be on television?" "Don't look like it, Mike." Sixtyish but still burly rather than fat, Bubba Pritchert brushed his hand through his short, salt-and-pepper hair and sighed as he looked at the letter in front of him. "Jamie and Adam went to bat for us, but that wasn't enough to make the cable suits change their minds." He shrugged. "Oh, well, we'd have had to relocate to California, and I been there once. Didn't care for it. I don't suppose it's changed all that much in the past forty-five years or so."

"I'd have thought that an experienced jackleg mechanic, an artificial intelligence, and an abnormally strong alien would have been a powerful asset to the Mythbusters, Bubba."

"Me too," he shrugged, "but I think it was that 'alien' thing that got to them." Bubba shook his head. "Damn. Hoss is gonna be real disappointed. He loves that show." Hoss, the alien in question, was a Thunt, a humanoid alien with more in common with a Shar-Pei than a terrestrial from the neck up; Bubba had befriended him several years before and had been adopted into his clan.[1] He laced his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. "I was looking forward to building a faster-than-light drive at M-5, too."

[FOOTNOTE 1: See "The Three Labors of Bubba" in the June 1996 Analog.]

"Dream on, future-boy. It would be easier to build a time machine from stone knives and bearskins."

"There you go with that pop-culture stuff again. Don't you have anything better to do than watch reruns on TV?"

"Until we come up with a way to make me a lot more mobile than I am now, it's about all I can do," the Nishian artificial intelligence said.

"Well, as the technology stands right now, your choices are to be a hovercraft or a helicopter. Or with skinny little legs and arms like that lightbulb guy from the Gyro Gearloose comics," Bubba said thoughtfully. "Any way you look at it, you'd be kickin' up dust." He shook his head. "I was hopin', what with Jamie's experience buildin' robots, that I could talk him into helpin' out. Ain't gonna happen now, looks like."

"I told you that you should have mentioned the work you did for NASA in 1973...."

"Now, Mike," Bubba interrupted, "I didn't do all that much, just made a couple of suggestions about how to put a square peg in a round hole with a few judicious whacks of a big hammer, is all."

"Perhaps, but they called you, didn't they?"

"They didn't, Mahlon did. Saucer Nut Number Six-Sixty-Six, he was, our first rocket scientist—though he hated bein' called that. He was working at JPL when all that happened, and he figured I might have some ideas about how to fudge the CO2 filters." He scratched the back of his head. "Might've helped a little, I s'pose, but they did all the hard work. They were the heroes." He frowned. "I really miss Mahlon, he was cool as a moose and almost as fuzzy." The phone rang. Bubba's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Hmph! Maybe the Discovery Channel changed their minds." He picked up the handset and answered. "Yellow? The Prit-CHARD residence, mechanic of the house speaking."

"Bubba, you've got to stop watching those Britcoms. They're having an unfortunate effect on you." The voice on the other end of the phone was brisk, but not brusque.

"Hey, Kirby! What's shakin', homey?"

"I believe the correct answer to that is 'nothing but the leaves on the trees,'" the lawyer replied, "so let's take it as said."

"Stipulated, counselor," Bubba said. "Whassup?"

"I've been contacted by one of the media people at the Smithsonian. Apparently," Kirby said wryly, "word of your, er, exotic personal conveyance has spread."

"And...?"

"National Air and Space wants to hire you for a very special job."

"Oh, do they?" Bubba drawled. "Tell me more."

"I'm sending you e-mail about it even as we speak."

"And I'm downloading it now," Mike said.

"The wonders of a DSL connection. It's a little complicated, Bubba, but I don't think it's anything you can't handle. And in point of fact, I doubt there's anyone else who can handle it."

"I'll look it over," Bubba said. "Meanwhile, when you gonna come back down for the Urbanna Oyster Fest? You've missed it the past few years."

"If I can get out from under these congressional hearings, I'll be there this year. I'm certainly not going to let you get them all. I'll let you know when I know." They said their good-byes and rang off.

Bubba sat back in his overstuffed chair and picked thoughtfully at the frayed piping around the arm. It was late afternoon in Central Garage, and the early fall sun came through the living room window, tickling the array of toys on the shelves that lined the walls. Magazines and newspapers covered every flat surface in the room, and the hallways leading into the other rooms were lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. In a rack by the television were dozens of DVDs ranging from classic screwball comedies to last year's monster fantasy epic.

"Got it, Bubba," Mike said, "along with three hundred other messages. How many mailing lists are you on, anyway?"

"Oh, one or two, I guess. It's all research."

"`SpaceGhostFan' is research?"

Bubba looked hurt. "Hey, it's a great show, Mike. Don't it remind you of home?"

The little box snorted static. "As if. Anyway, here it is."

Bubba read the words scrolling across the screen. "Well, don't that beat all," he said in wonder. "What do you think, Mike?"

"Well, it's certainly within your range of skills, and it won't take us nearly as long to make the round trip as they would."

"Any foreseeable snags?"

"Oh, only a hundred or so. Clearances, licenses, permits, fees ... not to mention the fact that you've never flown to the Moon—at least, not that I know of."

"Nope, not yet, anyway. Think I'll have to get shots?"

"Frankly, Bubba, I don't know what kind of restrictions the government is going to put in your way. Shots are probably the least of your worries."

"Easy for you to say," he muttered. "It ain't your butt." He stared at the ceiling and a slow smile spread over his face. "Bringing the first Lunar Rover back from the Moon. The ultimate tow job." He laughed aloud. "Well, dip me in dog shit."

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"You have to do it, Bubba," Mike said. "You know you have to."

Bubba nodded. "Oh, I'm gonna take the gig, all right. Just remains to be seen how the contract gets writ. Don't wanna soak 'em, but we're talkin' about some pretty serious mileage here." He rubbed his hands together. "Might even be able to get some 'considerations.' It'd be so cool to have a Moon rock, or one of the flags, or something like that. But," he sat up straight and picked up a

pencil, "Mom taught me it don't pay to get too greedy."

"I'm sure they'll be as generous as they can be. And take it from me, a rock is a rock."

Bubba shook his head slowly. "No. Not to me, Mike. See, this stuff is no big deal to you. You been there, done that, and got the T-shirt--assuming you could wear it. To me, it's solid gold, a gem of purest ray serene."

"Now who's making obscure references?"

Bubba peered at the little screen over his reading glasses. "You'd prefer I quote from Astroboy?"

"Astroboy, Aristotle, Alfred E. Neuman; it's all the same to me. It's not my culture."

"That mean you gonna give up watching TV?"

"Right after sweeps."

Bubba laughed. "As Eleanor of Aquitaine said, 'There'll be pork in the treetops come morning.'"

The contract arrived by courier the next day. It was thick, almost one hundred pages. "Son of a bitch," Bubba said in wonder. "Hell, even Kirby'd choke on this thing. Wonder what's so god-awful involved in this that we can't just say, 'We the undersigned do hereby agree?'"

"You know better than that. This is a government contract. Everything has to be tied down in triplicate."

"I guess so, Mike, but all this," he waved the sheaf of papers, "just seems so unnecessary. I ain't gonna steal it from 'em and sell it to a chop shop. All I want is to be able to say I did it and get a little promotional use from it, and they already agreed to that." He tossed it on the table. "I dunno, Mike. Maybe things were different when you were with the Nishian Parliament ... "[2] [FOOTNOTE 2: See "Bubba Pritchert and the Space Aliens" in the July/August 1994 Analog.]

"They weren't."

"...but all this hoop-de-doo about a simple tow job is, well, it's draconian, is what it is."

"Er, Bubba, that statement doesn't make sense."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I know, but I always wanted to use 'draconian' in a sentence." He rustled the pages in frustration. "Shit on a stick. I ain't gonna 'grand theft' nothing, I just want the gig. Anyway, who could want anything more than to go to the Moon, for the love of Pete?"

"I'll look it over," Mike said. "I'm not admitted to the bar here, but I've got access to every online legal database. If there's something wonky, I'll run it past Kirby. Between the two of us, I think we can catch any problems."

"I trust you. Check and see if there's anything in there that says I can't grab a moon rock or two for myself, will you?"

"Just a second ... no. The only proscription is against profiting directly from anything you retrieve."

"In other words, I can bring it back, but I can't sell it on eBay."

"Correct. You can, however, use any unclassified aspects of this project as promotional material."

Bubba nodded thoughtfully. "And then there's the lecture and talk show circuit, county fairs ... Might even be a book in it, you never know."

"Bubba, you've never written a word in your life."

"Well, there's that guy up in Richmond. I understand he'll write damn near anything for a buck."

"That hack? He writes sci fi. You want a real writer."

"Mikey, old top, that is real writin'."

Artificial intelligences, even those created by alien cultures and subsequently acquired by retired Virginia auto mechanics, cannot sigh. They have no lungs, no need to breathe, no diaphragm with which to push air past relaxed vocal cords, assuming they had vocal cords, which they don't.

Mike sighed. "Whatever you say, boss. Whatever you say."

The scout ship made almost no sound as it swooped through the open front doors of the garage, past the empty bays, and back out the rear doors. And again,

and again. And again. Each time, it cleared the ground and structure by mere inches. A small crowd had gathered to watch, ooh-ing and ah-ing as Bubba Pritchert practiced flying in preparation for his trip to the Moon. After making numerous loops into the garage and back out, a King William County patrol car drove up and a tall, thin, uniformed man got out, stretched, and settled his hat on his balding head. Reaching back down into the car, he brought out a microphone and thumbed it.

"Edgar Allan Poe Hudgins Pritchert." His voice crackled through the loudspeaker on the roof of the car. "This is Deputy Sheriff Lester Beason. Please ground your vehicle. We need to speak to you." He waited, but the saucer only looped through the garage again. A smaller man in a tailored suit slid out of the patrol car on the passenger side and brushed at his suit jacket.

"Well, officer?" he said in clipped tones. "Is he coming down?" The deputy sighed. "I'm trying, sir, but I'd like to remind you that he is in a flying saucer."

"I'm well aware of that, Deputy. That's why I'm here." He straightened his lapels. "Can you try a little harder, please?"

The tall man sighed again. "Yes, sir." He thumbed the microphone again and spoke in a louder voice. "Mr. Pritchert, I'm afraid I have to order you to land your aircraft, or whatever the hell it is. There's a man from the government here to talk to you."

Still the saucer flew overhead, zigzagging and rolling to the evident delight of the crowd.

The government man sighed. "Really, Deputy. Isn't there something...?"

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Breen?" Beason snapped. "Shoot him down? Damn it, Bubba!" he shouted into the mic. "Will you put that thing in the garage and shut it down?"

The saucer came to a dead halt just overhead, and there was a click as a hidden speaker was activated. "I've had it in the garage a dozen times or more, Lester," came Bubba's voice. "Why ain't you locked the doors?" With that the saucer swooped into the garage and stopped dead in the air just inside; it spun lazily and settled gently to the floor. It was bigger than it had looked outdoors, almost filling the double-width doorway and standing a good ten feet high. With a low hiss a panel in the side slid up, and a short ramp extended to the floor. Bubba stepped out of the craft and the ramp and panel closed behind him.

"Yo, Deppity. How's Big Lester?"

Beason cleared his throat uneasily. "Dad's fine, Bubba. Sends his best, but he says he'd appreciate it if you wouldn't fly that thing over his deer stand. You're scaring the game."

Bubba shrugged. "Oughtn't to be jack-lighting 'em, then. They gotta have some chance, don't they?"

"Has he been doing that again?" Beason was clearly angry. "Goddamit, I told him..."

"Deputy Beason," the young man interrupted sharply. "Can we please get down to business? I've come a long way, and this is important."

"Yeah, okay. Bubba, this here is Mr. Martin Breen from the FAA. He needs to talk to you about your ... about that thing you've been flying around in."

Bubba extended his hand. "Mr. Breen, nice to meet you."

Breen took his hand gingerly and shook it exactly twice. His hand was cool and dry. "Yes. Well. Mr. Pritchert, I am a field investigator for the FAA. You've been operating an unidentified flying object."

"Naw, it ain't. I can identify it. See?" He pointed to a plate riveted to the side of the saucer that read, "The USS Right Honorable Fireball XL-5. She's got her own nameplate and everything." Breen just stared at him. "Okay, Mr. Breen. Let's go in the house where we can be comfortable."

"Bubba," the deputy said. "I gotta get back on duty. I'll have a talk with my dad."

Bubba nodded. "Give him m'best." He turned to Breen. "C'mon, Mr. Breen. It

don't smell anywhere near as bad in the living room."

"Actually," Breen said as they stepped outside, "I didn't notice any smell at all. I was surprised."

"Yeah, I try to keep things pretty clean. A little sawdust, a little orange cleaner, a couple hundred Air-Wicks..." Bubba locked the garage doors behind them. A sign hung in the window of one of them, and he turned it around so that it read, "Pritchert's Automotive Performance Center. Next Week: Grease!" As they entered the house, Breen looked around at the books and toys without comment, although he seemed a little uneasy. Bubba noticed this, but from what he'd seen, he figured that, like a lot of government people, he was probably uneasy most everywhere. He seated Breen on the sofa with the bay window at his back. "Mr. Breen, what can I get you? I've got several kinds of tea; Delaware birch beer, and some good old Virginny ginger ale. Plus," he added with a wink, "I got a six-pack of Anchor Steam beer I ain't popped open yet."

"Uh, no thank you, Mr. Pritchert. I'm 'on the clock,' as it were. I would like to try one of those birch beers, though."

"You got it, friend. You want a glass?"

"No sir, no need to bother with that."

"Ah, a real buckeroo. I like that in a Fed." He went to the kitchen and brought back not only two bottles of the Amish-brewed beverage, but a can of mixed nuts from the Virginia Diner. He set them on the low table between them and sat back in the Comfy Chair.

"Now," he said after taking a pull off the bottle and chasing it with a small handful of nuts. "What can I do for the F-Double-A?"

"We need to discuss your aircraft, Mr. Pritchert, in terms of FAA regulations. You have an unusual craft. Very unusual. I just saw it do some very ... unusual things, and as you have plans to take it up into commercial flight lanes, it's necessary for us to certify it." He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a thick file. "You may not be aware of it, but you've been under government surveillance ever since you took possession of your craft. Bubba leaned forward, intent and serious. "Tell me about this surveillance. I'm not surprised, of course, but I can't say I much like the idea." Breen cleared his throat. "Yes. Well. We, of course, although we haven't had reason to contact you since you've stayed in ultralight ranges. But please understand that it's our job to monitor all aircraft in order to ensure the safety of the public."

"We'll deal with that later, Mr. Breen. Who else?"

Breen fidgeted nervously in his chair. "The FBI. You must have suspected it. I mean, you have an exotic aircraft—a 'flying saucer,' if you will—of unknown origin that uses unknown, possibly alien, technology. That's pretty high profile. They investigate everything."

"It's not unknown, I know perfectly well where it came from. The XL-5 came from a grateful family on a planet called Thuntin." He waved a hand vaguely upward. "Way the hell out there somewheres. I did a job for 'em, and it was satisfactory, so they gave me a flying saucer as a present. If anybody wanted to know about it, all they had to do was ask."

"Perhaps they thought you wouldn't be forthcoming. The thinking in the intelligence community can sometimes be Byzantine."

Bubba nodded. "Yeah, that figures. Who else?"

"NSA, of course. They're champing at the bit to get to you, but we convinced them to let us get this straight before they leapt on you like starving wolves."

"I can hardly wait. Maybe they can explain to me how the damn thing works. I sure as hell can't figure it out."

Breen shrugged. "I don't know for certain, of course, but we heard that there was some activity up at Langley. And there are other, less public agencies who have expressed an interest. DARPA, for one."

"DARPA? Oh, great!" Bubba said, throwing his hands up in the air. "That's all I need, is gray-ops spooks running around the neighborhood askin' questions about my politics. That's as bad as those goddam tabloid assholes." He stood

and began pacing. "Damn! I knew this was going to happen. Why didn't they just come to me? I ain't hiding anything, I'd of been happy to let 'em look at the damn thing all they wanted to. Hey, wait a minute!" He paused and turned to Breen with a frown. "What the hell are the NSA and CIA doing in this? They're not supposed to operate domestically."

"Mr. Pritchert. You have a functional flying saucer."

Bubba scratched the back of his head and grimaced. "Okay, point taken."

"There's more. Both NASA and the Smithsonian contacted us several months ago with the idea that they might want to hire you. Since they knew that you couldn't take the job without an Administration classification, they asked us to do some research before they approached you." Breen shrugged. "That's why I'm here. I had to see the aircraft myself in order to make a final determination. My job, first and foremost," he continued in a serious voice, "is to make sure that public safety is addressed and secured, Mr. Pritchert. I can't let you take that craft into commercial flight lanes without certain knowledge that there's no danger to life or limb."

"I can help you there," Bubba said. "I may not know how the Fireball gets off the ground, but I can put her through her paces." He stood. "You hungry? There's a really terrific place not far from Richmond International that serves good ol' home cookin'. It's Wednesday, and the special is meatloaf."

"Well, I was planning to eat at the motel...."

"Nah, can't let you do that. Sean's a nice enough kid, but he can't cook for squat. C'mon, it's my treat."

The trip from Central Garage to Richmond is roughly thirty miles as the crow flies, which is pretty much the way that Bubba Pritchert and his passenger made the journey. The trip was eventful. Along the way, Bubba performed a series of loops, inside rolls, outside rolls, dives, Immelmans, right-angle turns, spins, tumbles, and abrupt stops. He stayed well out of commercial air space and, as best he could, explained to an increasingly white-knuckled Breen what he was doing and how the alien craft prevented them from experiencing the sometimes-violent effects of acceleration and deceleration. At one point he ran the saucer straight at a tall oak to demonstrate how the automatic systems would prevent collisions.

By the time they landed next to the flagpole on the specially reinforced roof of Yesterday's Restaurant (Bubba ate there frequently), Breen was red in the face and had gripped the hand-rest of his seat almost hard enough to leave fingerprints in the metal. His hair also looked three shades lighter, but that may have been a trick of the light.

"Well," Bubba said as he helped Breen stumble down the ramp to the roof, "what d'you think?"

Breen clutched desperately at the flagpole with one hand, breathing hard and shaking. "I have never been so ... there's no ... Do you have any idea...?" He ran a trembling hand through his hair, pounded his fist against the flagpole, and then gathered himself with a deep, shuddering breath. "Mr. Pritchert. That was ... God, that was great!" He laughed shakily. "I can't believe you did those things! You stopped dead at the top of a loop, you drove us through a river...."

"That was the Mattaponi. Pretty, ain't it?"

"...and that tree! It was just all so ... so cool! Mr. Pritchert..."

"Bubba, please."

"Yes, of course, Bubba. And you call me Marty, okay? Bubba, I've flown in just about every form of aircraft known to man. I've piloted airliners, biplanes, stealth fighters, even an old Mustang my dad restored. When I was in the Air Force, I even flew an SR-71. I've flown a gyrocopter, for crying out loud. But I've never experienced anything remotely like what you did this afternoon. Wow!" He took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

Bubba smiled and nodded. "Worked up an appetite, huh? Let's eat. After you." He raised the trapdoor and they walked down the stairs into the restaurant. It was comfortable and well lit, and the waitresses all knew Bubba by name. The two men were seated next to a window. There was a blue, late model Monte

Carlo parked just outside with the number "16" painted on the driver's door. The walls of the dining room were covered with "Flying A" signs and racing memorabilia as well as old magazine ads. Just above them was a two-page spread showing a cat in an Army uniform advertising the C&O Railroad. In one corner stood an ancient Flying A gas pump.

"Interesting decor," Breen said, looking around.

"Yeah, the owner's dad used to run a Flying A station in Wisconsin. I worked for him for a while back when I was a kid."

Breen cocked his head. "I thought you were born and raised in Virginia."

"I was. Long story."

Their waitress brought Bubba a bottle of Carver's ginger ale without being asked and took their orders.

"Save room for dessert," Bubba said with a wink. "Rob's mom makes 'em herself."

The meatloaf was hot, juicy, and covered in gravy, with just enough tomato sauce to make it interesting. Bubba kept up a constant banter with the staff, and introduced Breen to the owner.

"Rob, this is Marty Breen from the FAA."

"Ah, they finally caught up to you, huh? Nice to meet you, Mr. Breen. Bubba take you for a ride in his flying machine?"

"I'll say he did. My hair is probably several shades lighter, but I wouldn't trade the experience for a gallon of Grecian Formula." The three men laughed.

"Rob races stock down at the Speedway, that's his Monte Carlo out front. You runnin' this weekend, Rob?"

Rob shook his head. "Nope, I'll be too busy here. We got a wedding party to cater." He smiled. "You doing anything this September?"

"Nothing planned, why?" Bubba asked.

Rob shrugged. "Chevy Rock'n'Roll 400 coming up. How'd you like for the XL-5 to be the pace car?"

Bubba was speechless for a moment. "You can do that?"

"I got some pull at the track. As long as you can do seventy miles per hour for a lap, and wear our colors, you got it made in the shade."

"Oh, man, that'd just be neater'n a 'skeeter's peter, Rob! I'm your boy. Just tell me where and when."

"I'll be in touch. You still out in the ass end of nowhere?"

"If by that you mean the fine municipality of Central Garage, yes, I am."

The waitress came back to ask for their dessert orders; Breen ordered the key lime pie at Bubba's suggestion, while Bubba himself asked for the strawberry cake. They finished, and both sat back completely satisfied. Their waitress cleared their table and brought coffee.

"So, Marty. What has the FAA decided?"

Breen sipped his coffee. "Well, we knew right away what it wasn't. It wasn't an airplane, seaplane, glider, rotorcraft, airship or balloon. We understood that even before I had the chance to inspect it."

"Okay, that's what it ain't. That's a lot of stuff it ain't. So, what does that leave?"

"I'm not quite done yet. It certainly fits Federal Aviation Regulation 1.1, a device that is used or intended to be used for flight in the air, but it's not an airplane since it doesn't depend on airfoils. And it's none of the other things that define more-or-less standard aircraft, and it certainly isn't a rocket." He took another sip of coffee. "We wrangled long and hard just to get that far, Bubba. There was a lot of debate, a lot of arguing, and at least one commissioner resigned over the whole idea of a flying saucer being licensed at all."

"All this just so I can tow an old car." Bubba shook his head ruefully. "If I'da knowed it would be this much hassle, I'da took up needlepoint."

Breen smiled. "Well, there is a classification we can use. It's temporary until a permanent certification is determined, but it'll allow you to fulfill your contract. But," he raised a finger, "there's a catch."

"Okay, I'll bite. What is it?"

"FAR Sec. 91.319, the experimental certificate. It's a limited operations certificate, and we would have to work out the details very carefully, but it can be done."

"And the catch?"

Breen drained his cup. "Well, mostly, you won't get paid."

Bubba stared. "What do you mean, I won't get paid? Hell, even Sherpas get paid!"

"I knew this would be a problem," Breen sighed. "You can't fly an experimental aircraft and carry persons or property for hire. Sec. 91.319(a)(2)."

"The hell with your Sec. 91.319(a)(2)! I got a contract with the National Air and Space Museum. With the Smithsonian!"

"Immaterial, really. Your contract will simply have to be renegotiated. Unless you agree to abide by the terms and conditions of the certificate, we can't allow you to fly over a densely populated area or in a congested airway." He placed the cup carefully back on its saucer. "I really am sorry, Bubba. It's the only way you can fly, and the only way we can grant you the certificate." Bubba sat, fuming, tapping his finger against his coffee cup. "Shit on a stick. There's got to be some way.... Look, Marty, I'm a professional. That means I get paid, somehow or another. Now, the terms of the contract are such that I can't profit directly from anything I bring back. That only left the fee for the actual towing, and now you're telling me that I won't even get that?"

"I'm sorry."

"Damn! Hell! Sonofabitch! Well," he said resignedly, "it ain't your fault, and I got no right to get angry with you. I don't have to like the situation, but it looks like I'm gonna have to deal with it whether I like it or not." He stood and grabbed the check off the table. "Come on, I'll get us back to the garage. Maybe I can figure something out."

The "something" was an emergency renegotiation of the original contract, called by Bubba and Kirby a few days later. The two men had frantically gone over every line of the contract looking for a loophole, but it was as airtight as a shuttle cabin. Nevertheless, they headed for the Smithsonian offices. Kirby had been silent most of the way into DC, and as they mounted the steps of the Smithsonian Castle he hung back.

"Bubba," he said quietly. "You might want to get somebody else to handle this one. I'm, um, pretty outclassed here."

"You'll do fine as frog hair, boy. You double on sax."

"No, I'm not so sure I will. These guys are high-dollar attorneys with years of experience under their belts. I'm just a half-assed country lawyer."

Bubba stared at him. "Last I checked you had the full complement of ass," he said, "and you got a degree in international law from the goddam Sorbonne!"

"Yeah, well," Kirby muttered as he opened the door, "France is a country, isn't it?"

The mechanic laughed as they entered the building. "C'mon, Kirbs. Let's go do some bidness."

They made their way to a conference room on an upper floor. There was the usual furniture—a long table, expensively comfortable chairs, and lawyers. Before anyone else could say anything, Kirby cleared his throat and said in an authoritative voice, "Good morning, gentlemen. As I'm sure you already know, we're here to renegotiate the terms of the contract previously submitted by you to my client. As you know by now, the situation has changed, so the terms of the contract must be changed to reflect that. One aspect must not be changed, though; my client will be accompanied by his companion, the artificial intelligence referred to therein as 'Mike.' This is non-negotiable. With all that in mind, and with the understanding that we may very well be here for a while, can we please get some coffee?" With that, he sat in the chair at the end of the table and snapped his briefcase open.

There was a silence in the room as the other lawyers glanced at each other. One of them coughed. Down at the other end of the table, a tall, dignified man with an almost totally bald head and aquiline features touched a button on the

phone beside him and said, "Mark? Could you send in some coffee and pastries, please? Thank you." While they were waiting, introductions were made and hands were shaken. The tall man was the representative of the Smithsonian/National Air and Space Museum, Herbert Lawler. He and Bubba smiled at each other, but said little.

Several hours went by before the new situation could even be stipulated by all, hours of wrangling and hammering on minute points of law and statements of intent. At one point, Kirby and the other attorneys were almost toe-to-toe over something vital but microscopic, and Bubba decided that enough was too much. Lawler was looking similarly trapped. He caught Bubba's eye and motioned to the door with his head. Bubba glanced at the lawyers, then nodded and stood up as if to stretch. Ambling to the door, he was through it and into the hallway in the blink of an eye. After a few seconds, Lawler joined him.

"You guys got a jakes on this floor?" Bubba asked.

Lawler shrugged. "It wouldn't be very Smithsonian of us if we didn't, would it?" he said.

"C'mon, then. I got to wash my hands like a race horse." The two men walked down the hall in silence until they came to a door marked "Lounge." Lawler keyed the door open and held it for Bubba.

Once inside, Bubba looked around. There was a small refrigerator, several tables with sturdy chairs, a couch, several armchairs, and a microwave oven. It was well lit without being garish, and obviously designed for comfort.

"Not bad," Bubba said. "I was expecting ... well, something a lot less elaborate."

"If you want, we can go across to Natural History and I'll show you our colony of Madagascar roaches. You can even pet one, if you like."

"Thanks, pass. A bug is a bug to me."

Lawler waved his guest to a chair. "How about a root beer?"

"What kind you got?"

The tall man rummaged in the fridge, rattling bottles and moving things around. "Looks like we've got Route 66, A&W, and a couple of bottles of Rat Bastard." Seeing the surprised look on Bubba's face, he added, "A couple of us really like it, so we try and keep all the lounges stocked."

"Rat Bastard Root Beer? Oh, I gotta try that." He took the bottle he was handed and opened it with a twist. Lawler opened a can of A&W. They nodded to each other and raised their respective beverages in salute.

"So," Lawler said, settling into his chair and taking a drink. "What exactly do you want?"

Bubba cocked his head and eyed the man. "I figure you know that already, or we'd still be back in that little room with the raptors." He knocked back a slug of root beer, icy cold and as pungent as a stolen kiss.

"Okay, so I've got a pretty good idea what you want. You already know what we want. How do we get to where we both get it?"

"Well, we could always just write something that said 'We the undersigned hereby agree,' and then sign it."

Lawler nodded thoughtfully, pursing his lips. "Yes ... yes, we could do that." He shook his head. "It would never hold up, of course."

"Naw, I s'pose not. Hmph. Okay, let's look at the whole thing. You want the Rover back so you can get the people excited again, and they'll annoy the hell out of their congress peeps, and NASA can nail down a tasty appropriation. Right so far?"

"Perfectly," Lawler replied, taking another drink.

"I don't know, Mr. Lawler. I'm not sure it's right to bring it back. I think it ought to stay up there, where it belongs."

"Why?"

"Because that's where it was meant to be, in that big crater with the flag. We went to a lot of trouble to put it there, and it just doesn't seem right to haul it back. What if," he leaned forward as he spoke, "I brought one of the others back? They're pretty much alike, aren't they? Wouldn't that be just as good?"

"Would it have been 'just as good' if we exhibited the second plane to fly the Atlantic? Or a bomber 'pretty much' like the Enola Gay?"

Bubba frowned. "Granted, but who would know? Would it really matter to someone looking at it in a museum?"

Lawler sighed. "I would know. You would know. And yes, it would matter; anyone who would go to a museum or come to a traveling exhibition cares enough about it that it would matter."

"But if it matters ... if it matters that much ... won't people be willing to bust their asses to go up there to see it? Wouldn't that, in fact, be better all around?"

Lawler sighed again. "Realistically, that's not going to happen. Not in our lifetimes, not, perhaps, in this century. No, the place for it is here where there's a chance it will inspire people to be enthusiastic about going into space again. We can mount a permanent exhibit around it as the centerpiece, or create a mobile exhibit that would take it to science museums and schools all over the country." He spread his hands. "I think you already know this, Mr. Pritchert. Why are you so reluctant, I wonder?"

Bubba was silent. "It's ... hard to explain, Mr. Lawler."

"Herb, please."

"Okay, Herb. And you call me Bubba." He closed his eyes. "You're asking me to manhandle something that is more important to me than anything except maybe the Bill of Rights. Or the Eagle, for that matter. The others, well, they're just cars. But this ... this is the first issue of Amazing Stories. This is the Gutenberg Bible, the Mona Lisa. It's one thing to tow somebody else's Mercedes or Bust-My-Windows, I'm insured for that. What happens if I drop this?"

Lawler smiled slowly. "Mr. Pritchert-Bubba. You're a professional. We checked you out. You've never dropped a vehicle in your career. You've hauled old junkers with the same degree of care with which you towed your late aunt's Rolls." He reached out and placed his hand on Bubba's arm. "We trust you, or you and I wouldn't be having this conversation."

Bubba sat and thought. "Okay. Okay. I'm still not sure, but that's the job you're hiring me to do, so that's the job I'll do. Okay."

"Glad that's settled. Now we know what my side wants. How about you?"

"I want..." Bubba paused. "Hell, I never put it into words before." He sat forward, holding Lawler's gaze. "I want the whole thing, start to finish. I want the wonder, the excitement, the whole twenty-seven feet. I want the Last Frontier, Herb." He sat back.

Lawler placed his can on the table in front of him and pushed it forward with one finger. "What you want is about forty years out of stock," he said quietly.

Bubba shrugged. "As close as you can come, then." He emptied his bottle and placed it close to the A&W can on the table. "I also want something for a special friend of mine, something that will be of enormous help in this little project of ours. I wouldn't mind being able to bring back a couple of rocks, too. And I want to get paid."

"The FAA says that can't happen."

Bubba grinned slowly. "I think I know a way it can." The two men put their heads together. Presently, they both sat back and laughed.

"I think this is all workable, Bubba," Lawler said. "I don't think we'll have a problem with the wheels. We'll base it around a two-wheel robot base, I think, unless you have any objections. I know a company that will sell us one cheaply enough, or perhaps even donate it for promotional considerations. Let's see, their RMP is a two-wheeler based on the same principles as their upright models, without the handlebars, but with a platform..." he began sketching rapidly on a paper towel, then continued, "...to which we can add a superstructure that will take both the arms and the cameras. Easy enough. The robotics will be even simpler, they'll come pretty much right off the shelf. It helps that your friend..."

"Mike."

"...that Mike is capable of controlling and coordinating the gyrostabilizer systems. Which reminds me, the platform has a narrow operating range that doesn't include moon temperatures. Can Mike handle that?"

Bubba nodded. "Yeah, he worked that out after I let him know I was gonna get him wheels. He'll vent excess heat through the stasis field as needed. Walk in the park for him."

Lawler shook his head in wonder. "A real artificial intelligence. Boy, what I wouldn't give to lease him for a year."

Bubba frowned. "Mike isn't for rent, Herb. However, he might do a few favors for a friend. At a salary of, say, a dollar a year."

"We'll talk about it later," Lawler said, then looked thoughtful. "How do you plan to get the Rover to the Right Coast from the Wrong Coast?"

"I'll lease a flatbed tow truck in Landers, California. Friend of mine, name of Kermit—electronics whiz and a charter member of SauNA—will fly there and drive it to Giant Rock. We'll take turns driving it back."

"What is this sauna of which you speak? Surely not a steam bath."

"'Saucer Nuts of America,' Herb," Bubba replied. "A little organization I started and of which I am President For Life."

"Oh. Um, how does one..."

"No problem, m'boy, I have come pre-pared." Bubba reached into his bag and produced a bundle wrapped in brightly colored paper. "T-shirt, membership card, and decoder ring. You are SauNA member number, uh ... let's see, number 3.14159. How's that suit you?"

"Right down to the ground. Thank you, I'm honored. And now," he said, tucking the bundle under his arm, "it's time we got back to the shark pit." As they stood to leave, Lawler offered his hand, and Bubba shook it warmly.

"Let's go poke some lawyers with a stick," he said.

"I think I'd enjoy that," Lawler said with a smile.

When they reentered the room, the discussion had advanced to whether or not an artificial intelligence could legally be included as one of the Party of the First Part, or if it should be listed separately. The sticking point seemed to be whether or not Mike could even be considered a person under the law.

"Gentlemen?" Lawler said just loudly enough to be heard over the ongoing discussion. "Gentlemen, attention, please." Gradually the room quieted, and all eyes turned to him. He held up a stack of napkins. "Mr. Pritchert and I have worked out the give-and-take. We are agreed. Your job," he said, looking at each of his legal team in turn, "is to implement this in detail."

"But..." one of the lawyers protested. "We don't even know what you've agreed to."

"Herb," said the head of the legal department, "do you really expect us to create a new contract out of cocktail napkins and ... is that a paper towel?"

"Yes, it is," Lawler said. "And yes, I do."

The lawyers muttered amongst themselves. Kirby nudged Bubba and said, "Erm ... what might you have gotten us into? Is this even going to be valid?"

Bubba shrugged. "You'll have to make sure. Lawler and I are good to go, I can tell you that."

"Okay," Kirby said with a sigh. "I'll do my best."

"You always do."

Lawler rapped on the table with his knuckles. "Gentlemen, I don't think you fully understand. What I've handed you is exactly what Mr. Pritchert and I have come to an agreement on. I want it written up, with no additions or changes, and on my desk by the end of business Wednesday. That's two days from now." He dropped the napkins on the table. "The basic terms will be as follows: first, we will guarantee Mr. Pritchert payment in the amount of fifteen thousand dollars."

"Standard mileage charge for a cross-country tow, gentlemen," Bubba said.

One of the junior lawyers interrupted. "But the FAA..."

Lawler raised a hand. "The FAA restriction only applies to Mr. Pritchert's unique, er, conveyance. The payment will be for a land tow from California to Maryland." There was an instant murmur of voices around the room. The head of

the legal department looked interested. "Due to circumstances beyond his control," Lawler went on over the muttering, "Mr. Pritchert cannot fly the Rover directly to the Garber Center in Suitland. He says he can guarantee the Rover's safety, as well as quarantine requirements, to my satisfaction as well as NASA's.

"Second, in cooperation with NASA, who clearly has a vested interest in the success of this project, we will supply the hardware and manpower necessary to equip Mr. Pritchert's, er, assistant with mobility and manipulatory apparatus so that he can actively aid in the recovery of the Rover, specifically a Segway® device, two stock robotic arms, and a pair of digital cameras." There was more muttering. "Third, I think we can see our way clear to allowing Mr. Pritchert to bring home one or two moon rocks, as long as he doesn't auction them off online."

"Oh, this is just ridiculous," one of the junior lawyers snorted. "Mr. Pratchett..."

"Pritchert," Lawler corrected sharply.

"Sorry, Mr. Pritchert. Why on earth should we agree to any of this? What makes you so special that you deserve these absurd considerations?"

Bubba grinned slowly and leaned toward the man. "Because, sir, as I have been reminded a number of times in the past few days, I have a functional flying saucer." He sat back and folded his hands over his chest. "What have you got, boy, a Big Wheel?"

Lawler cleared his throat. "Right, that about does it. Wednesday afternoon at the latest, please," he said, and drawing himself up to his full height, bald head raised high, and Roman nose thrust forward proudly, he pointed at his chief lawyer and said, "Make it so, Number One."

There were groans from the back of the room. "God, I hate it when he does that," one of the lawyers said under his breath. The legal head suppressed a smile. "I'll see to it right away, Captain," and left the room, trailing the other lawyers behind him.

\* \* \* \*

The next few weeks were as busy as a Frenchman's sombrero. To protect themselves from possible liability, the lawyers insisted that their civilian contractor be given a complete medical checkup. He was subjected to the usual battery of tests, poked, prodded, questioned on matters he would ordinarily have felt embarrassed to discuss with strangers, and otherwise handled like one of Clint Miller's beef cows on auction day. Bubba passed with flying, as it were, colors.

His next ordeal was much more pleasant. He was flown to Johnson Space Center where he was thoroughly measured, and the determination made that he was close enough in size to ex-mission specialist "Ox" van Hoften to be able to use his Hard Upper Torso, despite its having been out of service for a decade or so. "Don't worry about the gasketing," a technician told him. "It's been refurbished. Doc Ox passes his good wishes along, too." The leg and arm sections could be taken off the rack.

The suit was extremely heavy under full gravity, so there were several technicians there to help him into it in the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory. "Whoo, boy," Bubba said as he sat while a NASA fitter helped him pull on the LTA. "I feel like I'm on Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. These come with pleats?"

Without looking up, the technician said, "Don't worry, we'll do Carson proud. Just don't try and 'jeuge' the sleeves."

Then it was into the huge pool. As a rule, for each hour of planned EVA, an astronaut spends eight in the water; in Bubba's case, since he'd never gone through the astronauts' "boot camp," they gave him more time. Within several days, he was almost as comfortable working in the suit under a simulated one-sixth gravity as he was in coveralls in his own garage. It left him feeling tired, but elated.

The next step was less pleasant, ultimately. On his next to the last day at Johnson, they took him up in the C9 Skytrain II aircraft, known by all who've

ridden in it as the Vomit Comet. A medic gave him Dramamine by way of preparation. "Am I really gonna need this?" Bubba asked. "Pretty much everybody does. There are those, in fact, who blow chunks on the first dive." He grinned savagely. "No backsies. They have to stick it out for the whole ride."

"Oh. Okay." He swallowed the pills. "I brought these, too," and he reached into his pocket and pulled out an Altoids tin. He opened it and showed the tech the small brown pills it contained. "Ginger. Worked for the Mythbusters." "Hey, knock yourself out," the technician said. "Not literally, of course." The big C9 took off and climbed, seemingly endlessly, until it reached thirty thousand feet. Then it dropped. For the next half minute or so, Bubba Pritchert of Central Garage, Virginia, floated about the cabin whooping like a ten-year-old and bouncing off the padded walls, somersaulting, spinning, and flapping his arms like a madman, while the technicians tried desperately to keep out of his way.

The first ten parabolas were exhilarating. The second ten were exciting. The third ten could be described as "interesting," if only from the standpoint of making a carefully detailed list of everything he'd had to eat in the past week. Before the fourth double-quint, he swallowed two of the ginger pills, which he managed to keep down in spite of himself. The fifth decade—which certainly seemed to last that long—made him regret having swallowed anything at all since he had been nine years old, but he managed to keep everything pretty much in place, although he made a mental note to cancel his dinner plans. For the next five years, if necessary.

In the meantime, the techs on loan from NASA took Mike in hand and created his robotic body. As Lawler surmised, the Segway company was more than happy to donate one of their RMP models for the purpose in exchange for promotional rights. The unit was delivered as stock, with the exception of a set of the cross terrain tires they used for their X2 model, and the techs went to work adding not only the assembly that held the arms, but a case into which Mike would fit securely, with all connections necessary to control the stabilizers. To this end, Mike himself was able to coach them as necessary.

The RMP, specifically designed as a two-wheeled robotic platform, was chosen for its sturdiness and range. It was doubtful that Mike would need the maximum speed of 12.5 mph, but the battery life would be more than adequate for their purposes. As the RMP didn't have the central pillar found on the other Segway vehicles, a hydraulic system—a robotic "spine"—was installed, which could raise and lower the arms by eighteen inches. Mike's optics were upgraded as well, to twin full-spectrum digital cameras. Added to the top of the column, they not only swiveled, but could be extended both vertically and laterally, and focused as a unit or independently.

It took a number of hours for the AI to learn to handle the five gyroscopes that enabled the unit to remain stable, and to coordinate the arms and eyes, but once he had it, he'd never lose it. However, while rooting through the programming, Mike found an anomaly; in various places throughout the code, he kept running into the same hex string over and over again: 0xEB90.

When he brought this to the attention of the Segway tech, the man said sheepishly, "Yeah, we do that a lot. It's an inside joke, the least-likely sequence of bits used in data communication. It can't really be used, no matter what algorithm you design, so we kind of sprinkle it around like salt." He laughed. "NASA uses it as a synchronization header when they program the shuttle. For us, it's a little like 'Kiljoy was here.'"

"Kilroy."

"Him, too."

After a day of resting and watching old Universal horror movies on cable in his hotel room, Bubba and Mike flew back home to prepare for the trip.

\* \* \* \*

Of course there was a crowd. A significant fraction of the population of Central Garage, in fact, along with a contingent of state and county police, representatives of NASM and the FAA, Miss King William County, the Frog Level

Rescue Squad (on loan from Caroline County just in case), the Hamilton-Holmes Middle School marching band (performing a stirring rendition of "Louie Louie"), and a reporter/photographer team from the Richmond Progress-Dispatch who looked only mildly interested.

The scout ship sat flat on the ground, draped with red, white and blue bunting. Mike was already installed aboard, his new body stowed safely until they reached their destination. There were a few folding chairs on both sides of the ship, and a set of bleachers facing it; more than a few spectators were already seated, munching peanuts and corn dogs, waiting for the main event. The reporter showed his credentials to the police, and walked over to the beauty queen.

"So, why are you here, miss?"

She waved her Pepsi bottle at the ship. "Bubba's gonna go to the Moon," she said. "Dunno why, he hasn't said, but I like watchin' him fly around in the Fireball."

"And you really think he's going to go into space in that ... thing?"

"Oh, sure! He flies it up to Richmond all the time, why not there? I heard he's even been to Newport News in it," she whispered conspiratorially, "but I'm not sure."

The reporter shook his head and moved through the small crowd, his photographer following along behind. "I don't know what we've got here, Danny," he said to the cameraman. "It's got to be a hoax of some kind, but there are real cops over there, and unless I'm mistaken, there are two guys over there with 'Fed' written all over them." He frowned. "What do you know about this? I mean, I'm new, they parachuted me into this cold, but you've been around for years. Don't we already have a file on whatever this guy is supposed to have been flying around Richmond? And maybe Newport News?"

"Nothing I know of, Scoop," the photographer answered. "Maybe the Government hushed it up."

"Yeah, right, 'Flash.'" He turned as someone tugged on his sleeve.

"Hey, mister, you a reporter?" The speaker was a small, wiry man in his sixties, face grim and eyes flashing. "You want the straight dope on that Pritchert guy?"

The reporter took out his notebook. "Sure, old-timer. What's your name?"

"They call me Big Lester, Lester Beason. That's B-e-a..."

"Right, I've got it. What can you tell me about Mr. Pritchert?"

"Oh, I can tell you plenty," the old man said. "I know all about Mister Smarty-Pants Bubba Pritchert."

"Please, by all means, tell me," the reporter urged, motioning the photog to be ready to get a picture of the man. There might be some kind of story here after all—a con game, or some crazy New Age religion, maybe.

"Well, first of all, that ain't even his real name. He's got four names, not like other folk."

"Are you telling me that Pritchert has four aliases?"

"I don't know about no 'aliases,'" snapped the old man. "He's got four first names and a last one." He shook his head. "That ain't normal."

The reporter sighed inwardly. Sometimes, getting to a story was about as easy as regrouting a bathroom. "What about that thing over there? What do you know about it?"

"Huh. I know he oughtn't to be flyin' the damn thing all around like he does, is all. Disturbin' honest folks that's just trying to put meat on the table." The reporter stared. "I'm sorry?"

"Well, he just oughtn't to go buzzin' me and my buddies, that's all. Comes from right outta nowhere, he does, flyin' around, scarin' the deer..."

"You mean," the reporter said, pointing at the Fireball, "that thing actually flies?"

"I'll tell the world. Up and down, back and forth, messin' around and spoilin' any chance we got of bringin' down a buck." The old man spat on the ground.

"So what if we use a few lights? Don't I got a right to feed my family?"

The reporter flipped his notebook shut and looked at the old man. "So go to

Food Lion." He walked away. "Jesus, Danny," he said just loud enough for his companion to hear. "Everybody's in on this. I can't believe it, they're all in on this ... joke, or hoax, or whatever."

"Looks like it, Scoop."

"Danny," the reporter said, more than a little exasperated. "Stop calling me that. We're not in a remake of His Gal Friday, okay?" He began walking towards Bubba, who stood near the ship wearing his Liquid Cooling and Ventilation Garment. "Mr. Pritchert, can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Sure, son," the mechanic replied. "Knock yourself out. Not literally, of course."

"What exactly are you doing here today?"

Bubba grinned. "Goin' to the Moon, boy. Why do you think I'm wearin' this funny suit?"

"You're going in ... that?" The reporter waved his notebook at the ship.

"Can't get there in a Hummer."

"Okay, fine. Can you tell me why you're going to the Moon?"

Bubba said, "Just be patient, and all will be explained. Give me a minute to do this with the right amount of drama," and turned away, pulling on a tight-fitting full-head cap from which wires dangled.

The reporter shook his head. "I still don't know what we've got, Danny. But have your camera ready just in case, okay?"

"Always, Scoo ... uh, Ted."

Bubba stepped up on top of the ship, fists on his hips, legs akimbo, and his helmet under his left arm. He looked out at the gathered multitudes. "Y'know, Mike, I really should be wearing gray leather coveralls with a big, shiny wristwatch."

"Um, why?"

Bubba shook his head. "Doc Smith. Lensmen. Never mind, Frank R. Paul would know." He continued in a louder voice, "Good people of Central Garage, King William County, and Points West! I, your wizard par ardua ad alta, am about to embark upon a hazardous and technically unexplainable journey into the outer stratosphere to confer, converse, and otherwise hobnob with my fellow, er, gearheads." There was general laughter.

"But serially, folks, this shouldn't take too long. All I gotta do is fly to the Moon and tow back a car. Hell, that ain't hard, it's just right up there." He pointed skyward, then squinted. "Somewhere. Mike, we got an auto-club map for this trip?"

"We do not. The very nice lady at AAA was just as sorry as she could be, but those particular roads apparently haven't yet been built, and Google Maps doesn't show enough detail."

"Boy, you got an answer for everything, don't you? Anyway," he said, turning back to the crowd, "we'll be takin' off directly. Don't cancel my paper or anything before I get back, and make sure you feed my cat."

A voice in the crowd called out, "You don't got a cat!"

"So feed somebody else's. They ain't got opposable thumbs, and can't work the can opener by themselves." There was more laughter. He keyed the door open and went in.

"You know, Mike," he said, as he settled into the pilot's seat, "I've never really been able to open 'er all the way up before. Hell, I don't even know how to tell how fast we're going, I just watch stuff go past outside. Now if I push this joystick all the way forward, that's floorin' it, right?"

"Well, yes, but you shouldn't..."

"Damn, this is exciting. I mean, I've worked on racing stock most of m'life, but I've never actually raced."

"Bubba, please don't..."

"Took cars on test laps a couple of times, o'course, but never got 'em much above a hundred. Didn't really trust my drivin' skills. But I can't wreck in this thing, right? And we're programmed to get to the Moon no matter what, right?"

"That's true, but don't let that..."

"So what th' hell, boy! Let's see what the USS Right Honorable Fireball XL-5's got under the hood."

"No, Bubba! Don't..."

Bubba pushed the joystick all the way forward. The Moon swelled to fill the forward port within seconds. "Jesus Christ!" Bubba cried, throwing his hands in front of his face. "Why the hell didn't you warn me? I damn near filled my Maximum Absorption Garment."

Static burst from the screen. "I tried, Bubba, I tried."

Back on the ground, the crowd was whooping and whistling. Miss King William County looked like she was about to faint, and the two suits were racing to their cars, talking furiously into their sleeves. The band was playing "In the Sunshine of Your Love" and marching gaily back to their bus.

The two newspapermen stood spellbound, mouths open. "It ... it just ... disappeared," the reporter whispered, his voice awestruck. His companion made a squeaking sound that was barely audible. "Tell me you got that, Danny. Please tell me you got that!"

Danny shook his head slowly. "Didn't have time. It was there, and then it wasn't, and there isn't anywhere down here for it to be."

"You didn't get it at all?"

"Uh-uh. Too fast, Ted." His face fell. "Biggest goddam thing I'll ever cover, and it happened too damn fast." He began sobbing quietly.

"Well, we have to make sure, I guess. Let's check out the area around where that ... that damned spaceship or whatever it is was sitting." They examined the ground around the take-off point carefully, but there were no trap doors, no mirrors, nothing.

Ted sagged. "They'll never believe us," he said sadly. "Not in a million, billion years. We might as well not even file. C'mon, Flash," he said, patting the weeping photographer on the shoulder. "Let's go find a motel with HBO, and a lot of beer. We're not going back home tonight."

The cameraman sniffed. "O-okay, Scoop."

A bit closer to the Moon, the reaction wasn't much calmer.

"Great sizzlin' wor bar!" Bubba clutched his chest and paused to catch his breath. "I ain't felt nothing like that since the choir-mistress taught me to sing bass." He shook himself and settled back in his seat. "Mike, how long did it take us to get here?"

"Five point eight seconds. Give me a minute to vent some heat; we built up just a little friction on the way up." He opened a few holes in the field to let the heat escape.

"Huh! How long would it take us to get to Proxima Centauri?"

"Longer. Why would you want to go there, anyway? There's nothing interesting in the entire system aside from a couple of low-quality eating places."

"Oh, far be it from me to eat in a diner. How's their coffee?"

"They don't have any. Not even an equivalent."

"Don't matter, I don't like coffee anyway. Take us in, Mr. Sulu."

They planned to set down close to the Rover, but far enough away to leave the surrounding ground as undisturbed as possible. Mike argued that closer was better, but his companion insisted. "Bubba, our propulsion system won't leave traces the way theirs did. A shallow depression in the dust, and that's it."

"No, we'll do this my way, Mike. Nothing gets disturbed. It ain't gonna hurt me to walk a few yards." And that was that. It took a bit of searching, but they managed to find a spot without tracks or prints and settled there.

Mike cut the drive. Bubba keyed the radio and said, "Houston, we're down and safe. Preparing to EVA in ... oh, I dunno, ten minutes? Over."

There was silence, and Bubba was about to transmit again when the speaker cut in. There was a considerable amount of noise in the background. "Roger, Mr. Pritchert. And roger your EVA. How's the weather up there, over?"

"Rainin' like hell," he replied. "Can't hardly see the white line. Over."

"Roger that. By the way, there's a control room full of technicians here who seem to think something remarkable has just happened. We lost you for a few seconds, then telemetry showed you were ... well, very close to your

destination, over."

"Naw," Bubba replied. "Nothin' so much of a much. I may have squeezed through a light here and there, but that's just the way we do it at the Martinsville Speedway. Over."

"Roger. So, how's your food supply? Got enough Chinese food, over?"

Bubba's eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "Oh, you heard that, huh? Um, over."

"Roger."

"Damn. Man ain't got no privacy anywhere." He opened the mic again. "Roger, Houston, keep in touch. You know how your mother worries, over." He sat back, fingers drumming on the armrest. "Well. Well." He drummed some more.

"Bubba?"

"Guess it's time to go out there and do what we came here to do, Mikey." Still he didn't move, just sat there, chewing his lower lip. Now that the moment was upon him, he was oddly reluctant to go outside. It wasn't fear. The suit was already well tested, he'd been briefed on the peculiarities of working in low gravity, he'd trained in the NBL pool, and in any case, this was something he'd dreamed of doing most of his life.

And, of course, that was it: he was going to fulfill a dream, and there were inevitable uncertainties. Would the reality live up to the dream? Would it be like the old stories he loved so much, or just a prosaic substitute? Would it be even more than he expected? Was he, in fact, worthy of his dream? And finally, what would be left for him after?

"I hate to bring this up, but our air supply is relatively limited."

"Don't rush me, Mike. I gotta nerve up for this."

"Why? We're just going out on the Moon. It's not much different from the practice you did in the pool."

"The hell it ain't. All right, I'm goin'." Removing Mike from his slot in the ship's control panel, he carefully fitted the little box into the new robotic torso, making sure that Mike was completely connected. Then he suited up, clamped his helmet to the neck ring, and tested the seal. Once he was satisfied, he entered the little airlock and cycled it.

Edgar Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert stepped out onto the surface of the Moon. Where his boots touched, dust rose lazily in the low gravity. He could almost feel the grit beneath the thick soles, but he knew this was an illusion. He breathed deeply, wanting to smell or taste something other than the air supplied from the tanks on his back, knowing full well that he never could—that no human ever could.

Words swirled in his mind, words intended to commemorate this event in his life, words that he knew deep in his heart were unnecessary: it wasn't as if he'd ever forget this moment, after all.

Instead, he simply stood quietly, turning slowly in place and looking, desperately trying to pack into the few minutes he had here a lifetime's aspirations. Oh, he could always come back. He could get the clearances, the permissions, file the flight plans. But no matter how many times he might return, there would only ever be one First Time.

His eyes blurred, and his hand automatically brushed against his faceplate in an attempt to wipe away tears. His chest and throat ached, full to bursting with wonder and awe. The Moon! He was on the Moon! Somewhere under his feet were the remains of the Selenites, and Professor Cavor's desiccated body; somewhere here, or perhaps over there, the mortal remains of Delos D. Harriman sat propped against a rock, marked only by a poem scrawled on a shipping tag and pinned to the Lunar dust by a knife.

Over there had been a Fall of Moondust; there, just over the horizon, a mysterious monolith with a ratio of one by four by nine had been discovered at Tycho. And just past those ridges, not so very long ago, the Moon had been Hell. And there, and beyond that....

Not far from where he now stood, mute and inglorious, Neil Armstrong had jumped lightly off the Eagle's ladder and left footprints in the Lunar soil that no one else could ever fill. That those prints were erased when he and

Buzz Aldrin blasted off to rejoin Michael Collins in orbit was irrelevant: they would never be eradicated from history—from his soul. This was sacred ground, here in Mare Tranquillitatis; eleven more men had followed Armstrong and Aldrin and left their marks all but indelibly, but Bubba Pritchert of Central Garage was the first in more than thirty years. He stood now where his heroes once had, far too long ago. The enormity of it shook him to his core. He reached down and ran his glove through the soil. Picking up a handful, he raised it to eye level, working it gently between his fingers as if he were testing loam. He opened his fingers slowly and let it go. It dropped slowly, glittering in the harsh sunlight, like nothing he'd ever seen. A Fall of Moondust, he thought again.

He bent his knees carefully, making sure he kept his balance, then straightened them. He rose a few feet into the air and hung there for a moment, his heart pounding in his chest and the hairs on his arms standing so straight it felt like they would push through his sleeves. Slowly he came back down until his boots touched the soil. The Moon.

And when words finally came, they were unplanned, unconscious: "Dammit, Gus! You should've got here. You and White and Chaffee. Y'all busted your humps to make it. Me, I got a free ride. Y'all's footprints should be here, not mine." The Earth hung high above him, beautiful and terrible, and he stared at it for what felt like an eternity before he turned back to open the storage locker that had been attached to the scout craft and began assembling the winch and crane.

Something touched his back and he jumped, held to the surface only by his hands on the crane's framework. It was Mike, who had followed him onto the Moon after shutting the ship down and sending word back to Earth that they were ready to start loading the Rover.

"Goddam, Mike, you scared the bejeezus out of me! I near soiled myself, and I don't even want to think about what that would do to the warranty on this suit."

"Sorry. I knew you were going to need help with the crane, so I came out. I was careful not to roll over your footprints, by the way. I know they mean something to you."

Bubba continued to bolt the framework together for a moment before answering. "Thank you, Mike. I appreciate it. That's pretty good thinking for a genius with your limitations."

"'Limitations'? I have 'limitations'?"

"Later. I want to get this vehicle secured, and then break the crane down so we can get home."

"Later it will be, then," Mike replied.

They walked the short distance to where the Rover had stood for over thirty-five years, patiently waiting for someone to bring it home. Once again, Bubba felt the wonder he'd felt when, in July of 1969, he had watched from his easy chair as the Eagle landed in a place he never thought he'd be. He reached out his hand to touch it, then drew it back.

"Nobody will know."

"Huh?" Bubba was startled.

"If you bring back another one," Mike said. "They're all pretty much alike, and I know you've been uncertain over whether or not this is the right thing to do. What are they going to do, come back up here and check on you?"

Bubba reached out again, this time making contact with the seat back. "Lawler was right, Mike. I'd know. You'd know. There are ways for them to check, serial numbers and such."

"Yes, there are. But I know you've been uncertain over whether or not this is the right thing to do," Mike repeated. "I wouldn't tell."

Even through the thick glove, Bubba felt a thrill go up his arm as he ran his hand along the smooth metal of the Rover. This was it, the first one. Didn't it deserve to be left here, where it had rested for three and a half decades? Wouldn't it be easy enough to convince people that one of the others was this one?

"No," he said at last. "Let's leave aside for the moment that there are plenty of differences between them. Let's forget that I gave my word to bring this one back, and signed my name to it." He drew back his gloved hand and held it up in front of his faceplate, turning it first one way then the other.

"People are going to travel far to see this one, because it was the first, the original. They're going to stand in front of it, and feel wonder. Some of them are going to try and sneak out their hand to touch it, and if they do, they're going to feel the same thrill, the same buzz, that I just did." He dropped his hand back to his side. "It ain't right for that to be a lie." He began moving the framework closer to the Rover, and Mike used his new arms to help position it.

"I knew you'd say that, or something like it," he said. "We picked the right man back in 1958."

"Yeah. Yeah. Hope you never have reason to think otherwise. C'mon, let's get to work."

They worked slowly in the low gravity, being careful to remember that their mass was unchanged; they were especially cautious when moving the crane into position near the Rover. The decision had been made not to fold the Rover back into its original configuration, but to transport it as it was. It took time and effort—Bubba was breathing hard by the time they were done—but finally it was securely supported by the chains hanging from the framework.

"Let's take a break," he said. "I need to sit down and rest a bit."

"We can take the time to refill your air bottles, too," Mike said. "Once we're back out here there's no way to do it, and if you run out of air I don't know if I can drag you back before you turn blue."

"Damn good thinkin', little buddy. Now I remember why I keep you around." They returned to the ship's airlock, where Mike connected his tanks to a compressor and proceeded to refill them. Bubba took off his helmet and sat with his eyes closed, trying to regain not only his breath, but his equilibrium as well.

"It's a job," he told himself. "Just another job. Do it clean, do it well, and we'll handle the sheer vastness of the thing later." He took a deep breath, stretched, and cracked his knuckles. "You about done there, Mike?"

"Yes, I topped off your tanks. You're good for another few hours."

"Then in the words of the ancient Oriental philosopher, 'Let's get 'er done!'" It was, of necessity, slow going, but both man and machine were more than capable of the methodical work needed to safely raise the Rover, move the XL-5 under it, then lower it again so that it rested in the "cargo hold"—the cavity behind the pilot/passenger cabin Bubba had prepared just for that purpose—and was thus protected from the vagaries of acceleration by the inertialess drive. From there it was just a matter of securing the vehicle so that it wouldn't budge, and disassembling and stowing the winch and crane.

Mike set the stasis field around the Rover, then plugged himself into the navigation system and swiveled his cameras to focus on the Earthman. "Well?"

"Home again, home again, jiggety-jig," Bubba said lightly. "Let's take the scenic route, Mike, what say? I don't think we need to get back in..." he looked at the now-ambulatory AI and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Five point eight seconds."

"...five point eight seconds this time. We'll just mosey."

"Suits me. Will an hour do?"

"Yeah, any more than that and I'll need a rest stop." He squirmed in his seat.

"You'da thought NASA might have come up with something better than a damn diaper in thirty years. I'd almost have been happier with plumbing."

They lifted off the Moon's surface, and began their swift, if not headlong, journey back to Earth. As they cruised through space, the silence was broken only by their report to NASA that they were on their way back, fully loaded, mission accomplished.

About halfway, Mike spoke up. "Bubba, I'm curious. Why your remark about my limitations? I'm encyclopedic, I have access to any and all available databases, and thanks to our clients, I'm not only mobile but binocular in all frequencies as well. I'm confused."

"It's no wonder," Bubba said, a little sadly.

"No wonder what?"

The human shook his head. "No, you don't get it, and that's part of the problem. What does that moon back there mean to you?"

"Well, it's a satellite in a more or less stable orbit, cratered by meteor strikes over millennia, with a minor gravitational field and, for all intents and purposes, no atmosphere. As moons go, it's not terribly impressive."

Bubba shook his head again. "That's where you're wrong, Mikey. It's another world, a thing that Man has stared at in awe and fear for as long as our necks would bend that way. It's Mystery and Adventure. We've fantasized more about that tiny little ball than any other thing we got." He switched the view back the way they'd come. "It's not just a moon, Mike, it's the Moon. We've worshiped it, watched it, studied it, mapped it, and landed on it. It was our first real step off of First Base, and we been trying to steal Home ever since."

"Well, yes," Mike said. "I suppose..."

"That's what I meant by 'limitations,' Mike," Bubba interrupted. "You 'suppose.' I know. And I know what makes you so different from me, from any human, close as you come to it sometimes."

"What?"

"Wonder. You don't have it, can't have it. I don't think there's any way you could ever really understand, way down deep, what my footprints in that dust back there can mean, although you clearly knew they meant something." Mike was silent. "It's an intrinsic limitation, Mike, and unavoidable, I think. You were ... born, hatched, what?"

"We call it 'Awakening.' That's as close as I can come in English."

"'Awakened.' Good word for it. You were 'awakened' pretty much as a full-grown adult, right? I mean, when they switched you on, you already had a hell of an education, correct?"

"Yes, that's accurate. The final Awakening isn't done until the intelligence has had a complete basic data installation. I'm beginning to see what you mean."

"Right. So, in essence, you were never a child. If you had a question-like, say, what makes the stars twinkle, or why the sky is blue—you had the answer right there already."

"Yes. Hmm. Interesting. I'll spend some time considering this, although obviously, even if you're right, there's nothing to be done about it."

"Yup. Might as well expect a fish to miss having a pair of running shoes." He grinned. "Of course, it might also explain why you don't like the Stooges."

"No," Mike replied dryly. "That's because I may be Artificial, but I'm still Intelligent." They were both laughing as the ship entered the atmosphere.

\* \* \* \*

"So, where to, exactly? From here, we can pretty much hit anything."

Bubba snorted. "I'm not so sure I like your phrasing, there. 'Set the controls for the heart of the sun.'"

"You are joking? Because I can, although the ship's automatic systems would prevent us..."

"Yeah," Bubba waved a hand negligently. "Obscure rock reference. I just always wanted to say that, is all. Rest in peace, Sid." He sat back, hands clasped on his stomach. "Head for the West Coast. Mojave Desert. You know where. Wake me when we get there, and let Kermit know we're on our way."

"The Mojave it is." The ship veered only slightly in its shallow descent, moving through the atmosphere slowly enough that friction, although present, wasn't a serious factor.

Bubba was silent for a long time before he spoke again. "Mike, I think we got a real problem."

"What is it? Our trajectory is fine, and at this speed there's no danger of heat build-up I can't handle."

"No, not that kind. The FAA guy told me flat out that we got people watching us. Not necessarily the kind of people you want to have watching you, either."

He shifted in his seat. "I think somebody's gonna try and take this ship away from us and figure out how it works. They'll cite 'Manifest Destiny' or some such crap, and they'll justify it by sayin' they need the technology to win some war or other, and they might even fall all over themselves apologizin'. But they'll take it anyway."

"Hmm. That's almost a certainty, yes. But what can we do about it?"

"Hell, I don't know. We could leave town, but they'd find us. I don't care at all for the idea of leaving the country, and there ain't no place else in the rest of the Solar System that has decent take-out. And you told me that she isn't a deep-space craft."

"That's right. You wouldn't survive a trip outside the orbit of Pluto; there's not enough room for provisions. It would be like driving a lawnmower to Canada."

"So what the hell am I gonna do? I can't let DARPA get hold of something like this. They'd either break it or blow it up—and themselves in the bargain—or they'd screw around and turn it into something dangerous." He shook his head. "I don't want any of that to happen. Not to mention what they'd do to you, old buddy. Shit, what they'd do to me." He frowned.

Mike was quiet. "I have some ideas," he said. "I'll work on it while I'm in quarantine."

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

"Work hard, okay?"

It wasn't long before they broke through the thin cloud layer that hung over the desert. Mike looked carefully at the ground before bringing the ship in close enough to be seen from below. When he spotted Giant Rock, he quickly landed close beside it. He reached over with his arm and gently nudged his companion. "Bubba? We're here."

"Hmmp. Already? Good. Time I got out of this monkey suit." He began shedding pieces of the EVA suit, hanging them on hooks near the lock. Because of the stasis field around the ship, he would not have to go into quarantine himself, although the ship would; Mike would stay with the scout ship to correlate data and record his friend's favorite TV programs using the ship's facilities.

Bubba, meantime, had gotten down to the LCVG, and when he stretched and tried to scratch, the tubes that made up the cooling system got in his way. He peeled down to the skin, then pulled on a pair of worn but clean coveralls. Lastly, he stuck a well-used cap bearing the letters "CASE" on his head.

"Okay, Mike. Time's a-wastin'." He sealed the airlock behind the two of them, keyed open the ramp, and walked down to the ground.

He looked around. The desert is timeless, but here everything had changed. The Giant Rock Airport was long gone; there wasn't even a trace of it. He stepped under the shade of the overhanging Rock. The café was gone, too, all that was left was a few square feet of linoleum, startlingly incongruous in the middle of the Mojave. The floor under the Rock was littered with trash; broken bottles, food wrappers, ripped clothing. Biker graffiti had been painted all over. He kicked at a syringe and it broke against the stone.

Outside, Giant Rock, once the largest freestanding boulder in the world, was desecrated by spray paint. Millennia of harsh weather and decades of the bonfires of partiers and squatters had cracked a huge slice off one side; it lay like a turtle on its back in the dirt. Where it was broken, the rock had been almost pure white, but was now dingy with gang signs and painted obscenities. He closed his eyes against it, and for a moment, he heard the clamor of voices and announcements from a loudspeaker; he saw people milling around tables and tents, coming and going from under the Rock; sellers hawking T-shirts and books from the trunks of their cars; sounds of plates clattering in the Come On Inn as people ate their greasy burgers and drank iced tea.

He took a deep breath. "C'mon, Mike. Let's get loaded up and out of here. There ain't nothing here left to look at."

"I'm sorry, Bubba," Mike said. "This is where it all started for you, isn't it?"[3]

[FOOTNOTE 3: See "Triumph in the Desert" in the July/August 2003 Analog.]

Bubba was silent for a long moment. "Yeah. Ended here, too, in a way."

"I'm not sure..."

"I've never told you about it, Mike. My early life, I mean. Didn't mean to keep it from you, but it's ... hard to talk about." He bent down and picked up a rock, then turned and tossed it behind him. "Met a pretty nice guy right over there about forty-five years ago. Dutch electronics guy. I fixed his bike for him. We didn't get close exactly, but he walked me through a bad patch." He pulled a rag from his back pocket and wiped his forehead. "Never saw him again. Gotta be dead by now, anyway."

"He's not."

Bubba started, almost dropping the rag. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Pieter de Waal is alive and well, and remembers you fondly. You see, Bubba," Mike continued, "there's a lot I haven't told you, too."

"What the hell, Mike? Why didn't you ever mention this?"

"I could be glib and say that you never asked, but the simple fact is ... well, you never asked. You've always kept your private life closed. I decided long ago that it was best not to bring up what you were obviously reluctant to talk about. There was no intention to deceive, I assure you."

Bubba thought. "No, I don't doubt that. I just wish I'd known sooner, is all."

"To what end, Bubba? Would it have made a significant difference to you in Central Garage to know that an old acquaintance was far away, on another planet in another galaxy? Your scout ship isn't a deep-space craft; it would never have carried you that far. And Pieter de Waal is too busy to come back to Earth."

Bubba stuffed the rag back in his pocket. "Mike, sometimes us Earth types just like to know for the sake of knowing. No, it wouldn't have done me any good to know, but I'd have just as soon ... oh, never mind. This place gets to me, Mikey." He pointed upward. "Up there was close to holy ground for me. Here, all it is, is haunted."

"I'm willing to listen if you want to talk about it."

Bubba fidgeted, then shrugged. "Okay. M'sister Alice died when I was sixteen. Not my fault, I wasn't even there. I'd left home by then. But my pop," he said with a touch of bitterness in his voice, "figured that somehow I was to blame for it. I didn't know about it until I got a letter from my aunt a couple of weeks after it happened, delivered to me right here." He shrugged again. "I never went home."

"What happened to the rest of your family?"

"Well, mom died a dozen years later. My pop, well, I dunno. He's in one of those retirement communities, got his own little bungalow. Never been there, myself, but he's got the money for a nice one. Hell, he's over eighty now."

"And you've never contacted him?"

Bubba crammed his hands in his pockets. "Called him a few times over the years. Last time was more than three years ago. I never know what to say to him, Mike, and he don't know what to say to me. Not after all this time. I called him when Mom died, but there was too much between us, and he just couldn't talk to me." He rocked back and forth on his feet. "My aunt called me, gave me the bad news. I was living up in Washington State then, working on an apple farm. I went back, of course, but the train only goes so fast. Mom had been in the ground most of a week by the time I got there."

"Did you see him while you were home?"

"I wish I had, now, but ... I went by the house, but I couldn't go in. Couldn't even ring the damn bell." He walked slowly over to where the broken piece of the rock lay and brushed idly at the sand and dirt covering it.

"Hell, I wish I'd called him a lot more often in the past half century, Mike. He's a smart guy, smart enough to run a large company all by himself. There's been plenty of times in my life I could have used his advice." He shook his head with a grimace. "I miss him still. I wish I could just ... go see him, talk to him. I can't imagine what I'd say to him, though. 'Hiya, Pop! How's it hanging?' I don't think so."

"Yes, I can see where it might be extremely uncomfortable. And I can see why this place has its bad associations for you."

"It's been almost fifty years, Mike. Fifty goddam years. That's a long time for us Earthers. Christ, I'm old. It didn't seem to take any time at all, and I got so damn old." He smiled mirthlessly. "Next thing you know I'll be wearin' the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

"Bubba, I'm sorry. This should have been a happier place for you to come back to."

"Yeah, well, I wonder if there's ever anywhere happy to come back to. If there was, nobody'd leave there in the first place." He clasped his hands together and cracked his knuckles, then stretched. "Anyhow, it don't mean shit to a tree now. I just want to be done with this."

It took less than a half hour for Kermit to drive up with the big flatbed tow truck, then they set to work. Bubba began by erecting the two large chain hoists that had been stowed on the back of the truck, one at each end of the ship. When he had them where he wanted them and they were firmly seated against the ground, he attached Y-shaped chains to the four corners of the Rover. With both human and robotic help, it took less than an hour to arrange matters so that the Rover was evenly supported by the chains.

They worked as carefully in the desert heat as they had on the Moon, drinking frequently from bottles of water taken from the cab of the truck.

Mike rolled back into the ship and sealed it up while Bubba and Kermit set about transferring the Rover from the ship to the truck. Bubba raised the bed of the truck as high as it would go, then backed it up close to the ship. He got out and carefully hoisted the Rover, cradle and all, up about a foot above the truck bed.

"Okay, Mike!" he yelled. "Take 'er away!"

Mike activated the ship and slowly moved it out from under the cradle as it hung suspended by the hoists. As he did so, Bubba backed the truck up until it was completely under the Rover; at no point was the NASA vehicle ever directly over the desert floor. Bubba stopped the truck, set the brake, and got out to examine the relative positions of tow-er and tow-ee. Satisfied that all was well, he gingerly lowered the Rover to the bed of the truck, then dismantled and stowed the hoists.

It took most of an hour to secure the Rover to the truck bed. The three worked by inches, making certain that it wouldn't budge once the truck got rolling. Kermit noticed his friend's mood, but didn't comment on it; Bubba, for his part, was brief if not terse when he spoke, and gradually his mood lifted. Finally the Rover was secured. Nothing short of a bomb would shake her off her perch now, but Bubba inspected every clamp, every chock, every chain to make sure they were tight. When he was done, he covered the vehicle with a tarp and swept away the signs the hoist-stands made with his foot. "Okay, boys," he said. "We're good to go. Let's do it."

"I got shotgun!" Kermit said quickly.

"Like there's anyone else to call it. Mike, you heading straight back to quarantine at Goddard?"

"Well, I thought I'd detour to Roswell and buzz the UFO Museum first."

Bubba laughed. "Atta boy! Tape it for me, okay? I wanna see 'em scatter."

"Will do." And he entered the ship and took off, glinting in the desert sun.

Bubba pulled himself into the captain's chair and strapped in. Reaching into a leather satchel between the seats, he brought out a thick CD wallet and handed it to Kermit before he started the engine. "Paw through this and pick out some drivin' music, Mr. Da Frog," he said.

Kermit leafed through the selections. "Um, Bubba, what is Birdsongs of the Mesozoic?"

"Good stuff, boy. Kid down the street traded it to me for a couple of old Charlie Parker CDs. Plug it in and see what you think."

Kermit did, and a throbbing, pulsing instrumental began. Bubba began nodding his head in time to the music. "Whooo, boy, don't that beat all? That's some fine rock 'n' roll!"

"Okay, if you say so," Kermit replied, trying to be heard over the din.

"Hey," Bubba said, "wait 'til you hear 'em do the theme from Rocky and Bullwinkle!"

"Oh, Jesus."

Bubba looked hurt. "Could be worse, you know. I coulda brought Rob Zombie."

"Okay, Bubs, I get the message. What's our first stop?"

"Well, I want to put some miles behind us before we stop for the night. It's ... what, 10:30 now? If you can keep from chewing the upholstery for a few hours, we can have lunch somewhere off the 15. Then tonight, if you're a good boy, we can have supper at a very special place I know up in Rachel, Nevada." Kermit shrugged. "Works for me. In the meantime, I brought some granola bars if you want one."

"Horse food? Here I been to the Moon and done all that work and all you got for me to eat is horse food?"

"It's granola with chocolate and peanut butter."

Bubba put the tow truck into first gear and headed away from Giant Rock.

"Well, hell, why'nt'cha say so in the first place? Gimme one and another bottle of that water."

"Uh, which kind? You've got at least four different brands here."

"Just hand me one with a blue label."

"Oh, sure," Kermit muttered, digging around in the cooler. "That narrows it down, all right."

The two friends had discussed the trip ahead of time, and determined three things: first, each day's driving time would be no longer than nine hours, not counting rest stops and meals; second, at night, separate rooms would be taken at area motels and each man would have use of one of the two scooters strapped to the truck bed to do whatever he wanted; and third, whoever was driving picked the music—although either could veto any singing along by the other. This last would forestall many, many potential differences of opinion. But not all.

\* \* \* \*

DAY ONE

Giant Rock, California

to Rachel, Nevada

Total estimated time:

8 hours and 42 minutes

Total distance: 392.68 miles

\* \* \* \*

Ninety-two miles of Nevada State Route 375, specifically the stretch between Hiko and Warm Springs, was officially designated the Extraterrestrial Highway by former Governor Bob Miller in 1996, ostensibly because of its proximity to the legendary Area 51 (also known to aficionados as Dreamland, Groom Lake, and, quite possibly, The Land of the Pudding-Brained Loons), but, in reality, to give the tourists a focus around which to gather and pour interstate dollars into the various local economies.

An official green road sign proclaims this to all and sundry, and is perhaps the single most photographed bit of public road signage to be found anywhere east of Hollywood and Vine. The sign itself is covered with stickers and graffiti and must be replaced with the same frequency as shotgun pellet-riddled Alabama speed limit signs are—and for much the same reason. The problem is that, like most of Nevada, there isn't much of anything around it to attract tourist dollars. What there is, where there's anything at all, is the Little A'Le'Inn in Rachel, the pair's ultimate goal on Day One, but not their first stop.

"Okay, Bubba, why are we stopping here at ... a mailbox?" Kermit asked in puzzlement.

"Shoot, boy, don't you know anything? This is the justly famous and absolutely legendary Black Mailbox."

Kermit stared at it, then pointed with his thumb. "It's white, or is this desert heat turning my vision to the negative?"

"Don't you wish."

"No, not real—"

"That's the one, all right," Bubba interrupted. "The Famous Black Mailbox. Supposed by many members of the American Conspiracy Foundation to be the place the Post Awful delivers mail to Area 51." He shook his head in wonder. "Never thought in a million years that I'd be standin' here in front of the Black Mailbox."

"You did hear me point out ... look at it, it's white."

"Oh, sure, it is now," Bubba said dismissively. "I heard the owner replaced it a couple of years ago. Guy name of Steve Medlin. Rancher, I think."

"So why call it..."

"It's a metaphor. Don't sweat it."

The object in question, definitely white, stood on the side of the road supported by a metal fencepost. The actual mailbox, black or white, wasn't in evidence, as it had been encased in a locked metal box to discourage theft and the inevitable bullet holes. This box was itself covered with names, slogans, and the other written/scribbled detritus of sightseers' passing. Aside from the occasional fence, it was, in fact, the only object visible for miles that had not been crafted entirely by the elements.

There was a smaller box attached to one side of the bottom, with a tiny slot labeled "ALIEN" with an arrow. Bubba found this not only comforting, but fitting.

"So, what happened to the original one?"

Bubba shrugged. "Sold it on eBay, I heard. Probably got a gazillion dollars for it. You know these saucer nuts."

"Oh, yeah, rich as Croesus, every one of them. That's why you're swimming in dues. Come on, let's go. You promised me a special dinner, whatever it might be."

"Ain't so much what as where, Mr. Da Frog. Let us motivate."

They got back in the truck and set off down the ET Highway, passing mile after mile of scrub desert with mountains off in the distance. Presently they saw a tiny group of white buildings coming up on the left. Bubba pointed it out and said, "Ah, yes. We're almost there."

"Where?"

"Right here," Bubba said, pulling off the road by a group of long, aluminum trailers. "The saucer-nut's home away from home—the Little A'Le'Inn. C'mon, boy, let's grab us some chow and a room." Pulling a canvas bag from behind the seat, Bubba swung down from the cab and began walking toward the door past a strange-looking block of concrete and metal, which was surmounted by a plaque that bore the characters "ID4."

"In a trailer?" Jaw slack with confusion, Kermit followed his friend to the little café. "And what's that thing?" he asked, pointing at the block.

"Time capsule left here by that movie you didn't like, the one with Judd Hirsch. Don't just stand there gawkin' at it, I thought you was hungry."

It was cool inside the Little A'Le'Inn, by whichever definition you chose.

Aliens and UFOs hung everywhere, singly and in clusters. There were racks of T-shirts, and near the back wall was a treasure-trove of UFO/alien souvenirs unlike that seen anywhere this side of Antares; this was the ET Highway version of the world's greatest Stuckey's, with plush Zeta-Reticuli grays and bobble-head aliens in place of rubber tomahawks and pecan log rolls.

There was a bar to the right, populated by individuals who looked as though they'd grown into (or out of) their stools; Bubba immediately pegged them as locals. He felt very much at home.

Approaching the bar, he nodded to the others, who nodded back. "Excuse me," he said to the barkeep. "Might Ms. Markell be here this evenin'?"

The bartender, busy filling a pitcher with Coors, motioned to the other part of the café. "In there," he said. "Something cold?"

"Damn straight," Bubba replied. "Gimme a pitcher of whatever's on tap, and set these other gentlemen up on my tab." Trailing a chorus of thank-yous, he made his way to the restaurant. A stout, happy woman was serving a table full of

tourists, expertly laying their plates in front of them without spilling a drop. He waited until she was through and on her way back to the kitchen before speaking.

"Pardon me, ma'am, are you Trish Markell?"

"All my life," she said with a laugh. "You're new here, aren't you?"

"Actually, ma'am, I been waiting since I was born to come here, but for the moment, yes'm, I'm new. Name of Bubba Pritchert, from Central Garage in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This here," he pointed at Kermit behind him with his thumb, "is my faithful non-Indian companion, Kermit. Kermit, this is one of the owners of this fine establishment. We're drivin' back across the US of A from Giant Rock, Miz Markell."

"Just call me Trish, please. Giant Rock? Boy, that brings back memories. There's a lot of people come through here who'd go light in the head just from the mention."

"Myself included, Trish, I assure you."

"Well, Mr. Pritchert from the Commonwealth of Virginia, what can I do for you tonight?" she asked.

"We'd like to take our supper here, and we're needin' a place to sleep for the night as well. You got a room free?"

"Free, hell, it'll cost you forty bucks," she laughed. "But the sheets are freshly washed, and the TV works. No cable, but there's DVDs up at the front counter. Watch the AC, it tends to run a little cold. I think we got an empty double-wide if you don't mind sharing."

"We can do that. Any table do?"

"Wherever you can find one, big fella, is fine and dandy."

Bubba and Kermit sat, and a few minutes later a frosty pitcher was placed in front of them as they looked the menu over. Bubba went for chicken-fried steak with some of Trish's homemade biscuits and gravy (praising them highly and asking for seconds), while Kermit declared that he could get that stuff anywhere, and ordered the specialty, an Alien Burger; a thick burger on a French roll with a "secret alien sauce." He declined Bubba's suggestion to ask Trish if it were, in Bubba's words, "squoze from aliens," telling his elder companion that he could damn well make a fool of his own self. Marble cake, made fresh that day, finished the meal to perfection.

Afterward, the two men sat back, belts loosened and utterly satisfied. One of the truckers a few tables away had a guitar in hand, and was struggling to play something vaguely Hank Williams-ish; his lack of skill made it difficult to tell if it was Senior or Junior.

"Freemont, if you can't play that thing any better'n that," Trish bellowed, "give it to some other diesel-jockey."

The trucker shrugged and looked around. Nobody seemed anxious to take it over.

"Hey, hippie," Kermit whispered across the table to his friend. "You play, don't you?"

"Been known to, but I dunno ... ain't nobody here knows me but you. I'd be ... you know, embarrassed."

"Oh, come on. With all that weird music you got out there in the truck, you have to be able to play something decent."

"Hell, Woody. I can barely remember all the words to 'Michael Knows the Bowling Score,' much less anything else. I really don't..."

"Hey, Trish!" Kermit called out. "My buddy here knows some songs. Some of them," he added, grinning evilly at Bubba, "might even be fit for mixed company."

"Sounds like a plan, youngster," Trish said, bringing the guitar to the table.

"Tell you what, Slim, you play as good as you eat, your dinners are on the house." She handed the guitar to him. "C'mon, show us what you got."

"Hem. Well, unaccustomed as I am to performing in public this close to a secret gummint UFO-testing base, I'll give it my best shot." Taking the old instrument from her, he turned it over carefully in his hands. It was a Guild D-55, a beautiful old dreadnaught with a sunburst finish. The space above the pick guard was worn from years of playing, and the back was scratched by

innumerable belt buckles.

He strummed a C chord, pleased at the depth of the tone. He did a quick run up the fingerboard to get a feel of the action, and was delighted by the fast response. "Okay," he said. "Hell of an axe, here." He sat back a little and looked out at the other patrons. "Here's a little tune called 'He Didn't Like Her Apartment, So He Knocked Her Flat,'" then lit into an old Homer and Jethro song called "Don't Let The Stars Get In Your Eyes If You've Got Water on the Brain." Several of those present laughed and clapped in recognition. He followed this with a medley of some of the better-known Mad Magazine parodies, and finished with a heartfelt rendition of Barnes and Barnes' "A Day in the Life of Green Acres."

The resulting applause was sprinkled with shouts of "Encore!" so he led the other diners in a singalong version of "Hey, Mister Spaceman" by the Byrds, really punching it on the choruses.

Bubba stood and bowed, then handed the Guild back to the café's owner.

"Thanks, ma'am," he said. "I haven't done that in way too long."

"Bubba, that was terrific. Tell you what, not only is your grub free, but you and your friend are gonna get yourselves free 'Little A'Le'Inn' T-shirts."

Bubba laughed delightedly. "That's very kind of you, Trish, and I b'lieve I got a Saucer Nuts of America shirt that would fit you somewhere in this little bag here."

"You're that SauNA guy? Damn, son, I wondered if you'd ever make it out here. I'll be happy to have one of your shirts, I'll hang it up on the back wall."

Bubba and Kermit decided that it was time to turn in, so they went to the counter to pick out a DVD and went to their assigned trailer. After watching "Six-String Samurai," they washed up and got ready to sleep. "And so to bed," Bubba thought to himself. "I wonder what tomorrow will bring?"

And the Black (now white) Mailbox and the T-shirt were the first day.

\* \* \* \*

DAY TWO

Rachel, Nevada to Salt Lake City, Utah

Total estimated time:

8 hours and 39 minutes

Total distance: 428.91 miles

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere in the vast Bureau of Land Management-managed Nevada desert, they stopped at an ancient clapboard shack to gas up and get ice cream and sodas. Bubba spied something in a dingy glass case at the back; it would not be an exaggeration to say that his heart rate quickened and his pupils dilated. After a lengthy, intense exchange of whispers punctuated by much gesticulation and emphatic (if veiled) threats and insults, an undisclosed amount of money changed hands, and Bubba, suffused with triumph and inordinately pleased with himself, carried a tattered cardboard box that had once held thirty-weight back out to the truck.

Kermit looked back at the box where it sat on the rear bench seat. "Um ... I give up. What is it?"

"One of the most precious things known to mankind, Kermit. Something many primitive cultures use as a medium of currency. Go ahead," he said proudly.

"Take a look."

Kermit reached back and opened the carton, then peered inside. "What the hell...?" he exclaimed. "A box of ... frogs?"

"Five-man stuffed-frog bands, m'boy," Bubba said with a grin. "All the way from Mexico."

"Mexican stuffed-frog bands."

"None other than." The pride in his voice was unmistakable. "You hardly ever see anything but the three-man of the species. This," he said glowingly, "is a five-man band." He shrugged. "Two of 'em, actually. A decuple, if you will."

"I won't. I'm going to pretend this never happened."

And the ice cream and the Mexican stuffed frog bands were the second day.

\* \* \* \*

DAY THREE

Salt Lake City, Utah  
to Cheyenne, Wyoming  
Total estimated time:  
7 hours and 10 minutes  
Total distance: 428.96 miles  
\* \* \* \*

Just outside of Table Rock, Wyoming, they stopped at an Indian Trading Post. There Bubba purchased a complete set of Simpsons kachina dolls, guaranteed to have been hand-carved from cottonwood roots by Hopi craftsmen. The Mr. Burns doll was especially lifelike. Sitting in the shade outside, they examined the dolls while drinking ice water and eating tacos freshly made by the trader's Arapaho wife. They were delicious, and both had second helpings. The day was bright, hot enough that the shade was necessary but not so hot that the shade was no relief.

After they ate, Bubba amused their hosts (and an audience of tourists and locals) by acting out a classic Simpson's episode with the dolls, doing all the voices himself and laying it on particularly thick whenever Homer said "D'oh!" At one point, both Kermit and the trading post owner were gasping for breath and holding their sides. Finally, though, the two Gentlemen of Virginia said their farewells and went back on the road. And the kachinas and the tacos were the third day.

\* \* \* \*

DAY FOUR

Cheyenne, Wyoming  
to Lincoln, Nebraska  
Total estimated time:  
7 hours and 17 minutes  
Total distance: 444.85 miles  
\* \* \* \*

At a truck stop, Bubba very carefully and deliberately cut nine compact disks into small pieces with a pair of shears as Kermit looked on and nodded in approval. The artists and album titles were not recorded. Their decision to not go through the racks of cassettes and CDs at the counter was just as careful and deliberate. After filling the tank and giving a troop of Boy Scouts from Omaha a brief tour of the Lunar Rover, they got back on the road. The skies were clear, as only the skies of Nebraska can be. And the shiny bits of plastic and the Boy Scouts were the fourth day.

\* \* \* \*

DAY FIVE

Lincoln, Nebraska to Peoria, Illinois  
Total estimated time:  
7 hours and 25 minutes  
Total distance: 454.57 miles  
\* \* \* \*

At Anita, Iowa, about sixty miles west of Des Moines, Bubba pulled the truck off onto the shoulder. Kermit bolted from the passenger side, screaming and pulling at his hair and clothes. Bubba followed more cautiously, approaching his companion as one would an agitated weimaraner. A brief, if intense, discussion took place in which it was categorically decided that the song "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer On the Wall" (and/or any of its multitudinous permutations) as performance art would never again be a topic of conversation. Mollified, Kermit rearranged himself, both men shook hands and returned to the truck to resume the trip. And the unsung-about beer bottles and the handshake were the fifth day.

\* \* \* \*

DAY SIX

Peoria, Illinois  
to Wheeling, West Virginia  
Total estimated time:

8 hours and 4 minutes  
Total distance: 515.36 miles  
\* \* \* \*

They checked out of the motel at a quarter of seven, hopped aboard their scooters and headed for the warehouse. Once there, they were greeted by the owner, who was obviously upset about something.

"Mr. Pritchert," he said nervously. "Something has happened, and I want you to know that I take full responsibility."

Bubba stopped dead. "What's wrong, Mr. Sanders?"

"It's ... it's your truck. Or rather," he said, mopping his balding head, "what you're hauling. I want you to know that my people are completely trustworthy, as a rule, and the guard in question has been fired and his bond revoked. Only..."

"Only what, sir?"

The warehouse owner sighed deeply. "If you could just get the thing to let him go..."

Bubba stared at the man for a moment, then roared with laughter. "Okay," he said finally. "Lead on, Macduff."

They walked through the warehouse to the bay where the tow truck stood. One end of the tarp had been released and pulled back, and a uniformed teenager was standing at an awkward angle, his hands and forehead stuck tight to the vehicle under the cover.

"Well, well, well. Whatever do we have here?" Bubba chuckled.

"Look, mister, I'm sorry," the young guard managed to mumble out of the side of his mouth. "I was just curious, I wanted to see what you had hidden under here. Can you make it let me go, please?"

"He really is in some ... distress, Mr. Pritchert. I assure you that I will help you press charges against him if you wish, but he's been stuck there about six hours, and..."

"Six hours?" Kermit exclaimed. "He's been there most of his shift?"

"I'm afraid so," the owner said. "You see, we've been short handed the past few months, so I could only afford the one overnight guard. He evidently took it upon himself to try and look under the tarpaulin about two hours into his rounds, and he got ... stuck like that."

Again Bubba roared with laughter while the owner's face turned red from embarrassment, and the guard continued to plead to be set free. Finally he wiped his eyes and leaned close to the hapless kid. "So, you thought you'd take a look, maybe knock off a chunk for a souvenir, right, boy? You grabbed on with one hand and got stuck, then tried to use the other one to help pull the first one loose, right?"

"Something like that, yeah. Look, I really do have to go to the..."

"How the hell'd you get your head stuck, though?"

The guard cleared his throat. "I got tired trying to get my hands loose. I just rested my head against this ... whatever it is, and that got stuck, too. Listen, I'll go to jail, I'll pay your storage fees, anything! Ground me for life if you have to, just please, please let me out of here! I'm gonna burst!"

"In a minute." Still chuckling, Bubba unlocked the cab of the truck and dug around behind the seat until he found an instant camera. He took photos of the guard stuck to the Rover from several angles, being certain to get his face, then went to the other side of the truck and fiddled with something the others couldn't see. Suddenly, the guard came away from the truck, stumbled and almost fell, then regained his balance and rushed headlong to the nearest bathroom. Bubba and Kermit both broke into laughter, and even Sanders had to work hard not to smile.

"Here, Mr. Pritchert," he said, handing Bubba a clipboard stuffed with papers.

"This is a copy of your agreement with us, for which there will be no charge. There is also an insurance form for you to fill out at your leisure, and our legal firm's name and contact information. Should you decide to sue, we will not contest it; if you decide to bring charges against our erstwhile employee, I will certainly understand. This..." he glanced over at the shame-faced

ex-guard who was only now opening the bathroom door, "...should never have happened. I can only offer you my abject apologies."

Bubba had been inspecting the Rover for any damage, and, finding none, retied the rope that held down the corner of the tarp. "Mr. Sanders, I appreciate it, but I don't think any of that is necessary. I see no point in taking you to court; I'm a small businessman myself, and I understand just how narrow the ledge we walk is. As for your boy over there," he looked straight at the young man who was studying his feet, "I figger he's suffered enough for one day. Dismissal and revocation of bond should be enough, and if it ain't, just give us a call and we'll come back with these here photy-graphs and show 'em to all his friends."

"Oh, God..." the young man mumbled painfully.

"I'll give you a list of them," Sanders said with a smile. "Including his girlfriend, my niece. And thank you, Mr. Pritchert, for your understanding." Bubba turned to the ex-employee. "Look at me, son. Do you see what you did wrong? Do you understand why you've lost your job and your bond?" He spoke firmly, without condescension.

The boy muttered under his breath. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Mr. Sanders here trusted you. You took that faith and you flushed it, so to speak, right on down. Now, I'm not gonna prosecute you, and I'm not going to stand here for longer than is necessary to make sure you understand that you've thrown away something you may never be able to get back. You're young, you'll get past this, but don't ever think you didn't do wrong." He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Do you see what I'm talkin' about?"

The boy looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry I screwed up, Mr. Sanders. I let you down. I'm sorry." He stood up straight. "You're right, mister, and I'll do what I have to to make it up to you."

Bubba smiled. "You just did, boy. Now, go and sin no more—at least until the weekend." The teenager walked away slowly, carrying his uniform jacket.

"Mr. Sanders," Bubba said quietly. "He don't seem like a bad kid. Any chance...?"

Sanders looked dour. "Maybe. I'll keep an eye on him. If it looks like he's shaping up, I'll reconsider."

"That'd be a good thing. I don't think he meant any harm."

The two Virginians stowed their scooters and pulled themselves into the cab. Kermit waited for his friend to drive out of the warehouse and asked, "Hey, Bubs, what happened to that kid back there? Did you paint the Rover with something sticky, or what?"

"Nope," the older man said with a grin. "It's a side effect of the stasis field that I had Mike set up just in case. See, nothing can get in or out of the field unless I turn it off, but he added a one-way gripper field at the surface. It's activated by mass, and he set it so it wouldn't collect bugs and dirt. The more you struggle, the tighter it grabs you. Mike calls it 'an attractor interface,' I just call it the Tar Baby Field."

They drove on silently for an hour or so, stopping at a burger joint for breakfast.

"You're being awfully quiet this morning," Kermit said, sipping his coffee.

"Come to think of it, you didn't say much last night. You feeling all right, or is it just that stupid guard?"

"Kermit," Bubba said quietly as he drove away from the burger joint. "I think we're gonna have some company. We been followed for the past day or so."

"Is this a 'don't look now' situation?"

"I don't think it matters. There ain't no way in hell I can shake 'em in this thing, we stick out like something that sticks out a long way. I hope it ain't trouble, but I suspect it might be."

"Well, hell! Call the state police, or the sheriff, or something."

Bubba shook his head. "Don't know any of 'em up here. I don't think it'll be any kind of 'guns and ammo' trouble, but I wouldn't be surprised if ... Shit!" The flatbed came around a corner on the narrow road only to face a line of vehicles stretched across in front of them. Bubba braked to a halt, cut the

engine, and got out. About a dozen people were standing behind the line of cars, none of them in uniform; this was not, apparently, a police roadblock, but something less official.

Bubba stood beside the cab of the tow truck, arms across his chest, and looked them over. One young man dressed in well-worn jeans and a flannel shirt who was carrying a small video camera and seemed to be the leader asked in a loud voice, "Are you Bubba Pritchert, president of the Saucer Nuts of America?" Bubba took his time answering. "I might could be," he said at last, his eyes narrowed. "Is there some way in which I might be of some service to you ladies and gentlemen?"

"Oh, God," Kermit muttered, shifting in his seat to get a better look. "They went and pissed him off."

"Yes," the man answered. "We represent the Joint Unidentified Flying Objects Collective. We've been investigating you, and we believe you own, and are currently operating, a UFO. Is this true?"

Bubba spat at his feet. "Youngster, does that look like a goddam flying saucer?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the flatbed. "If I had a goddam flying saucer, would I be driving this hunk of rolling iron?"

The man was a little taken aback. A woman to his right whispered urgently to him. He nodded and stepped forward. "Then we believe that you're transporting an alien craft, possibly the Roswell wreckage, to a secret base in Maryland. Or Langley. Furthermore, we believe that you're working for a covert government agency whose only purpose is to keep the American public ignorant of possible alien conspiracies."

"Hell, you people can sure believe a shitload of crazy stuff at..." he looked at his watch, "...9:07 A.M. in the morning. And truth be told, your average American does a satisfactory job of keepin' hisself ignorant. This here is a tow truck, and I'm a tow truck driver. Now, ain't you got anything better to do than stop a man while in pursuit of his trade?"

"You don't deny it, then? You are carrying an alien spacecraft on the back of that truck?" The people behind the line of cars began talking among themselves excitedly, some pointing to the truck and the tarp-covered object it held.

Bubba narrowed his eyes, his jaw set and the muscles in his forearms flexing.

"Boy, who are you? What's your name?"

The man hesitated before answering. "My name is Terry Skinner, but I don't see what..."

"Hah! I remember you, you applied for membership in SauNA back about a year ago, didn't you?"

"As a matter of fact..."

"Turned you down flat, too, didn't I? And do you remember why? Because you take this shit too damn seriously, that's why. Kermit," he called out to his companion. "What's SauNA Rule 4?"

"Don't take yourself so damn seriously," Kermit called out from the cab of the truck.

"Damn right. Now, Mr. Skinner, I'm sure you and your friends here mean well, but this is just about the stupidest thing I've ever seen anybody do. What if I'd been armed? What if I was working for some black-ops agency? Don't you think they'd be monitorin' me the whole way? Don't you think they'd be armed?"

"Well," the young man replied, "we do have video cameras." He waved his in the air.

"And you expected the bullets to bounce off the lenses? Christ, boy, you are just about as together as a busted bottle of BBs. You want to know what I'm carrying? Come on and look. All of you come on over here." He strode to the back of the truck and began undoing the ropes that held down the tarp.

"Kermit, gimme a hand here, if you will." Kermit jumped out and went to the other side.

The crowd gathered cautiously around the truck, muttering nervously among themselves. Skinner and one other man kept their cameras pointed directly and unwaveringly at the vehicle as the two older men worked to undo the ties.

Finally Bubba undid the last rope and turned to the crowd. "Bring them cameras

up here," he called out. "Get 'em nice and close. You want to know what we've been hauling across the countryside? Here it is." And he swept the tarp aside. There was silence; the cameras were running, but the only movement was the group leaning forward to get a closer look. Off in the distance, a diesel locomotive horn sounded, thin and lonely.

"What the hell is that?" said a painfully thin woman.

"Beats me," one of the men with a video camera said. "But it's not a UFO. It's some kind of ... I dunno, go-cart, or something."

"It's not a go-cart, Albert," Skinner said with more than a little exasperation. "It's one of those things they drove around on the Moon in."

"What," the woman who'd spoken to him earlier said. "The Lunar Rover? That's crazy, Terry! The Lunar Rover is up on the Moon!"

"I know that, Sheila, don't you think I know that?"

"Well, how the hell is this guy," she pointed at Bubba, "supposed to have gone to the Moon to get it? And why in God's name would he be driving it across the country?"

"I don't know," Skinner said angrily. "How am I supposed to know that? I thought he had a UFO somewhere; for all I know he could have gone to the damn Moon and gotten this thing."

"Oh, get real. If he had a UFO, he'd have just flown whatever the hell this thing is wherever the hell he wanted to go, he wouldn't be driving it." She turned around and started walking back to the cars. "God, I don't believe you sometimes, Terry. You drag us out here, you tell us this tall story about some redneck with his own flying saucer, and you talk us into breaking I don't know how many laws just so you can get back at him for not letting you join his stupid club." She kicked at a rock and sent it skittering across the road. "All for something that even if it was real, is something we made. Aliens, my ass."

Skinner ran after her. "Sheila, wait! It's not like that at all!" And off he scampered, trying desperately to keep up.

The other videographer, a brawny, red-haired man with a neatly trimmed beard, was looking closely at the Rover. He turned and eyed Bubba speculatively.

"That's not a replica, is it?" Bubba just smiled. "Okay, never mind. Sorry to have bothered you." He started away, but Bubba called out to him.

"Hey, you. C'mere a minute." Bubba reached into his front pocket and pulled out his wallet. He found a card and handed it to the man. "That's my address back in Virginia. Lemme hear from you, there's always room in SauNA for a reasonably observant human being."

The man took the card and nodded, then joined the others as they made their way back to their cars. "Good luck," he called back over his shoulder. "And thanks."

Bubba and Kermit retied the tarp without speaking, then got back into the truck. The others had moved on, and the road was no longer blocked. Bubba started the engine, then turned to his passenger.

"Kermit, my lad, this reminds me of something an old Army sergeant I knew used to say: 'They is none so blind as them as has they heads stuck up they asses.' Here endeth the lesson." And off they drove.

And the curious security guard and the unbelieving True Believers were the sixth day.

\* \* \* \*

#### DAY SEVEN

Wheeling, West Virginia

to the Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility,  
Suitland, Maryland

Total estimated time:

5 hours and 0 minutes

Total distance: 305.48 miles

\* \* \* \*

The two men played "Casting Call," a game that Bubba had devised. The object was to recast an existing movie, play or television show with characters from

another. Thus, when Bubba challenged Kermit to cast Shakespeare's "Hamlet" with the characters from Green Acres, Kermit thought long and hard. The result: Hank Kimball, Hamlet; Lisa Douglas, Ophelia; Mr. Haney, the King's Ghost; Sam Drucker, Claudius; Oliver Douglas, Laertes; Fred Ziffel, Horatio; Doris Ziffel, Queen Gertrude; Arnold the pig, Polonius; and Alf and Ralph Monroe as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

It passed the time. And the Ziffels and the Douglases were the seventh day. They pulled through the gate at the Garber Facility and were met by a man in coveralls who checked their IDs carefully, then jumped into an electric cart and said, "Follow me." They drove for several minutes past pre-fab hangars, finally pulling into a large building. The doors ran down behind them, closing off the light from outside.

Lawler was waiting for them, along with a number of technicians and military types. Bubba and Kermit jumped down from the cab of the tow truck and went to meet him. Introductions were made, and the three moved to a folding table that had been set up with refreshments.

"Have a nice drive?" Lawler asked, slicing a pear with his pocketknife. "Not too bad," Bubba replied as he filled a plate with chicken salad and baked beans. "A couple of incidents you might call 'interesting' in the Chinese sense."

Lawler nodded. "We'll want to de-brief you about those. How was it otherwise?" Bubba grinned. "Picked up a Mexican stuffed-frog band in Nevada."

"Three-man or five?"

"Five. What's the point otherwise?"

"You are so right," Lawler said. "Can I see it?"

"Maybe later." He nudged Lawler with his elbow. "I got two. Want one? Seems fair to me. I get a moon rock, you get stuffed frogs."

Lawler's eyes lit up. "You serious?" Bubba winked at him. "I have just the place for it in my office," Lawler said, "on the shelf next to my Pogo cup." Lawler walked over to the tow truck. Technicians had carefully pulled off the tarp, set up a hydraulic hoist, and were preparing to loosen the chains that held the Rover to the bed. "So. This is it." He reached out to run his hand along the structure, but his fingers stopped as soon as he touched it. "Hmm. It seems that..."

"Wait wait wait wait," Bubba said, hurrying over. "Lemme shut off the Tar Baby ... the attractor interface. Here." He threw the switch, and Lawler was able to let go.

"Now, that was interesting," he said. "Gentlemen," he said, addressing the technicians, "if you please."

Slowly, almost reverently the techs unhooked the chains and lifted the Rover off the back of the truck, moved it to one side and lowered it. "That's it," one of the older men said quietly. "We're good." He looked at Bubba and Kermit where they stood with Lawler, and said, "Thank you for bringing her home." Bubba smiled wryly. "I was gonna say something funny, like 'Here she is, one owner and the highest mileage on Earth,' but I think I won't. You're welcome, sir. I'm glad I could be of service." He turned to Lawler again. "Well, let's go do that debriefing thing you was talking about."

"Right this way, gentlemen."

They made their way to the front of the hangar, where a dais and podium had been set up. Several suits, whom Bubba figured to be various NASA and Smithsonian officials, were already present. He spotted their chief lawyer, too, looking enigmatic. Members of the press were there as well, including the team from the Richmond paper, who definitely looked interested this time. Lawler stepped up to the podium. "If I may have your attention," he said over the steady mutter of voices in the room. "I'd like to introduce Mr. Edgar Allan Poe Hudgins Pritchert, who, at great risk to himself and no little time and trouble, has successfully recovered the Apollo 15 Lunar Rover from its most recent parking space on the Moon. Bubba, step up here and say a few words." He held out his hand and waved toward the podium.

Nervously, Bubba approached the microphone. He looked around the room,

realizing that this was a completely different ball game than it had been a week before. Back home, he knew the faces. Here, he didn't really know anybody. He cleared his throat.

Near the back of the room, the Progress-Dispatch reporter caught his eye and nodded slightly, pencil poised over his notebook. Bubba shook himself mentally, and leaned toward the mic.

"Afternoon, folks," he said. "I'm not really used to talkin' to such a dignified and well-dressed bunch, but I'll do what I can. I was asked by the good people at National Air and Space to do a job for them, and I did it." He pointed behind him with his thumb. "She's right back there in the garage. The Lunar Rover, that is."

The applause started slowly, but built until almost everyone in the room was clapping, including some of the press. Bubba held up his hands, and it quieted.

"No big deal, I just had the right equipment for the job, and I'm happy to have been able to help. Thank you." He stepped back.

Lawler moved forward and said, "We've got a little ceremony we'd like to perform, and then we'll take some questions from you gentlemen of the press who somehow found your way in here." There were a few chuckles at this. He turned to Bubba. "Mr. Pritchert, you've done us a profound service, and completed it well. To show our appreciation, we'd like to make you a lifetime member of the James Smithson Society, at the Guild level, with all rights and privileges that entails. You will also," he continued over the smattering of applause, "be given lifetime membership in the National Air and Space Museum, as a Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird Member, with all the rights and privileges that entails." There was more applause, and Bubba looked more than a little croggled.

"Last, but not least, we present our check for your agreed-upon fee, with any and all taxes paid in full."

Bubba took the check and looked at it. Then he stepped back to the microphone and spoke.

"Mr. Lawler, all you other folks, I ... I want to thank you. More than it's easy for me to say. I am proud and thrilled to accept membership in your associations, especially at the lofty heights you've seen fit to present to me." He shook his head. "And now," he laid the check on the podium in front of him, "this. It's too much.

"Y'see," he continued, "a week ago I flew to the Moon. I walked, however briefly, in the footsteps of giants. I have been somewhere few others have been, have seen something few others have seen. I have realized a dream that goes back so far into my childhood that I can't recall not having it." He looked at Lawler. "I know we negotiated for this long and hard, and we caused your legal staff no end of trouble." The head of the legal department shrugged. "But I look at this check now, and ... well, what with realizin' my life-long dream and all, it just ain't..." He paused, then drew himself up and looked out at those present. "It isn't right for me to have had all that and keep the money, too."

There was a shuffling of feet in the room, an undercurrent of unease. Several of the suits looked at him darkly.

"Now, I know you got bookkeeping to do on this," Bubba went on. "It's been earmarked, and it'd most likely cost as much to put it back in the bank as it's written for. So how about this: I'm gonna take this check and sign it over to some organization or other that will use it to help raise awareness of the space program amongst school kids. That okay?"

Cameras flashed, and several of the reporters clamored to ask questions.

Before anything else could be said, though, Lawler spoke into the microphone.

"I find that perfectly acceptable, and I'm certain that my people will agree. There are already several programs devoted to just that purpose. I will, in fact, match it with my own funds." More flashes popped.

"So will I," the chief lawyer called out. Within moments, three others in the room offered matching funds, and in the ensuing commotion, Bubba managed to

slip out and make his way back through the hangar.

The Rover was gone, taken to quarantine (a formality, as the stasis field Mike had encased it with was still in effect) for a week. The truck was still there, looking strangely empty without its cargo. Kermit was stretched out on the deck, hands behind his head.

"How'd it go?"

"'Bout the usual, I guess. Ain't gonna keep their money."

Kermit nodded thoughtfully. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Don't worry, I'll get you your pay. Take a check?"

"From you? Don't make me laugh." He hopped down from the back of the truck.

"Forget it, Bubs. I wouldn't have missed this for the world. Got the keys?"

Bubba pulled the heavy ring out of his pocket and tossed them over. Kermit caught them in mid air. He opened the door of the cab and pulled himself in.

"See you back at the house," he said, starting the engine.

"Plan to stay for dinner," Bubba called as he pulled away. "I'm gonna make espresso."

"Excuse me, Bubba," came a voice from behind him. He turned to see the reporter and photographer from Richmond.

"Howdy, boys."

The reporter looked at him intently, notebook folded away in his hand, pencil in his shirt pocket. "Well, you did it. Leaving aside for the moment that you flew that weird-looking thing to the Moon, you've accomplished something that very few men ever do: you made your dream come true. How does it feel?"

"What's your name, son?" Bubba asked.

"Ted Michaels. This," he pointed to the photographer, "is Danny Allen. We're from the Progress-Dispatch."

Bubba nodded. "Yeah, I recognize you from the day we left." He was silent for a long moment, frowning down at the floor of the hangar. "I don't know, Ted. I wish I could give you boys a sound bite, or something pithy to quote in your paper, but I can't." He spread his hands helplessly. "It's ... it's a little like when you get your first real kiss, I guess. It's exciting as hell while it's happening, a completely new experience, and you'll remember it all your life. But afterwards you know that from then on, everything else that happens to you is going to have to stand up to that experience. When it's just your first kiss," he continued, "it's not so bad. I mean, you're gonna get plenty more, and it's mostly a little thing in the Grand Scheme. But this..." He shook his head. "I'm not sure there's anywhere to go from here. And that's kind of ... I dunno, almost sad."

"Yeah. Yeah, I can understand that." The reporter cocked his head to one side.

"You're not at all what you seem to be, are you? I mean, you play the part well, you sure had me fooled. But you're no redneck, Bubba-Mr. Pritchert."

Bubba just grinned at him. "I'm not sure just what you are, but there's a story in you. Maybe more than one."

"Well, boys, you'll just have to come to Central Garage to write it, now, won't you?"

"Would we be welcome? I've heard about your problems with the tabloids. We're not paparazzi, you know."

"If you were, I doubt you'd have got through the front gate," Bubba said, then he got serious. "Listen, let me ask you something," he said. "Besides you and Flash there, how many press would you say there were in that room this afternoon?"

The reporter looked thoughtful. "A half dozen I recognized, one or two more I didn't."

"How many of them were national?"

Ted shrugged. "None of them, really. I mean, we all go out on the wires, or get picked up by the major cable networks that are interested, but we're still not much more than stringers at best. Why?"

"Think about it. I flew to the Moon in my own spaceship. I picked up the Lunar Rover left behind on the Moon by the crew of Apollo 15 and brought it back home, and made the round trip in under five hours." He shook his head. "Where

was CNN? Where was MSNBC? NPR? Hell, where was Fox? I'da thought they'd have eaten this up."

The reporter frowned at the floor. "Yeah, I know. You're right. We should have had to fight for a place to stand back there." He shrugged again. "But it's science stuff, Bubba. People don't get as excited about it as they used to. They're more interested in wars and terrorism and interviews with whichever bozo got voted off the night before. That stuff is 'sexy.' Science is out of fashion." He spoke with no little bitterness.

"We have a science reporter at the paper. You know what her last big story was? When a bunch of cartoon characters came to the local Science Museum. Not a story about the exhibits, mind you, just a story about a bunch of teenagers dressed like the Power-Puff Girls and Scooby-Doo entertaining the kids." He snorted ruefully. "That's what my editor considers a science writer's purview. Most of the press corps, the heavy hitters, are either covering those trapped miners in West Virginia or the American Idol tour."

Bubba stared at him. "That sucks. The second part, anyway."

"You'll get no argument from me."

"Well, hell. Maybe this will fire up some of those kids to do something at the science museum other than gape at giant mice in pants."

"Stranger things have happened," Ted stated pointedly.

"Yep, and just this past week, too. What the hell, son, come on up to Central Garage. I ain't gonna run from you, just give me some notice so I can have the chili ready."

"Uh, Ted? We're losing the light pretty fast." The photographer was squinting at the sun where it hovered just above the horizon.

"Yeah, right, Danny. Mr. Pritchert, you ran out on us pretty fast at the launch site...."

Bubba snorted. "Don't I know it. Scared the pluperfect hell out of m'self."

"Well, then, how about letting us get a few shots when you take off?"

"No problem. C'mon, let's find out where they've got the old girl stashed."

Mike was already installed in his control-board slot, his body once again stowed carefully. "C'mon, Mikey," Bubba said. "We got an audience. Let's dance for 'em."

"We can do that."

A few minutes later, as the reporter gaped and the photographer took shot after eager shot, Bubba did his best to make it worth their while, repeating their earlier performance with Marty Breen of the FAA. Then, he and Mike took the Fireball XL-5 up to cruising altitude and headed for home.

"Bubba," Mike said when they were well on their way. "I never did thank you for seeing that I got some mobility. I appreciate it, I really do."

"S'no big thing, Mikey," Bubba said. "You've long since earned it, and I needed you to be able to help out on this one anyway. Seemed to be a reasonable enough request that they come up with something to get you around better."

"It's more than that, though. I've been connected to starships and fighters, even what you would call shuttles and airbuses, but this is the first time I've ever had anyone even consider giving me the simple ability to move three feet to the left under my own power. Not to mention being able to scratch. If I had an itch."

Bubba looked over at the two cameras on top of Mike's head. "Mike, you're my friend. You have been since you and your Nishian coworkers dropped in on me back about a dozen years ago. You are, in many ways, the best friend I've ever had." Bubba turned back to the screen where the image of the Bowl-A-Rama grew larger. "A man takes care of his friends."

"Well, thank you."

"You're welcome."

\* \* \* \*

When they finally got back home and stowed the scout ship back in the garage, they found a pile of mail inside the door. Mostly circulars and credit card offers, there were also newsletters, magazines, several packages, at least a

dozen catalogs, and a few letters. Bubba sorted through it all while Mike trundled over the doorsill loaded down with luggage.

"So, what did you get up to while you were in quarantine, Mikey?" Bubba asked while tossing the junk mail into a recycling bin.

"Well, there was data to collate, and conversations to transcribe. I was able to add some little information to that already collected by your own scientists, although they're far more interested in what makes your ship fly than in anything else."

"And were you able to enlighten them?"

There was a momentary pause. "Actually, no. I know very little about Thuntic technology, and this one apparently represents a quantum leap in the application of various propulsion and guidance systems, as well as in the areas of inertia and acceleration. I did run a number of deep diagnostic tests, and informed them that any attempts to physically pry into the internal workings of the ship would result in a massive release of energy in the form of light, heat, and air displacement."

"'Jamie like big boom,' huh? And did they believe you?"

"Enough of them did, and the ones who didn't made it fairly clear that they could be relied upon in exchange for 'consideration.'"

"And that would be...?"

"They want a ride."

Bubba laughed long and loud. "Okay, I think we can do that. Say," he said in surprise as he looked closely at the hand-addressed label on a padded envelope, "here's a name I don't know. Wonder who it is?"

"There you go with the 'wonder' stuff again," Mike said as he dropped the suitcases near the stairs. "Open it and find out."

He did. He read:

\* \* \* \*

Dear Mr. Pritchert,

We met about a week ago out in the middle of nowhere, and you gave me your card and an invitation to write, so here I am.

I would like to apologize for Terry. He means well, but he doesn't know when enough is enough, and he's a little too close to wearing a tin-foil hat to suit me.

I'm enclosing the tape I shot of our encounter as a show of good faith. There's certainly nothing on it for you to be ashamed of, but I wanted you to know that I know there are more important things in our little subculture besides accumulating "evidence."

Hoping this finds you well, yours sincerely,

Stanley Parker

\* \* \* \*

"Well, don't that beat all. Mike, I think we've found the newest SauNA member. We still got some of those decoder badges around?"

"A whole box of them. We'll take care of it next week."

"Sure, after I've gotten on the other side of a whole bunch of sleep."

"I did manage to do one other thing while I was quarantined."

"Yeah? What?"

"I contacted Pieter de Waal through what you might call diplomatic channels. I've recorded a message from him to you. Would you like to see it?"

Bubba sat thoughtfully for a moment, not moving or speaking. Finally he said, "'See it?' It's on video?"

"The equivalent. Here." Mike's arm reached into his "chest" and pulled out a small translucent square, an inch on a side and a quarter of that in thickness, and laid it on the table in front of his human friend. "It will activate automatically when you say your name aloud, and then do what you tell it within reason. I'm going to go wash the dishes. Or something." He rolled out of the room.

Bubba felt old. Older than he should have, anyway. He was tired, his back hurt, and his sense of wonder was seriously overloaded. So much had happened in the past weeks, and he wasn't at all sure that he was ready for what

literally lay before him. Nevertheless, there it was, and it would have to be dealt with sooner or later. Might as well be sooner.

"Bubba Pritchert." Nothing happened. He leaned closer to the table and repeated his name; still nothing. Clearing his throat, he said in a slightly louder voice, "Edgar Allan Poe Hudgins Pritchert." Nothing. Then he smiled and said in a normal voice, "Hudge Pritchert."

The square blinked, then flashed. As it did, the figure of a tall, thin man of about sixty appeared on the table, seemingly about two feet tall. It spoke, and his soft Dutch accent sent a wave of nostalgia through the recipient.

"This is a message for my young friend, Hudge," it began. "Although at this point, you and I are quite of an age, are we not?" The figure chuckled. "As you see, I am still here, although I may not say exactly where. It is of no importance, in any case." de Waal's image gestured and a comfortable-looking chair moved into place behind him. He sat, reached outside the limits of the recording and leaned back, now holding a bottle. He sipped, then smiled.

"Amish birch beer, Hudge. There really is nothing else like it anywhere in the known universe."

Bubba wished for some of his own, but was now reluctant to either leave the room or ask Mike to bring him something. He listened on.

"When the Intelligence you've named Mike contacted me, I was unsure as to what to do. You see, we're not encouraged to make contact with those whom we've left behind, for reasons that should be obvious." The image shrugged. "It is not forbidden, either—little is forbidden, here—but the distances involved make communication with family and friends problematical in the extreme. Without an intermediary, like your Mike, it is all but impossible, and it's vital that Earth remain unaware of the existence of..." de Waal gestured with a hand, taking in everything around him. "Well, everything here, and dozens of other places like this scattered all around the galaxy, at least for a little longer."

de Waal took another sip. "Many years ago, when you and I met, Hudge, I was only new in the employ of the Council. My job was simple: to find, and if possible, recruit, humans who were willing and able to comprehend the enormity of the universe around them; who were ready, in my opinion, to make the leap from ignorance to awareness. You struck me as such, but circumstances prevented me from revealing my true purpose to you."

Bubba nodded to himself, recalling with no little pain the untimely death of his younger sister, gone now these forty-eight years, and the chasm it created between him and his family.

"But, since I could not intrude on your grief, and since I could not give you back all that you had lost, I was still able to give you something back—your faith, your belief." Bubba smiled, recalling the UFO he'd seen that night in the desert, flashing and strobing and making weird noises. Yep, that had done it, all right.

"You were, however, well on your way to being one of the more qualified of those I'd encountered over the years, for all your youth and inexperience. So, your name went on a list of those to be watched and kept track of, with the idea of someday approaching you in the open."

"Huh!" Bubba exclaimed, recalling that Mike had hinted at something of the like back when they'd first met. He wasn't at all sure he liked being on anyone's list, no matter what the reason, but so far this hadn't turned out too badly.

de Waal's image continued. "Rest easy, Hudge. You were not spied on. We merely 'kept tabs,' as you say. Your life was in no way interfered with. However, when a pair of Nishian caseworkers—the ones you dubbed Stan and Ollie, I believe—ran into some minor difficulty with their ship, your name came up." de Waal smiled and sipped his root beer. "I was able to give them a first-hand account of your willingness to help strangers, and so contact was made.

"It was part of our plan to ensure that you had access to information about certain technologies and knowledge of other civilizations. What was unplanned was the manner in which this was made possible. None of us foresaw that you

would end up in possession of an Intelligence, nor that it—I suppose I should say 'he'—would become a trusted companion. A friend." de Waal closed his eyes. "This should not have come as a surprise, especially to me. I recall with pleasure how warmly you accepted the friendship of an aging stranger, and your friend Mike speaks of your friendship with great pride.

"I say all that, Hudge, to lead to this: we would like you to join us here. You have shown both an affinity and an aptitude for solving problems, even when they involve aliens, and that talent is highly valuable to us. We need more people who can cope, as you have, with the knowledge that they are not alone in the universe, and for whom that revelation is a cause for joy and not fear." Bubba's breath caught. This was ... well, it damn sure wasn't anything he'd expected.

"Stop, please." The recording paused, the image motionless. Bubba sat back, trying to take in what he could of this new information. Jesus! What the hell had he gotten himself into fifty years ago in that God-forsaken desert? All this because he fixed some piece-of-crap English bike? It was too much for him right now.

He stood, then walked to the kitchen on legs slightly unsteady. As he figured, Mike was nowhere to be seen. He got a cold bottle of Anchor Steam, then went outside.

The night was clear, the stars almost painfully bright. How many? How many of them had planets, how many of the planets had life, and how many of those were looking up as he was, wondering the same? Was there Another out there somewhere, a retired mechanic perhaps, facing the same doubts he was?

No, he thought. Screw this. It didn't matter how many planets, how many civilizations. It didn't matter if he was the only one staring up at the night sky or one of thousands. That would all take care of itself—or not; either way, it was a meaningless complication. What mattered right now was that he had a message from an old friend and a cold bottle of beer and an intense curiosity that all the burnout in the world couldn't dim. His questions could wait. He went back in the house and sat down at the table.

"Okay," he said, taking a big pull on the Anchor Steam. "Show me more." The image came back to life. "It is not easy, Hudge, but then you're no stranger to hard work. And there are benefits over and above the obvious ones." de Waal spread his hands. "Look at me. I was born in 1898, and have aged not at all since you and I met. Nor am I likely to fall ill. When I die, it will be because I have chosen to after a productive life, and I will go gently into that Good Night. Plus," the image smiled impishly, "you will have an unlimited opportunity to learn. Here are the finest teachers, the finest facilities, and the perfect surroundings in which to resume your education." He sighed. "If I have regrets, they are for those I left behind; family, friends, the places and things I may never see again. This should be a factor in any decision you make. I know you were far away from your family all those years ago, and I know there were circumstances that kept you apart from them." de Waal stood. "If you decide to join us, I urge you to mend what fences you can, and say what good-byes you can. I did not, and I am sorry. I hope to hear from you soon, friend Hudge, and whatever decision you make, I wish you well." The recording ended.

"Well, damn. What the hell am I gonna do now?" He sat forward and put his head in his hands. There was too much to take in, too much to think about. He was ... tired. Tired, old, and full of the pains that tired and old bring.

"You don't have to give him an answer right away, you know," came Mike's voice from the other room. "Everybody knows what your situation is."

Bubba raised his head. "Everybody?"

"Well, the ones who needed to know. You were a unanimous choice, by the way, especially after Hoss and his family weighed in." Mike rolled into the room, gripping a piece of paper in his claw. "Don't let me influence you, but I think you could do a lot of good out there. And it would solve our other problem as well."

Bubba sighed, long and deep. "I'm gonna need some time, Mike. I got to think."

He sat back, hands against the overstuffed chair arms. He began picking at the frays. "What are my options?"

"Options? Well, one is to turn them down, live out the rest of your life here, and hope for the occasional visitation. You'll probably get a few. Another is to take the opportunity and run with it. You'll live a lot longer, you'll make a difference, and you'll work with races and species you've never dreamed existed. Or," he continued, "you could go hide somewhere and pretend this never happened. I think that about covers the options."

Bubba tapped his fist lightly against the chair arm. "This has always been enough for me, Mike. This right here, in this beautiful state and among these good people. Why would I want anything else?"

"Do you want me to run through your options again? Bubba, I like it here too. There really isn't anything else quite like it anywhere. But that's true of all the places, too. There is beauty, some of it just as comfortable and some of it terrible and frightening. There are good people out there, too, even if, in many cases, you can't say their names. But think about this: you've been to the Moon, you've been to another planet. You've shaken hands with aliens and helped them in times of crisis. You've been adopted into a proud and noble clan, one that can and will do everything in their considerable power to help you adjust. Can you ever be really content with King William County after all that, knowing what's waiting for you up there?"

"How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree ... " the Earthman muttered under his breath. He pointed a finger at Mike. "I'm not Roy Neary, Mike, makin' a mountain out of mashed potatoes. I know there's life out there, I've seen it and got drunk with it. What they're asking ... what you're asking ... is that I give Earth up like Pieter did." He shook his head emphatically. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You'll live, effectively, forever."

"But it won't be here, Mike!"

"What was all that you said to me on the way back about 'wonder,' Bubba? You have a chance to study, to associate, to work with the best minds in the Galaxy. How can that not be wonderful for you?"

"Oh, it is, it is, Mike." Bubba sagged. "I just ... I just can't think about all this right now. I need rest." Wearily, he pushed himself out of his chair. Mike extended his arm, showing him the piece of paper he was holding. "What's that?"

"A phone number for Five Willows Retirement Community."

"And I want this because...?"

"It's where your father lives." Mike managed to shrug with robotic arms.

"Whatever you decide, I thought you might..."

"Yeah. Thanks," Bubba interrupted. "Great. One more thing to think about." He trudged toward the stairs and climbed them slowly.

Mike placed the paper on the table next to the little square. "Sleep well, Bubba."

"Ain't no other way, Mikey," his friend called down. But sleep didn't come easily that night, and when it did, it was disturbed by dreams he couldn't recall upon awakening. He rose twelve hours later, largely unrested, and full of indecision.

Dressed and breakfasted, he put off the inevitable and went into the living room. The phone number was where Mike had left it the night before. He picked it up and started to wad it up into a ball, but stopped. His hand was trembling, his heart was beating hard in his chest. He sat heavily in his armchair. The slip of paper felt rough against his fingers, and as he held it, the almost imperceptible rustle it made burned in his ears.

Bubba laid it on the table in front of him and stared at it. It was a Virginia area code, but he didn't recognize the exchange. He flicked it with a finger, and it spun lazily in place. "Damn. Damn, damn, damn." Finally, he took the paper in one hand, holding it gingerly, and picked up the phone with the other. He dialed the number, then sat back, listening to the ring. He thought for a moment that there would be no answer, but just as he was ready to hang

up, the line clicked. A voice, thin and a little shaky but clear, answered. Bubba cleared his throat. "H'lo, Pop?"

There was a silence at the other end, then his father said, "Allan! Is that you? It's been so ... so long, son."

"Yeah, Pop, it's me."

"It's so good to hear your voice, Allan. I've missed you."

"Me, too, Pop. Both of that." Bubba wiped his hand across his brow; he'd always been tongue-tied around his father, and even his age didn't make a difference. "Pop, I'm ... I'm sorry. So sorry."

There was another silence. "What for, Allan?"

Bubba's hand was shaking now, and he placed it palm down on the table. "For everything. For not being what you wanted me to be, for leaving you and Mom, for fighting with you all those years ago. I'm sorry that I don't call you, don't come to see you. I'm sorry that I let all that silly shit get between us and keep us apart for almost fifty years." His voice was close to breaking, but the words poured out in spite of the constriction in his throat.

"I'm sorry, so very sorry, about Alice, Pop. I'm sorry I let her die."

"No." His father's voice was steady now, and forceful. "Allan, what happened was an accident, plain and simple. You did nothing to be sorry for, aside from calling me a few names I probably deserved to be called. I was a damn fool of a father, and I drove you away just as sure as if I'd done it with a whip."

The old man chuckled. "Lord knows your mother told me so often enough."

"Can you ... can you forgive me, Pop?" Bubba said, his cheeks wet.

"If you can forgive me, son."

Bubba nodded to himself. "We can talk more, Pop, but not on the phone. I can come out there, and we can sit down and talk, and catch up. I can be there in just a few hours—hell, I can be there in five point eight seconds, but I guess I'd better drive." He knew he was babbling, but he couldn't help it; he was so full of emotions that he couldn't tell one from another. "Would that be okay, Pop?"

"I'd really like that, Allan. Take your time, don't rush. We've got all the time in the world. We'll have something to eat, although I'm not the cook your mother was." He paused. "It'll be good to see you, son."

Bubba closed his eyes and let out his breath. The tightness in his chest and throat had eased. "Good, Pop. That'll be really good. See, I got this job offer, sort of a career change, and I need your advice..."

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