



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 5 Number 4

Page 1 – ETHOPOEIA by Hayden Moore. Mr. Moore’s excellent yarn “Neither Fish Nor Flesh” was in our Freifaxi issue last summer. He lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and cat.

Page 8 – KILLING US SOFTLY by Janet Gershen-Siegel. Ms Gershen-Siegel writes, “I’m a Lambda Literary Award nominee (2014, Untrustworthy, under SF/F/Horror <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/current-submissions/>), and I won the 2013 Riverdale Avenue Books NaNoWriMo award. My work is published by Riverdale Avenue Books, Hydra Productions, JayHenge Publishing, and Writers’ Colony Press. My current project is a trilogy of works about time manipulation, called Time Addicts. I live in Boston with my husband and twice as many computers as we need.”

Page 25 – FREEDOM by Shainur Ullah. Mr. Ullah writes, “My name is Shainur Ullah and I am from England. I like writing short fictional horror stories on the creepypasta site (<http://www.creepypasta.org/user/ullahshy>). I also have a reddit account called Shortstory1 with more horror short stories. My most popular horror stories online have gone “viral” - “Crunched Up Paper House,” “The Camera Man,” and “The Guys Behind Hollywood.” They have also been narrated onto YouTube - check them out!”



“ETHOPOEIA”

by HAYDEN MOORE

‘Simply the thing I am shall make me live’
(Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*:
Paroles, Act IV scene iii)

He was too tired to fly. Drought had withered everything but the sand and the cacti, the mangroves and the sea. A general malaise had enveloped the island along with it, a nebulous fog composed of feeling rather than water droplets, like brush-strokes upon a painting obliterating the landscape rather than mystifying it. But the light of dawn was still comforting as the mineral breeze played with the waxen leaves of the tree next to the boy. Its forbidden fruits resembled apples—a resemblance in form rather than Biblical metaphor—a plentitude of toxic green balls unabashedly tempting in their sweet odor and fecund nature. The tree’s earthbound roots held firm to the sand while its canopy drifted in the immediate sky, a living model of the reefs just beyond. But here the fish were the birds, no less extraordinary in colors and markings. The cantankerous eels were the black-spiked iguanas, a chimera of sorts that borrowed the needles of the sea urchin millions of years ago. The boy smiled as he thought of some primordial iguana, neither fish nor flesh, ingesting an urchin in the ancient sea. It was a primeval union, an

amalgamation of sorts that left the spines poking through the iguanas armored skin in a ruthless exhibition of symbiosis. The pain of the acquisition left the iguana eating the air in its slow progression through the poisoned branches of the tree, the fruit it encountered along the way tasting just as sweet as it did all those years ago. It was an acquired taste the boy was too young to appreciate.

Solitude comes at a cost. For the hermit crab, the acquisition of its shell is a dangerous search. No less harrowing is the burden of carrying a house upon its back. The blue whale spends most of its life alone in its monstrosity, the drifting plankton and dwarfed fish it passes by throughout its years—years measured in disparate breaths—are nothing but ghosts as the whale searches for another of its kind in the vastness of the sea. Worms dig dark tunnels with eyeless bodies in a compacted world. Sea turtles feed alone on the sea grass and soar through the currents of the ocean. But the yellow tangs swim along the limits of the turtle’s shell feeding on the algae and scraps of food, something less than silent companions. The turtle, like the whale, breathes the air, a burden that thrusts them out of the very world they live in throughout the day for the entirety of

their lives in a solitude upon solitude.

Here the boy sat alone in his own distinction of being human. Warning signs marked the Manchineel Trees that surrounded him, the familiar open hand marked out with an oblique red line telling non-existent passers-by not to touch. 'Do not touch' was a common phrase, especially for humans of his age. It seemed like there was a collective prohibition on curiosity. But danger tended to keep others away. So it did on this strip of sand flanked by the sea. Behind the boy, the sea was placid as if asleep. In his field of vision, the winds from another realm blew the waters into a turbulent sea, the waves resembling a collection of unsupervised children high on perpetual pieces of candy. The boy had already determined that this was not a day for flying. The cost was too great. Whether the morning would be marked by the water or the land was a question too important to answer. Something had to call out to him. Yesterday had almost ruined him.

Sympathy is a word marked by ill-usage. Self-interest and narrow-mindedness make the word meaningless. In the best of times, the act of *sympathy* is a dim reckoning, a fleeting feeling or metaphoric glimpse regarding the other person. Like dreams, sympathy follows no course of Time or reasoning, it is a mood with a general theme and nothing more. Everyone is themselves alone. No amount of tears or embraces, copulation or psychological analysis can unweave the layered rainbow of the self. Sympathy is a word without a life. It should have been drowned and put out of its mis-

ery centuries ago. Sympathy cries out silently for its own sympathy. It is an endless regression into oblivion. Art would never account for it and no amount of Time could change what already was not when it began. Sympathy was doomed to misuse and kitsch greeting cards. A deed without a name had to either justify it, or destroy sympathy. No more could it dwell in the twilight between word and deed. The boy knew this as he watched the world around him. Today would not be a discovery, it would be a justification, a coming together of this and that. He would no longer be himself. He would be the thing he truly was. Contradiction was the force in finding the form. Absurdity was the state of the world. He pulled his spent legs into his chest and rested his chin upon his skinned knees. He looked, he waited and he saw.

The greatest tragedy is choice. By choosing, all the rest are forsaken. What could have been is far too complex to reflect upon with any meaning. There was never enough Time for that. Chance played a pivotal part in this cruel game. But the boy had planted himself in a place full of choices that all belonged to the realm of his predilections. It would come down to Time and cultivated chance. With his eyes fixed on the wind-tossed sea, the boy saw the embodiment of compromise. Erupting from the tumultuous surface of the sea, a pair of aquatic wings flapped as the form continued to emerge from the water. A barbed tail flapping in the wind looked like a beacon reporting the conditions of the empty world back to the water-bound crea-

tures below. This was a creature from the same galaxy as octopuses, a collection of stranded aliens making-do on the faraway island of earth. The morning sunlight sparkled on the dark skin of the manta ray. It dwarfed the pelican gliding just beyond it. It was a miracle of the godless world. With a few more flaps of its enormous wings, the ray could have taken to the further reaches of the air and flown back to its galaxy at the edge of the end of the universe. But habit is the great deadener. It descended as it always had back into the water. Just before the barbed tail marked the end of its flight—just as it had the marked the end of the beginning—the boy made his choice.

Indeed, the tail was far more than a beacon. It steadied the boy as he navigated the waters for the thousandth Time. But this was his first experience as a manta ray. Some kind of instinct whispered within him. The boy rolled up his pectoral fins and swam through the water just as his forbear had. Just behind his head-fins, the boy's eyes looked at the world flanking him. Never had he experienced the sight to his sides. The boy realized the wasted motions of his terrestrial life as he had looked from side to side for non-existent predators. He felt the water drifting through his gills, a slight tickle as he increased his speed made his fins tremble. This was not a world of bated breaths ruled by the automatic. It was a liquid world of flowing breaths governed by the body in motion. The reefs passed beneath him like fairy castles under the gaze of a dragon. He

could smell the nuances of the seascape. There was no salt. Water was something else. He certainly was not wet. Row upon row of teeth cut through the water as he fed on something that reminded him of pine nuts. Just as there was no direct field of vision in front of him, there was no future. Life as a manta ray was in the instant. But forgetfulness was not an attribute of this state of being. That was left to the perversion of fish kept in bowls on children's dressers. Every flap of his graceful fins was forever in an instant. There was no up or down. Even the limits of the surface were not limits. That had been proven before. The most refined bird could never mimic the feats of flight of the boy soaring through the water. Freedom was impossible but this knocked at its hermitically sealed door. The boy whipped his tail and shepherded himself on.

When the boy first saw her, he thought she was riding a fish. When closer proximity revealed her for what she was, the boy paused as he caught himself categorizing her as a half-realized form, a girl unwilling to commit to the ocean. But she was the quintessential embodiment of her kind. Even if she were the only one, nothing could surmount who she was. Neither the boy or the girl were *like* or *as*: they were what they were. He was a manta ray and she was a mermaid. In spite of his understanding, the boy was constantly reminded of his life on land when he saw the mermaid's upper half. Her gestures were that of the land but possessed a fluidity that made the earthbound gestures of his former life

look like barbarism. Her flowing black hair was something altogether different, a magic in its strands exacerbated by her energy. Even her belly-button, the stigmata of the human form, mocked humankind as it looked like she had pulled away from the womb of Oceana rather than the confined waters of an earthen mother. In spite of their differences both in species and sex, the boy and the girl knew something hidden about each other. Things keep their secrets. But living myths know the secrets that make them real. It was a fantastical simpatico. She spoke with her green eyes while the boy responded with his articulate tail.

—This is your first day.

—Not living in the water.

—I know. I mean your first day as what you are.

—Yes.

—I have been what I am for seven moons.

—Are you lonely?

—No. I was lonely when I was alone up there. Now I am here.

—How did you do it?

—I made a choice after I saw the signs growing on me. One day, I stepped into the water and never took a step back on Terra.

—Is that what you call it? Terra?

—We do. There are others. You are not yourself alone. How did you do it?

—I watched and waited. When I saw it fly out of the water, I knew. Here I am.

—You projected?

—Yes. Wait...you didn't?

—No. I was born to be what I am. I was

imprisoned from the water before. When I returned, I finally grew into me.

—But...

—Where is your other?

—Back on Terra. Just off the shore.

Sitting beneath a tree.

—You have to cast off that vessel. You cannot be two places at once. Not for long. Come with me.

—But here I am.

—Come with me, at once.

As they swam back towards Terra, the girl told the boy about the terrors of the ocean. Armed with superior intellects, both of them were at the top of the food chain. But humans, too, were there. With his left manta-eye, the boy watched as the mermaid cried while she related to him the Time she had been taken by the old man in the deep-sea vessel. The steel claw had nearly cut her in two. She still felt remorse for drowning the old man but desperation transcended morality. The girl admitted that the old man had violated her with his eyes. Even at the bottom of the sea, pernicious things intruded. The boy admired the way the mermaid moved through the water at a pace that surpassed his own. Even the grandeur of his wings failed to match the grace of the girl. Perhaps it was a question of experience, but she was wholly her own in this element. The boy still saw Oceana through metaphor. Human arms still powered his fins while human thought reconciled his new eyes to a thinkable vision of his surroundings. He saw the girl through the eyes of a boy, her beauty that of his

familiar rather than the beauty of another genus. He wondered how she saw him. She knew that he was something like her but his form was altogether different. Would she befriend him or was that sort of relationship impossible with two such creatures as themselves? There could be an ancient enmity between the two of them, an impossibly deep chasm that divided them. But here they were swimming through the sea with each other. They shared a language but the other sea-life was mute and indifferent to him. She trusted him enough to tell him her secrets. She was risking her life to take him back to where it all began. Never had a girl been so candid with him. Only a mermaid could. She had a beautiful name. It was Akaste. When she spoke, he listened.

—I can't believe you ventured out so far.

—This body was made for that.

—Not with the mind that moves it. Tell me your name.

—Reed.

—Of course, it is. Neither here nor there.

—Tell me about the others.

—Not until you are wholly one of us.

—How do we do that?

—You'll see.

—You are beautiful.

—You won't think that for long.

—You will always be beautiful. You are the most beautiful person I have ever seen.

—That's exactly why you won't think that way later. You are a person. I am something else.

—So beautiful.

—Reed?

—Beautiful.

—Reed?!

—Beautiful, beautiful...

—Oh, goddess! What do you feel?

—It tastes...

—What do you taste?

—Sweet...apple pie with black pepper... burns...

—Where is your body? Where did you leave your body, Reed?

—Under a tree...told you. The rain is hot. Lava rain. Sign says stay out. No people. None but me.

—You left yourself under a ^{^**^~**^} tree?! Why would you do that?

—No people, silly. You know, Akaste. Don't eat this pie. It's spicy.

—Can you make yourself stand? Can your other stand up?

—Nope. Legs don't work. Haven't for a long time. Fell. Never really got up. Time flies. Fins work. Tired though. So tired. Still burns. Water not helping. Worse. So much worse.

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Water and earth were speaking to each other. No matter the intent, the medium through which the sound passed gargled the sounds. For Akaste, her words were drifting vowels while Reed sounded the concatenations of rigid consonants. The rich markings that constituted the skin of the boy were fading into sallow ghosts. His barbed tail hung lifeless as his streamlined body drifted in the water. Akaste tilted towards the shallows. Her tail snapped

up and down at a furious rate as the warmth of the water increased. She could see the rain pelting the sparkling surface before her velocity forced her into the storm. Rain felt like shrapnel from the sky—a fresh water assault on a saline creature—when she fell upon the shore. The wind deafened her ears. Even the pouring rain failed to fill the emptiness of Terra. Akaste thrust herself forward with her powerful arms. The trail she left in the sand was reminiscent of the one that led her into the ocean. Both trails—the one of memory and that of the moment—were obliterated by the waves but neither was like the other in intent. The former no longer existed while the current one threatened existence. A line drawn in the sand: terrestrial thoughts were already intruding upon her. Akaste could see the boy's Other twitching just ahead. His arms were contorted at his sides while his legs lay lifeless on the sand. Within arm's reach, Akaste saw blisters covering the boy's face and arms. The poisoned water droplets did nothing to her as she watched those same droplets assaulting the skin of the boy. A black iguana watched with indifference from a branch above the boy, its reptilian eye fixed on the scene below. The fruits of the tree were scattered around the boy, some in his lap while a portion of the last bite hung on his drooping lower lip. Only the whites of his eyes were visible as the boy choked on the air he breathed. As Akaste pulled her body upon the boy, she could feel his withered legs below her scales. They were nothing but skin and bones. She reached her hands out

and embraced his blistered face. The puss of the wounds ran between her long webbed fingers. She shook his head and the boy opened his eyes. Vacant brown eyes with touches of hazel looked at her. He moaned.

—No more.

—I know. I'm here to help you.

—Please, no more.

—Not much longer now, Reed. Focus on me. Not on the pain.

—Mmmmmmm, Akaste.

—Yes.

—I can understand you again.

—Of course, you can.

—Go back.

—I will. And I will see you there.

—Really?

—Of course.

—Good.

—Now...this is going to save you. You have to trust me.

—I trust you. Always.

Akaste kissed the boy on his ruined forehead. The wind blew her black hair over his head like a death shroud. She clasped his neck with her fingers and felt his throat struggling in her firm grasp. As she squeezed, his eyes stared into her own. Tears streamed from the boy as Akaste strangled him. Her own tears magnified the living portrait as his unseen body flailed in protest. Everything but the boy's legs fought for life. She felt his neck snap in her hands. His head fell to the side just as his body went as limp as his legs. As she wept, Akaste arranged the boy's body in a peace-

ful position, the same position she saw other loved ones at funerals when she was a child. The gravity on Terra was ruthless, even in death. But love could rearrange it, if only for a moment. Akaste heaved as she dragged herself back to the sea. She could feel her skin breathe through every pore as she felt the living water again. Terra was a place of emptiness and death. She never looked back. As the water nourished her form, Akaste swam towards Reed. It looked like he had grown since she last saw the dying manta ray. The magnificence of his fins articulating the waters made her cry different tears. What were the fading markings on his body, were now rich in their contrasts, the white far whiter and the grays tending towards authentic black. Akaste looped around the boy and smiled as she spoke, the first time she had smiled at another in years.

—You look beautiful. It hurt to do that to your other. But now you are free. How are you feeling? It must be strange to know you are here. What I mean is, to know you belong to the sea now. I hope you are not angry with me. That was painful. Reed? Please talk to me. I need to hear your voice. Especially, after that. Reed? Just a word. One word. Please? Reed?

The relative silence of the sea had always comforted Akaste. No matter how many fish she encountered, the exchange was that of one living thing with another. There was never the obligation of a word. While there were others like her, each one of them was alone. The sea was a place to

escape the labyrinth of language. Words were meaningless in the streams of Oceana. But fundamental truths were often negligent of emotional needs. As Akaste drifted in front of the face of the manta ray, she saw the silence in its eyes. What was, was not what she had known a little while before. What was now, was no longer who she knew. The ray's eyes implied the need to move, to feed and to be what it was. Its barbed tail moved in accordance with its instinct. No longer was it the articulate tongue of before. Goodbye meant nothing. Akaste's hands felt that back on the beach. She felt the guilt in her hands as the manta ray flew away through the calm waters of the sea. She watched as the grandeur of its form dissipated into an indistinct dot on the horizon. All that remained was herself alone in the waters like before. But memory was already haunting the place, no matter where she would go. Just as the manta ray was fading from perception, its tail gesticulated into a perfect line above its body. Akaste laughed as she flapped her tail in pursuit of the gesture, an exclamation point on the horizon of the silent sea. ❖

“KILLING US SOFTLY”

by JANET GERSHEN-SIEGEL

*Strumming our pain with their fingers
Singing our lives with their words*

Susan stared up at the night sky. The view was off-the-charts spectacular, with more stars than she could possibly ever count. It was one of the perks of being stationed in the middle of the Australian continent.

The downsides were the abysmal shopping and dining choices, but sturdy drones and a trusty helicopter – which she flew herself – fixed all of that. She even had a tiny airfield at her disposal, in case anyone wanted to fly in but choppers gave them the willies.

The new president was gaga over anything to do with space. And so General Susan Sheffield’s agency, SETI, was more handsomely funded than it had ever been in its history.

She had her Bluetooth earpiece in her ear and was listening to a bit of late-night radio when she heard the SETI ringtone. It was one special tone, directly linked to the array.

She picked up and heard a repeating series of tones. The first few times they iterated, she sat in silent contemplation. After the eleventh repetition, she let out a whoop to the outback. As if in response, she got

the ringtone for her assistant.

Reluctantly, she interrupted the repetitive tone. “Marshall?”

“General, I think we’ve found something.”

“Yes, I know, Mr. Porter. I’m listening to it right now.”

“Oh, well, there goes my news. But seriously, this is incredible! It’s historic.”

“Have you run it through the usual protocols yet?”

“I have, and it checks out. It’s a repetitive signal, and it is definitely not coming from Earth or any of our satellites. I also checked probes and whatnot, even the old Voyager spacecraft. Equipment also checks out perfectly.”

“So there is no other conclusion we can possibly draw.” Her earlier excitement was replaced with an inner calm. Susan had no idea how she was maintaining her composure.

“Correct,” said Marshall. “That signal is coming from outer freakin’ space.”

“Screw the time. I’m calling the president.”

The president was as excited as Susan and Marshall were. There was a hastily-called press conference, and Susan revealed all.

Then the calls for interviews started to

pour in, from both the American and Australian press, among many others. There were dozens of editorials praising the cooperative efforts of the Aussies and the Americans. Other world governments started to talk seriously about copying such obviously fruitful collaborative efforts.

Zealous religious leaders divided into two camps. In one, they threatened fire and brimstone, claiming any alien intelligence was proof of the existence of Satan and a whole host of demons. In the other, ancient myths and tales were reinterpreted so as to be up to date with the latest findings. None of them wanted to lead a faith suddenly made obsolete.

There was even an effort to contort the so-called prophecies of Nostradamus into a tortured connection to the discovery.

Susan and Marshall headed up any number of teams. There was one dedicated to trying to pinpoint the exact genesis of the signal. Another was dedicated to trying to translate it – somehow, as if a bunch of numbers could truly be translated properly. And yet another, led in a joint effort with the armed forces of both Australia and the United States, was determined to decide if there was some sort of a threat.

It was a few months before a translation could be considered at all complete. Marshall sent his report to Susan.

To: Brigadier General Susan Sheffield, US Army, Chief of SETI for Australia and the United States

From: Marshall Porter, Chief Technologist, SETI

We are quite sure, with an 85% degree of cer-

tainty, of the contents of the alien message.

One rather interesting observation, which my staff members and I all made independently of each other, is that the message was designed for ease of translation. Therefore, the writer or writers wished to be understood. Here are the contents of the message:

'So beautiful!

We are happy to meet you and hope you will permit us to visit. Or if you have capable technology, then let this message be considered an invitation to visit us.'

Then the remainder is a series of precise coordinates.

Susan stared at the memorandum for a few seconds. It could have been, as it was on its face, an invitation. Or it could be a trap. She muttered to herself as she hit a preset on her phone, "I don't get paid enough to decide on the fate of Planet Earth."

The usual clerk came on the line. "President Brookfield is having supper and will call you back. What is your message?"

"We can talk to aliens. That's my message."

"I, oh dear." The clerk was flustered. "I can connect you now."

"Thanks." The clerk made the connection and dropped off the line. "Talia?"

"Susan, this had better be good. The sushi tonight is intensely spectacular, best I have ever had."

"We translated the message."

"And?"

"I'll send it to you. I'm guessing this is about where the UN gets involved and I step off."

“No, no, you’re the expert. You’ll still be on this one.”

Susan was nonplussed for a moment. “Uh, all right. Talia, between you and me and the Australian outback, I don’t think they’re hostiles.”

“Maybe let’s reserve judgment for the nonce. After all, we’ve only gotten the one message.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

It was over a month before the response was written and finalized, translated into a series of numbers which the team hoped was accurate. Susan and Marshall were the ones to relay it although they did not know exactly where to send the message. This was despite the precision of the coordinates, for there was any number of systems in that celestial neighborhood.

They pointed the Palomar Telescope in the general direction as submitted by the message, and crossed their fingers.

‘We appreciate your message. Thank you for contacting us. Our planet is called Earth. What is yours called? We are naturally curious about you. We hope this is just the start of a long-lasting and peaceful relationship between our two worlds. We look forward to hearing from you again and, perhaps, eventually meeting you.’

It took another few months before there was a response. Fortunately, because the team already had the right tools in place, the translation took only about a tenth of the time.

‘So beautiful! We received your message and were so very pleased once it was translated. Our language is

rather different from your own, as you well know. So we will instead offer a translation. The name of our planet, in your language, means: “perfect home”. What is the meaning of the name of your world? We have been monitoring your transmissions for a while, and our translators believe it means “dirt”. Is that correct?’

“It’s like interstellar pen pals,” Susan muttered once she’d read the message.

“Or a first date,” Marshall commented. She shot him a look, so he hastily added, “I mean, don’t you think there’s something like that going on? And then the relationship end game is an alliance of some sort and not a marriage, of course.” He looked at her expectantly.

“We never should’ve used the word ‘relationship’ in our response. Egad, do they think we’re flirting with them?”

“Good lord,” Marshall said. “I sure as hell hope not.”

It was another few years of pen pal-style correspondence, back and forth. Questions were sometimes answered, often not. The tone of the correspondence from the alien side seemed to be getting more and more coquettish. That is, if there could be any tone inferred from numbers. At times, Susan felt the whole correspondence was like a cosmic Zapruder film, subject to a ton of interpretations, depending on a person’s agenda, beliefs, hopes, and desires.

Susan took to sending a few short messages – preapproved by the president – on her phone. She could go on vacation and still talk to aliens. She also talked to Talia nearly every day, as the notes started to

come in more frequently, thick and fast. At least they still took a month or so to get to Earth, and then another to get back.

Until they didn't.

Talia called Susan in a panic when a message arrived in two weeks instead of the customary two months. "What the hell is happening?" Talia moaned.

"They've gotten closer," Susan said. "That's got to be what it means. I doubt they can send a message any faster than the speed of light."

"But if they're closer, doesn't that mean they can already break the light-speed barrier?"

"I - oh God."

There was a frenzy of preparations. More importantly, the president and other world leaders broadcast speeches to their people. The general public had not yet been told much about the existence of extraterrestrial life. The fear of a panic had been more than justified.

But this was different, as any panic from the revelation would, they hoped, be a lot less than the panic that would have ensued if the people had not been told anything, and then a race of intelligent aliens suddenly showed up on their proverbial cosmic doorstep.

Susan was in the thick of it, giving press conferences to tell amateur astronomers where to point their telescopes, meeting with religious leaders to try to assure them that the existence and probably imminent arrival of aliens was not a sign of the Apocalypse, and then assure the general public that the aliens seemed to be

benevolent.

At the absolute, barest minimum, they had never said anything that was at all threatening. She couldn't tell them if the aliens could be trusted as she, too, had no idea. Zapruder film, indeed.

A few months later, the sound communications started, read by what sounded like a mechanical voice. As the written ones had, these messages all started with the same two word greeting: '*So beautiful!*'

The communications also provided the first indication of the name of the alien species. They called themselves the *Callade*.

Still months later and the first video transmissions were received. But it was a bit of a disappointment as the Callade had only shown images of the exterior of their craft, which was in a kind of barbell shape.

Rumors spread. Were the Callade shy? Secretive? Grotesque? Planning to kill everyone? Or was it something else? Susan ended up fielding those questions as well, and it was all she could do to keep from losing her patience as the same queries were made, over and over again.

People speculated constantly. Children in schools drew pictures of what they thought the Callade were like, and local news programs would hold contests to see how imaginative the kids could be. Crayon drawings ended up on the nightly news. They were as good a backdrop to the reporting as any.

Susan reasoned the aliens' reticence was understandable. After all, her fellow human beings weren't exactly laying out the welcome mat just yet. There was no map

for the Callade to follow, for Talia and the other world leaders had refrained from simply handing over the Earth's precise coordinates. So they were guessing at Earth's location.

She had an occasion to sit down with the former president once the new one was sworn in. "Talia," she said as a soup course was served, "We're getting to a weird impasse with the Callade."

"I agree. If we welcome them and they turn out to be horrible – against all observed behavior, over the course of several years – then we've sealed our dooms. And if they really are as friendly and wonderful as we hope, but we passive-aggressively let them just gad about the galaxy and don't even so much as point them one way or another, then even the most patient people are bound to get a little miffed."

"It's a touch like the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years. And maybe it is for the same purpose, to just let an older generation die out."

"You've been answering too many Bible thumpers' questions lately." Talia put her spoon into her now-empty bowl. "Susan, there's no way to know what's right."

"That's true. And not to continue the Bible theme any further, but seriously, it truly is a leap of faith."

"No doubt," Talia said. "What I wouldn't give for a little *deus ex machina* right about now. You know, someone with authority, who we could trust, who could just swoop in and tell us what to do."

Susan chuckled a little. "I'm afraid we've got to be the grownups in the room.

No one's going to come to our rescue, or anything."

Two months later, it was more or less decided for them. "As of today," the new president proclaimed, "I have authorized a message to the Callade with clear information about our location and what we look like."

Once the president's speech was over, Susan angrily turned off the screen. She immediately contacted Marshall. "Do you know what the hell is going on? And how could the president ever have another team to translate the Callade's language?"

"Susan," Marshall said, "There's just the one team."

"Wait, wait, hold the phone," she said, hearing a chime signifying a caller was trying to reach her. "So they made you translate their message, is that it?"

"No, not exactly."

The chime was still ringing in her ear as the full import of what he had just said became clear to her. "You, you volunteered."

"Well, kinda."

"No, wait," she raised the volume of her voice considerably; "they offered you something."

"I," he swore under his breath. "Just talk to the president." Without so much as a goodbye, he hung up.

The call waiting chime was still ringing, so she answered it, none too happily. "Yes?"

"I have the president for you."

A moment later, there was a booming Texas-accented voice on the line. "General Sheffield! I'd like to make y'all an offer."

“I beg your pardon, President Jensen?”

“An offer. You’ll get a handsome retirement package and even another star just at the point of retirement. That ought to increase the payout significantly.”

“You’re pushing me out.”

“Y’all are 73.”

“So? I can still do my job, sir.”

“I got Porter for that.”

“So you promoted Marshall Porter without my knowledge or consent? And you also underhandedly had his team translate a welcoming message to the Callade. Tell me, Mr. President, did any of the other world leaders agree to that?”

“It wasn’t their call. Now, darlin’, we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way.”

“Oh?”

“Either you retire voluntarily with a sweet package, or I fire you and you get nothing. Your choice.”

“I take it that retirement package comes with some sort of a nondisclosure.”

“Naturally. Y’all shouldn’t be blabbing this to the overly nosy press, now, ya hear?”

It only took a second for Susan to weigh her options. “Screw you, Mr. President. I quit!”

“Pity ya’ll won’t get that sweet package.”

“Pity you can’t bribe me into silence, Jensen.” She cut the connection and contacted her favorite member of the press. “Jeremy? It’s Susan Sheffield. And have I got a story for you.”

When the news broke the following day, Jensen was, by turns, furious and then

panicky and then cocky and then overly apologetic. Apparently Susan had not been the only person left in the dark. The entire minority party delegation had been, too.

The panic which Susan had so carefully worked to avoid arrived that very same day. And her phone wouldn’t stop ringing for hours. It was even annoying on vibrate, so she took to answering it.

She fielded questions, complaints, and accusations with as much finesse as she could muster. The public’s demands were unending and the barrage of communications lasted for nearly half a year. Sleep could only come with the phone in another room, ringer off, and some chemical assistance. But she had to count her blessings.

President Jensen had it far worse. Members of his own party flipped left and right as calls for his impeachment turned into charges and proceedings. Convicted of treason and hounded out of office, he put a bullet in his brain, rather than face the people back home, or prison, or both.

His Vice President and successor was a stern and sober Oregonian named Elmer Davies. After less than a month in office, Davies contacted Susan personally, apologized profusely for his late boss’s behavior, and offered the general her old job back, with an extra star to boot.

Marshall Porter received a lateral promotion in name only. He was none too pleased that Susan was back and again in charge, and let everyone and his brother know all about how he felt about it.

Susan remained coolly professional in the face of his displeasure. For the most

part, she left him alone. All she wanted to hear from him was if there had been any return messages from the Callade, and what those messages translated to.

It took nearly a year after the death of the disgraced President Jensen before they heard anything from the Callade. And it wasn't even a specific message at all – it was just the Voyager probe's message, played back.

At 75, Susan had been the point person for contact with the Callade for the better part of a decade. But the work was getting more wearying, particularly with the loss of the collegial relationship she had had with President Talia Brookfield.

But it was the rift with Marshall that hurt the most. Once the Voyager message was received, she took the initiative and contacted him. "Marshall, what do you think it means?"

"It means they found the goddamned probe," he snapped. Although she didn't hear him say anything beyond that, Susan expected Marshall would have loved to have added a cheap shot, such as, "Well, duh!"

"I understand that," she said evenly. "And we had had a handle on Voyager up until about the time we heard the first Callade signal."

"Yes, yes, go on."

"Have a little patience, will you? I'm trying to reason something out here. If they picked up the probe at its last-known location, just where would that be?"

"About three-quarters of the way from here to Proxima Centauri."

"Okay. But what if they took the probe

somewhere and are transmitting from there?"

"We have no way of knowing that."

"I agree. The main point I'm making is that we can conjecture where they are – and the last-known position of the probe is likely our best guess, but it's not the only possible guess."

"Maybe the probe just appeared on their cosmic doorstep."

"Possibly. Or maybe they encountered it somewhere in deep space."

"If it did get that close to them," he said, "then they're probably close to us, cosmically speaking."

"Of course they've got interstellar travel. I wonder how they beat out the Theory of Relativity."

That gave Marshall pause. "I know we've been all wondering if they're coming to eat us and all of that. But they know we're not their equals in terms of technology. It's not really an even exchange."

"Perhaps not. But maybe we're the only game in town, that they're so starved for cosmic companionship that they can tolerate their country cousins."

"It's like speed dating where there's exactly one match," he said.

"So they take it or leave it."

"Look, Susan, I'm sorry."

Susan was taken aback by his abrupt change of subject for a second. "It's all water under the bridge."

"No, seriously, we've worked together for how many years? And then Jensen dangled money and academic fame in front of me. I shouldn't have done what I did. Not

just to translate and send his foolhardy message, but also to throw you under the bus in the process.”

“Thank you; I appreciate that.”

The SETI ringtone went off, and they both tapped their Bluetooth earpieces. “Oort Cloud? Really?” he asked.

The reply from the researcher in Jakarta was just, “It’s been confirmed. There is definitely a vessel entering the Oort Cloud. Whether or not it’s the Callade is currently impossible to tell.”

This time, they kept the finding top secret. President Davies agreed with the precaution. There was no sense in causing yet another panic unless there was truly something worthwhile to panic about.

It was only world leaders and top scientists who knew – and one General Susan Sheffield. There were daily reports. Visual confirmation was difficult; due to the amount of debris in the area, not to mention its remoteness.

All they had were wobbles and reflections from the bigger objects in the Cloud. It wasn’t until the vessel had reached Sedna that anyone could get a handle on its size. The French and Israeli research teams put it at a very large size – as in close to the size of the Saturnian moon, Europa.

Such a vessel, in addition to its space-faring capabilities, was beyond the capacity of human construction. To create something so huge on the ground would have blanketed most of the Australian continent. And to construct such a monstrosity in orbit would have caused numerous eclipses. Not to mention the fact that any major

construction accidents that came crashing back down to Earth would have had the potential to be extinction events. However the Callade had so much as constructed the vessel, that was beyond anything humans could do. And that wasn’t even getting into faster than light travel.

Susan attended meeting after meeting after meeting. World leaders and foremost scientists were getting scared. And the general public, if they could have heard even one-tenth of what was currently secret, would have returned to a state of full-blown panic.

It likely wouldn’t be possible for any members of the general public to be talked off *that* kind of a ledge.

So the meetings were divided into one faction which was tasked with trying to figure out how to tell the public without setting off a maelstrom, and the other faction, which spent its time trying to figure out how the hell to deal with the Callade.

Not being a scientist or a politician, Susan shuttled between the two committees. Some considered how to meet an alien threat with force yet at the same time not panic the populace. That seemed an impossible combination.

Others wanted to continue believing in and trusting the Callade. Maybe Jensen had been right all along. Maybe what had been more or less a hastily blurted-out invitation had been a good idea after all.

Still others wondered if Jensen’s suicide was the only reasonable reaction to everything that was happening.

And through it all, Susan and Marshall

worked with the rest of the SETI team to communicate, somehow, with the approaching vessel.

It was plowing along at a 1% of the speed of light clip. Hardly the stuff of hard core science fiction, but still far faster than any human or human-made object had ever gone. Scientists estimated that the craft would get to Earth in about two Earth years or so. There was time enough to figure out what the hell to do.

And then there wasn't. For when the alien vessel left the Oort Cloud and entered the Kuiper Belt, someone must have hit the gas. The vessel traveled from Quaoar to Pluto at a speed that was closer to one-tenth of the speed of light.

If that speed could be maintained, then the vessel would be on the Earth's doorstep in around a week. Adding to their problems was the start of scattered reports by amateur astronomers seeing something moving out there, between Pluto and Charon.

Davies and the other world leaders had to act, ready or not. They all made speeches at just about simultaneously, urging calm and prudence at the same time.

To the surprise of Susan and everyone else who had been privy to the Callade's imminent arrival, most people stayed calm. It wasn't a festival of looting, although church, mosque, temple, ashram, and synagogue attendance was way, way up.

The news followed the craft as it orbited Neptune and some of Neptune's moons a few times, and then moved onto the Uranian System.

Suggestions poured in from all over the world about what to say and who would say it, and how. The general public got hung up on the minutiae of First Contact. They sent in everything from fashion choices to the protocols of who should talk first, where they would meet, whether refreshments would be served, and hundreds of other nagging details.

Susan's name had been in the press before, and she found herself inundated with suggestions on makeup application, how she should wear her hair, and even the heel height of her shoes.

It was all too much – but it was, she felt, the only way the general public could inject themselves into the process. She tried to be patient with their many, many bizarre ideas.

Meanwhile, the Callade continued what was looking more and more like a search. They circled Uranus and then Saturn and also both of those gas giants' biggest moons. They treated Jupiter a little differently, only circling the largest planet one time. Marshall remarked on that to Susan, who replied, "You know that some people suspect Jupiter is a failed star. Maybe the Callade feel the same way."

The craft then made its way through the asteroid belt, circling larger bodies like Vesta, Pallas, and the largest asteroid, Ceres. By the time it got to Mars, every person who could broadcast – or so it seemed – was doing so.

Radio stations got in on the act, offering the Callade everything from a lifetime's supply of music to a new car if the aliens

would land somewhere close by. Amateur podcasters put their two cents in, too, and old timers hauled out their CBs and ham radios so that they, too, could participate.

“We sound needy and kind of desperate,” Susan remarked to Marshall. Their truce was still on, and they were in her living room, enjoying a glass of wine.

“Well, right now, they’re the only game in town.” He checked his phone. “At their present course and speed, they should be orbiting Earth in less than an hour.”

“I would have thought I’d be more nervous, or scared. It’s funny, but I’m neither.”

“So how do you feel?” he asked.

“Intrigued – I suppose that’s as good a word for it as any. I’m curious when it comes to what they look like, of course. But right now, they don’t scare me.”

“You may very well change your mind in an hour.”

“Always the optimist, eh, Marshall? But in all seriousness, it just feels like we’re in a theater, waiting for the curtain to go up.”

“Let’s just hope the genre isn’t horror.”

A little over an hour later, the craft orbited the moon once and then the Earth. Its orbits were in bands. First it circled the South Pole, then farther up to the Tropic of Capricorn, and then north to the Equator, and then the Tropic of Cancer. Then it circled the North Pole and switched everything up.

This time, it followed longitudes rather than latitudes, circling the Earth above Africa first. Maybe the Callade were starting with the larger land masses first, or

southerly ones, or... something. There had to be some sort of logic behind their behaviors.

The flight path was deliberate and careful. It was obvious even to the smallest child, that this was a search grid.

But there were no communications. The craft was utterly silent, and didn’t seem to even make engine noises. The suspense was killing people. Bored, nervous, scared and on edge, rioting started. It fanned out from major cities in waves. That is, except for the areas just below the craft.

Just within the craft’s shadow, there was an eerie calm. Were the Callade somehow mind-controlling people, through drugs or vibrations or other means? It certainly seemed that way to Susan.

The craft finally stopped just above, of all places, Kampala in Uganda. The Callade released a shaft of golden light that reached all the way to the ground. The vessel itself remained in geostationary orbit. The light’s purpose revealed itself shortly thereafter – it was some form of space elevator.

What eventually looked like two individuals took it down to the surface as the people of Earth sat and rocked and collectively bit their fingernails as longtime quitters chain smoked and others paced so much they threatened to wear out the carpets.

The light was dim enough to obscure the details, but that didn’t stop people from speculating about the Callade’s appearance. The descent took several minutes. So there was plenty of time for every human crackpot from Saint Petersburg to

Rio de Janeiro to tweet or post or broadcast or just shout out their terrified, addlebrained theories to whoever would listen.

Once the descent concluded, the shaft of light disappeared. And the sight of the Callade – for there really had been two of them – made the people of Earth collectively gasp.

Every prediction and speculation as to their appearance had been wrong, wrong, wrong. Instead, they perfectly matched the male and female archetypal images on the record which the Voyager probe had been carrying. This was even down to the gold tone and utter nudity.

They stared at the people of Kampala for a moment, and then the pair of Callade shifted. They mimicked the looks of several people, altering their appearances every half a minute or so. The one that had initially presented as female would change to either male or female, and the one that had initially presented as male did the same.

Therefore, Susan reasoned, they were probably not male and female as understood by humans. Maybe they didn't even have gender – or maybe they had as many genders as they had appearances.

They went through iteration after dizzying iteration, but they never said a word.

They were silent even when people tried to speak with them. It wasn't until they had seemingly cycled through everyone in the immediate vicinity that one of them finally spoke. It was the one that had originally presented as female, currently imitating the look of a little girl. She stated the standard Callade greeting, "So beautiful."

Susan could have sworn those words were in perfect English, but the entire assembly in Kampala seemed to understand the greeting without effort. English was spoken in Uganda, but by *everyone*? Weren't there some people who only spoke Swahili?

She'd been only half-listening to various news reports, and they started to report that foreign news bureaus claimed the greeting was in Thai or Portuguese, Mandarin or Navajo. So they had some sort of a translating device. Or maybe the Callade themselves were, somehow, able to speak in hundreds if not thousands of languages simultaneously.

Marshall looked her in the eye. "This feels weird. Nice but weird."

"Definitely weird."

No one in the Kampala unofficial greeting committee – obviously – had any form of experience in First Contact protocols. There wasn't even a leader among them, so they all started to talk to the Callade at once.

"God, I hope nobody accidentally causes an interstellar incident," she muttered.

"So far, so good. They're weird – as we agree, and I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way – but they haven't done anything that we could possibly construe as a hostile act," he said.

Then the news broadcasts reported that more shafts of golden light were starting to be spotted, appearing over dozens of areas on Earth. The locations seemed random, and maybe they were meant to be. It was cities like Wilmington, Delaware and Cairo and Helsinki and Montevideo. But there

were also rural and suburban areas including, ironically, Mars, Pennsylvania.

Susan could hear rustling outside. She didn't really have neighbors off in the out-back, so that in and of itself was highly irregular. She threw open the door and there was a shaft of light just in front of her doorstep.

So she had more company, and they had traveled a long way.

Marshall got up and stood just behind her.

A pair of Callade arrived on that same sort of golden stair. They had assumed the appearances of Susan and Marshall, apparently before they had even reached the ground.

"So beautiful," they said together.

"Uh, so beautiful," Susan replied. She elbowed Marshall, who responded with what was looking an awful lot like the Callade standard greeting.

Then she froze in panic. What was she supposed to do? Offer them a soda? Take their nonexistent coats? Ask them which sports team they preferred?

It was also unnerving to see her and Marshall's doppelgangers. At least the voices didn't match. Much like the first sound transmissions, the voices sounded mechanical.

The one that had her shape said, "Do not be afraid. We are only interested in a peaceful connection."

"I see," she said.

"Can I ask why you picked this house?" Marshall asked. "We're off in BFE here. I mean, it's the middle of nowhere."

"We have been investigating the messages we were receiving from you," said the Callade who looked like Marshall. "And some of the shorter earlier messages came from right here."

Those few short messages – she'd sent them from her phone! "Yeah, that was me," Susan confessed. "The leader of our country approved of them. Marshall here led the team that cracked the language barrier and perfected the first translation."

"Then this is most fortuitous," said the one who was in her shape. "We had hoped to meet you. There is also the leader who invited us."

The other Callade said, "That verbiage was radically different. We suspect a part of it was not authorized."

"Oh, yeah, you mean Jensen," Marshall said. "He's not the leader of our country any more. He's also not alive anymore."

"That is most unfortunate," said the Callade that looked like him. "Was it recent?"

"A few years ago," Susan said.

"So it is too late to try a resurrection."

"Don't you mean resuscitation?" she asked.

"A resurrection is a lot more of a religious term for us," Marshall explained.

"Understood," the Callade replied in unison.

"Can I ask you a question?" Susan asked.

"Of course," the Callade replied, again in unison.

"What's your mission? And I mean *really*."

“We are curious about other life forms,” said the one that looked like her. “So we travel, we meet them, and we establish relations in much the same way as we have done so here.”

“How many times have you done this before?” Marshall asked.

“Over one thousand times,” replied his alien twin.

“There are *that* many intelligent species in the galaxy?” Susan asked.

“Can we meet any of them?” Marshall added.

“We have encountered hostility at times,” his alien twin explained. “Others are more interested in maintaining their privacy. Allow us to be the go-betweens.”

“We must go,” Susan’s doppelganger said abruptly.

“Go?” Susan asked.

“Yes. It is our intention to meet all of the humans on your world. This will take us a while,” said Marshall’s alien twin.

“There are people who are going to shoot at you,” Susan pointed out.

“We will be careful,” said her alien twin. The two Callade stepped back outside and were whisked right up the shaft of golden light.

They were both quiet for a while. “Well, that was weird,” Marshall finally ventured.

“I could use a drink.”

Similar scenes, apparently, played out around the globe. As Marshall and Susan had warned, the natives weren’t always so friendly.

And then there was the matter of the

other species which the Callade had already encountered. Where were they? And, even more importantly, why were the Callade being so damned patronizing when it came to the question of meeting them?

President Davies called a meeting. “I’d rather not look a gift horse in the mouth here, but I got a funny feeling about all of this. It feels like we’re their pets and I don’t like that, not one bit.”

A number of governments soon afterwards changed hands, as people voted overwhelmingly, time and time again, to just give the Callade free rein. Investigations into elections fraud and hacking turned up nothing.

And so when he expressed his concerns to the newer versions of his fellow world leaders, he was outvoted by an overwhelming majority.

The Callade inserted themselves into human society. Laws were passed so as to prevent wily shapeshifting aliens from committing fraud or stealing trade secrets. Rape and breaking and entering laws were strengthened as well.

But none of that seemed to be at all necessary. To a person, the Callade were polite, respectable, prudent, sober, studious, and law-abiding. There were none of the feared incidents – not even by accident. They never, ever broke the law.

Eventually, humans and Callade started to intermarry. They could not have offspring. But otherwise their unions were very much like fully human marriages, except for the part about a spouse never having to age. And they could be anything

or look any way, at any time. Adultery never happened, and divorce was unheard of. Foundling wards emptied out.

The Callade, it seemed, loved humans more than themselves. Humans were *all* beautiful to them, with no exceptions whatsoever.

Susan was nearly 90 and still at SETI, in a way, as was Marshall, although he was still in his late seventies. They both moved more slowly. Callade medicine and technology had done nothing to stall or reverse the human aging process. All they had was the potential promise of reviving the dead, but only if the dead could be attended to nearly immediately. But revival did not last for long, and no one got any younger from it. A lot of humans made their final intentions clear in their wills and other directives – *no revivals*.

For Susan and Marshall, their tasks at SETI were largely superficial. They were treated with reverence, having been part of the team that had first contacted the Callade and translated their language. But they really didn't have anything to *do*.

The Earth was prospering, as the threats from overpopulation and famine started to disappear. Lines were shorter. Traffic eased. Unemployment was very nearly nonexistent. There was competition for adoptions.

Susan was sitting on her front step, just outside the home she still had in the Australian outback, even though she was no longer cleared to fly the helicopter solo.

The night was crisp with just a slight breeze. The visibility was off-the-charts gor-

geous. It seemed as if every single star in the Milky Way galaxy was out there to be seen.

She still wore her earpiece, and she still listened. It was getting harder to listen, as the numerous messages from the Callade on Earth to the Callade elsewhere were hard to figure out. Wherever 'elsewhere' was, no humans knew. But at least she wasn't losing her hearing yet.

But whatever promise or hope of space travel with the Callade was gone. Still, no one much cared, or at least it seemed that way. Things were far too exciting and wonderful at home.

But the messages had gotten annoying to Susan. If she didn't know any better, she would have sworn the Callade were either blocking transmissions or preventing SETI from listening to them. But that was absurd! The Callade only had humanity's best interests at heart.

But that night, she heard a rhythmic tapping and a repeating tone. She contacted Marshall immediately. As a precaution, everyone on the team was sworn to secrecy as they worked on a translation, for the message was neither human nor Callade. The numbers didn't match.

It was slow going but finally, after nearly a year, they had something.

Beware the Callade

They sent back one message with the top-secret approval of two former American presidents, Elmer Davies and Talia Brookfield. The current president, Casper Pennington, approved but didn't want to be in on the nitty gritty details.

Why?

The answer came back swiftly. And because they had practice translating those aliens' numerical patterns, the translation was relatively quick.

They mean to drive you to extinction. And they do it through intermarriage and interbreeding with the native species. We have seen this happen before. They will either take you as mates openly, or they will use their shapeshifting abilities to do so by fraud. If you do not stop them now, your species will die off in no more than four generations.

Susan and Marshall stared at the communiqué. "Do you think that's at all accurate?" he finally asked. "I mean, maybe their motives aren't such pure ones."

"Right," Susan replied, distracted.

There was a hasty meeting called for everyone in on the message. Davies finally suggested, "Well, why don't we just ask them for proof?"

Marshall translated and sent the approved message himself.

We need proof.

They got their response in a month. It translated into a set of schematics with attached directions. Nobody in the group was particularly handy, so an engineer was hired. She wasn't told anything about the origin of the schematics or the nature of the project. She had but one task: to build whatever the schematics were for.

The prototype was ready in two weeks. It was a kind of metallic slat, about the size and shape of a standard six-inch ruler. It was to be implanted in one's forearm. With little to lose, Susan and Marshall volun-

teered as guinea pigs.

The implantation process was done under local anesthesia and it didn't hurt. The device was covered with skin and the whole thing was seamless as a plastic surgeon sworn to secrecy created the tiniest of incisions and sewed the tiniest of dissolving stitches which no one could see unless they were really close up.

Once her barely noticeable scars healed, Susan was flown home and thought very little of it for the next few days. It seemed as if nothing was happening, and the warning and the prototype were both time-consuming lies, possibly designed to drive a wedge between humans and Callade.

After four days, her doorbell rang. She shuffled over to answer it, still half-asleep. "Yes?"

It was the letter carrier with a package. And it was far too early for that. "Sign here, please."

Something must have kicked in, for she looked into his eyes and the whites weren't white at all. They were green. "Callade?"

"Nice folks. See ya."

After the letter carrier had left, she called Marshall. "Have you seen anything yet?"

"What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Green sclera; you know, the whites of the eyes. Except they're green. Once you see them, you can't un-see them."

A couple of hours later, he called her back. "There are a lot of them. Haven't you noticed, Susan?"

“Well, I kind of live out in the middle of nowhere, you know. But a lot of Callade isn’t necessarily a sign of malice.”

“Understood; so we need to test the test.”

They thought for a few moments, her in Australia and he in Brazil. Finally, she said, “We need to test the people who we know are human – or at least they *should* be human, no matter what. Have you tested whether you can get a reading from images on the viewer, or does someone have to be close by for it to work? I looked at myself in the mirror and I look normal, but maybe that’s a function of the reflection or something or other.”

“Hang on; I’ll test it right now.” He flipped on his viewer and surfed through the channels as she listened in. “Aha!”

“What did you find?”

“That home shopping gal who sells those puff paint angel paintings with dates of birth and stats so they look like heavenly baseball cards? She’s Callade.”

“So maybe the Callade are just here to sell tchotchkes?”

“Very funny, Susan. The whole thing is damned fishy.”

“But which part of it is fishy – the Callade or these other aliens?”

In a few more months, they got their answer. It was the State of the Union address, which was to be held on the White House lawn and not inside, so as to accommodate a ton of both human and Callade press.

President Casper Pennington was wearing sunglasses, as were all of the Supreme

Court justices, former presidents like Davies and Brookfield, and all of the human press corps. That made sense, at least on its surface. It was a bright sunshiny day, after all.

But then they took off their sunglasses as one and, to a person, they all had green sclera.

Shaken, Susan called Marshall. “Did you see? It’s Brookfield and Davies, and, and Pennington! So they know about the message and, and the implants.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Marshall, what do you think happened to the *real* Brookfield and Davies and Pennington? Do you think they’re dead?”

“I - oh God – I bet they are. I mean, how else could the Callade cover up the switch?”

She felt a scratchy lump in her throat. Talia Brookfield had been a good friend for decades. “Poor Talia – and the rest of them! Marshall, this is appalling! We have got to do something!”

“What do you have in mind?”

“There have got to be people left who can broadcast. We need satellites and all of that. Get a reporter on the air. Even some cub reporter can warn the people. We’ve got to get a message out, before it’s too late!” Grief was set aside for the moment, in favor of mobilizing. She would deal with her feelings later, like she always did.

“Calm down, okay? I’ll get flown out there, and we’ll strategize. Just sit tight.”

“Okay.”

She was expecting a helicopter, but

instead, nearly a day later, at the end of the day as the sun was setting, Marshall arrived in a Cessna, which touched down expertly on her tiny airfield. He wasn't alone.

The moment Susan saw he and his three cohorts were wearing sunglasses, she started to hoarsely scream. And when they took them off, all showing green sclera, she fainted.

She came to a few minutes later. "I would have thought you would have killed me for knowing."

"No. You are an older human, near the end of your expected life span," said the Callade in the shape of Marshall.

"You must want something, then. Tell me, how many humans – *real* humans – are left?"

"About one hundred thousand, maybe. And you're right that we want something out of you. We want you to broadcast a message through SETI."

"Whatever for?"

"The ones who warned you? We had thought we completely crushed their rebellion."

"Apparently not."

"Exactly so. Therefore, Susan Sheffield, it is your mission to lure them here. They will believe you, as you are the only one left who was in on their initial communications."

"Oh? I take it Marshall Porter refused?"

"Yes. And so he has been replaced."

"What if I refuse, too?"

"Then we'll kill you, too."

Susan thought for just a second. "You'll kill me anyway. So you can just go to hell."

She wasn't as nimble as she had once been, but she knew the area better than any Callade and even better than most humans. Under cover of twilight, she escaped into the bush. They would not be able to find her.

Her phone was still linked to SETI, and she sent a message.

Beware the Callade. They have killed my people. And if you give them half a chance, they will kill yours, too.

Once satisfied that the message had gone through, she dug a hole with her bare hands into the Artesian Basin. She threw her phone into it and covered it up as best she could, wiping her muddy hands on her clothes.

With no food or water, she would surely die. "But at least it'll be on my terms. Besides, everything in Australia is always trying to kill you. All I've got to do is wait."



“FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode two of our serialized short novel *Freedom*. In this story, alien beings feed and survive off the freedoms of humans, who can only combat them by restricting their own rights, even to the point of slavery. See episode one in our January 31 (Disablot) issue to catch up and...enjoy....

Episode 2

The house was not far from where I was, just a few streets, just down the central avenue, I walked for about 15 minutes, absorbed in my thoughts, I thought a lot about the way I would address the issue, although I think maybe not I am the only one who has approached this house for this purpose, I would soon discover it.

In front of the house there is a garden, quite careless to be realistic, it looks like a completely abandoned house, and if I had not seen the reflection of his face peeking out of the first floor window, I probably would not have noticed the human presence in that place. I proceed to my work, and I slowly approach the door, I play it a couple of times, I wait a while and nobody comes to my call, I play again with force and insistence, nothing, apparently Mr. Wilson does not need visits in his home; I

value myself and think about what I would do. I knock on the door, but this time I scream "Mr. Wilson, I am Jacob Bradley, and as for your son, they also came for me, help me, I beg of you", and I stood for a longer time, approached the door and I placed my face on the threshold, closing my eyes, begging to really attend, I do not know how many minutes passed, but after a moment the door opened, and a small man was approaching me, I saw how it came From the shadows, I knew it was him.

"What do you want, boy?" And I could not speak, the words did not come out, when I saw his face, I could see the sadness, the years of emotional and physical wear, I can almost see my father reflected in this little gentleman, I regained my composure, cleared my throat and told him I needed information about what had happened in my town, from my experience with these beings who wanted to take me away from my family, offering me a much better life if I left them behind, simply opened the door completely, and with a kind gesture made me go home.

I went in and I could immediately see that there were family portraits in several visible parts of the house, evidently this man loved his family, but he looked lonely and tired, after analyzing the situation a bit

more, I realized that he was not I knew where the wife was, and not even the authorities had mentioned it, maybe I was in the same state as him, sad and disconsolate, or maybe he just left home, but these were just theories that were hardly formulated in my mind , and that they were diverting me from the main objective.

I returned from my thoughts, and decided that I should start the conversation about myself, so I started to contradict Mr. Wilson how was the first time they approached me, what was my reaction, how was it that I felt, my thoughts, and everything, I came to tell you that there was a time in which I no longer feared, I just ignored the signs and their presence, their sad eyes looked at me with attention, and I thought I saw a hint of amazement when you listen to my words, I suppose that your son the same thing happened to him, and the difference was evident, I was still among us and he had left with them a long time ago.

Mr. Wilson explained to me that he had been pointed out long ago by members of his community, who did not believe in their stories, even when they became official statements by the highest authorities of the town. That is, he was partly blamed for the death of his son, but he told me that he did not care that anyone believed him, his wife, the authorities and he had seen what happened, and that it was enough for him that these people had witnessed this fact.

When I asked about little William, but not only wanted to know about that horri-

ble day where these parents had to say goodbye to their little one, but wanted to know about their personality, their tastes and preferences, all the information they could collect from the child would be useful. , so I could create a kind of relationship, a common factor, maybe I could get to know why they chose us both to be taken from this earth, I needed answers and it was very difficult to put together a case or a theory with so little information, with so much ignorance.

The father made a description of his son, which was quite similar to how I was as a child, very skillful, intrepid, with a great desire to learn from everything around me, curious, restless, was always in contact with all the elements inside and outside the house, and he was always loved by all the people under his command; that's how I was as a child, a very curious being, completely free to live by my standards, always eager for information, and quite intelligent for my age, I could understand, in my short life, many issues and situations that were difficult to process even for some Adults.

I began to make assumptions, maybe the "others" wished to have in their power the mind or spirit of a child so awake and attentive to the details of our world, or other things like these, it was not known for sure what was I tried. The Lord took me out of my thoughts, he told me that his daughter had become very ill, something about a respiratory illness, the diagnosis was not encouraging, the people who did the medical evaluation of the little Sarah

advised her parents to try to make her live his last days in the happiest way possible, and they obeyed that way; According to what the man said, Sarah was quite similar to us (William and I), but as soon as the disease began to attack her she lost her spark, however, she said that she had visions of people who wanted her to accompany her, they all carried these hallucinations to high fevers suffered by the girl due to infections.

She was just 10 years old when it happened, Sarah was in her room, and her parents were downstairs, there was a loud scream and then a thud, as she ran down the stairs, the little girl was on the ground, lifeless. This was a hard blow for the family, they spent years of darkness, they dreamed of the little one, they did not stop thinking about her, the pain was unbearable, and it stayed that way until the arrival of William. The boy represented a light in this home that had become so gloomy, and the Wilsons were gradually forgetting what had happened years ago, always talking to the little one about his sister, and how much he would have loved the company of a good boy like him, I guess he drew a vision of his little sister.

He became suspicious, after William's departure, that perhaps they also took her to her, that perhaps she was the first to see them and that the hallucinations were attributed to the illness that the little girl suffered. I asked myself the same.

The gentleman said that after seeing his daughter take William, he changed his form to a terrifying being, which produced

fear and disgust, a rather disgusting creature, there they knew with certainty that it was not Sarah, who took the form friendlier than he found to be able to approach the child and take his wishes to live. The truth is that I did not find much useful information in the story, but one thing did seem strange to me, when the Lord described the visits of these beings to his son, said that he seemed in a trance, that he was definitely completely under his control, and that this surely would have accepted the first request if it were not for the presence of his parents who had rescued him. I remembered the first time that happened to me, I was in a small trance, but not under his complete control, and I think it was the most vulnerable time I was, because for the rest of the visits, I was very clear that my answer would always be negative the requests of these beings.

We talked a little more about what happened, it was getting late and I had to return to my town, I swore to return if I could get a little more information, because in a way I felt that this man deserved an explanation about what was happening, I also I deserved it, but for now we did not have anything else, I said goodbye to Mr. Wilson and I started my way home, with more doubts than before, but with information I did not know before, since my father had not heard the complete story of Mr. Wilson, In any case, I felt uneasy, less satisfied because I had fulfilled the objective I had set for myself.

I came home again, with new hope, thinking that perhaps I would find a way to

evade these beings, or that some person would discover some fantastic secret by which we could defeat this pair of beings (I thought it was a few) and we would get rid of their existence for the rest of our lives, I really had great hope in this, and I would really do everything possible to make this happen, I was not going to let my family wear out what's left of life to this matter that torments them since I was little, I could no longer resist their suffering, and it is not that before it seemed normal to me, only that before I could not take this matter with more seriousness, due to the limitations of age, worse I was ready to face my fears and those of my parents, and I was also sure that something good would come out of this.

The days went by quite normally, and the commotion of the "workers" who were previously slaves was a matter treated by all the homeowners, like us; the truth is that in our town these things were carried much more calmly, and at least in my house was not much difference, we always liked to treat slaves well, they performed better in their work, and I liked to believe that they were happier that way, the fact that they were workers now made me think that they would be much happier than they were at any time, and I kept thinking about it for a couple of months, however, one day everything changed.

Since that day when I got home I felt that things took an unexpected turn, that is, I thought that in a long time I could not find any news about these beings, but I was wrong, and in what way, at that moment I

thought that this it would mark a before and an after for our town and all its inhabitants, and it was. Before dawn, I remember having slept peacefully, I felt safe, firm in my idea of making a plan to get everyone (in this case my family) away from the power and influence of these beings, but apparently soon we would need more than a plan to protect a few, we would need a strategy to protect all the people, and all the surrounding areas, because apparently this evil would spread.

I woke up the next day, it was a really long night - I had a rather strange dream, I was visited by one of the beings, or rather, I was like in a kind of place where I was the "stranger." I was surrounded by the creatures, I assumed it because they asked me to stay with them, to give me their strength, their influence and I would be free, I felt like fighting, but for some reason I could not do it, I felt that the hopes left me a little, but I did not want to give in to them. I woke up quite exalted, with pain in the chest, I suppose the dream prepared me for everything that came after, and I greatly appreciate it.

As soon as I got up and knocked on the door, it was the person who gave me the information about Mr. Wilson, about his case, or rather the little son. He told me that many more cases had been registered in just a few days, he could not find an explanation as to why, at that moment, cases had increased, why these beings had ended the lives of so many people in such a short time, and More frightening was that his attacks had become more frequent. He

said that one of his companions had moved to one of the most important capitols of the nation, where apparently they had already confronted the creatures and had already found a solution, something temporary, this gave me great hope, if there was a way to evade these beings, I wanted to know her, to protect us all.

Apparently in a few days we all would have information about how to avoid everything that was happening, in the town we would not wait too long to know the most common methods to get these creatures away from here, and apparently they were just beginning their visit, to all the towns that we knew. This was a threat to which you had never confronted us, but we had to have faith that this strange and frightening situation would end soon, for me it was very difficult, I felt personally affected, because of all the cases that were talked about, none the victim resisted, all accompanied these beings to what they called "a better life". I sat down to think about the situation, I had the need to meet someone who has also escaped the clutches of these beings, this thought became frequent in my mind, but the chances of finding another like me were hard to imagine, and that I was terrified, however there was an even worse thought, that there was only one person in the world that these strangers could not take, me.

The cases were increasing, what I found more curious is that many of these involved the slaves who were now workers, I decided to dig a little more, with my trusted workers, one of them told me that rumors were

running about these beings , which one of their ancestors had told them, he told them "freedom is beautiful, there are freedoms of many kinds, and if they wanted them before, they must now renounce them", he explained that they had never been attacked by these beings before , but since they were given a little freedom, most of them (slaves), began to fantasize about all the freedoms they could get, and that right at this stage was when beings realized their existence. Many of the workers, especially the elderly, were encouraging other slaves to surrender their freedoms, to leave the figure of worker, so they would be safer, away from the sight of all evils, had to make a sacrifice for the greater good At first it seemed like a crazy idea, but if you spent a few minutes understanding why the attacks increased in the last few days, this made some sense, and honestly, I needed to believe in something more concrete than my own assumptions, I definitely needed it.

Later another case had been registered, of a slave, of a nearby house, apparently he asked his master for some kind of right, which some acquaintances had, and he accepted gladly, after this, one of the beings took away the life, the theory of the worker was gaining strength, but we would only know what would happen in a definitive way when the information of the city arrived, and while this did not happen, surely I could not sleep, I felt them close, I felt they were coming for me, I wanted to be prepared, but for now, just as always, I only had my determination not to go with them, that was my best weapon, and I

could not do without it just at this moment
so dangerous for humanity.



END TRANSMISSION