

# Just for Fun

*Comical incidents and humorous stories*

by

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[Kindle](#)

## **Preface**

Comical incidents happen in the life of a missionary. Or perhaps I attract them somehow. Maybe it stems from something in my youth, so I included a couple of stories from my pre-missionary days.

As for the fiction: I was watching a corny TV drama one night and said to myself, “even I could write drivel like that!”

So I did. I hope you enjoy my drivel more than most of the TV programs you watch.

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## Tarantula

It is a well-known fact, among other myths, that missionaries are fearless. People given to phobias need not apply. Not that I am confessing to a phobia, mind you. I have none. A loathing, yes. Profound detestation, of course. We may even describe my personal trauma as an abstract theological problem formulated like this:

Why did God bother to create *tarantulas*?

God is supposed to be a *good* God. The problem of universal suffering poses a difficulty to the faith of some. Not me. That difficulty pales beside the grand mystery of the necessity for tarantulas.

The matter is purely theoretical, as long as none are present. But an occasion occurred in the jungle when the issue abruptly lost its abstract nature.

While living in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador, we took some vacation and visited missionary friends at the Wycliffe jungle base. It happened, one evening, that I was lounging serenely in my cabin. These wooden duplexes had a corridor leading past the restroom to the adjoining room. A young ecologist, recently arrived, was living next door.

My wife was in the adjoining room while I was seated on what was designated sarcastically, 'the throne', since this comfortable apparatus was superior to any seen in most parts of the Amazon. This white-porcelain device had been recently installed and inaugurated, and is known in civilized society as the 'commode'.

I recall being in a thoughtful pose, somewhat like that Greek statue, The Thinker, and similarly clad. I happened to look to my left, and something caught the extreme corner of my eye. I twisted around to look behind and found myself staring inches from a huge black tarantula, perched on the wall, directly above my shoulder. It was square in front of my face.

I know that I did not panic because I would have remembered doing so. Since I remember nothing between the time I spotted the monster, and the moment I found myself shuffling down the corridor, it is clear that I had the situation well in hand. It was only my drawers I did not have in hand. They were tangled around my ankles.

Fortunately, no one was in the corridor at the time. Not that it mattered. Survival takes precedence over propriety, according to the mission manuals.

After getting ahold of myself, as well as my drawers, my wife asked about the commotion. I explained briefly, and then outlined calmly what must be done to dispose of the intruder. However, she insisted quite unfairly that it was my job.

Sadly, this left only one recourse. Commit the usage of that room to the tarantula and find other avenues to exercise our necessities. But again, my wife did not consider this a viable option. Some women can be unreasonable under pressure.

We needed a weapon. That's when I spotted the broom leaning against the doorjamb. Jungle made, it consisted of straws and thin sticks bound tightly and cut off at the bottom. I reasoned

that if I could somehow impale the spider on it, this would solve our problem. I grabbed the broom and approached the door stealthily.

Why *stealthily*, I do not know. Stealth seemed the appropriate demeanor at the moment. I pushed open the door of the bathroom with the broom, concerned that the creature may be lurking above the jam ready to pounce on my head as I entered. My wife doubted if the tarantula had such designs, but I proceeded with caution. After all, what do women know about tarantula psychology?

I peered cautiously into the room. There he was, right where I left him. I approached, the broom held ready. The lid of the commode had fallen down on the seat. Carefully, I lifted the lid with the broom. Then pulling back the broom to about three feet in front the arachnid, I plunged it upon him with all my might.

It worked. In one touché, he was dispatched down the toilet. I notified Dianne of the outcome with a firm tone of triumph.

While standing there reveling in my victory, a profound sense of satisfaction swept over me and I lapsed into a philosophical mood. If beauty is skin deep, doesn't it follow that the right to existence is mitigated by hideousness?

This insightful motif was interrupted by a loud knock on the adjoining door. It was the ecologist next door. "What's the commotion about? Is something wrong?"

I was certainly not ashamed of what I had done. I had met the enemy squarely and vanquished him. So, I explained with a flourish, my ingenious method of dispatching the intruder.

"What?!" he exclaimed, "How could you *possibly* do such a thing? It was harmless! You should have picked it up in your hands and put outside in its natural environment!" This was the mild beginning of a tirade that lasted at least a minute. I was "cruel and insensitive." I did not respect "the natural order." The act was "entirely unnecessary," etc.

Many reasonable men, from time to time, have felt the desire to whollup a tree-hugger. This passion began to overcome me, but my muscles refused to respond. For some inexplicable reason, they were still trembling when he left. This was providential for both of us.

I hoped he would repeat himself the next morning at breakfast, because I had the perfect reply. Baptism by oatmeal. Egg benedict á la face.

But he was silent.

## Hit Man

“Not with murder, Joe,” I answered emphatically. “With cigarettes we let you taper off. Not with murder.” I leaned back in chair in a thoughtful pose, hiding amazement at the confessions I just heard.

I had met assassins before, but none who considered murder an annoying habit to break by tapering off gradually.

Joe did it for a living and that was part of the problem.

His question had been: “What if I were to do one hit, say, this month? Then another the next three months, etc.?” The hopeless tone in his voice showed he suspected I might get stubborn about this.

He leaned forward with a pained expression. “Are you absolutely sure?” he asked. “Doesn’t your religion make exceptions for special cases like mine?” I paused, not because of doubt, but from the shock of realizing he was deadly serious. “Absolutely, Joe,” I responded, “no exceptions.” He cleared his throat. “I thought you were going to say something like that. The problem is, they’ll kill me if I stop.”

The value of human life varies from culture to culture. In Joe’s country, it was exceptionally low. But Joe had a conscience. And God was working in it, or he would not have showed up at my door.

Joe was a hit man for the leading political party in his country. “I never expected to get into this,” he said forlornly. “I was hired as a courier to transport important documents. Then one day the bosses said to several of the guys in the office, ‘Let’s go out to the field for some target practice. We’re going to issue you pistols in case you need to defend yourself. We have enemies, you know.’”

Joe described how this ‘target practice’ continued once a week for about a month, until the bosses summoned the employees into the office one day with startling news. “There’s going to be a big political rally next month in such-and-such a town. The key speaker is a danger to our regional plans. He’s got to be eliminated. You, Joe, will drive the car. The others will do the hit.”

“Only one of the boys objected, and asserted that he would not participate under any circumstances. The bosses warned him it would be preferable if everyone participated. Beyond this, they said little. But the boy’s body was found in a ditch the following week, full of holes. There were no more objections after that.”

The hit went pretty well, Joe said. He didn’t actually do the shooting, at least not that first time.

The few times Joe showed up at church, he stood in the back with other men, leaning against the wall, afraid of being noticed by his peers outside. He had been seeing one of the girls of the congregation. When the service ended, he would leave with the young lady.

I tried to talk to him a couple of times about the Lord. He was always polite, but somewhat distant. So I was surprised when he showed up at my door that day.

As we discussed his dilemma, a plan evolved. Why not talk to the bosses in the language they understand? Instead of Joe telling them he wouldn't do hits anymore, he would ask them for an alternative. He would explain that he wanted to marry a girl that goes to an evangelical church, and that 'hits' are forbidden by that religion. He could explain that he had no intentions of leaving the party (for the moment), and would rather be assigned to another branch of the party if that was all right with them.

The glitch in the plan was the possibility that they might pretend to go along with Joe, and then knock him off later. But Joe said he could pretty much tell by now what they were really thinking. So we came up with an alternate plan to help him escape town if necessary.

Two weeks later, he showed up at my door again.

"Oh, how I thank God!" he exclaimed. "He answered our prayers! I did as you suggested. I talked honestly with them, and asked for another assignment. Now I don't have to do 'hits' any more!"

We rejoiced together over this victory, until it occurred to me to ask about his new functions. I assumed he was back at his old courier job. Indeed he was, sort of. He replied, "I'm running marijuana to the border for the bosses!"

We left Joe's country some weeks later. But just before, Joe and I agreed that if some day he freed himself completely from his bosses, he would write or call me and say a secretly agreed phrase. About 6 months later, I got the call. He spoke the phrase and a lot more. He and the girl were married, and owned a large tract of land. If we would return, he said, he would build us a house and let us live there free. We did not accept this offer, knowing he really didn't expect us to.

In Joe's culture, that meant, "Thanks."

## Dangerous Duckling

Roberto Espinoza scrutinized me with mouth agape, head tilted. He wore that quizzical expression from time to time when he pretended he thought I was crazy. I ignored it as usual, though he held this pose longer than customary, possibly on account of my unusual request. I had just asked him to strip naked and jump into a freezing lake.

“Do you realize,” he said, “that we are at 12,000 feet altitude and this water is nearly ice!?” I put on my most reasonable ministerial tone with a slight inflection of pleading, and replied, “But Roberto! It’s my first duck! I wouldn’t have shot it if I meant to leave it out there!”

He muttered a half-audible comment about bird dogs, and started to turn away. “Look Roberto,” I pleaded, “why not swim out a few feet and if you can’t make it, just come back. I’d sure appreciate it if you would give it a try.”

Roberto removed his clothes, mumbling incoherencies the entire time, and entered the water. But two strokes out, his nerve failed. He emerged soaked and shivering. We exchanged disgusted expressions for a brief moment while I considered my options.

It had been a good day of hunting. We four men had gone after game birds in the highlands of the Andes outside the provincial town of Cuenca, Ecuador, where my wife and I served as missionaries. The only hitch in the day so far, was that I had pulled a hamstring muscle in my right leg because of uneven ground, and was limping severely.

These three Ecuadorians knew the territory, and decided to stop by lake San Francisco on the way back to see if any ducks had come in.

Roberto and I had gone around the east side of the lake to check out a patch of reeds where ducks might be hiding. The sun was descending, crimson rays touching the sparse grass that waved in the cold evening breeze on the surrounding hilltops.

That’s when I saw the duck paddling across the lake about thirty yards off, heading for the reeds where we had taken cover. It was hard to see due to the sun directly behind it. But it cast a fine shadow as it approached. Too far for a shot. We waited until it was about ten yards away, and I let him have it. Blam! My first duck! First ever!

I was ecstatic...at least until Roberto started his irrelevant remarks. Roberto is a nice guy, but is capable of a veritable killjoy attitude. “How do you plan on retrieving that duck?” he asked.

It annoys me to explain the obvious. Since my right leg was injured, clearly the retrieval of the duck was his responsibility. We were partners in hunting and I had done my share in stalking and shooting it. He would have to swim out and retrieve it.

Roberto is usually reasonable. But he has his days, like us all. He can become stubborn at the most inconvenient moments. That may explain why he made it only a couple of yards into the lake before turning back.



The options were clear. Either I give up the duck, or go and get it myself. I'm a pretty good swimmer, I reasoned, and rely more on my arms than my legs anyway. Maybe I could make it. It was my first duck and a profound loathing to abandon it gripped me. I decided to give it a try. I recalled reading somewhere that a person can survive freezing water for about 90 seconds before hypothermia sets in. I could do 10 yards and back in half that time. So I stripped down to my underwear and stepped in.

Roberto was right. Water gets a bit chilly at 12,000 feet. But resolve and greed inspired my forward plunge. My swimming style felt right, and I was confident.

What did not feel right was my underwear, now waterlogged and slipping down. I reached back with my left hand to pull them up and promptly sank. Now I was swimming with only two limbs. The dilemma? I could not continue after the duck and hold up my underwear at the same time. Something had to go.

Logic prevailed. I have plenty of underwear at home, I reasoned, but no ducks. So the underwear slid to a new home at the bottom of the lake as I pursued my quarry, teeth clenched. Four more strokes and I was there.

To my horror, the glorious prize, which I envisioned broiling in the oven and feeding all the hunters, was no more than four inches long.... a mere duckling. Somehow the light had amplified its size, with the sun shining behind it. I decided to abandon it, ashamed of my error in killing it. On second thought, I had risked my health for it and decided to retrieve it anyway.

Not only was my heart sinking with disappointment, but my whole body was sinking as well. The instant I grabbed the duckling, I faced the same dilemma as before...only two limbs for swimming, my right arm and left leg. I thrashed around for a second or two trying to figure a way to save both the trophy and myself. So I stuck its foot in my mouth and headed for shore.

This novel solution was short-lived. My teeth began to chatter, and the foot was quickly bitten clear through. This introduced a new dynamic. Not only was the duckling again floating around me, but also I had its severed foot in my mouth and could not extract it because of my chattering teeth. As though drowning and hypothermia were not enough, I was now in danger of being choked to death by a duckling foot.

Desperate measures for desperate times! I grabbed the duckling, forced my teeth apart, and jammed the whole thing into my mouth. Only the head dangled out, as I headed for shore.

My swimming style was not Olympic quality but I emerged victorious, proud, and quite naked.

Oddly, Roberto seemed to feel the sight of a naked preacher with a duckling in his mouth was cause for amusement. I detected this attitude because he was rolling around on the ground, holding his stomach and screaming with laughter. This seemed unkind, since I considered my recovery of the prey to be a brave accomplishment. So I spit the duckling into my hand, severed foot and all, and exclaimed, "Look, Roberto. I don't care how small it is. It's mine all mine." At this he sat up, considered my comment and person, and renewed his hysterics.

Later on, back at the car, fully dressed and still amused, Roberto recounted the incident to the other hunters, between spasms of laughter. They told it to their wives and friends when we returned to town.

Before coming to Ecuador, I had envisioned notoriety for worthier accomplishments. Nevertheless, a tone of respect still remained in their spreading of this episode, for which I was grateful. Even their comments about gringo bird dogs were tolerable. I still feel a twinge of chagrin when I recall an insufferable moment during a church business meeting. One of the ladies owned a pet duck, and she sent it into the meeting, waddling uncomfortably, wearing a pair of men's underpants. "Brother Roger," she exclaimed, "we found your underwear!"

## My Enemy The Dog

Nemesis was a brute of a German shepherd who lived about a block down the road from where my wife and I resided in Quito, Ecuador. I love animals of all sorts...except for spiders and Nemesis. The Hound of the Baskervilles is an anemic poodle compared to this beast. A little broader head, and he would pass for a lion...and not a friendly one either.

This brute had a favorite game, which if he could speak he would probably call “ambush the gringo.” His master’s house had a thick hedge with an iron fence tracing its interior length. There was a gap in the greenery at the corner and the iron bars were spaced so the monster could lunge his head through with a deafening roar. Yes, roar, not bark. I didn’t know any dog could roar, but this one did.

Nemesis would hide behind the hedge, and when I would stroll around the corner he would attack. Don’t tell me dogs cannot grin. A dog that can roar can also grin.

Why did I fail to anticipate these attacks? Matters exist more sublime to contemplate than the bad manners of overgrown house pets. So Nemesis slipped my mind most of the time...until the day I plotted revenge.

Nemesis was someone else’s property. I couldn’t harm him, but I had to devise an incident by which this dog would remember me with regret. Guilty musings skipped through my mind one evening as I strolled home, eating a bag of peanuts. Not *guilty* because of the dog but because of the peanuts. A certain female diet chairperson in my house has evolved the notion that peanuts are fattening, so I was trying to finish off the bag before arriving home.

Taken again completely by surprise by Nemesis, reflex caused me to fling an entire handful of peanuts right in his face. The effect was astounding. He stopped attacking and said, “Woof?” And began lapping up the peanuts.

This gave me an idea. The next day I armed myself with some bread, since bread is cheaper than peanuts. A few seconds before Nemesis’ attack I tossed some bread his way. No lunge. Just a feeding frenzy.

The following day Nemesis was not lurking behind the hedge. His paws were up on the railing and his tail wagging as I approached. No roaring. No lunging. I fed him some stale croissant, pondering a new dilemma: Before I left the country, how could I give a parting shot to a creature that imagined I was his friend?

I was coming out on the short end of this deal. Nemesis had a grin and a half-dozen stale croissants. All I got was the peculiar sensation that maybe I had stumbled on a novel strategy for dealing with enemies.

## Pain in the Neck

"Sergio, you have a pain in the neck, because you ARE a pain in the neck."

I didn't actually say this to Sergio, but the idea was tempting. This Ecuadorian gentleman was about 60 at the time. He had found Christ recently and was known in the church as a bit cantankerous. Considering his previous lifestyle, this could be described as a vast improvement.

I had just stepped behind the pulpit that Sunday morning when he approached, walking down the center aisle with a slight limp. Apparently he thought this was the appropriate moment to request prayer for his affliction. After all, we had an open invitation for people to ask for prayer, but I had forgotten to specify exactly when.

Sergio had been a bit feisty with his family that week, and a mature believer had counseled him about his temper. My attitude toward him was not improved by his approach at an inappropriate moment in the service.

But a thought struck me. This was a perfect moment for a little exemplary counseling, brief but effective, to implant a lesson indelibly on his mind. I could help him grasp a possible correlation between his problem and the need to repent.

But several new converts were present, and I feared intimidating them about requesting prayer. So I decided to go through the motions and forget the counseling for the present.

My faith was firm, though. Firmly negative. In view of what he had put his family through that week, it was perfectly clear that God was NOT going to heal him.

Perhaps that is why I felt annoyed when God healed him.

Clearly God is not accountable for anything He does, no matter how incongruous. But I felt that I deserved at least a small bit of explanation. So that afternoon, I spent time in study of the Scriptures, with the prayer, "For what good reason, Lord, did you heal Sergio?" I then prepared to ponder this inscrutable mystery.

It took most of the afternoon, but I came up two explanations that I suspected the Spirit was whispering to my heart. It seemed the Lord was saying, "First, you are not an adequate judge of who should be healed. Second, it is fortunate that I am not limited to YOUR faith as means of healing."

"Well," I replied, "I was just asking."

Since then, I pray for everyone without question, and leave the motives and outcome to God. It saves a lot of time on situational analysis. Much more efficient.

I wondered if my own attitudes compared favorably with Sergio's that week. The question seemed purely academic however, and I dismissed it from my mind, thankful that I was rarely a pain in the neck like he.

One thing puzzled me, though. Why had God not healed me of my hay fever? Another mystery to discuss with the Father some Sunday. Eventually such a Sunday came about, but the answers are rather personal and I prefer not to discuss them right now.

## Reluctant Healer

The Land cruiser bounced cheerfully down the mountain road, with a mischievous knack for hitting every pothole dead center. The air grew warm and muggy as we descended toward the coast from the Andean highlands of Ecuador. But the discomforts were assuaged by the fellowship and joking of us three men, along with the anticipation of the open-air campaign that evening.

Julio knew the road well. His occupation as a jeweler drew him to cities around Ecuador to sell his merchandise. Machala was a coastal town he visited occasionally, where he would stop and stay with his cousin who pastored a church there.

If an armpit could be transformed into a town, it would resemble Machala. Warm and humid with similar odors. Germs lurking, ready to pounce. Pigs wallowing in mud ponds while swarthy-skinned children, barely clothed, play games in the streets.

Julio's cousin had invited him to hold an open-air film campaign in Machala. Such campaigns always drew crowds. Televisions were scarce in those days, so a movie was a big attraction, even if projected outdoors onto the side of a whitewashed building.

We arrived just before dusk. The pastor was waiting. It took about a half hour to get the equipment set up, while a few Christians strode around town with a portable hailer to invite the people to the campaign.

About twelve rows of benches had been hauled out of the church and these were quickly filled. A crowd formed behind them.

The mosquitos were thrilled to meet a gringo. Their insidious attempts to lodge in my ear reduced my amiable disposition to an all-time low. Sinus allergies tortured me. Fatigue smothered me, and I saw no way to contribute to the meeting that night. I thought it best to stand in the shadows behind the crowd, out of the way.

Julio led the singing as more people arrived. His dynamism seized the crowd as the fervent music blended with the tropical atmosphere. Nothing unusual happened until Julio said, "...and after the film is over, Brother Roger will pray for the sick!"

I gasped. Surely he didn't mean it! Who was going to pray for ME? How could I pray for the sick if I was feeling lousy myself? Impossible! I waved my hands in the air and mouthed "NO! NO!" while bouncing up and down on the balls of my feet.

Since I was standing in the shadows, Julio could not see me clearly. With his enthusiastic temperament, he assumed I was moved by the Spirit, and bellowed, "YES! Brother Roger is going to pray for the sick!"

In Julio's tradition, it was considered an honor to pray for the sick. This 'honor' usually fell to the senior minister present, so I could not refuse without offending. So, I quietly prayed with faith and fervor. "Lord," I said, "make him forget he said that."

He didn't forget. Toward the end of the film, about 20 mosquito bites later, Julio stood up and decreed, "Now Brother Roger is going to pray for the sick!" So I strode up to the platform

confidently, as though I knew what I was doing, faced the crowd and began to preach about the power of Christ.

At the invitation, four people came up for prayer, two men and two women. Two complained of back trouble. A short gentleman with a paunch approached, the buttons of his white shirt straining to hold in his protruding belly. A tall lady with an uncomfortable expression came next.

They thanked me for my prayer and returned to their place in the crowd. Nothing spectacular. In fact, nothing seemed to have happened at all. The Pastor closed the meeting with a Gospel message, and I gave the matter little thought until the astonishing events of the following evening.

The news spread around town about the film campaign the next day. We assumed this would happen and set up the equipment in a nearby spacious field to accommodate a larger crowd. Over 200 showed up.

Again, I was asked to pray for the sick. This time I felt better and strode up to the platform with confidence. But when I turned to the audience to speak, I noticed that four other people had followed me up, -- the same four from the previous night.

Before I could say a word, one of the ladies took the microphone, and said, "Last night I was on my way to the hospital, with severe internal pains, when we passed by the meeting. I said to my husband, 'stop the car, and let the brothers pray for me'. When brother Roger prayed for me, nothing seemed to happen until I started down toward the benches. Then all of a sudden my pains disappeared. I never went to the hospital."

One of the men was next, and said, "I had a protruding hernia. When brother Roger prayed for me, it went in and closed up." The other two had back problems and both bent down and touched their toes.

I was dumbfounded. I had felt no power that night, no special anointing and not even much faith. My sinus allergies were still bothering me, and the only one in the group that didn't get healed was me!

I took the microphone as the four joined the crowd that had grown attentive. With such a positive introduction, I began to preach with confidence as drops of light rain began to fall. We knew how the weather worked in that area, and realized I had no more than 10 minutes to complete the message. The people standing there knew it also. I decided to blend everything together... A call to repentance with prayer for the sick, and leave the results to God.

About 60 people approached the front to receive prayer for illnesses. No time was left to pray for them individually, so I prayed a general prayer just as the deluge started.

Seven years later, we learned that a young man in that crowd was healed of tuberculosis. In gratitude to God, he donated the land on which a new church building stands today.

I am surely no healing evangelist, and was reluctant to be thrust into that role. But it didn't matter that night in Machala. I had one along who knew all about it.

## Remember Freddy

I had a little sign on the wall near my desk that read “Remember Freddy.” Occasionally someone asks, “Who is Freddy”?

Among the top ten stupid notions that have afflicted my cranium, one deserves special mention...the yen to become a middle-school teacher. During my preparation for this adventure, I was asked to substitute for a class of fifth graders. I assumed, of course, that fifth graders were much easier to handle than seventh. These two notions occurred during a period in my life I now label as ‘naive’.

Mrs. Wasson was in the classroom at 7:30 AM when I arrived. “You are the substitute I presume,” she exclaimed. This tall and self-possessed teacher greeted me cheerfully. She was young and pleasant, and her smile seemed genuine... not like the kind normally reserved for bums, substitute teachers and other low-life.

After discussing the assignments, I asked about problem students... disciplinary cases in particular. She mentioned a couple of kids who tended to be a little rowdy. Mrs. Wasson paused thoughtfully, placed a thin finger on her cheek in the pose of the competent professional, and said, “...and then there is Freddy.”

I chuckled, “So you are saving the worst for last. The bad dude. The real problem kid!”

“No, it’s not that,” she said pensively. “Freddy hasn’t a malicious bone in his body. It’s just that...,” she paused, searching for the right expression. “Well, Freddy, you see, is determined to have a good time no matter where he is. You’ll just have to be firm.” The beginnings of a grin lifted the corner of her petite mouth. “You’ll see what I mean.”

She turned briskly and headed to the door, with a wave of the hand over shoulder, and a friendly “good luck.”

The students arrived and the class began normally. I checked the seating chart and found Freddy. He was in the back, writing, and presenting no problems.

Things went well the first hour. Then unexpectedly, Freddy’s head jerked up, eyebrows raised with a gleeful expression. *Here it comes*, I thought, *I wonder what he is going to pull?*

“Mr. Smelling?” he asked with an innocent tone. “Yes, Freddy, what do you want?” I answered, pretending indifference.

“May I sharpen my pencil?” He held up a new pencil, and I could see nothing wrong with the request. I certainly could not deny him the privilege because it was a permissible act. “Yes, Freddy, go ahead,” I replied.

He strolled to the sharpener, inserted the pencil, and began to grind away with the handle, eyebrows still raised with a tinge of glee. I couldn’t fathom why sharpening a pencil was so entertaining. The act seemed innocuous enough so I ignored him. That was my mistake.



He continued sharpening and sharpening and sharpening until he had a perfectly new pencil 'sharpened' clear down to the nub. He turned nonchalantly to the class with a distracted air, held up the pencil and said, "That looks about right."

Order in the classroom collapsed into hysterics. Their underdeveloped fifth-grade sense of humor actually found the act amusing. Or perhaps the amusing part was that the 'sub' had just been bamboozled.

I faced the class firmly, and asked, "Do you expect me to be amused at that? Sit down Freddy!"

Freddy feigned surprise at my feigned indignation and sauntered back to his seat, while I lectured him on unnecessary wastefulness.

I found it difficult to be really angry with him. Anybody able to turn Social Studies into fun has a lot going for him. A hidden genius. A special coping. So in my heart, I forgave him, though he never knew it.

The day continued normally, but I suspected this was not the end of Freddy's escapades. So I prepared myself mentally. Sure enough, about five minutes before the end of the class, Freddy raised his hand. "Mr. Smalling?"

I was ready. I said, "Freddy, the answer is NO! *That* is the answer no matter what it is!" Freddy looked shocked. I knew I had him, and it gave me a perverse satisfaction as he mumbled, "Thank you very much, Mr. Smalling."

I turned to the board again, but something tugged at the back of my mind. The way he muttered 'thank you' intrigued me. I faced the class again, and said, "Freddy, what was it you were asking?" He cleared his throat innocently and said, "I was asking if we *really* had to do our homework for tomorrow."

Laughter. Pandemonium. The sub had bitten the bait again.

A lot of years have passed since that class. I'm well past the beginner stage in which I take the ministry and myself too seriously. Mrs. Wasson's parting words have helped me. "Freddy is determined to have a good time, no matter where he is." Mission work in particular carries incredible stresses and the ministry is not meant as an exercise in jocularly. But then, neither are Social Studies. If life was meant to be a drag, somebody forgot to tell Freddy. Adding a bit of Freddy's attitude helps me minister better.

The scenario of your life might seem dull and devoid of good times. But look around. Use a little imagination. Remember Freddy.

## Slow Indian

A small cumulous cloud just missed the mountaintop, catching its bottom on the tip, as though staining to make enough altitude to clear it. After all, the valley was at 11,000 feet. The summit of that hill must pass 13000 feet at least, I thought. Gazing at the cloud caused me to notice the Indian family descending the trail toward the valley where I had been hunting game birds.

I abhor laziness. Whether among the idle rich or the indolent poor, it provokes me to want to teach a lesson. These Indians were walking so slowly; it would take them most of an hour to get down to the valley at that rate. I decided to show them the right way to walk a trail. It would be rude to say anything to them so I decided to set an example.

I grabbed the shotgun resolutely by the breach and started up the hill at a determined pace. The dusty path meandered around the bunch grass and rocks, climbing steadily. Without a doubt the Indians would get the point.

A hundred yards later I collapsed on the path, gasping for breathe, my heart pounding dangerously. Something had gone wrong in my calculations. Surely a mere 11,000 feet would not make so much difference. So I stretched out on the grass to consider matter as the Indians descended the trail.

The valley stretched for miles, a small stream meandering around smooth boulders at the bottom. Gray-brown cattle yanked at the hardy shrubs on the far side as a cowbell, barely audible, floated over on the breeze. Tall Eucalyptus trees waived at the occasional passing cloud, and I stretched out on the grass in a pensive pose as the lead Indian approached.

“Are you out for a stroll today sir?” he said. I looked up at his thin frame and elderly face and replied, “Yes, I thought I would just stop here for a minute and enjoy the scenery.” He turned toward the valley and gazed briefly. “Yes, it is truly beautiful. We are blessed to have such fine scenery where we live,” he said. “I hope you have a nice day.” He said with a respectful nod. With that, he turned and started back down the trail.

His lanky legs took only a couple steps, though, before he turned half-around, looked over his shoulder and said, “Oh, by the way. You WILL walk slowly, won’t you, sir?”

“Sure, of course,” I answered. I managed to keep the chagrin out of voice. After all, the missionary must always appear respectable.

## Firecracker Prayer

The firecracker was solidly inserted into the peach. Tom prepared to light it.

“Hold still!” he barked. I gripped the peach more firmly, planted my feet a bit wider for balance and said, “Light it right on the tip. It might go off in my hand!”

It was a Big Red...an illegal firecracker brought back from Tijuana by our Mexican friends down the street. They always had a few left over from Fourth of July. We usually managed to connive a few from our buddy Eduardo.

Tom lit the end of the firecracker. It hissed and I paused a second to make sure it was well lit before heaving it in the air. This precaution was essential to avoid wasting a good peach.

Fruit was plentiful that year. Apricots from our yard, and peaches from Tom’s made fine ‘bombs’. With our Dads at work and Moms off shopping, we took advantage of the sunny summer afternoon for this ‘experiment’.

Tom and I were good at inventing ‘experiments’. He was a year younger than I, about 13, and we had already tested apricots with the little ‘lady finger’ firecrackers. These were small and made a sharp bang when they went off in the air. But the teeny bits of scattering apricot were hard to see and we needed to improve our technique. If this was fun, reasoned Tom, then a peach with a Big Red would really be spectacular.

Our mental image of the big peach spewing pieces over two quarter-acre lots was too delicious to resist. It was destined to be glorious.

I failed to convince Tom to throw the peach. He had long since learned to be wary of my ‘suggestions’. “Hey man,” he said indignantly, “it was YOUR idea.”

“But it’s YOUR firecracker,” I countered.

Tom cocked his 13-year-old head to the side as he usually did when making a strong point. “You are the one with the good throwin’ arm.”

That argument was clearly irrefutable, so it fell to me to launch the peach. The Big Red could do serious damage to a person’s hand if it went off. But who considers insignificant details when you are fourteen?

Nor had we considered that the peach might not explode exactly at apogee as calculated...Nor had we thought where it might land if, in fact, it didn’t go off at all. Occasional particulars get overlooked in even the greatest of experiments.

That explains why we didn’t notice old man Jackson next door on his hands and knees digging in the garden. This was his therapy. His heart attack just two months before, left him down but not out. Were he not stone deaf, he might have overheard our plans.

It was a beautiful toss, a good 20 feet nearly vertical. The peach spun and the Big Red sputtered, tracing a tenuous smoke-spiral as it passed the apricot tree. And right at the pinnacle of its arch... it failed to explode.

That's when we noticed Mr. Jackson on his knees digging rhythmically with a trowel. The peach was headed straight for his back.

No time to pray. Not even to cry out. Merely a second to fling myself on my knees and project desperate thoughts. He'll die and they'll never believe we didn't kill him on purpose! Can God read minds? Oh Lord Jesus, DO SOMETHING! PLEASE!

The hissing peach continued its plunge until about three feet above Mr. Jackson's back. The blast spewed peach all over his yard. Indeed, it was spectacular.

But our concern was for Mr. Jackson. Was he still alive? Had the shock given him a heart attack?

Stone deaf and concentrating on his work, Mr. Jackson never missed a beat in his rhythmic digging. He noticed nothing.

Apparently the firecracker exploded in the split second when it was *exactly underneath* the peach. This threw bits of peach horizontally rather than downward on Mr. Jackson.

We gave Jesus the credit for saving Mr. Jackson...and us. We abandoned all firecracker experiments. Well, at least for *that* day. We still disagreed about what happens when one is dropped into a coke bottle. Tom thought it would break the bottle. I thought it would just explode out the mouth, which gave me fresh ideas about projectiles. But that's another story.

## PART TWO: Fiction

While watching a lousy TV drama, I said to myself, “even I could write drivel like that.”

So I did!

I hope you have as much fun reading these yarns as I did writing them.

## Prologue

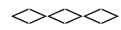
This is a tribute to my all-time favorite science fiction story. The title and name of the author is lost in a labyrinth of distant memories. Of the scores I've read through a lifetime of enjoyment of the genre, the theme of this one stands etched in my mind.

To satisfy my frustration at being unable to find it again, I borrowed the theme to write my own version. I hope the reader enjoys it as much as I did the original.

## The Wimp

Jeremy Whitby sat on his last crate of food and wept. His mathematician mind did not need a calculator to tell him how long it would last. *Six weeks, maybe eight if I ration hard*, he thought to himself. *But rationing won't help. That will still leave me two months to starve to death.*

He stood up, walked outside the house and looked up at the sky. "You morons! You blithering imbeciles," he shouted. "You have stranded me here to die." He knew no one would hear him. Not at 700 light years from earth. Nor would anyone on the planet hear. He was the only one there.



Months before on earth, Director Jordan Stenton, president of the Galactic Colony Services, looked across his polished mahogany desk at one of the most wimpy-looking men of the several he had interviewed that day. The Director thought, *this man obviously expects to be dismissed immediately. That explains why he averts those gray-blue eyes every time I speak.*

Director Stenton smiled, "I believe you are the man we want for this mission, Mr. Whitby."

Jeremy Whitby, who had been slouching timidly, sat up abruptly. "I beg your pardon, sir? You said there have been at least 600 applicants." He paused and cleared his throat nervously and continued, "I am indeed honored, sir, but I must ask...exactly, what abilities do you see in me that would qualify me for an exploratory mission on a distant planet?"

"None whatsoever," the Director replied. "That is precisely why we picked you."

"Sir, I read the brochures," Jeremy replied, "so I understand you wanted people with no experience in exploration, survival or weapon skills. I assumed you expect to do the training yourself for those you call your proto-colonists. However, you can see that I am not exactly what most would consider a candidate for such training."

The Director's paternalistic and disdainful smile barely hid his true thoughts. What an excuse for a man. Skinny, timid, no confidence. Why is it that wimps are usually skinny? Are they afraid to eat?

He spoke, "Mr. Whitby, we can find all the intrepid adventurers we want for exploring the planets we intend to colonize. They apply by the dozen every day. Our robotic technology has made types like that obsolete. Our scanners can tell us from space all we want to know about a planet before anyone sets foot on it. Our problem is to convince ordinary citizens to go. They want absolute proof it is safe, before leaving everything to live on a world they know nothing about."

"Yes," Whitby replied, "and paying you their life savings for the passage."

The Director chuckled. "Spoken like a true accountant, Whitby, which I see your application says is your profession." He leaned back in his black leather executive chair and continued.

“You see Whitby, people want to hear that someone has already lived on the target planet and returned safely. And not just anyone. Certainly not a gung-ho macho type, but an ordinary man with none of the skills you mentioned.”

Director Stenton continued, “Here’s the deal, Jeremy. May I call you Jeremy?”

Whitby replied, “Yes, of course. This is getting intriguing.”

“All we want you to do is live on Delta Prime, our next colony target, for one year. Everything you need will be provided. A years’ worth of rations. Whatever food and clothing you choose. A robotic supply ship will take you there. Robots will set up your lodging and storehouse. Then the ship will take off and maintain an orbit around the planet and return to pick you up the day you are to leave.”

Jeremy was sitting up straighter by now. “What about possible dangerous wildlife? Will I have weapons and training in how to use them?”

“No, Jeremy. Our Organoscanner has scanned the target planet, Delta Prime, for any kind of fauna. Nothing but vegetation exists on the surface. Entirely safe, so no weapons are necessary. Besides, it will be better propaganda to say that our proto-colonist survived without weapons of any kind.” The Director smiled. “The only thing you have to worry about is boredom.”

“I’m used to boredom. I’m an accountant, remember?”

“I see you have a sense of humor, Jeremy. May I ask what are your motives for going?”

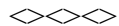
“Well, sir, I’m tired of my life as it is. Few friends. Never was any good at sports. No girl friends. Can’t get a date. Frankly, sir, being away from the human race for a year is more attractive than it would be to most people.”

Jeremy paused to clear his throat again. “Also, I must ask you, Director, was the salary mentioned in the brochure a misprint?”

“No Jeremy, it wasn’t.”

“That’s more than I could make in twenty years,” Jeremy replied. “How’s that for a motive?”

“Jeremy, you’re hired.”



Even with the new derelium star drive, the trip to Delta Prime took nearly a month. The landing went without incident. The robots did a perfect job of setting up the stormproof lodging and the storehouse about twenty meters away. The supply ship took off like the Director said and Jeremy settled down to a leisurely life of reading and writing. He even wrote a few poems about the environment; the low hills a half-mile away and the varied colors of the three moons. Not great poetry he knew, but he didn’t care.

He heard a noise outside one night but ignored it. Probably a stack of crates settling.

In the morning, he found a corner of the storehouse ripped open. At first he thought a crate must have been fallen off a stack and broke the wall. Then he spotted the claw marks.



Crates had been torn apart. Containers of food pierced and spoiled. Clothing items shredded. *Whenever did this, Jeremy thought, must be big and strong.*

The creature had left a trail leading to the nearby hills. Although Jeremy was terrified, he followed until the trail rounded a knoll and disappeared. He dared not follow it around a blind curve, so he climbed the knoll, lay on the ground at the top and peered over.

The trail led to the mouth of a cave across a stretch of barren ground, about 50 meters from the knoll. Jeremy gasped and thought, *The Director said the Organoscanner searched the entire surface of the planet for fauna. Gang of fools! Did it never occur to them to scan for life under the surface?* He slid down the knoll in the direction of the house, careful to avoid noise.

This was serious. He had to find a way to keep the creature out, whatever it was. He repaired the breach in the storehouse wall as best he could with the few tools he had. It was pathetic. He calculated he had lost about five percent of his stores.

Another raid the next night. He shined a flashlight through the house window and the sight sickened him.

The light revealed a low lying bulk, about three feet high and eight feet long, something like a giant centipede with a bulbous back, multiple legs and a string of yellow eyes across the face. Two long claw-like protrusions extended from the front that tore at the fabric of the storehouse.

The creature turned and hissed in Jeremy's direction, then backed away from the light. Jeremy shut off the flashlight.

It took a full hour to recover his composure and think through the situation. Ripping and smashing sounds continued through the night. Jeremy slept not at all, terrified the monster would attempt to break into the house.

The next morning, he surveyed the damage. Another tenth destroyed. *It will only be time before this creature attacks the house. I have no weapons.* He remembered the monster retreating from the light and had an idea.

It took the better part of the day to string a set of lights around the roof of the house. Not enough to protect both buildings completely. Hopefully it would keep him safe until he found a way to discourage the creature.

The following night, the raid continued. Several more crates destroyed. Jeremy spent the day lugging crates into the house. It was backbreaking work for a man not used to manual labor. He stacked crates from floor to ceiling. That night the din outside was even louder. He ventured a look outside and saw at least three shadows milling around the storehouse.

It would be a race against time. It took him four exhausting days to stack the house full of crates until he could hardly move around. It was not enough. The rest of the storehouse was at the mercy of the creatures.



Months went by. Jeremy surveyed the shambles of the storehouse. Smashed boxes, broken support tubing, spoiled containers strewn everywhere.

One crate of supplies was left in the house. *The options are simple*, he thought. *Starve to death or suicide*. He looked over the rubble and noticed a shard of broken crate, about a foot long, tapered and sharp on the end. He walked over and picked it up.

As he turned the shard over in his hand, he recalled an incident in his childhood. A bully had beaten him up. Not just once but twice. One day, he asked himself what it would be like to hit the bully just once. He knew if he did, the bully would beat him worse than if he just took the abuse. *Just once*. He said to himself.

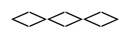
The next time, he hit the bully square in the mouth. Indeed, the bully beat him badly. When Jeremy got home, he hurt all over except in one place, his hand, the one that hit the bully. It felt good. Very good.

He looked up at the hills and had an idea. *Maybe there is a third option after all*.

It took him the better part of an hour to rummage through the rubble to find what he was looking for. A broken piece of plastic tubing, about two meters long, part of the support structure for the storehouse.

It took the rest of the day to figure out how to attach the pointed shard to the end of the pipe and make it stay. Electrical wire and tape made a dubious looking spear but it stuck in the ground and held when he threw it.

“Just once,” he said to himself.



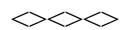
The next morning, Jeremy opened the last crate of supplies and ate an ample breakfast with complete disregard to rationing. Afterwards, he picked up his spear and a flashlight, then strode outside and stood by the rubble.

A teardrop splattered on the dusty ground in front of his foot. He was crying again. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, and then ground it into the dirt with the heel of his boot. *Well, I've taken my first step*, he chuckled.

He took another step and then another, shuffling along, head down, looking up occasionally to make sure he was still on course toward the cave. His hand was shaking, knuckles white, causing the spearhead to waggle.

He rounded the base of the knoll and stopped. The mouth of the cave was about 50 meters away, the aperture around three meters high and a couple of meters wide. He said out loud, “Monster, one of us is going to eat well tonight. Probably you. But at least I won’t die of starvation.”

He took a deep and trembling breath, switched on the flashlight, hoisted the spear to shoulder height then walked forward briskly. At the halfway point he began to jog. By the time he reached the cave, he was no longer jogging. He was sprinting full tilt, shouting, the spear held high as he plunged through the mouth of the cave into the blackness beyond.



Four months later on earth, Director Stenton of the Galactic Colony Services, stood at the base of the landing platform for the company star ships. He was ecstatic. The ship from Delta Prime had just returned, bringing back Jeremy Whitby, the planet's proto-colonist. *This, he thought, is going to bring in a bundle of money for the company. And a fat bonus for me.*

The entire senior staff stood around him. Behind them, thousands of citizens milled in anticipation, hopeful for a berth on the first transports to the new colony. Many had already sold everything they had for passage, desperate to escape to a new life on a new planet.

The ramp of the ship opened with a hiss and descended slowly to the tarmac with a thud. The crowd held its breath, waiting in anticipation to cheer Jeremy. A shadow of the morning sun obscured the doorway and the top of the ramp. For a moment, the crowd could see nothing. Then the indistinct form of a man appeared in the shadow of the doorway.

The man descended slowly down the ramp. Director Stenton started to clap and the crowd cheered. When the man stepped into the sunlight, a stunned silence swept over the crowd and Director Stenton stopped clapping.

What they saw on the ramp was nothing like what they expected. They saw a man clothed in a robe of strangely colored skins, tied around the waist with a twisted thong. His bare arms hung at his side, fists clenching and unclenching, slowly, rhythmically.

A breeze blew a wisp of shoulder-length scraggly hair over the man's face. A muscled arm reached up and flung it aside. He surveyed the crowd, squinting in the morning sun, his head turning slowly, as though looking for something or someone.

Director Stenton stood stunned, his hands still in a clapping posture. "Whitby?" he said.

The face of the man on the ramp snapped toward the Director and met his eyes. Director Stenton started to speak but the words caught in his throat. It was neither the skins nor the hair that transfixed him. It was the eyes.

Director Stenton knew it was Whitby's eyes but with a quality he had seen only in pictures. It was the eyes of a predator, like the steel blue gaze of a wolf.

Or, like the eyes of a dangerous....man!

THE END

## Cut Me Kindly

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.*

*Galactic year 3840, Alpha Quadrant.*

When the alien pleaded with me to stab him in the heart, I hesitated. Not merely because he was my friend but killing another sentient being without provocation is murder anywhere in the galaxy.

It took a few wars to get that law established. We humans used to put less value on killing an alien than each other. Then we discovered aliens disagreed. Enough inmates of a variety of species in prison planets can testify to the consistency in galactic law and I did not want to join them.

So right there I had two good reasons to avoid stabbing my alien companion in the heart. A third reason was I could not bring myself to believe the portable language translator was accurate. I had never heard of a sentient alien pleading to be stabbed in the heart. Only a cold-hearted machine could make such a statement, excuse the pun.

The translator device automatically recorded the speech and kept it until I told it to erase. We only had one translator between us and it worked for galactic, my own native language and the alien's Artaak dialect.

I went over the alien sounds at least fourteen times. That's probably an exaggeration because I was under pressure and the pleadings were increasing. It was the word *please* that was increasing from the mouth of the alien, or what technically could be taken for a mouth since in his case, the opening for speech and the orifice for food are different. I won't tell you where these are located because you would not believe it and it would detract you from the point of the story. Look it up in the galactic encyclopedia if you are interested.

The words *stab* and *heart* translated clearly. Maybe a nuance the machine missed meant *please don't*. This was unlikely, considering I had made no gesture to indicate a desire to stab anything. In fact, Jartuk, my alien friend, had made the request before I had drawn my knife.

So I remained kneeling over his prostrate form, knife in hand, paralyzed to inaction by confusion.

We had sent down the Organoscanner from orbit to search for life forms before venturing a visit ourselves. Standard procedure in planetary exploration. It discovered some primitive multi-cellular life and even a few viruses but these checked out as harmless. So it seemed a green light for landing and claiming the planet as a potential future colony. That's our job. We're in real estate, so to speak. Planetary size. Finding habitable planets for the Galactic Colony Services.

In retrospect, I keep trying to figure a way to blame the scanner. I can't. It is designed to find life forms and decide if any are dangerous, not to predict allergic reactions to strange chemicals in the environment. Some things we learn only by trial and error. And sometimes the errors can be permanent, if you catch my drift.

While kneeling over my writhing companion, I realized I had nothing but bad options. Do nothing and watch my companion die. Or do as he asked and prison planet here I come. So I did what the company training said. Go with your gut feeling when you don't know what else to do.

"Jartuk," I yelled, "where is your heart?" A writhing tentacle pointed at a spot on his anatomy. So I took the plunge, excuse the metaphor. A swift stab and Jartuk went limp.

"I've gone and done it," I said to myself. Maybe an insanity plea might work. Or I could blame it on the translator box. Self-justifying notions whizzed around my cranium like alley cats in a panic, just at the moment Jartuk started to move and sat up.

"Get me to the ship, quickly," he said. I did not question the translator box this time. I dropped my knife in the dust, grabbed one of his tentacles and started to drag him back as fast as possible. He staggered along as best he could.

On the ship, he headed straight for the shower and was there a good long time. I stood outside the door and periodically inquired if he was o.k. He gurgled something and I don't know what he was saying but it answered the question. He sounded alive so I waited.

While standing there, I had weird thoughts of how to explain things if I went in the shower and found him dead. I could tell the truth, "first I stabbed him in the heart with a knife. Then I sent him in to take a shower." Something about that seemed to lack credulity so I was fishing around in my head for a plausible lie when Jartuk came out of the shower. "Thank you for saving my life," he said.

An hour later, Jartuk and I were lounging in the ship's recreation room. "Would you like me to explain what happened?" he asked. Artaaks have no sense of humor so I discarded the sarcastic remark on the tip of my tongue and simply said, "yes."

"I have two hearts," he explained, "a primary and a secondary heart. The secondary remains dormant until the primary sends out a chemical signal in case it fails suddenly. If it fails slowly, the chemical signal does not get sent and we die of what you call a heart attack. Destroying the primary heart in such circumstances is a standard surgical technique on my planet."

He paused and emitted what could be taken for a cough, waved a few tentacles for effect and continued. "I could feel myself having a serious reaction to something in the environment and my heart started dying. Your action saved my life." He paused and laid back in the recliner to rest.

I decided this anatomical peculiarity made more sense than the location of his mouth but I did not want to insult him by saying it, so I kept my own mouth shut. It took us the better part of a day of high-tech chemical analysis to discover the allergen in the dust that caused Jartuk's reaction.

That put the planet off-limits for his species but not for mine. So the company picked up another planet to sell but almost at the cost of a perfectly good but weird employee.

I feel a twinge of guilt that I will only share with company headquarters and never with Jartuk. We are still good friends and I would never want to hurt his feelings.

I'm going to put in a request for a partner transfer. Somebody with only one heart and maybe not so many tentacles. I know that sounds like interspecies racism, which is politically incorrect in our day and the company won't like it. I'll risk the consequences.

Which reminds me. I must close this journal now because I just remembered something important I forgot to explain to Jartuk. I must tell him what NOT to do if I have an allergic reaction.

THE END

## Alien Clown

I did everything I could to avoid becoming an alien invader, short of degrading myself by begging. Somehow my subconscious did not agree. You know how stubborn the subconscious can be. It has a mind of its own. So, I found myself begging anyway. "Please, Captain. Please don't send me down there. Is there no other way?"

"Stupid question," the captain said. The captain did not actually utter those words but his eyes communicated the thought. He gets this peculiar expression when he considers a question beyond his dignity to merit a reply. I was going to ask if he really thought of me as expendable but decided against it because I feared it would not change his expression.

We exploratory scouts are not really invaders, just explorers. The invader designation is usually how an alien culture perceives us whenever we accidentally blow our cover during an investigation. That normally results in planet-wide panic and more often than not, the death of the investigator.

We try to prevent that by learning what we can about them before introducing ourselves. This requires wearing disguises and infiltrating the alien society for a while before blowing our cover.

Actually, we don't have enough of a crew to be a threat to a village. But you know how it is. You may recall what happened in the year 2870 on earth when we discovered the Targellians from the Orion belt were checking us out. They had no more evil intentions than we would today and we have been good friends ever since.

It's a natural reaction, I suppose. Sort of like finding somebody wandering around your living room in the middle of the night. You assume he must be up to no good until you find out he is a harmless drunk who got lost.

Actually, the last time I was an alien invader, it worked out okay. Well, sort of. It took me about two and half weeks of sneaking around, disguised like a fat rodent, picking up enough native conversations on my translator box to decipher their language.

The reactions of the rodent-like aliens we were investigating that time were not exactly what I expected. When I accidentally ripped open my disguise suit on a tree branch, I knew my cover was blown. Some of the observers indeed showed surprise but not all. I prepared myself mentally for death.

One walked up to me and said something. I figured he was going to plead for mercy or the like. The translator box spoke. "If you don't move that miserable excuse for a space ship off our sewer line, we're going to shove the contents down your throat."

Now that was disconcerting. I assumed the disguise suit was pretty good. Apparently it wasn't. This point was made clear by the next sentence out of the translator box. "And take off that stupid suit. You are a disgrace to galactic intelligence."

So how was I to know they were three times smarter than us? Worse, it was not first contact after all. Our Targellian friends had been there years before. We don't know what they said about us but apparently it was not that flattering.

So, my reluctance to descend out of orbit and investigate yet another alien culture, was not merely fear. I was fully willing to accept the risks. Well, not exactly fully. It was the captain who was more fully than I.

What I mean is, I really don't mind being viewed as a dangerous alien invader. It's kind of cool. What I really can't stand is being treated as a buffoon.

I have asked the captain twice to tell my fellow crew members to stop calling me the clown, just because of that one weird incident. But all I get is that peculiar expression in his eyes.

THE END



## Soft Touch

It took me a while to figure out why the aliens had tied my hands in front instead of back. The way their arms were set, they could not touch their own backs so it never occurred to them to bind mine behind me.

Big mistake for them, though I did not appreciate it at the time. I assumed it would not matter. The size of those creatures was unbelievable, nearly three meters. Bulky, slightly reptilian, large scales, bipedal with a stumpy tail. Enough muscles to make King Kong jealous. Their teeth did not seem carnivorous, so that gave me a thin hope.

My hands were secured painfully tight and I was being dragged at a brisk enough pace to keep me off balance and stumbling most of the time. After a while I managed to get the hang of hopping along in the low gravity, about 65% earth normal.

About every third hop, I cursed my carelessness for getting captured. Leaving the scout ship without reporting my landing to the mother ship in orbit was error number one. The second was not watching my back. As huge as the aliens were on that planet, they walked quietly and managed to hit me in the back of the head and knock me out. Probably something thrown. They were accurate, whatever it was.

For a guy like me, with twenty-two years as a first-contact scout in the Galactic Colony Services, blunders like that were inexcusable. Well, mostly so. After you have landed on dozens of planets and encountered nothing but boredom, the fine edge of caution gets dulled.

The Organoscanner had shown life on the planet but nothing sentient. Animal life, yes, but slow moving so we assumed herbivores. It looked like a world ripe for the taking, ideal for colonization.

No matter to me. My career with the company was in the process of termination either way. If the aliens didn't kill me, which seemed likely, the company would fire me for safety violations.

We hadn't trekked far when the group paused and formed a circle around me. They chattered at each other and I assumed they were arguing over what to do with me. The circle was closing slowly and the alien holding the other end of the cord tied around my hands was the closest. He stood facing me, chattering.

What I did next was not planned. Maybe instinct. Maybe a frustrated craving to fight back, however futile. Do something to show my species would not go down without a struggle. With my hands bound, I couldn't hit, so I took a step forward and jumped, the lower gravity helping me gain height. My foot shot out and struck the alien square in the lower left part of the abdomen and pushed in his belly like a soft balloon! I don't mean a little. I mean nearly all the way to his backbone!

The creature screamed and lashed out with his left arm. I instinctively blocked with my tied arms and the block broke his arm. I couldn't believe it. Those creatures were soft as butter and I thought them tough as dinosaurs.

I withdrew my foot with a yank and down he went, thrashing and howling.

Now that was encouraging. He dropped his spear and I lunged for it. The other aliens approached and I swung the spear, baseball bat style, at the nearest alien and missed. He backed off. I took a moment to cut myself loose with the point and hoisted the spear, ready for action.

Two aliens reared back to throw spears but were ludicrously slow. I anticipated the action with enough time for a cup of tea and easily smacked down the spears when they flew at me.

I charged the two who had throw the spears. They tried to back off in time but could not. I jabbed at the bellies of each one with the spear point, deliberately pulling up short and then backed away without injuring them.

They were obviously at my mercy, slow and weak as they were. At first I was not feeling merciful but as the fight continued an idea was developing. I spun the spear over my head with a dexterity they could not match. I leaped from side to side as high as I could to show my agility then jammed the spear point into the ground and let it stick. I stepped in front of the spear and raised my hands.

They got the idea. They realized I did not want to fight but could do lethal damage if threatened. They chattered at some length while the alien I had kicked was carried off, attended by two companions.

Evidently we both learned a lesson. Small doesn't mean weak and big might mean nothing at all. Appearances can be deceiving and fortunately that old adage displayed itself before they cut my head off.

I simply turned and walked back toward my ship. At intervals I raised my hands, turning my head cautiously to check for flying spears. None came. The aliens raised their hands every time I did.

When I entered the ship, I reported to the company and said I had just landed. After waiting an hour, I described encountering semi-sentient aliens, stone-age level. They learned nothing of my capture, so I got to keep my job.

Since the planet was tagged as sentient inhabited, the company disqualified it for human colonization. I agree. If those aliens had the brains to figure out that being friends is better than being dead, they have something going for them.

The lesson served me well. On the next planet, we ran into another kind of alien only that time I was the big guy. I did not assume that made me the toughest. Good thing I remembered that or I would not be alive to write this journal. But that is another story.

THE END

## Drug Runner

The guard grabbed me by the throat with one hand and shoved me against the wall with the other. I wanted to lash out and hit him but since his head was about two feet higher than mine, I could not reach it. Even if I had, it would probably hurt me more than him.

“I hope you get the death penalty,” he said. “I despise drug smugglers and would genuinely like to squeeze your miserable throat.”

“It’s not your call,” I replied. It surprised me I was able to speak because he had my head against the wall, but his hand was so big his fingers were touching the wall and leaving a space for me to breathe. I suspected this was by design. I assumed guards were not allowed to execute prisoners a supposedly civilized planet.

While I was not exactly terrified, my fear was skirting the fine edges of it. His planet, known as Argonia, was on the official list of civilized aliens but I decided to challenge that ruling to the Galactic Council if I ever got out of that alive.

“Do you know that two of our children almost choked to death because of your stinking contraband?” the guard said.

“No, I was not aware of that. It was not me who gave it to them.”

“Tell that to the judge tomorrow. I do not think he will believe you any more than I do.”

His dog-like face inched closer to mine for effect. I knew then two important facts. He was not going to hurt me because he was thinking of a trial the next day. In some places they leave a prisoner in jail for weeks while communications and negotiations take place with the prisoner’s home world.

On the other hand, I thought maybe they execute prisoners the same day as the trial. Well, I said to myself, we’ll find out tomorrow. At least this guard is not going to kill me today, I thought.

The next day, I was brought into their courtroom. It was a large bare room. Since the Argonians stand about two feet taller than us, everything seemed big. No one but the judge behind a desk, two guards and I were on the floor but the huge balconies were crowded. A lot of crowd noise outside.

I guessed this must be the first time an outworlder was going to be tried on their planet. It must have been a sensation on their news channels.

I stared at the judge and he seemed to stare at me. The Argonians have faces something like a giant pug dog. Bug-eyed, furry with a squat nose. Expressions are hard to read, if for some strange reason you may be inclined to peer at such a face long enough to try to read it.

The judge spoke. “Are you aware of the charge brought against you, merchantman?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I am charged with drug smuggling. I assure your honor, as I have said repeatedly, I did not know about your laws regarding this.”

“You are fortunate, merchantman, in one respect. This dangerous element found in your possession has not yet been officially classed as a forbidden substance. Are you aware that two of our children nearly died as result of it?”

“I was told that by a guard,” I replied. I didn’t mention being roughed up in the cell. “That is tragic indeed,” I said. “But it was not me who gave it to them.”

The judge leaned forward. “We know that because it happened before you arrived. It must have been smuggled in by another merchantman.”

The judge paused and looked down at his computer screen. I tried to read his expression but there wasn’t any. None that I could detect, at least. “Because of the unusual nature of the case,” he continued, “I will not sentence you to death or imprisonment, despite clamors of the populace for the former. Therefore, I am fining you 1000 galactic credits and releasing you.”

I started to laugh but thought better of it instantly and covered it up with a spat of coughing.

“Your dismay, merchantman, at the heavy fine is understandable,” the judge declared. “But we cannot allow such a serious offense to go without punishment, despite the unusual circumstances.”

The judge mistook my cough as an expression of dismay! I spend more than that on a night’s bash back on earth. So the judge assumed I was sufficiently shocked and humiliated.

The fine made sense. Executing tradesmen tends to be hard on trade. And this little backwater planet had just been approved by the Galactic Council as sufficiently advanced for intergalactic commerce.

I have my personal opinion on that point but then I’m not on the council. I’m just a common trader in galactic goods. The Argonians did not want to risk shutting down business just as it got started.

So I replied, “Your honor, your decision sounds reasonable and fair. Be assured I will communicate to all my colleagues that the Argonians are an honorable people with whom we can do business. And furthermore, I promise on my word of honor, that as I long as I live, I will never again bring chewing gum to your planet.”

THE END

## Pillow Chatter

An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.

Galactic year 3843, Beta Quadrant

Torture? No. Unpleasant? Yes.

Since the aliens who pulled me out of my wrecked scout ship were anatomically similar, I had no doubts they could inflict real pain if they wanted. Arms can be twisted and joints strained regardless of species. They seemed careful to avoid that. The problem was, they would not let me lie down.

I do not know if any reader of this journal has ever been in a smashed up spacecraft but if so, he or she knows that lying down is an attractive option. This is especially true after hours of fighting a losing battle to stay in orbit long enough to send a distress signal and get a rescue tug from the mother ship, no more that a few light years down the road.

I had enough power to attempt a landing but avoided it until I ran out of options. The planet had enough oxygen in the atmosphere but also a trace of methane gas. We humans do poorly with methane. Besides smelling bad, it has a tendency to provoke annoying symptoms if inhaled long enough, such as death for instance.

The mass detector was supposed to warn of incoming meteors or other matter when in orbit. It did not always work, especially if the debris was traveling at several thousand clicks per second and its trajectory is between a planet's sun and the ship, making it tricky to detect. I figure that's what happened. Whatever slammed amidsthips hit hard enough to buckle that little scout ship like a piece of wire and spew most of my fuel out the back.

The hull held, though. Piercing a strontium-titanium hull is nigh impossible. Good thing or the only positive aspect would be that my death by sudden decompression would be painless.

As I fought the controls on the way down I thought, *Maybe the ship will hit soft enough to avoid bursting open, now that the hull has been weakened. Then again it might not.* The choice was to use the remaining power and try for a landing or burn up in an uncontrolled descent through the atmosphere.

Choice made. Result? Crash! No, it was not soft either. As the craft plowed a long furrow along the bleak landscape, I could see the nose of the ship starting to buckle inward toward me. I tried to get out of the seat but the deceleration pressed me hard against the straps.

The moment it skidded to a stop, I released the straps and threw myself behind the seat just as the roof caved in. I was pinned in a small space between the back of the seat and the debris.

I could see a hill in the distance and was not looking through a window either. Burst open? That's an understatement. Strontium-titanium hulls are tough but not invincible.

My last thought before I passed out was, Yup, that's methane all right. Smells like a large herd of cattle in a small barn feeding on pinto beans.

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The next time I opened my eyes, I shut them again right quick. That's instinctive when we recover from unconsciousness and look up into an alien face. You probably knew that so you know it took me a few seconds to process the usual survival-instinct questions. Friend or foe? Ugly or pretty?

Since they were Eniwerts, you know the answer. Friendly, but not all that pretty. I opened my eyes again and tried to look around but that is tough to do flat on your back on a hard floor. I was hoping to see a human face. No luck. Just Eniwerts.

The Eniwert facial features give them a perpetual quizzical look, something like a kangaroo trying to ask a question, if you can imagine that. Their bodies are a bit bigger than ours, covered with tawny short fur and long arms extending to short, squat legs. It would be a stretch to compare them to kangaroos but if you've never seen a picture of an Eniwert, that will do for an analogy.

A great bunch of aliens, in my opinion. They had a good reputation around the galaxy. Never known to pick fights and interested only in trade.

My brain was still in decent enough shape after the crash to figure out I must be on their ship. The air was clean and breathable, the room small and spotless, no furniture.

I started to sit up and they chattered excitedly while reaching out to lift me. I was grateful for the effort, stood on my feet groggily and looked around. I smiled and said, *Thanks for the rescue, boys. I could not have done it without you*, knowing they would not understand but it seemed right to say it anyway. I had some bruises and few scratches and that was about it.

I deduced I must be aboard their ship. I knew this was not their planet so they must have picked up my distress signal and dropped in to check it out. Good thing. I don't know how long I would have lasted. It would take four or five days for the mother ship to get a rescue out to me once they got the subspace distress call signal. I doubt if I would have lasted that long pinned under the wreckage and with that stinking atmosphere.

I was grimy all over and tried to brush it off. The Eniwert brought me water and I drank it eagerly and tried to clean up the best I could. They just stood around and watched. Apparently they knew what a human was but did not know much about us.

They seemed interested in my ingestion of water and brought me more and I drank some. We stood around and just looked at each other. I was hungry and made gestures with my hands and mouth to indicate eating. They simply brought me more water.

I rejected the water and continued my gestures, thinking I might have to fast until my rescue team showed up. That could be a while, assuming the signal got through.

The Eniwert continued chattering amongst themselves. After awhile, two of them left and were gone a good long time. When they returned, they were carrying rations from my ship.

More water and a bite of rations and I was in great spirits. I thanked them profusely for rescuing me, though I knew they understood nothing.

Now for a good nap, dreaming of the rescue ship to come. Nothing like a good nap after a crash. They always make me sleepy.

I laid down on the floor and instantly strong arms dragged me right back up. Oops, I thought, maybe I missed a protocol here. Easy to do when you know nothing of an alien's customs.

So I gestured to the floor, made snoring noises, bowed apologetically and every other inane movement I could think of to indicate I really did need a nap. They just stood around and gawked at me and each other.

I thought, O.K., I'll do it slower this time. Maybe just sit down politely with a friendly wave and a smile and then stretch out. I didn't even make it to sitting. Strong long arms dragged me back up.

*I got it now*, I said to myself aloud. *It's rude to lie down on the floor.* Maybe they did not want their nice clean floor dirtied with the grime on my flight suit.

So I removed my soiled suit. My ordinary jump suit was underneath anyway, so I put the flight suit on the floor and they seemed to ignore it. That puzzled me. If dirt was the problem, they should have jerked it off the floor also.

I pointed at my jump suit, rubbing my hands on it, nice and clean and headed for the floor again. Nope. This time they held me for a while until I quit struggling and let me go.

*Let's try leaning on the wall*, I thought. I did so for about 15 seconds, with my eyes shut. The eyes came open when they jerked me off the wall.

So maybe shutting the eyes was the problem. I stood there looking at them for a moment and then shut my eyes, still standing. Nothing. They didn't move. I opened my eyes and informed them of what I thought of their hospitality in words I was thankful later were not recorded.

This kind of bizarre scenario continued for endless hours. I was getting groggy. I even threw myself on the floor quickly and stupidly in the hopes of getting a couple of seconds of sleep. I found out a couple of seconds is not much for a dream because that was all they let me have.

Over what must have been a couple of days, I endured water on the head, loud chattering and being shaken. Eniwerts left the room, replaced by others obvious called on duty to prevent me from lying down.

The room seemed to spin periodically. I recalled that a human can endure sleeplessness for only about five days and then he dies. It was hopeless.

The craving for sleep was overcoming hunger but I decided to grab a snack anyway, more out of boredom than anything else. I reached for a ration pack and then it hit me. It took the Eniwert a long time to get me my rations. Why? If they had carried the rations off my ship then it should be no more than a few minutes to get them for me.

I had assumed we were in orbit or somewhere in space. So maybe we were still parked on the ground next to my ship.

I opened a ration pack and picked out some sticky food, kind of dark. Maybe a roast. I walked over to the wall and begin drawing a picture of a translator box. Lousy drawing but the Eniwert did not interrupt me. They watched, chattering excitedly. They were intelligent and knew I was trying to communicate something.

I spoke at the drawing of the box in my own native tongue then pointed at it, making a circular motion with my finger back toward the Eniwert and tried to imitate the sounds of their speech.

The looked at each other and chattered. Then I walked over toward them, turned and chattered in what to me sounded like their speech, pointed to the picture and then stood by the picture, made the same circular gesture in reverse and spoke a few words in my own tongue.

This caused chattering, arm waving and a mild bouncing motion I took as their way of expressing excitement. It looked like my tactic was not working until three of them skittered out of the room.

They figured it out. The three were gone a long while and I nearly jumped out of my hide when they showed up with the translator box from my ship.

I was ecstatic. At last I could make them understand I needed to be left alone to sleep. I grabbed the box and saw it was smashed in on one end. This caused me to drop to the floor in despair where I was immediately picked up again against protests that I confess had degenerated from anger to whimpering. I almost threw the translator on the floor in frustration and then had a thought.

Maybe I could fix it. Shaking it didn't help. I could not get the screen to show up on the face. Yelling at it didn't help either. Sometimes if you take a thing apart and put it back together, it will work even if you don't know what you are doing.

I had never seen the inside of a translator box and assumed it was beyond repair. I pointed at the seam, looking at the Eniwert. They just looked at me. I set the machine on the floor, ran my finger down the back seam and made a gesture of parting my hands. Pounding gently on it, I made all the gestures I could think of that could signal opening it.

An Eniwert left the room and emerged a few minutes later with a handful of tools. One tool looked like a chisel and I used it to force open the back of the box. It took a miserably long time to get the back bent enough to see inside. No wiring of course, just typical trilarium micro cubes for the dozens of languages.

I was about to pass out again. When I tilted my head, the room seemed to tilt with it. I knew I was going into delirium and this was my last chance. Poking around inside with the chisel seemed to do nothing until I rammed it clear to the other side of the box.

A flicker on the screen. Or was it my delirium and wishful thinking? I rammed the tool in again and the screen lit, sputtering. I let my hand release the chisel gently. It was apparently connecting something and I don't know how. I fooled around with the screen trying to find Eniwert and could not. Maybe it did not have Eniwert. We hardly ever ran across them anyway.



I wanted to hit the machine but thought better. If I could not find Eniwert, maybe I could bring up something they recognized. I started reciting *Mary had a little lamb* while changing language settings. Weird sounds started coming out. The Eniwert bent down, listening intently.

Then it happened. Excitement! Loud chattering again. I spoke a few more words and shortly one of the Eniwert came in with a small device in hand. I continued speaking and the device in the hand of the Eniwert repeated the sounds of my voice and of the translator. Evidently I had stumbled on a language they recognized though not their own. I have no clue to this day what it was.

In a while, we had a system worked out. I spoke into the translator, the Eniwert recorded the response of the translator, their own computer then translated it into their language. Then back again to me. A tedious three-step process that was spelling out hope for me.

I thought it would be easy now. Wrong. They could not understand the word *sleep*. The words came back from them as *die*, and *death*.

Their first words were, how we help more? You not die.

I explained, with a bit of exaggeration, that I had been in a crash and needed to go unconscious for a long time for my internal organs to repair. If not, I would die.

Answer back? You won't believe it. The Eniwerts have never heard of sleep. They said, in essence, *if we go to not aware, that is one step to die. Must never, never allow to go not aware.*

So going unconscious means to them, about to die. Hence, stay awake at all costs.

I told them if I do not go unconscious within the next few minutes, I would die and never wake up. But if I go unconscious now for a while, I will get up and be healed.

Excited discussion, longer than I liked. It appeared some did not believe me. So I decided to try lying down again. They did not stop me this time. That hard floor felt like a king's mattress. All I remember is I dreamed deeply of chattering aliens and woke up a long time later with a stiff back and a bruise on my head. Translator boxes make lousy pillows.

THE END

## Phobia

Jake Sardona, the toughest sergeant in his regiment, jammed all four fingers of his aching right hand into the crack of the rock wall and hoisted himself up. His left clawed the surface above, seeking another hold.

He stretched out a bit more, scrabbling with both his left foot and hand, seeking a purchase. -It would be easier, -he thought, -if the crack weren't so nearly vertical. One hand and one foot dangling in the air is dangerous!- He lowered his hand, wiping the sweaty palm on his military khakis.

The climbing had been relatively easy 'till now. The cliff face was a steep slope of knobby alien rock. Not sheer, but over 400 feet high. Jake was getting exhausted. A climber could slip and still catch himself, unless he started to roll. Then it would be all over. The main danger was climbing in the thick fog. Worse, the rock seemed smoother the higher he climbed.

He stretched his arm out to one side, as high as he could reach. Since he had several feet of visibility in the fog, he decided to chance leaning back to look up. He adjusted his feet to allow for the heavy weight of the creature clinging to his back, and then looked up. He could see the problem at once. The cliff face straightened up as it neared the top. And the rock was indeed smoother.

He was stuck.

Going back down was not an option. The dissection tables awaited him and his alien companion, the fate of all escaped prisoners. Continuing up seemed impossible. Jake leaned forward, resting his forehead on the rough rock. His fist pounded the cliff in frustration as he swore.

"Go down three body lengths and one to the right," came a shrill, squeaky voice from the creature on his back.

"Shut up you little freak!" Jake growled. "If I hear another word out of you I'll let go and when we land, it'll be on my back! That voice can be heard from here to the next solar system!" Jake lowered his tone a bit and muttered to himself, "Risking my neck on this cliff is bad enough without a revolting..." He stopped in mid-sentence, realizing that insulting the little creep wouldn't help. After all, they needed each other. Neither could escape the prison camp alone.

So close,- he thought. -Three, maybe four meters from the top.-

He started to stretch up again when it dawned on him that the alien Menx clinging to his back had said something significant.

"What did you say?" he muttered.

No answer.

Maybe it took me literally, he reasoned. "Answer me," he whispered. "I won't let go." The shrill voice started again, "down and right."

Jake started down, fumbling for footholds he had used minutes before. Since the passenger on his back had the best eyesight of the three known alien species, Jake figured it was probably

right. Vision from ultraviolet to infrared. Sees right through fog. From its vantage point, it must have sighted another route to the top.

Twenty minutes later Jake lay face down, panting on the top the cliff, exhausted. The Menx scampered off his back onto the dull-purple turf. Its movements caused chills of revulsion on Jake's skin that the balmy warmth of the alien sun could not assuage. Jake glanced at the Menx, then buried his face in the grass and groaned in horror.

An impulse gripped him. How tempting it would be to kick out with his right leg and send the hideous creature to the bottom! But conscience and practicalities restrained him. After all, the Menx were supposed to be neutral in this war. He could get court-martialed for that.

But why, why, did they have to look so much like giant tarantulas!? Coal black like a tarantula. Long thick hairs. Three bulbous eyes in a triangle. Did tarantulas have bulbous eyes? Jake couldn't remember. He knew that arachnids had only 8 legs. This creature had 10, all of them prehensile, like tentacles. But this dissimilarity did nothing to alleviate Jake's revulsion.

The Menx moved off a few feet in front of Jake and squeaked a couple of times. Jake lifted his head. Why was it talking again?

Still on his belly, he looked back and realized that his size 11 military boots were protruding over the cliff. The enemy Vrinli guards below might see them, though that was unlikely in this fog. They hadn't the eyesight of a Menx. Jake rolled over and drew up his legs, listening for sounds below. He doubted if much noise could carry up 400 feet of cliff, unless the alarm was sounded.

The Menx squeaked again, this time loudly. Jake stood up to see what was going on and stumbled a bit to the right on a knot of the purple Vrinli grass. The stumble saved his life.

The Vrinli guard's claw ripped past Jake's face, powerful enough to tear his head off had it connected. Jake regained his balance as the tentacle-like alien arm whipped around for another strike.

The two escapees had taken a chance that the Vrinli would not keep a guard on the cliff-top. Since the Vrinli were too bulky to climb cliffs, perhaps they would assume that humans and Menx could not either. But the guard was there anyway, and they were in deep trouble. No human could match a Vrinli in hand-to-hand combat.

Jake ducked low, something the barrel-bodied guard could not do, and the move was therefore unexpected. He twisted his hip toward the alien, sending his foot in the most powerful roundhouse kick he could muster against the stumpy leg of the guard. It was like kicking an elephant.

The clawed tentacle swung back and down. Jake shoulder-rolled to the right, coming up on his hip, slightly to the left and behind of the Vrinli guard. Bracing both hands on the ground, he thrust out with both feet and with all the force his 210 pounds could muster. This time, the impact jerked the bulky alien's leg from under it, and the creature slammed to the ground, rolled toward the cliff edge, then over.

The thick, hooked claw of the Vrinli's right tentacle caught in the turf as the heavy alien hung over the edge. Its other tentacle, the prehensile one without a claw, pulled futilely at the cliff edge, slipping on the purple grass.

The short neck tentacles of the alien guard writhed hideously, the changing patterns of which corresponded to language for the Vrinli. Without adequate vocal cords, the Vrinli guard could make few sounds. But if any of his companions below saw him, they would know in a second everything going on from the patterns of the neck tentacles. This, thought Jake, must be the Vrinli version of a scream.

Jake was still on the ground, stunned to find himself alive, trying to assimilate what just happened. He leaped to his feet, eyes fixed on the claw that was saving the alien's life. He moved to the cliff edge and lifted his boot, preparing to stomp the claw and send the guard to his death.

"No!" came the shrill voice from behind. "It will warn the others!"

Jake lowered his boot to the ground. The Menx was right. The guard's fall would alert the Vrinli camp below and they would be recaptured. Maybe if he saved the guard, it would spare them. Maybe they could outrun it. Maybe he could find some way to kill it. "I can't beat him!" growled Jake. "He's too strong! If I pull him up I'm dead meat!"

"Trust me," squeaked the Menx.

Jake dropped to his hip and grabbed the tentacle with his left hand, just below the claw. Bracing both feet on a tuft of Vrinli grass, he pulled, the muscles of his strong back straining until he thought his shoulder was coming loose. The heavy Vrinli moved upward a bit, just enough for the left tentacle to wrap around a tuft of grass roots, and began to ease itself up.

The guard's central chest-claw, short but deadly, scrabbled rhythmically on the rock above the cliff, caught its point on a nub, and the alien lurched up over the edge.

Jake let go of the tentacle, scrambled to his feet and leaped back giving the alien room to climb over the edge.

"Maybe he'll be grateful and let us go!" said Jake.

Wrong. The alien lunged, tentacles swinging.

"Keep backing up away from him," squealed the Menx. Jake was already doing that as fast as he could, but not fast enough. "Get him past the spot where I am." said the Menx

Jake didn't hear this last remark as the alien tentacle snaked out, slamming him to the ground. He kicked at the alien legs, staggering the Vrinli, but not felling him. The Vrinli jerked him up and pulled him toward its chest claw.

The flight-jacket held for a moment against the tearing claws, its metal-woven fabric, supposedly tear-proof, coming apart with a grating sound. Jake's right hand struck out at the central bulbous, insect-like eye.

The alien reacted violently, apparently in pain, swinging Jake around, stumbling. Both fell in a heap, Jake underneath. He thought he felt ribs crack. Pain shot through his body. The alien chest claw continued ripping at his jacket, while the tentacle-claw slashed his scalp.

Suddenly the clawing stopped. The alien guard seemed to shiver, the writhing of its tentacles slowing. Then stillness, with only the crushing dead weight of the Vrinli body pinning Jake.

"Get up, Jake!" shrilled the Menx. Jake moved his right arm enough to get it under the alien's side and heaved. The dead guard rose slightly and Jake managed to free his left arm enough to roll the body free.

He sat up, pain shooting through his chest. "What...? How...?" He looked around, scarcely believing what was happening, ignoring the blood running down his collar from the scalp wound.

"I bit him," replied the Menx.

"You WHAT!?" shouted Jake as he stared in horror at his fellow escapee. "You...you...didn't tell me you're....!?"

"My venom is the most potent of any known species. I thought it wiser to avoid mentioning it, Jake, after the conversation we had in the camp about your abhorrence to my appearance. I thought it might influence your decision to include me in the escape plan." The Menx seemed to squat lower in the grass as though apologizing.

Jake rolled over on his stomach, face down, and pounded his right fist hard and methodically on the turf. A growling, groaning sound came from his mouth, mixed with unintelligible words.

"Jake!" came the shrill voice, "I am alarmed! Are you dying?"

The human stopped groaning and sat up. Blood was trickling down his cheek and running down his collar. He looked at the Menx, groaned, and buried his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. The Menx heard a few sonorous, barely audible words from between the hands. "Hideous ...ugly...venomous to boot...."

"I agree, Jake, the Vrinli are ugly!" shrilled the Menx. Its long posterior hairs undulated rhythmically. Jake glanced at the Menx and nearly shouted, "I was talking about YOU, freaky. Of all the hideous...! You have no idea what you look like! For galaxy's sake, bite me and put me out of my misery!"

"Doing that would put us BOTH out of our misery, Jake. We need each other. We already discussed this in the prison camp. If you are in pain, and hopelessly dying, I shall indeed bite you to spare you suffering. Then I shall launch myself over the cliff to my own death, to avoid recapture and torture. Shall I do that now, Jake?"

"Just hold off a minute and let me think about it."

"We don't have many minutes. Someone may come looking for this Vrinli guard we killed."

Jake started to get up. "Disregard what I said. I was only kidding...what we call a joke."

"I am aware of that, Jake."

Jake looked at the Menx, startled. "You understood that?"

The Menx ignored the question. "I am concerned about the red, viscous fluid proceeding from your head. This is what you call 'blood', I presume?"

"Yeah, that monster slashed me a good one!"

"If your head contains the cognitive organ, and your blood is essential to its proper function, it can be deduced from the quantity you are losing that you are either dying or will shortly be insane. As I said before, Jake, I am alarmed."

"Hey, cool it, Freaky! It ain't that bad! I know more about my anatomy than you do. This is a scalp wound. It bleeds a lot but isn't serious. It'll stop in a minute. My brain is o.k."

"Good!" exclaimed the Menx. "I was beginning to fear for your sanity." Its posterior hairs undulated again.

Jake took a deep breath, stretched his arms and groaned in pain. "I got a clacked rib. Hurts, but not serious. I can walk fine. Let me check that dead Vrinli and see if he's carrying anything useful. Then we go." He stumbled over to the dead guard, fumbled around the body and come up with an object about 14 inches long, similar to a spike, tapered down to a flattened point. A circle of metal on the other end seemed to serve as a handle. He jammed it into his belt.

"I think this one of the keys they use for the prison gate. It ain't much of a weapon, but it's all we got. Maybe we better take it along," he said. "Let's get going." He hadn't taken three steps when the Menx squeaked, "You're going the wrong way, Jake. You're headed toward the cliff. It curves toward the right."

The solder turned around, and mumbled, "O.K., you lead the way. This fog is getting thicker and I can't see more than a few yards. How far can you see?"

"About two kilometers," said the Menx. "I can see both suns clearly. With my knowledge of this solar system, and a little triangulation, we shall be well oriented. But I cannot lead the way. You will have to carry me. I cannot walk rapidly enough through this high grass. You MUST carry me."

Jake looked at the Menx and grimaced, fists clenched, trying to control himself. "Wait a minute, freak-0! I can't do that. You don't understand. You know about my phobia...I told you in plain language in the camp. I'm afraid of nothing. But I got this one thing, you know. Spiders. I can't stand..."

"I think you called it arachnophobia?" replied the Menx.

"Yeah. We all got a right to at least one phobia. Nothing personal, you understand. It's just that you are the most hideous thing that ever crawled out of a nightmare. Glancing at you makes we want to throw up. That's just for openers. A good look makes me want to die. No offense intended, freak-face! I CAN'T carry you. I would die of disgust. I made it up the cliff with you on my back, a three-foot long hairy hangover. That was bad enough. But there are limits..." This semi-hysterical speech tapered off to a sonorous sob.

"Facts, Jake!" shrilled the Menx. "You can't see through this fog. I can. I can't walk through this grass. You can. If we stay here and argue the matter, we will both be re-captured and sent straight to the dissection tables. Dominate your phobia or die right now! Do you want a bite?"

Jake's shoulders slumped as he turned his back toward the Menx. "O.K. Climb aboard. If I don't have to look at you, I can make it."

"That won't do, Jake. I must be able to see forward. You will have to carry me on your front."

Fists clenched, arms trembling, Jake blurted, "NO! Good Galaxy, NO! I'm a soldier in the toughest assault regiment in the Corps. But I never thought..." He paused, caught his breath, and thought of what the squad would say if they had heard him. "O.K., freaky. Climb aboard."

Jake turned around slowly, the color drained from his face, looking toward the sky as though pleading for supernatural assistance. The squeaky voice penetrated his consciousness. "Lie down on your back and I'll just climb aboard, Jake."

The sergeant nodded, as though in defeat, and lay down long enough to allow the Menx to climb on his chest. It wrapped its ten prehensile tentacles, which to Jake seemed like legs, clear around to the man's back. "O.k., Jake. Rise and conquer!"

Jake rose, started to look down at the Menx, thought better of it, and asked, "Which way?"

"Turn slightly to your right, and proceed," replied the Menx.

About an hour later, with only occasional course corrections from the Menx, Jake stopped, his chest heaving. "I gotta rest. This grass grows in bunches and tramping around in it is hard work."

The mini-translator on the Menx spoke. "I understand Jake. At our average velocity, we should find your damaged scout ship in about 5 or 6 hours. The next feeding period at the camp is not for another 4 hours. That's when they will discover us missing. I dislike suggesting it, Jake, but we must do better. Minutes may count."

Jake sat down on a small undulation in the turf. He closed his eyes as the Menx crawled off beside him. The soldier sat quiet, his head on his knees, breath short from the pain in his rib. He avoided looking at the arachnid-shaped creature, trying to convince himself that the Menx was not really a spider. Almost involuntarily he glanced at it and promptly pressed his palms on his eyes, as though doing so would remove the sight from his brain.

A few minutes passed and the Menx's posterior hairs started waving again. "Hideous...ugly...the nightmares of the galaxy," shrilled the translator box. Jake's head jerked up, startled. "What are you talking about, Freaky?" The Menx paused, hairs still undulating. "The Vrinli. Hideous creatures. Enough to make one die of disgust."

"By Galaxy, you're making fun of me! You're repeating what I said about you! Don't tell me you have a sense of humor! You're nothing but a..."

"Another sentient species, Jake. Our scientists speculate that humor is intrinsic to intelligence. They expect to find it in most sentient aliens."

Jake laughed. "A giant smart-aleck tarantula, with x-ray vision. I don't believe this!" Hand on forehead, he chuckled, "Right now my only motive for survival is to tell this to the guys at the barracks!" He looked down at the Menx, thinking, deducing.

"Hey, freaky! Those waving hairs. Is that they way you express..."

"Yes, Jake. You express humor through repeated explosions of sound from your voice apparatus. An obvious waste of energy. We express the same more efficiently, by the movements of what you call our hairs."

Jake thought for a moment, recalling recent events. "Pick you up with my hands, you said? Your hairs were waving. You been laughing at me!"

"I observe that the drainage of blood from your head was not severe," replied the Menx, waving its hairs. "You are still sentient. Congratulations."

Jake lay back on the grass, holding his ribs, guffawing. In a moment he sat up again, shaking his head. "Well. At least there's one thing about you that isn't hideous. Maybe if you start telling jokes, I'll remain sane after all!"

"Rise and conquer, Jake." shrilled the Menx. Jake looked startled, remembering this as something the Menx had said just before they started out. He fell back on the turf and laughed. "O.K., Freaky. Cut it out. You're tickling my ribs!"

The Menx's hairs were still undulating as it climbed back onto Jake's chest.

Two hours to go-, thought Jake. -At this pace, I ain't gonna make it.- He staggered forward, almost falling, catching himself. Since the thick alien grass grew in bunches, he had to decide whether to walk around the bunches, thus adding extra steps, or plunge through them. The latter was exhausting, the former time-consuming. He compromised by pushing through the smaller bunches.

Then there were the ditches to avoid. The Menx could see them well ahead, despite the fog.

"Jake!" came the shrill voice, "Three ships overhead, just coming over the horizon!"

"Where? How high?"

"To your left, about 2000 meters up."

Jake looked around furtively. "Nowhere to hide, freaky!"

"Ahead about a hundred meters, there's another indentation. We'll try laying down in it. But hurry." shrilled the Menx.

Jake stumbled forward, gasping from breath. Twice he fell, catching himself with arms full outstretched to avoid falling on the Menx. "More to the right." squeaked the Menx. He fought his way through a large bunch of grass, and nearly fell headlong into the ditch. It was about half full of black, brackish water. Jake stopped, confused.

"Jump in the water, Jake!"

"What?! Are you crazy?!"



"The Vrinli's infrared sensors can detect us through the fog!" yelled the Menx. "The water will mask our heat!"

Jake jumped, hitting the water feet first. He expected to rebound off the bottom, but there didn't seem to be any bottom. Frantically he struggled upward, strong arms clawing for the surface. He broke the surface, gasping for breath, treading water. His boots seemed to weigh him down. He struggled for the sloping side of the ditch and got a foothold on the muddy bottom, keeping his nose just above the surface, hiding as much of his body under the water as he could. -

Where's freak-O?- he thought. The Menx's weight on his chest seemed to be relieved. He reached down and felt the fat bulbous body still where it was when he jumped. -He'll drown!- thought Jake. -I can't make it without him!-

Jake grabbed at two of the tentacles wrapped around his body, and tried to pull the Menx loose to get it to the surface. The tentacles tightened their grip. Jake pulled again. They tightened again, resisting his efforts to dislodge the Menx. He gave up. -If the stinking thing wants to drown, that was its own choice,- thought Jake. -Maybe I'll make it on my own, after all.-

He waited, listening for the sound of antigravity engines overhead. It came gradually. The ships were moving slowly. -Were they looking for them?-Jake asked himself. -But we shouldn't be missed for another two hours.- Maybe we were seen! Maybe they found the dead guard already! Or maybe it's just a regular patrol flight.

The engine noise increased, with a sound like sand in a cement mixer. Jake took a deep breath and plunged under the surface. The infrared sensors would have a tough time tracking them now. Assuming, of course, that they were being tracked. -In which case,- thought Jake, -I'm wet for nothing.

Jake counted the seconds. He knew he could hold his breath for nearly two minutes. That should be enough time for the vessels to pass overhead. He relaxed, thinking about the Menx. A pity. The repulsive thing had wanted to live as much as he did. But it was surely dead by now, having been under water this long.

He raised his head slowly to the surface, taking in a deep breath. The engine noise receded in the distance. They were undetected. It must have been a regular patrol after all, or the Vrinli ships would have been moving in circular search patterns.

The Sergeant waited another couple of minutes in the warm, fetid water, listening for the return of the engine sounds. None came.

He moved toward the slope of the ditch, and managed to climb out of the water to a depth of about hip high. This exposed the Menx, still clinging to his chest. He tried to pull the tentacles off. It would be easier climbing out of the ditch without this dead thing still on his chest.

"Why are you trying to remove me, Jake?" came the shrill familiar voice.

"Because you're dead, that's why!"

"Are you delirious Jake, or is this humanoid humor?"

Jake leaned on the side of the ditch, trying to get his mental bearings. "How come you're not dead? Don't tell me you can hold your breath that long!"

"I do not require breath," replied the Menx. "That is a biological inefficiency, required only by creatures of your planet."

"I should have known," muttered Jake, as he struggled up the side of the dank, slippery ditch. He slid back, then tried again, and failed again. "We got troubles, freaky. I can't get out of this ditch."

The Menx shifted its weight a little and said, "I have an idea. Can you throw me to the top?"

"Hey, that's not too neighborly, freak-0! You get out and I stay here and die! We both get out or we both stay here and die."

"Trust me, Jake."

"Why?"

"Because you have no choice."

Jake thought about that. "There's something about the way you think that I just can't fathom, bug-head."

"It's that I think logically."

"O.k. Here's how we do it. I can't scramble up higher than about three feet from the top," said Jake. "So I'll hoist you up on my right arm, and at the last second I'll throw you upward. You might be able to grab the grass at the top."

The Menx was silent for a few seconds. "We'll have to try. I see no other possibilities."

Jake crouched on the slippery bank, then lunged upward with a grunt, his powerful legs pumping in the thick mud. He threw the Menx as hard as he could...and failed.

The Menx came tumbling back down the bank, splashed into the water and quickly wrapped a couple of tentacles around the human's arm. "Try again, Jake."

They tried again. Failed again.

On the third try, Jake realized that if he threw a bit more forward, rather than straight up, it should work better. As the Menx neared the top, one long leg-tentacle whipped around a clump of grass and the creature hoisted itself to the top.

"Now what, freaky? Aren't you even going to say goodbye?" exclaimed Jake sarcastically. The Menx did not reply. It was still visible on the edge of the ditch. It seemed to be doing something in the grass. Jake couldn't tell what.

The spider-like creature's bulbous eyes appeared over the edge at a spot slightly to the right of where it had gone over the top. The grass was thicker there. Several of its posterior tentacles seemed to be wrapped tightly around the base of the thick grass. Its front ones dangled over the edge.

"Jake! If you can leap up and grab my tentacles, I can haul you up!"

The sergeant didn't reply for a moment. "Hey, ugly-bug. I weight two hundred pounds. I would pull your tentacles to pieces!"

"Not so, Jake. Each of my tentacles can resist up to 150 kilos of pull. I'm extending four of them. Now jump!"

Jake jumped, ignoring the pain in his rib. Two tentacles whipped around his right arm. He felt himself hoisted. He couldn't believe it. His legs pumped at the slippery bank, and with the pull from the Menx, he managed to get his left hand around the roots of the tough grass at the top, and pulled himself over.

At the top, he lay on his back beside the Menx. "You are one barrel of surprises, freak-head. You are stronger than I am!"

The Menx was silent for a while, then replied, "But you walk much faster, human. At least through this grass. On my home planet, the herbage is small. I suspect that there I could outrun you."

Jake didn't reply. He was falling asleep. But not for long. "Jake! Jake! Come conscious! We must get going!"

Jake awoke. "I can't make it, freaky. I'm through. No food. No water. Hard slogging through this terrain. I've had it." He rolled over on his side, back toward the Menx.

"I'm going to have to bite you, Jake." shrilled the Menx.

Jake sat up. "You what!? I'll kill you first, you little..." He started to struggle to his feet.

"No Jake, it will only be a mild stimulant. I can control the dosage of venom. It won't kill you. It'll only give you more strength for a while. Then of course, you will collapse from exhaustion, but by then we will be safe. The bite will be somewhat painful, but you will glad for the extra strength."

The human ran his hand through his hair thoughtfully, wiping off the smelly ditch slime. He began to mumble to himself, "Let a living hangover bite me?" He turned briskly toward the Menx. "Get this straight the first time, stink-bug. I don't need any of your so-called stimulus. I might die of exhaustion but..." The words trailed off as Jake lay down to let the Menx climb aboard. They were on their way again, Jake stumbling forward determinedly. The Menx rode contentedly on the chest of the human, its posterior hairs undulating gently, pleased that it had correctly guessed an aspect of human psychology.

Two hours later, the fog seemed to be lifting. Jake didn't dare stop. He knew he might not be able to get up again. He followed mechanically, the monotonous orders of the Menx. "Left a few degrees, Jake. A little more. Stick to this course. Right a little. A little more."

"Hey freaky, when you're not giving me orders, I'll tell you some jokes. Maybe that'll help me from going nuts. You know what a joke is, eh, bug-buns?"

"Continue if you wish, Jake. Perhaps I'll grasp the essence of it."

"Well here's my favorite." Jake continued. "This is one we tell only among the guys, you understand...or maybe you won't understand. Anyway, there was this barmaid and a spacer sitting on a stool. Yeah, that's right. Both sitting on the same stool. Don't ask me why, 'cause that's part of the joke..."

Jake finished the joke, then another and another. Time passed, he staggered on. After a while, he asked, "Did you get the idea of 'joke', freaky? If you make it through this and I don't, I want you to carry home the essence and finesse of human culture. Ha! Ha!" Jake laughed deliriously. "Hey, this is sweet. Let's see your scientists analyze that!"

The Menx said nothing, indifferent as long as the human was making forward progress.

"Say, freaky, maybe I'm corrupting an innocent species here. You understand, of course, that I would never share my favorite jokes with any of our females."

"Does that mean, Jake, that you would share them with females of another species?" inquired the Menx.

"I hadn't thought about that, but now that you mention it, I guess not."

"I am a female, Jake."

The Sergeant stopped dead, mouth ajar. "Tell me you're jokin', freaky."

"I'm simply stating a fact, my human friend. But that, of course, does not mean I am not also joking."

Jake stopped talking, but the posterior hairs of the Menx didn't stop waving.

After what seemed an eternity of walking, they found the scout ship. Jake lunged forward like a thirsty man stumbling toward an oasis. He collapsed at the side of the ship, laughing hysterically as the Menx climbed down. "Let's waste no time, Jake. Send the distress signal. I suspect that by now the Vrinli will have missed us. They will know we would head for the scout ship."

Jake walked around to the other side of the ship, looking for the escape hatch. He stared at where it should be, his numbed mind not grasping at first the problem. He knew he had crawled semi-conscious out of the downed fighter, having been too dazed to activate the distress switch that would bring a pick-up ship to prevent his capture. The hatch should have been right there, just in front of the central glider-fins.

He stepped back, trying to get a better view of the mangled craft. The simple fact dawned on him. The Vrinli had rolled the machine over on the hatch to prevent anything or any one from getting into it. Apparently the capture of the human was more urgent than the inspection of the wreckage. They had wreckage of other downed fighters, but not many human captives.

Unless Jake could activate that switch, then all they had been through would be in vain.

The sergeant tried to look under the ship to see the hatch opening. He could see the edge of it easily enough. The ship was not quite on top of it.

He explained the problem to the Menx. The two of them weren't strong enough to roll the ship over. "Jake, if we can get even a small space between the ground and the hatch, I might be able to squeeze under and get in."

"Yeah, like dig a small, shallow ditch under the ship and you could squeeze through!" Jake looked around for something to dig with.

"What about the key you took from the dead Vrinli guard, Jake?"

An hour later, an exhausted sergeant lay on the ground, covered with dirt and sweat, watching the Menx squeeze its way along the narrow indentation leading to the hatch. Jake's arms could not quite reach the edge of the open hatch, but the Menx had the tool in hand, or rather in tentacle now, and was removing enough dirt to allow for the few inches necessary to get in.

It took about two minutes for the Menx to enter the hatch. It had to remove its translator box to make it, but that was no hindrance. The Menx already had instructions from Jake as to the approximate location of the distress switch. In a few minutes it came back to the translator box and said, "I can't find it, Jake. There are switches all over this machine. Some are damaged."

"Just turn on every switch you see on the right side of the pilot's panel."

After a minute it returned to the edge of the hatch and said, "One of the switches started blinking yellow for a minute, and then started blinking red. What does that mean, Jake?" The sergeant yelled and whooped. "The yellow means that the signal was sent. The red means our guys have heard it and are on their way!"

Two days later, Jake and the Menx stood together on the launching platform just outside of the advance assault base. Rescued, fed, washed, comforted; the nightmares of the escape drifting away in the fresh breeze of freedom.

An occasional dust cloud swept over the landing pad, stirred up when a scout ship took off. Jake coughed in annoyance, waving his hand in front of his face.

"Looks like we'll have you joined up again with your own kind in a couple of days, squeaky. Free ride home on one of our best ships. The Colonel knows we owe you that much for rescuing one the forces' best sergeants. It was one heck of an adventure."

"Thank you for your assistance, Jake," came the voice from the translator box.

"Hey, squeaky, I'm the one who owes the thanks. Look how many times you saved my hide!"

The Menx shuffled slightly on its feet-tentacles. "It was a symbiotic relationship, Jake. Neither could have survived without the other."

Jake rubbed his scalp wound nervously. "Yeah, that's true. We really went through hell and high water." He shuffled his feet nervously, cleared his throat and said, "You know squeaky, I said some pretty rough things at the beginning there..."

"I noticed you stopped calling me 'freaky', Jake. 'Squeaky' is an improvement. I appreciate that."

"Well you know how it is. We're aliens to one another but we gotta try to get along. After all, we been through a lot together. Who knows? Maybe our two governments will team up and whip those Vrinli."

"That could be, Jake. I think we have more in common with humans than the Vrinli."

"Yeah squeaky, if you weren't so ugly I could almost think of you as human in a way. No offense intended, you know."

"I understand, Jake. Perhaps we'll meet again."

Jake chuckled and said, "Maybe I'll drop in on your home planet someday and pay you a visit."

"You're perfectly welcome, Jake. I'll introduce you to our young at the breeding hive, and after I explain who you are, they'll show their affection by crawling all over you."

Jake's mouth dropped open, head tipped to the left. "Well, it's quite a distance from here..." Then he noticed that the Menx's posterior hairs were undulating furiously, and he burst out laughing.

"You overgrown bug! If you had a neck, I'd wring it!" Then he paused and added, "Actually, if you had a hand, I'd shake it. That's what we do when we say goodbye."

The Menx shuffled again and replied, "I'm aware of your custom, Jake. Among our people, that gesture is performed by wrapping the tips of our front tentacles around each other."

Jake looked around furtively, and knelt down, extending his hands. The Menx wrapped his tentacles around the fingers of Jake's hands. Jake looked at the Menx's yellow bulbous eyes.

"Goodbye, squeaky."

"Goodbye, Jake."

Both let go. Jake stood up and the Menx scampered toward the boarding ramp of the ship, with no further word.

Jake turned and strode back toward the de-briefing building. A corporal raised a window from the barracks as Jake passed by and said, "Hey Sarge. For a minute there I thought you were gonna kiss that thing!"

Jake stopped, annoyed. "Haven't you read the manual?! Be friendly to all natives and alien allies. Don't forget that, corporal!"

"Sure, Sarge," replied the corporal as he shut the window.

Jake Sardona, the toughest sergeant in the regiment, turned and marched briskly toward de-briefing... wiping dust from his eyes.

THE END

## Sweet Meat

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.*

*Galactic year 3841, Beta Quadrant.*

When the dart slammed into my right thigh, roughly between the knee and the hip, I winced but did not cry out. It occurred to me in the next second that while such momentary discipline was laudable, it was also useless. Those natives would not have shot me unless they knew I was hiding in that thicket. I restrained myself anyhow on the chance it might have been a random shot to see if I was hiding there.

The dart barely penetrated my flight suit, just enough for the tip to embed itself under the skin. My hand was next to my hip so it took another second to reach the dart and yank it out. All that happened in about three seconds.

I thought of poison darts used by some cultures, including on ancient earth centuries ago and waited a bit to see if I was going to pass out. After a minute or so, I felt nothing and relaxed with a few deep breaths of relief.

As I lay in the undergrowth, I reached for the clasp on my belt buckle harness, opened the face and fumbled for the emergency transponder button. It was unnecessary to see it. The button was the only one under the clasp. Good thing. The brush in which I was hiding was the thickest I could find. Dark, dank and smelly, despite the bright orange vines twisted around rust-brown trunks of brush.

All I needed to do was press the transponder three times. Pressing once or twice would cause the computer on my scout ship's computer to ignore it as accidental. Three times and my scout ship, parked some three clicks away, would relay the signal to a communications beacon I left in orbit over the planet and set off a blast of high powered sub-light signals in all directions. How long it would take the mother ship to get the signal and reach me was not clear. I only knew they were exploring a planet on the other side of this system while I explored this side.

I hit the transponder three times. Sending such a signal other than life threatening emergency could not only get me fired as a planet hunter but might buy me at a year in prison and a hefty fine. Being chased through a forest by a horde of armed natives with long sharp teeth counted in my book as an emergency.

At this point in time I would have been pleased to stand in front of a judge as long as I got a cell on the other side of the galaxy from these little monsters. I cursed myself for not sending the signal it sooner because it looked like my career as a professional planet hunter was coming to an end.

I could take down any of these aliens in flash. Maybe three or four. After all they were only about half the size of a tall man. The problem was there were hundreds of them, all armed with miniscule bows and what I guess was supposed to pass for arrows, small but sharp.

The tangle of orange and brown vines was not so thick that I could not move a few aside and peer out. The natives were standing directly in front of my hideout. Dozens, looking straight at me. So much for my plan to hide.

I lay still for some minutes trying to figure it out. Why didn't they shoot me again? Why not pull away the thicket and drag me out? The answer gradually dawned on me. Their intentions were not as hostile as I thought.

After all, those little darts could hardly be deemed dangerous unless shot by the hundreds. Maybe it was just a warning to say they resented my presence. As I looked them over, I began to see beauty I had not seen before. The down-curved mouth reminded me a girl I once knew on earth. Kinda cute, when you think about. The fur matched the rust brown tint of the brush I was hiding in. Small is often cute, is it not?

The elongated teeth might qualify as fangs, if one insisted on applying our own prejudiced criteria but set in rows like that, I could see they had a beauty of their own.

I had a feeling if I showed myself friendly, they would reciprocate. It took a couple of minutes to crawl backwards out of the underbrush, walk cautiously around it and stand in front of them. I was not afraid. It was one of those gut feelings a guy needs to follow sometimes. I just knew they meant no harm. The dart must have been an accident, maybe an overzealous warrior.

When they spread their arms in welcome and grinned, I knew I was right to trust my gut.

They parted on each side of me, a path to follow. During the hours it took to reach their village, I endured their high-pitched chattering. At first it sounded like a beginners violin class. I got used to it after a while and by the time we reached the village, I could see the rhythm and music in their speech. It was delightful. I regretted not having some way to record it.

The village was a typical pre-metal age type we planet hunters often encounter. Small round huts, made of that same rust-brown brush and tied together with dried out vines.

Their bows and arrows seemed made of the same stuff. They all carried their bows in the right hand, the opposite of most humans and with a packet of little arrows over the shoulder. Primate and typical.

Maybe they thought I was a god. *That must be it*, I thought. That happens sometimes in planet hunting and creates difficulties of its own. At the center of the village, they stood around looking, chattering and doing nothing at all.

I felt like such a fool. The distress signal was on its way and I could not stop it. Sooner or later somebody would show to rescue me and would have to tell the truth. These were the finest, most hospitable, gentle little aliens I had ever met. I knew I would be the laughing stock of other prison inmates in the near future. Rescued, in quotes, from, harmless overgrown teddy bears.

Before I dropped down to the planet, I skim-read the data about the planet. Thin oxygen atmosphere, nice scenery but not recommended to visit. Not a planet to claim for my bosses at the Galactic Colonization Service either, since it was inhabited by semi-sentient beings. But you



know how it is. After weeks on a ship, not much to see, bored out of your mind, you would give a lot for a stroll on some firm ground.

Just a couple of hours wandering around would have suited me. Now a couple of hours could never be enough. I wanted to stay.

We reached the village and they directed me to the center. Out of a large hut emerged three natives, dressed in colored skins, decorated with bits of bright stones and woven fur ornaments. Chiefs obviously

I knelt before them and extended my hand. *Maybe this was a hostile gesture in their culture*, I thought, but decided to take the chance. One of the chiefs approached and put one paw on each side of my hand, then proceeded to pat my arm all the way up to the shoulder. I did the same for him. He seemed to appreciate it. Soon, dozens were patting me all over. It felt a lot better than laying in that brush, for sure. Wonderful, in fact.

I can't say I have ever loved aliens of any kind. A few good friends, sure. But my thoughts about these guys came close to that. Maybe I could convince my company to open this planet as a tourist resort or something.

I stood up and they started to move me to a large clearing on the edge of the village where an enormous round hut stood, big enough to accommodate nearly the whole village. The town meeting place, for certain.

That's when all hell broke loose. Natives pointed to the sky behind me and I as turned, I heard the whining metallic roar of a ship engine passing overhead. I looked up in shock. A galactic assault craft!

I shouted stupidly, "No, no! It was a mistake!" The craft settled just outside the limits of the village, to the right of the large hut. Troops poured out, charging with battle gear and armored suits. They advanced on the native horde, firing ultra-microwave stun-blasts, the shots dropping natives on impact, not killing but putting them down hard.

Natives armed their bows, shot scores of arrows that bounced off the suits like leaves off a wall. At the time it seemed a lopsided, unfair and unnecessary battle.

I lost my mind. Grief, guilt and rage swirled through me like devilish winds and I charged the attackers. I had to stop them at all costs, even with no weapon in hand. They absolutely must not harm my precious friends.

I slammed into the nearest attacker, clawing, pounding the faceplate with my fists, bloodying my knuckles uselessly and kicking with my knee. He spun and pushed me down, shouting at me through his faceplate something I could not hear over the clamor of the natives.

Another soldier jumped on me and I fought him as best I could, screaming in anger and frustration as two others jumped on me. One pulled something from a side pouch, slammed it into my neck and pulled a trigger.

That's all I remember until I opened my eyes and found myself looking up into the face of nurse Stedson on the mother ship. "How you are feeling?" she asked. I could not answer because I was

trying to decide if this was a nightmare or a pleasant dream, since I had a secret crush on that particular nurse since about a month ago.

I glanced around the room and saw I was in the infirmary, hands bandaged and the captain standing just behind the nurse. He had a peculiar grin on his face with hands on hips, a favorite posture he takes whenever he thinks he is right, which is most of the time.

I closed my eyes and said, "Thank you for whatever kindness you intend but I do believe I am owed some explanations. I was in the midst of defending some dear friends from a brutal assault when I got zapped by a stun gun."

The captain grinned at me. "Still spoiling for a fight?" His expression was jovial and in no way threatening, with an odd twinge of compassion.

"I'll skip it for the moment," I replied, "maybe after I get a few questions answered. I suspect your rescue of me had to do with something I was not quite grasping."

He chuckled, "Right on. You were about to be invited for dinner, with you as the main course."

"That's absurd! Those natives were both harmless and friendly. When I came out of that thicket they could have drilled me with a thousand darts. They didn't. The dart they accidentally hit me with did no harm at all. If it were poison, I would have dropped dead."

The Captain leaned back on his heels a bit, looked up at the ceiling pensively, like a teacher about to lecture a small child. "It was indeed a poison dart but tipped with a peculiar kind of potion. We call it sarcastically, the native love potion. Instead of killing its prey, it makes the victim dearly love the natives. So the prey surrenders willingly. You see, they like their meat fresh."

"That still makes no sense," I said. "Cultures throughout the galaxy, including some in the history of our own planet used poison darts. The prey gets carried back home for dinner where it gets butchered and served fresh enough."

"You don't quite get it," the captain said. "They like it really, really fresh."

I noticed the twinkle in his eye just as he noticed the puzzled look in mine. "You see, they not only like their meat fresh when they consume it. They like it alive!"

My jaw dropped about the same time as my elbow gave way on the mattress and I flopped back down on the bed. I could not speak. Something caught in my throat. I think it was my pride. The captain laughed and turned to exit the room.

I sat straight up in bed and declared, "Captain, I have a couple of questions. But before that I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, soul and quivering liver."

"You are more than welcome. What are your questions?"

"First, are we still in orbit over the planet?"

"Yes, we are," he said. "We'll be going to star drive in about half an hour."

"Now the other question. Do you happen to have a spare hydrogen bomb you could loan me?"

THE END

## Petticoat Kitty

“Y’all might could set its tail afire,” exclaimed Cliff Jackson.

“Naw, that’d be cruel,” said the Rev. Hank Elswood. “It might set the petticoat afire too,” he added. “After all, it’s nigh on 125 years old.”

A mischievous twinkle lit the eyes of Sam Jenkins as he chuckled, “I know somebody else’s tail that’s agoin’ to be set afire when your little woman comes back and sees that calico kitten tangled up in her antique petticoat.”

Guffaws and chuckles swept across the small group of five dungareed farmers. All were amused by memories of the Rev. Elswood’s former affirmations of the virtues of celibacy. Since the balding country preacher had fallen victim to the charms of little Susie, Elswood’s friend rarely missed an opportunity to remind him of his late commitment to matrimony.

The Rev. Elswood made a sincere attempt to avoid showing annoyance, but his balding scalp betrayed him again.

“Y’all are the onliest preacher I’ve ever seen that could blush straight out of the top of his head,” said Sam Jenkins. This produced another round of guffaws and chuckles, but everyone knew that they were putting off the moment of truth in which each must admit that he had no idea how to extract a frightened calico kitten from an antique petticoat without damage to either.

“Shorely a bunch of fine farmers like us has got enough smarts to figure this out,” exclaimed Bill Smith.

“That’s what’s got me worried,” replied the Rev. Elswood, knowing that nobody would catch the innuendo.

Feet shuffled, hands were thrust authoritatively in pockets, as if to say, “It weren’t really a problem atall.” But each attempt to pull the kitten out of the folds of the delicate petticoat only caused it to cry distressfully and dig its claws in even further.

Offerings of food had not prevailed, since frightened kittens have notoriously poor appetites. A small wad of chewing tobacco, (which Cliff Jackson confidently affirmed was strong enough to make the devil let go of sin), had been placed directly in front of the nose of the animal, but had also failed to produce the predicted relinquishing of its claws. Turpentine on the tail, cod-liver oil on the nose, hot and cold water and other liquid expedients had been suggested and rejected on the grounds of potential damage to the valuable antique.

A smoke-gets-in-your-eyes trick had been tried by Bill Smith, because he was sure he had heard it in a song somewhere, but he hadn’t been able to recollect what the remedy was good for... which, (he concluded), was probably why it didn’t work.

Non-chemical expedients had also been attempted such as loud noises, pleadings and threatenings, and (in deference to the presence of the country preacher) a number of polite substitutes for swear words. Time was running out.

“Well,” said Bill Smith, “I hate to say it, but it looks like we are just plain goin’ to have to kill it.”

The Rev. Elswood looked up disgustedly and said, “And how do y’all figure I’m agoin’ to explain that to my wife?”

“Y’all could say it died of itself, or fell off of this here balcony,” said Smith.

“No,” said Sam Jenkins, “he couldn’t say that ‘cause he’s a preacher and preachers ain’t supposed to tell a lie. I ain’t nothin’ but a regular deacon so let me tell it.”

At this suggestion the Rev. Elswood had taken to pinching the top of his nose with two fingers and shaking his head back and forth.

Jenkins was about to ask him why, when he looked up and saw a blue pickup bouncing over the potholes in the dirt road leading to the parsonage, with a pert female nose poking over the steering wheel.

“Preacher, I hate to tell you this, but the holy fire is about to fall upon thine anointed head,” he said, proud of himself for this clever announcement of Susie’s arrival.

As Susie parked the blue pickup in front of the door, she noticed the group of men on the balcony. Remembering the carefully washed petticoat, which had been placed there for drying, she scampered up the steps to confront the now silent group of country bumpkins.

As she stepped out on the balcony, she was met with the view of her husband’s mouth wide open, momentarily incapable of articulation. His finger pointed at the petticoat.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a plaintive and distressful cry emerging from the folds of the petticoat. “Oh, you poor little darling,” exclaimed Susie, in a long soft drawn-out southern drawl. “Come here to Momma,” she said gently. Her feminine hands stroked the kitten as she bent over and kissed it squarely between its pointed ears. Immediately the kitten released its grip on the petticoat and clung to her hand.

As she walked off the balcony, caressing the kitten with her cheek, five farmers shuffled their feet and one country preacher again pinched his nose and shook his head.

Later on, with guests gone and dusk settling in, the Rev. Elswood was still on the balcony, pacing back and forth muttering, “Lord, I know thar’s a sermon in this somewhere. I know thar is. But I just can’t quite git aholt of it.”

THE END

## Rabid Squirrel

“Come out of that thar tree, Sam Jenkins, or we’re agoin’ to shoot you out,” said Smitty, exasperated.

“I think his brains is rattled,” replied Cliff Jackson.

Directly above them, the frightened Jenkins listened to the conversation and clung tenaciously to the slippery maple branch. “What rattler?” he yelled. “Does rattlers climb trees? I thought you said it was a rabid squirrel!”

The Reverend Elswood, standing between the other two, pinched his nose and shook his head as he always did when presented with complex problems. “Smitty,” he said, “if ‘n we can’t get him out of this here tree afore nightfall, we’re in trouble. We can’t find our way out of these woods in the dark.”

Old Jason, from across the river, sauntered up just about then, having caught the conversation that just transpired between the men on the ground. “I thought old screwball Jenkins was afraid of heights,” he exclaimed. “How did he get up in that thar tree?”

Patiently, Elswood explained.

It seems that during the hunt, Jenkins had been assigned to watch the hole of a hollow log into which an unidentified furry object had taken refuge. He rested the butt of the rusty shotgun on the stump, alongside his left foot. His hand was on the barrel, ready for action.

He felt clear-headed that day. “Sure,” he thought, “I ain’t in the class of that thar Earnest Hummingbird fellar and these here backwoods ain’t the hills of Kill-a-man-gyro; and squirrels ain’t chargin’ elephants. But still, us hunters has a lot in common.”

He stood tall and proud, ready for anything. Meanwhile, Smith was poking a long stick down a hole in the log at the other end in an effort to extract the creature Elswood had seen dive in there. “Thar he is, Cliff,” he yelled.

Cliff stopped swinging at the log with his ax and stepped back to get out of Reverend Elswood’s line of fire. This action provoked Jenkins to lift his gaze from the hole in the log, contrary to orders.

The timing was perfect. A small animal bounded out of the hole. It ascended the stump, paused in confusion, and then scampered across Jenkin’s boot, heading for the nearest tree. Jenkins realized it was a squirrel. Smitty, from the far end of the log couldn’t see it well, and yelled, “I think it’s a rabbit.”

“Rabid!” shouted Jenkins in panic. “It’s a rabid squirrel. Run for it!”

The other three hunters dashed briskly around the log in pursuit of the unfortunate rodent, ignoring Jenkins’ affirmations. None knew where it went, but all were in hot pursuit anyway.

Jenkins interpreted these moves as agreement with his diagnosis of the rodent's state of health and sprinted for the nearest tree. He caught the lowest limb and swung himself up, climbing hard.

This situation presented no difficulty except in one minor detail. Both the rodent and Jenkins had chosen the same tree.

Jenkins was so successful in his ascent that the squirrel was obliged to occupy a position opposite and slightly below. While Jenkins considered himself trapped, the rodent apparently interpreted this procedure as a new and unfair hunting tactic and chattered angrily. The squirrel was now in clear command of the expedition.

"Jenkins thinks that thar squirrel is hydrophone," said Elswood in his most scholarly tone.

"Oh, you mean the rabies," replied Jason. "But squirrels don't catch that do they?"

"Well, Jenkins thinks so," said Reverend Elswood, "and he's not about to come out of that thar maple tree."

While the sun began to sink behind the tree where Jenkins was perched, the men below exchanged suggestions. No one wanted to risk climbing a tree in the fading light. Chopping it down was out of the question since it might hurt someone on the ground. Besides, they didn't want to risk losing the squirrel. The prospect of a cold night in the forest began to loom insidiously in their minds.

Suddenly Reverend Elswood began rubbing his balding scalp as he usually did when stumbling on the solution to a problem. "Well, I guess I can always repent afterwards," he mumbled. He turned and walked briskly back toward the hollow log where Jenkins had dropped his shotgun. The others ignored him and continued exchanging suggestions.

Presently, Reverend Elswood returned with the shotgun and proceeded to unload it. He opened the front of the cartridges with his pocketknife, removed the shot and threw it away. He scooped up some sand and began to pour it into the cartridges. Smitty asked, "what on earth are you doin'?"

"Your last idea was the right one," replied Elswood, "and I hope Jenkins lives to regret it."

The cartridges, now armed with harmless sand, were reloaded into the shotgun. "Jenkins," shouted Elswood, "Smitty told you that if you didn't come out of that thar tree, we was goin' to shoot you out. This here is buckshot!"

The others looked askance at one another because of this obvious lie, while Elswood aimed at Jenkins and pulled both triggers on the old double-barreled gun.

Balm! Sand splattered on the tree trunk, whistled through the leaves and smacked Jenkins square on the behind.

Jenkins evaluated the situation for a second and concluded that things were getting serious. Rabid squirrel or no, he was going to come down and take charge of this situation. "Them fellars don't know how to handle a shotgun," he thought.

Both occupants bailed out of the tree at the same instant. The squirrel made a beautiful flying leap toward a thicket on the far side of the tree. Jenkins, noticeably less graceful, began his descent hand over hand, primate style.

It was a pity he missed the last branch. He completed the trip with a spectacular WHOMP as he landed on his back, generating a cloud of dust on either side of his uninjured person.

Later that night, hunting party dispersed, a weary Reverend opened the door to his house and stumbled into the living room. As he eased himself into the rocking chair, his wife Susie entered the room. “How many squirrels did you shoot today?” she asked.

“Only one,” he answered wryly. “Only one.”

THE END



## Letters From Farley

### ***Prelude***

Rarely is the term “prelude” employed to describe the introduction to a body of literature. In the domain of the arts, it customarily introduces music or drama. But “prelude” has a more *experiential* ring than the mundane noun, “introduction.” And this booklet is intended as an experience, not a treatise.

An ominous connotation also adheres to “prelude,” such as “prelude to a disaster,” or “prelude to being called on the carpet by the Presbytery.” This latter usage comes to mind because of the booklet’s slightly iconoclastic tone. But isn’t iconoclasm a blast? Such a delectable vice! Often worth the risks. Someday I shall get around to repenting of it. In the meantime, I present, “Letters From Farley.”

Who is Farley? He’s an *almost* imaginary ministerial colleague. Farley actually exists somewhere in England, but I’ve lost track of him. He was the leader of an Operation Mobilization summer team in France, where I was a fledgling missionary, young and taking life too seriously. Farley taught me, among other things, not to take life *quite* so seriously.

He was somewhat of a character. Despite this, we enjoyed a remarkable affinity of mind. He taught me his favorite game, which for want of a better title, we shall call, “Challenging Everybody Else’s Presuppositions.” It quickly became a favorite of mine, also. The game has served me well, both in and out of Christian circles. The following is an epistolary format of imaginary correspondence from Farley on a variety of themes.

I hope you enjoy the game also.

Dear Roger,

Though your invitation that we become confidants is flattering, doubts plague me. It strikes me as comparable to a proposal to strip. This entails some distressingly practical questions, such as, who goes first? How much can we trust the other party? Will anyone cheat? What is the intended result? I don't recall any clarifications in your suggestion.

Even more important, is the issue of *appropriateness*. For Christians, this is always foremost, so let's address it first.

I find no scriptural evidence to suggest that the "self-disclosure" or "intimacy" concept is a key to spiritual maturity, nor even therapeutic. Unless Scripture portrays it as essential, then we are free to enquire if it is even advisable.

Moreover, the origins of the idea disturb me. "Self-disclosure" is a procedure involved with the "group-encounter" techniques practiced by some psychologists, nearly all of which are humanists. Since their humanistic methods failed with individuals, some assumed it might work better in a group. But the presuppositions remained the same. As humanists, they feel that man is basically good. Though man has problems, he retains enough latent goodness to provide the basis for self-improvement, if only the right techniques are applied. Group-encounter, with its emphasis on transparency, is part of this package.

Sooner or later, the world's ideas filter into the Church, usually about the time that the 'experts' abandon them as failures. The Church then endeavors to apply them to her problems, with similar results. Some appear to view the garbage-heap of the world's discarded notions as the source of their supply. Does this testify to the riches of Christ?

By now you might conclude that I am rejecting your proposal to be confidants. Untrue. I merely want to be sure that we don't commit idolatry.

Idolatry? How so?

God is jealous, and our fellowship is to be first and foremost with Him. Could the "self-disclosure" concept be a substitute for a lack in the devotional life of some believers? Religious forms of humanistic substitutes are surely no better for being religious.

I suppose the answer boils down to the quality of our relationship with Christ. But if self-disclosure is your desire, then you are welcome to go first.

Your irascible colleague,

Farley

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Dear Roger,

So we agree that complete self-disclosure is inappropriate among Christians. It only remains to negotiate the limits. This puzzles me less than your suggestion that we share only our "spiritual" battles. What, precisely, is the difference between a "spiritual" battle and any other kind?

By “spiritual,” I assume you are referring to certain religious exercises, like Bible study, prayer and church attendance, in which all Christians consistently delight and of which we ministers are experts. This sublime definition would serve our purposes, if it were not baloney.

At any given time, I seem to find one or more of these activities unappealing, and occasionally downright tedious. And I distrust any Christian who refuses to admit the same.

That’s why I distrust the mystic types in my church. Some appear to have been born with a natural religious bent that assists them in attaining an apparently uninterrupted sweet communion with God, characterized by unruffled feathers and a benign smile. How much of this do you suppose is real, Roger, and how much is genetic? Is there a gene for spirituality? Sometimes I think so, and wish I had it.

I’m reminded of that worn-out joke about the man who said to his wife one Sunday morning, “Dear, I don’t want to go back to that church today. The people are unfriendly, the music is old-fashioned, the preaching is lousy, and the whole thing is boring.” His wife replies, “But you *must* go, dear. You are the Pastor.”

Granted, I may be rationalizing my own failures. Nevertheless, I’m posing a serious question. Is such a sweet, mystical communion *really* supposed to be the norm?

If we always walked in a *sense* of this communion, then what are we saying when we talk of walking by *faith*? What about the virtue of acting on conviction of truth, regardless of feelings? Or even *contrary* to our personal temperaments?

How then could the habitual sense of sweet communion be normative, if acting on conviction of truth is the higher virtue? Don’t try to weasel out of it, partner, with nonsense that these two are compatible after all. You know they are not.

Is the sense of “sweet communion” one of the inducements that God must remove to test the genuineness of our convictions?

Granted this, the mystics are wrong, and we strugglers might be closer to normalcy after all.

This still smacks of rationalization, doesn’t it, comrade? But occasionally my self-deceptions contain a grain of truth.

What do you think?

Your onerous colleague,

Farley

◇◇◇

Dear Roger,

So! You are having trouble with your district supervisor? Are you quite sure it is not the other way around? It might be amusing to interview him to see out whom *he* considers the source of conflict. But never mind. We both know human nature too well to doubt his answer.

The question you asked about leadership is academic, spiritual and profound. In other words, I don't know either. The standard answer as to why God appoints some to high offices, and not others, is because some are endowed with wisdom above their fellows. The Lord looks into the crowd of candidates and spots one with superior wisdom. This is the chosen one. That is why some are appointed to spiritual leadership, and others not. This fact is, of course, common knowledge.

I haven't believed that silly myth for the last 23 years. I've been in the ministry for 25 years, which means it took me less than 2 years to notice how silly it really is.

I realized it largely through self-observation. I would have preferred that God reveal it in some other fashion, but who am I to question His mysterious ways?

So you think your supervisor's four-step process is unique? Surely you jest! How many times have we done the same, Roger? First, we make a genuinely stupid decision. Second, the wounded scream. Third, we apply our "wisdom" to clean up the mess, and bring "healing." Fourth, we congratulate ourselves for our "wisdom" in rectifying an ugly situation in such a way that nobody gets the blame...certainly not the leader!

People may be appointed to offices for reasons other than intrinsic wisdom. Perhaps it is to teach *them* rather than their subordinates. Some wiseacre said that people generally get the leadership they deserve. Perhaps some leaders are a means of inflicting judgments on the unworthy. Is *that* why God put us in *our* particular offices? Is this the reason why your supervisor is over *you*, old friend? That verse in Daniel about God promoting the basest of men is disquieting. I would feel better if it were not in the text.

I've evolved a theory that the rarefied atmosphere of high-level spiritual office causes a dissolution of the neural endings in the frontal lobe of the cranium. Therefore, never aspire to promotions, Roger. It might be the last rational thought you have.

Your pungent pal,

Farley



Dear Roger,

So! Your supervisor turned out to be right! I'm genuinely sorry you feel so annoyed. No, I retract that. I'm not at all sorry. I am gratified. Not out of malice, mind you. It's simply that misery loves company. I share your chagrin, having experienced the same interminable times.

How often have I assumed that my leaders were wrong when they weren't? I've forgotten on purpose because chagrin is one of my least favorite emotions. For we ministers, planned forgetfulness is almost as useful as doublethink, don't you suppose?

Now the specific issue in your last letter had to do with the question of where you went wrong in your calculations of the situation.

Your calculations were not the problem.

Let me put it delicately: You are a numbskull. After all those years in the ministry, it has escaped you that faith in God is just as necessary in this area as any other. The basic problem was not your supervisor. It was your *attitude* toward your supervisor. And that attitude can be summed up in the term “unbelief.”

Is God sovereign even over Christian leaders? Appearances may belie the fact, but it is really true, you know. If the Lord can turn the heart of a king in whatever way he pleases, as Proverbs tells us, then how much more can he bend the neck of a Christian leader? True, the neck might get broken in the process, being frequently endowed with the attribute of stiffness. But it is God’s business to do the breaking, not yours.

I shall not exhort you on how easy it is to adjust to these facts, because it isn’t easy at all. When the car is about to crash, it is natural to want to grab for the wheel. But let’s keep in mind that doing so might make matters worse.

Your kooky colleague,

Farley



Dear Roger,

I grieve for you, Roger. I weep for you. Such a disastrous dilemma befalling your church causes shivers of apprehension that it could happen to me.

Would God that the treasurer had absconded with the funds; that a deacon had run off with the secretary; that the ACLU had taken an interest in some of your remarks....

But for a Theistic Evolutionist to request membership in good standing in your church...*that* is beyond the ultimate.

Your description of his views is apt. The term *stinks* is not one currently used by our more astute theologians but it will do in a pinch. Such a position is, in my opinion, just as atrocious an example of theology as it is of science. But this is not what you asked me for. You asked for really good advice as to what to do with him.

I regret that I have no *really good advice*, as you put it. I can only sympathize with your suffering.

I can also sympathize with the suffering of your theistic evolutionist.

*His* suffering? How so?

It just so happens, Roger, that I have conversed in depth with a couple of those. I discovered, to my surprise, that some of them have gone through a nerve-jarring, mind-boggling, soul-searching and painful odyssey. While many are accommodating themselves to the ungodly thought-currents of our confused century, others feel they have taken a courageous stand for intellectually honesty in the face of rejection from lesser-informed colleagues.

Nevertheless, I suspect both types are profoundly deceived. However said this may be, is it a reason for rejecting them? After all, is the church a society designed exclusively for the undeceived? What if they were deceived about issues less controversial?

It's the *controversial* nature of the matter that most bothers you, right? Shall we accept people on the grounds that they are deceived only about non-controversial issues?

Your dilemma doesn't exactly reside there, does it? If only he were not, as you put it, *such a good Christian in every other way*, the dilemma would not be so acute. Were it not for that, you could use our standard operating ministerial procedure and sidestep the matter on other grounds than the real issue. It is clear you have no such luxury in this case.

What makes it worse is that he asked you point blank if he could be a *member in good standing*. I really wish he had not put it that way. *Member* is one thing. *Good standing*?" That might be going a little too far.

On the other hand, maybe that is your answer. You could ask your Presbytery for a definition of the difference between "member" and "member in good standing." They could refer it to the General Assembly, which would appoint a study committee on the precise theological distinctions involved. A position paper may be included in the Archives, which could delineate the persons belonging to each category.

Unfortunately, the process might not be completed before the year 2025. Assuming that you, your Theistic Evolutionist and the church are still alive by then, you will be able to refer to the paper for guidance.

In the meantime, I regret you may be forced to fall back on plain old love, tolerance and patience. That's not much to go on, mind you. But in emergencies, sometimes God obliges us to make do with the little we have. Only He knows why we wind up in such dilemmas. Were I not so theologically sound, I would suspect He lacked foresight.

Your befuddled buddy,

Farley