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“Looney bin!” I thought as I sat at the bar. “I’m in a freaking looney bin.”

It was the wide swath of shade that first captured my attention. Fifty feet off the county road, you wouldn't notice it driving past but I wasn't driving this mile, I was walking, no thanks to my unfaithful SUV.

As one sandaled foot after the other led me across the cracked and baking tarmac a fine dust, whipped off the hardpan by vagrant twists of breeze, settled on my hair and arms. Whether the oily charred scent was the baking tarmac in front of me or the charred looking hard scrabble brush on the roadside made little difference. Everything baked. The unexpected gift of a patch of darkness snatched my attention as it hove into view beyond a tall brittle roadside shrub.

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My feet wandered toward it without consulting my steeping brain. Stepping off the tar seeping gravel road onto the dusty lot in front of the shade, the fine sand kicked up into my sandals. I hopped a little dance step to kick some of it out. I could see a flickering neon “BEER” sign in the depth of the darkness. It reminded my throat that we were dry and swollen. The tissues of my mouth were stuck together, my lips drawn into a tight purse against the dry heat. Electricity meant civilization... ..of some sort.

The deep shady porch was an amazing relief from the sun but as the door closed behind me the cool air conditioning caressed my gritty skin. I stood soaking it in for a moment.

“Phone's on the right.” A voice emerged from darkness that my eyes weren't yet adjusted to. A hint of a person stood silhouetted in light reflecting off a rack of glasses at the end of a long dimly lit bar.

“How'd you know I want the phone?” I croaked as best I could.

“You're walking aren't you?”

A dim glow to my right turned out to be the phone, wall mounted with the tow truck number posted above it under a dying christmas tree bulb. It didn't have a coin slot so I

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just poked in the number. When the dispatcher asked where I was, I raised my voice so the bartender could hear:

“What's the name of this place?” I asked.

“Just tell him between milepost 53 and 54. He won't know this place.”

I relayed the instruction to the dispatcher and as predicted he didn't know of any bar out here, but would get a truck here in about 45 minutes.

Call done, I turned back toward the end of the bar where the barman was standing, wiping out glasses. I could see better in the dim light now, but chairs and booths around the walls still seemed a bit indistinct. For such an obviously old, threadbare place, it smelled oddly sterile, not quite like bleach.

The barman was wiping out glasses and expounding on something that I didn't quite catch, but when I parked on a stool and started paying attention I wondered if I hadn't wandered into an odd asylum.

“...you are such a sad little race. You can barely keep one tribe from wiping out another for a single orbit around your sun! You breed indiscriminately, which results in a high percentage of sociopaths whom you institutionalize by

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selecting them to lead your countries. Then you shower them with gifts and riches. What mania!

“Your wealthiest nations boast of their freedom and liberty, then prosecute people who question that statement.

“Equality for all people! You proudly proclaim, except for your childbearing gender, which is a slightly more than half of the 'ALL' you mentioned.

“Your self proclaimed greatest democracy turns out to be a supermarket where the highest bid buys the most representation.”

“Whoa partner, hold up a minute.” I objected. “You keep saying 'you' and 'your'. Aren't you a part of this society too? You're just as responsible as I am for this supposedly dire state.”

“No. No, I am not a part of this society.” He proclaimed, squinting at me through his thick glasses.

“You would call me an alien. I ended up here by accident in 1947 and I've been stuck here ever since.”

“Really. You certainly age well. I'm sorry, what was your name? Are you sure about that date?”

“Jack. You can call me Jack. And the date I gave you was just fine. One thousand-nine-hundred and forty-seven

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years after the vaguely estimated birthdate of an ascetic Jew named Jesus.”

“Pleased to meet 'ya Jack. Hit me with a Bud if you got it.”

Jack waddled twenty feet down the bar to his cooler. A short, rotund, balding man of fifty-odd years. In the light leaking around the misfit door his silhouette looked like a snowman but for the thick stubby legs.

“So if you came here in '47 you must have been in the wreck in Roswell.” I sallied down the bar top.

“Wasn't a wreck! Just a really bad landing. That's what broke the dinglebing.” Well, 'dinglebing' sounds kinda like what he really said.

“No Bud left. Would a light beer be okay?” came from the silhouette rummaging around in the cooler.

“Yeah, anything cold and wet.”

He turned, placing an unopened can on the bar and slung it toward me. For a second I lost it in the bright light from the front door. I stuck out my arm blindly, and picked it up again just in time to actually catch it.

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“You'd be surprised how many people just sit and watch it sail past.” He said as he waddled back. “I put a net on the end of the bar a few years back.”

He gestured toward the end of the bar on my left and sure enough, there was a net.

“Generally speaking, you humans aren't too quick.”

I decided he was either totally nuts or was playing a game to keep from getting there.

“Just fast enough to catch a beer. What do I owe 'ya?”

“A buck. You can pay as you go, or when you go. What's your preference?”

“Here.” I handed him a dollar. “This way if I get tired of your alien bullshit I can walk out in a huff.”

“Good thinking. Stay on the porch 'til the truck comes though, no shade anywhere else.”

“So Jack Alien, if ya don't like it here, why don'tcha go somewhere else?” The spritz of the tab opening put a brief grainy scent of hops in the air. I took a long pull and the beer soothed my parched innards all the way down.

“Like where? Russia? Too cold. So cold there they don't even have the energy to make war on each other. But

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they are more honest than your system. At least they tell you they're a brutal dictator before they tax you to death.

“I go to Europe and Asia occasionally. They're all pretty much like you though. With so much democratic consensus required, nothing gets done there either. China is kinda promising.”

“You guys need a great leader once in awhile. Someone with a clear vision of the future and the balls to push it through. Of course, that generally means good business for the wealthy few, and leftovers for everyone else.” he shrugged. “I guess ya get what ya wish for.”

“So what do you wish for, Jack?” I humored him. I didn't want to argue and get kicked out before I'd had another beer.

“I just wanna go home.”

“Where's home?”

He cocked his head to one side and peered at me through his thick glasses.

“Its about 250 light years in the direction of Deneb.”

“You're really into this alien thing aren't you?” I was getting a little put off by the continuous act.

“Its just what it is lad.” he shrugged.

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“So why are you here at all then?” I asked. “Why haven't you tucked into your little UFO and flown off home?”

“Its broken. I use it to get around locally, but the parts I need to go deep won't be buildable for a couple centuries.”

“That's kind of a long wait isn't it?”

“Yeah. Means I'm stuck here until whenever that happens, if it happens.”

“Why, Jack? If you're such an advanced alien, why can't you just build a factory and create your missing pieces?”

He considered me for a brief few seconds before answering with a metaphor.

“If you tried to explain what a perfect circle was to a Neanderthal, how close do you think he could come to understanding what you were talking about? A round rock? How would you then manage to convey to him the concept of Pi?”

He shook his head. “Without a background understanding that makes sense for your universe I can't even teach you the terms you'd need to know for me to describe what I need!

“Change is slow. Someday you may evolve to a social and industrial level at which I can plant some questions which

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might guide you toward what I need. But that technical understanding is two full generations beyond the nanoscale industries that are just being developed here now. And generating a world-scale industry takes generations of social change too.”

“You don't like our political system?”, I asked. I was a little tired of his condescending act.

“The idea of a political system is just that. An idea, an abstraction. Real governance calls for a practical activities, not installing the theory of the day.”

“Such as... Wait! Can I have another beer? ...please?”

“Sure, demo time.” he said as he waddled back toward the cooler. I had no idea what he meant, but wanted that beer before I cut out. I watched him bend over to get the beer, then he was standing in front of me.

“Here.” He handed me the can.

I stared at the can hovering in front of me for a half second until I realized that he had moved from bending over the cooler back across the twenty-odd feet in less than the blink of an eye! That wasn't supposed to happen... ...and it wasn't acceptable. I leaped back off the bar stool and backed up another couple feet.

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“Whoa!” I said, hands out in front of me defensively.

My gut was saying 'Run like hell!' but he wasn't chasing me and he wasn't acting hostile. He looked like a middle aged Charlie Brown standing there waiting for me to calm down. You don't run from Charlie Brown.

A drop of condensing moisture on the beer's cold aluminum surface sucked in its brethren and got heavy enough to run down the side of the can. The empty standing next to it was dry.

“That's your fight or flight reflex.” he said quietly. “If something sudden happens you don't understand, adrenaline shoots into your system, speeding you up. It takes a while to dissipate. That's why you're shaking.”

I hadn't noticed that before he mentioned it. It was like a super intense caffeine buzz, a body-wide humming. I glanced down quickly to see if I'd soiled myself.

“Please don't run off, I won't do anything else to alarm you. Take a couple of deep breaths and sit down again. Its still half an hour before your tow truck gets here.”

Cautiously I sat, but my hands were shaking too badly to pick up the beer.

He handed me a cold, moist towel.

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“Here, wipe down your face and hold it on the back of your neck, it'll help.”

I picked it up gingerly and sniffed at it.

“Its just water.”

The cool fabric on my skin sent a calming wave through me. I took a deeper breath and let it out slowly, helping me relax, and draped the cool cloth over the back of my neck.

I finally managed to control my fingers enough to grasp and pull the tab but I couldn't look at him. I struggled to rationalize what I'd seen.

“That's some trick!” I finally admitted. “How'd you do it?”

“I tuned my suit to a different operating pace. And I did it because without hard evidence you'd just pass me off as a whacko bartender. I want you to believe what I'm saying.”

“What suit?” I asked. He wore nothing but ordinary pants, long-sleeve shirt and an unbuttoned red-checkered vest.

He held up his hands.

“This one.”

“You mean your skin?” I squinted at his hands.

He shrugged his shoulders.

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“Touch my hand.” He extended his palm toward me. I shifted backward uncomfortably.

“Baby.” he said disgustedly.

I reacted to his taunt by doing just what he wanted. Defiantly I stepped back toward the bar and reached out to touch just in front of his wrist. As far as I knew it felt like a hand was supposed to feel.

I poked it again. “Just like any other hand.” I mumbled.

“Good. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do so you won’t be frightened.”

“I wasn’t frightened” I bristled, “...just surprised.”

His eyes chuckled at me. “Okay. I’m going to change this hand into a claw, three toed, like a Therapod.”

“Thera-what?”

“Dinosaur.”

As I watched, the hand rippled for a moment, then it settled down.

“Want to hold onto it?” he asked.

“Nah. Go ahead.” I half sat on the stool, one leg dangling and ready to run.

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His hand rippled like it had snakes under the skin and I winced involuntarily. The middle finger grew longer and curved inward as did the ring and index fingers next to it. The outside finger and thumb shrank as the color darkened, then disappeared into a skin that bubbled into an alligator briefcase look. It settled into a nastily taloned huge bird's foot extending from his right forearm and I shifted more weight off the stool, ready to launch. More snakes happened and the claw morphed back quickly back into a hand.

“Lets try another parlor trick,” he suggested.

He turned around, placing his broad round back toward me, looking at a dusty row of bottles on the end of his bar back. “Pull something out of a pocket,” he commanded.

I patted my jeans. My useless cell phone was in the right front pocket, my wallet and jackknife in the left.

Reaching in my hand closed on the knife and I started to pull it out.

“Ooh! Good pick, Swiss Army knife, Victorinox camper version with the serrated saw blade. A very handy personal toolset for this time!” he said.

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A chill ran down my spine. I couldn't have told you what model it was. I looked behind me for a camera or something but saw nothing except dusty chairs and tables.

He turned back, at normal speed.

“If you were going to have to live in a space suit for a very long time, wouldn't you make it as versatile as you could?”

“This suit has sensors your people won't be able to even imagine for a century. If you put sensors on a space suit would you put them only in front? Would you ignore the 180 degrees of reality that was occurring behind you? Above you? Below you?”

He rolled on without waiting. “Don't answer that, I've seen your space suits. Pretty primitive, but as an illustration, they represent a product that requires an industry to create. You couldn't build an effective one, even at your level, in a garage. It needs a lot of technologies working together.”

I took a pull on the rapidly warming beer. If he had air conditioning in here it was lightweight. What would he care, he's in a spacesuit, I thought. I was happy to finally understand something he said, but he moved on before I could celebrate.

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“The manufacturing processes necessary to create the organism I need to return home will be based on science that you don't have words for yet. And the only vehicle that can get me to that time is a chair. I have to wait for it.”

“All right, ...Jack. But why tell me? What the hell have I got to do with it? I'm not going to be around that long.”

“I can't lie. My code set, call it DNA if you like, is constructed to prevent untruths. I couldn't withhold information from you so its easier to be open right from the start.” He pushed his thick glasses back on his nose.

I wondered if the glasses were window dressing or some kind of magical sensor.

“If I died and it was possible for your people to remove my suit you'd see an unfamiliar creature, generally bi-symmetrical like you, with a head, limbs and a vestigial tail, but about three feet long and forty-five pounds. A different member of my race might look more similar to you. We're constructed for different functions.”

“You mean you're an engineered product?” I asked, mentally trying to envision a DNA assembly line.

“Something like that, yes,” he nodded.

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“I still don't understand where I come in. Why tell me?”

“Telling you increases my odds of reaching that 250 year goal. If your race doesn't survive and advance, I can't go home. Right now you have weapons that are capable of destroying the planet and you have industries which are destroying the planet.

“This is lunacy! You have no where else to go and no way to get there if you did. Planets as habitable as this one are rare. If you found one, it would probably be taken already.”

“Oh yeah? What about making a paradise in the moon,” I challenged.

“Really?” I knew from his tone that I'd lost this one too.

“Think about what you just said. You have a paradise here, now. You're not capable of keeping it that way. But you're going to build it again on a piece of bare rock.”

He just looked at me like he was wondering if I was worth his time. Then he went on.

“We've never met any interstellar travelers who came from an unharmonious home world. An accepted theory suggests that such an event isn't possible, pointing to the

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world-scale cooperation required to support the technology, and the social advances needed to support the industry.”

“No.” he shook his head. “This is your one shot.”

“Do you know of any that haven't made it?” I wondered.

“Oh yes. I've seen one planet that won't be habitable for thousands of years because its populace allowed runaway greed to overrule self-preservation.”

“How long do you live anyway?” I wondered if 250 years would stress his normal life span.

“Its irrelevant. This suit cultures and regenerates my physical body down to the code set. As long as it can draw basic elements from the environment it can repair both itself and me.”

“And just how did you picture me helping you out?” I asked again.

“I've chosen to speak to individuals, like you. I try to impress on them the need for sanity in your planetary leadership.”

“Convincing just one of you to live a more sustainable life helps, but it isn't enough just to live a life respectful of the

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people and environment around you. You've got to demand that other people be responsible citizens too.”

I had trouble wrapping my brain around that plan and said so.

“Isn't that a little slow? I mean one person at a time seems...”, I was stuck for a better word, “...slow!”

“It works like compound interest,” he replied. “It gains strength over time.”

“Why haven't you talked to the important people? Surely with your technology you could convince them you're what you say you are.”

“I have. Your leaders wanted to appropriate my 'abilities' for military advantage. They're still looking for me even though the people I first spoke with are long dead.”

“How come nobody ever hears about you?” I asked. “If you've been doing this for sixty years you must've talked to a bunch of people. Don't any of them go to the newspapers?”

He was patient with me. “Do you watch TV? How many hundreds of shows are dedicated to UFOs, ancient aliens, forgotten knowledge or anything else that can be made into a mystery? Of course there are stories. Usually however, my pleas for sanity are sidelined in search of sensation.”

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He leaned into the bar. I shifted back again.

“You believe me now because I'm standing in front of you and I scared you. An hour from now you'll doubt your own memory. Tomorrow you'll think about telling your best friend but you won't because you think he'll call you a nut case.”

“I can bring him back here!” I protested.

He shook his head as if disappointed in me.

“Your tow truck is a mile out. Want a beer to go?”

“Um. Sure. What's my tab?”

I didn't realize how dumb that sounded until I said it, but he answered normally.

“Two bucks, Chief. You paid for the first one already.”

He fetched another beer and put it on the bar.

“You should wait on the porch, you'll probably have to flag him down.” he suggested.

I dug out two crumpled ones and dropped them on the bar. Cold beer in hand I started for the door but stopped and looked back before I went out. He stood watching me go. He looked the same, but instead of a Charlie Brown bartender, I was looking at a lonely and patient traveller who couldn't go home. I gave a little salute and he nodded back.

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“Live better, Chief.” he intoned as I went out the door.

He was right, the tow truck was plowing a high-speed wake through the heat shimmer over the road. After I stepped off the porch and waved, the driver braked hard and pulled onto the roadside in a cloud of dust.

I took a couple extra seconds waiting for the dust cloud to catch up and settle on the truck before I chanced walking through it. When I opened his passenger door the driver asked if I was the owner of the SUV back down the road.

Nodding assent, I climbed into the cab. The driver, a rugged looking guy in his forties wearing t-shirt and jeans, looked at the cold beer in my hand then leapt from the truck. He ran around the hood toward the bar and as I watched him I saw a different place than the one I had just exited. This one was collapsing and older than dirt. It couldn't have been the same place I was just inside, it didn't even have the shade porch I'd just stepped off!

The driver looked it over, walked to each side, then shaking his head trudged slowly back to the truck, repeatedly looking back over his shoulder.

When he climbed back up I asked what was the matter and he glared at me like I was an idiot.

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“Been carrying that cold beer around for an hour or so out here?” he asked.

I looked at the condensation on the can and shook my head. I was getting used to feeling stupid.

“It was Jack, wasn't it?” he said, putting the truck in gear and turning back up the road toward my SUV.

“Jack? Yes! It was! Do you know him?” I asked excitedly. Someone else had seen him! I wasn't alone with this fragile knowledge.

He ignored me.

“Did this place look like that when you went in?” He jerked his head back toward the rapidly disintegrating structure.

“No. It didn't look a whole lot better though. Had a big shady porch.”

He nodded his head and spoke, more to confirm his own suspicions than to converse. “Shady porch. Cold beer out of nowhere in the middle of the desert. Tell ya to save the world, did he?”

“Yeah, but...”

He interrupted like he wasn't interested.

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“I had a flat tire on County 13, about a hundred miles south of here, ten years ago, no spare. Been looking for him every day since then. Today's about the closest I've come.”

“Why? What do you want from him?”

“A lot. Ten years and a hundred stories later I've got a thousand questions for him.”

“Do you see signs of him often?” I asked.

“Traces 'most every day. He likes this stretch. But he never talks to the same person twice.”

“Why don't you just come back here and wait for him?” I asked.

“That place won't even be there if we tried to go back to it now.” he explained. “A bar, an old house, a roadside diner or something like that will just pop up about a mile in front of somebody who has car trouble out here. Some form of it will last about a half hour after I pickup the client, then it'll be gone. Even that dusty lot it stands on will be gone. It'll look just like the rest of the roadside.

“Do the powers that be know about it?”

“Bet yer ass they do. I avoid 'em if I can. They don't like talk of revolution.”

“Revolution?” I echoed.

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“What'd you think he was talking about?”

“Changing the government?”

“Which would be...?”

“Uh, revolution, okay, I see, but it doesn't have to be violent does it?”

He shrugged as if tiring of my naiveté.

“You think people that dedicated all their lives to getting into power are gonna step down and hand it over nicely when they're asked?”

“Umm.”

“Then come on, we'd better get to it... “ He said as he geared down to turn in front of my SUV. “Don't want to be stuck here forever.”