

On November 22, 1978 two strange visitors came to the sleepy town of Mount Shasta City, California.

The two, who travelled by unconventional means, emerged from the alley between Shirley Ringer's diner and the abandoned True Pine Lumber office. The little man in the cream linen suit cheerfully tipped his hat to three passers-by, resulting in an odd conversation. His young female friend listened curiously. At the diner, they had pie. A mild issue of payment was settled satisfactorily.

This is stuff that really happened.

The Boys Upstairs

by Al B Dickerson

for George Potter

But it's not my diary or anything like that. It's my story. You see, I *was* that young female friend who had pie. This happened a long time ago and a lot has happened since, so I've had to rely on old memories (hazy), guesses (wild) and cut & paste articles from the internet (convenient).

I'm Dorothy McShane (Hello!), but back then I was Ace. The little man in the cream linen suit is the Doctor, but back then he was the Professor, except when I was angry or irritated at him (frequent) or being obedient (rare).

So, fair warning. This is all memories and guesses, like I said, and I'll tell it the way I want. For example, I'm getting ready to skip ahead thirty-five years.

On November 27, 2013 (see?) a single strange visitor came to the sleepy town of Mount Shasta City, California.

She was me: a mature woman, but still sturdy and healthy. I drove a rented '72 'Cuda someone had painted blue. It was roomy, but nothing like my old getabout.

The rangers tried to talk me out of it. No surprise. Tell Dorothy McShane she can't do something? That always works. In twenty minutes I had my wilderness permit, summit pass and a written apology.

Worst time of the year to climb the mountain, they said, but I knew that already. I'd done my homework, like the Professor said I should. I don't rush in anymore. I already knew that the weather had been unseasonably warm, but there were no active avalanche warnings. There had been snow the week before but down here it was almost melted. Up there, it was shallow and crusted and would only make the climb easier. Not that that mattered. I was going. I had a promise to keep.

"Have a good day!" said the man in the robe. "Hello there!"

All morning, ever since the Professor had told me we'd be taking a 'little detour' from my 'orientation' (by which he meant, 'learn my rules'), my imagination had been ablaze. Would we visit Earth's past again? Travel to another planet? Or (as I feared) would it just be another visit to another alien shop or bazaar? I swear, the man loved haggling, but he never seemed to purchase anything. Which is handy when you always forget to carry money, despite my constant reminders. Anyway, he wouldn't tell me.

I'd wiped the last of the sleepy-dust from my eyes, the Tardis had landed, and we strode forth bravely. I was deflated to see a dingy alley full of trash bins. Then I saw a familiar bottle.

"'Coca-Cola'? Professor, we're on Earth? Again?"

He scowled and I changed my tune. "It's okay, Professor. I was just looking forward to something more..."

"Wicked? Brill? Ace, you underestimate the importance of twentieth-century Earth."

Uh-oh, lecture time. 1) Don't interrupt. 2) Let him finish. 3) Act appreciative.

“It’s here, now and in the beginning years of the twenty-first century, that Earth becomes a matter of galactic interest. You’re becoming interconnected, global, a unified species. The people of your time are the template of the future. Your taste in music and clothing and food will influence your descendants for countless eons to come. This is the proverbial ‘it’, the cradle of the many Earth Empires of the future! But now, you’re just amateurs. You’re announcing yourselves to the galaxy with no regard for the consequences. Did you know that races infinitely wiser than yours have declared your world a quarantine zone? Right this moment there’s a ring of cloaked satellites up there telling the colonisers, the entrepreneurs, the invaders, the missionaries and the merely curious to leave this world alone or face the consequences!”

Okay, I had to interrupt. Leave this world alone? “It’s not stopping *you*, is it, Professor?”

He frowned. “I *am* the consequences. And stop calling me ‘Professor’!”

“Sorry, Doc – hey! Look at that awesome mountain!”

We’d cleared the alley, and I had my first look at Shasta. I don’t know why, but I fell in love and awe right then and there. Shasta’s not a very big mountain. She’s just another extinct volcano. Mountaineers don’t rate her a hard climb. But there’s something to her that’s hard to describe. There’s a mystery in her symmetry, like you can sense her weird history just by seeing her. Later, I’d read about the things that happened there: there were said to be survivors of the ancient land Lemuria living inside. A man claimed to meet St Germain up there. Sasquatch (the Professor calls them ‘skinny Yetis’) are rumoured to roam the slopes. But even if you don’t know about her history, the mountain seems to watch you.

I knew I would climb her one day, and was about to ask the Professor if we could do it now, when someone said: “Have a good day! Hello there!”

Three men stood on the sidewalk outside the diner. Except for the star-covered robes they wore, they looked like the first line of a racist joke. The white man who’d addressed us was smiling expectantly while his Asian and black companions frowned. The Professor tipped his hat.

“Well, hello yourself! I’m the Doctor and this is my friend Ace!” he said.

“Thank you for greeting us so kindly,” said the man. “Would you be so helpful as to give us directions?”

The Asian man hissed. “Don’t talk to the locals!”

Our new friend turned to him. “Be quiet, Cap. It won’t do any harm.”

“Please excuse my friend,” he said to us, “but could I entreat you to tell us where the Bigfeet live?”

The rangers keep the road to Bunny Flat open as long as they can. I’ve traded in the ‘Cuda for a sturdy jeep and as I climb through the forests the details begin to trickle back. As I park in the deserted lot on the lower slope of the mountain, the memories begin to collate. I remember coffee, pie and adventurous expectancy.

In the boot, my climbing gear. Crampons, a fur-collared parka, a hunting rifle (for bear, I tell myself), survival pack. I collect my gear, lock up and listen to the big silence.

I’m back, I tell the mountain, myself and anyone listening.

“Listen, mister. I don’t care if it is ten per cent beryllium, it ain’t legal tender!”

Peace Spenser, on the day we met, had already had a bad morning. She’d woken up feeling disconnected and groggy, as usual. The spacious house was chilly, the breakfast her mother left on the counter was cold. The sky was gloomy as she walked to work. Her feet already ached when she arrived at the diner. Business was slow with the holidays. Small mercy.

And now this: me, blushing a bit, and the Professor, irritated. Two customers who ate pie, drank coffee and tried to pay with an array of novelty coinage.

Poor Peace.

“Professor,” I said, “what did I tell you about money? Is this going to happen every time we land?”

“The matter seldom arose before,” he said. “Stay here, Ace. I’ll be back.”

“You’d better!”

I smiled at the waitress. “I’m sorry. He’s absentminded, is all. Your name is Peace? That’s brill! I’m Ace, and that was the Professor. I used to be a waitress, too,

so I know how this looks. Don't worry, he'll be back with the right money. If he doesn't, I'll thump him."

Peace smiled back. She was about eighteen, I guess. Sort of skinny, pale and blonde-haired. Pretty, in a weary way.

"Sure, then. You can do it out back. I'll loan you a baseball bat," she said.

She grinned then, and her eyes twinkled, and I saw that under the exhaustion she was actually quite beautiful. We laughed. I looked around – the diner was empty.

"Will you get in trouble if you sit down?" I asked, and she said no, Shirley was cool.

"So," she said, "are you in town for Thanksgiving? You guys have family here?"

"Oh, it's Thanksgiving! That's why you have turkeys and puritans everywhere!", I said. "And I don't have a family. It's just the Professor and me."

"Oh... you're his student?"

Which is the diplomatic way of asking why a sixteen year old girl is traveling with an older man. People never seem to ask the Professor why he travels with a young girl. They just accept it and move on. Me, I get the third degree. At least Peace wasn't leering.

"Yeah, sort of, I guess, but not really. The Professor got me out of a tight spot. I'm his assistant, like. I watch his back. He's not funny or anything, if that's what you're asking. He's my best friend."

She sipped coffee. "Those coins were cool. What are they, tokens or something?"

Don't tell people about travelling, the Professor said. But Peace was nice.

"Would you believe me if I said they're from outer space?" I said, expecting another laugh.

"Of course not, silly. The Galactic Brotherhood banned all commerce eons ago. As the Immeasurable One has said, 'All possessions and wealth are chains to the soul.' The Space Brothers would deal harshly with an outbreak of forbidden Capitalism."

What's that they say in screenplays? (Beat)?

“Anyway, it’s nice to sit down. My feet are killing me. Pass me the sugar, will you?”

“As with all worthwhile endeavours, the foundation of the Social Empire of Galactic Brotherhood came at a painful cost. The galaxy at this time was troubled and unenlightened, and messages of peace and war were sent between the star planets.

On Mechavolcanus meetings were held between the Airless Brains and the Faction of Robot Hands, an unprecedented congress, wherein acceptance of the Terms of Wisdom paved the way for planetary unification. Thus, Mechavolcanus joined the Empire.

On Silinam Delta the ageless prophets of the Third Recursion were consulted, and the Unhinged Ultra confirmed their visions. All who resisted the Social Empire were doomed to soul extinction. Thus, Silinam Delta joined the Empire.

The dark ships of Zillotti Colony V resisted all attempts at peace until it became clear to the Ascended Commanders that total destruction was their only hope for spiritual awakening. And so, after the regretful termination of negotiations, the Space Brother fleet performed the Rite of Final Unction upon the heretics. Thus, Zillotti Colony V joined the Empire.”

from ‘The Foundation of the Social Empire and What it Means to You!’ (Illuminated Science Studies, Vol. 42. Published in 1963 by IDBSB Science Press, Mount Shasta City, CA)

It’s an easy hike from Bunny Flat to Horse Camp; not climbing at all. But it’s necessary if you want to avoid the accumulated centuries of scree and catch the route up Avalanche Gulch. That’s where it starts, when you leave the gullies and trees and finally see the looming reality of the mountain above. I sit on a boulder for a moment, affixing my crampons. My helmet muffles the wind but, not for the last time, I hear it call my name.

“Ace! Pay attention!”

“Sorry, Professor. I thought I heard something.”

It was later in the day. We’d rented two rooms (after, naturally, initial naive assumptions on the Professor’s part) at the Shasta Motor Inn. The Professor paid

cash, drawing bills from the huge roll of American twenties he'd used to buy breakfast. Now we were just walking around. The Professor was looking at people and buildings. I was distracted by the mountain.

"Good. Use your ears. Use your eyes, your nose, your skin. Let's see how observant you are." He peered sideways at me. I was getting to know that look. It meant he was testing me. "Pretend you are Sherlock Holmes," he said, "and tell me about Shasta."

"Doctor... I hate this," I said. "You make me feel stupid."

"Come on, Ace. We lead dangerous lives. We have to keep our wits about us. Remember Kane? Remember Sailor Jack and the brakeman on the Overland? Remember..."

"Okay, okay. Sorry, Professor." I adjusted my backpack, taking care not to jostle the Nitro-9 I officially didn't have. "All right. It's 1978. The day before Thanksgiving."

"Oh, really?" He seemed pleased. "That explains the turkeys and puritans."

"Doc-tor..."

"Sorry, Ace. Please continue."

"We're in Shasta, California. Weather is nice. Not many people out. Don't Americans go on holiday at Thanksgiving? That could explain why it's so quiet."

"Enough with the facts. Think! What have we seen? Look around! What do you see?"

"Um, we've seen the three weirdos? They were right off, like they were all tripping on something. Or maybe Americans on a bus tour."

"Good," the Professor murmured. "What else?"

My spider-sense tingled. I knew there had to be a reason the he'd brought us here. "Got it! When that one talked to you he was speaking English... but when the other told to him lay off it was that Tardis translation thingie. We heard English, but it wasn't!"

He stopped strolling and smiled at me. He beeped my nose. "There! Not stupid at all, are you, Ace? Now, tell me about your waitress friend again."

"I already told you. Not paying attention, Watson?"

“Tell me again,” he said. “What were her exact words? And don’t call me ‘Watson’!”

“Sorry, Professor. She said ‘Galactic Brotherhood’ and ‘Space Brothers’. Then you came back and she clammed up. So that’s why we’re here! Aliens in California! But *why* are there aliens in California?”

“Now, Ace!” the Doctor remonstrated. “How should I know?” He stopped, seeing something. Grinning, he pointed his umbrella. “What’s that they say in the movies?”

Around the corner moved a vision of eccentric opulence, a bizarre fusion of classic Detroit engineering and the artistic design of a frenzied six-year-old. It was a huge, black Cadillac. Every surface, even the tinted windows, was covered by a mad scattering of stars and planets, every single one with a tiny name painted below. A double line of little flags of alien worlds gently rustled along the bonnet, top and the huge fins on the boot. Most striking of all, though, on the top it was crowned by a clear, lit-up model of a flying saucer. I heard the ‘Blue Danube’ in my head as it sedately steamed past – then realised it wasn’t in my head, but coming from the Space Cadillac.

Wow. Just wow. I grinned back at the Professor. “Follow that car?”

I knew this wasn’t just another bazaar crawl! He chuckled and offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

“The Physical Plane is but a poor shadow of True Reality. With its matter, its fleshly creature desires, its dimensions and boundaries, the Physical Plane is a prison for those who are Illuminated. But it is a prison with a Purpose, for here are our souls forged and tempered in the fires of pre-existence. Our enlightened behaviour here shapes and moulds that which we shall become when we are born into True Life, and that enlightenment can only come with strict adherence to the outlines and procedures given us by the Immeasurable Luuna and the Benevolent Space Brothers.”

from ‘Introduction to Soul Preparation and Bodily Purity’ (Illuminated Science Studies, Vol. 1. Published in 1959 by IDBSB Science Press, Mount Shasta City, CA)

There's a problem with stories based on real life, isn't there? In a made-up story the writer can put everything in order. The people, the stuff that happens, it all serves the story. You find out what you need to know when you need to know. Real life doesn't work like that.

For example, they haven't properly come into the story yet but they're the key to the whole thing, in a way, so I really should confirm it. It's true, you see. The mountain looming above actually was full of Lemurians, keenly observing as events unfolded below.

There's a weird moment of disconnect when you step over the Tardis threshold. From the outside, you open a wooden door and see darkness. One step, and you're walking through a big mechanical vault door into the console room. From the other side, you step past the big door into darkness and see the wooden door just ahead. But that one step? You feel it, every time, like you've spanned a kilometer-wide canyon. It's more than the sensation of moving: it's the feeling that you've just crossed the line between reality and fantasy. The Professor says it's a security measure and swears he'll disconnect it some day. I think he just likes the sensation.

I bring this up because it's exactly how I felt when we stepped into the temple of the Illuminated Disciples of the Benevolent Space Brothers. Outside, a bleakly lit mountain town smelling of petrol fumes and fir trees; inside, a whole other world, untouched by the one outside. Or reality, for that matter.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. And then it took a moment for my mind to adjust.

It was tacky. It was beautiful. It was hard to take in. Golden stars were on every surface. Set in the pink marble floor, on the red columns lining the walls and on the blue curtains behind them. A mobile of the solar system, complete with a little flying saucer, hung from a purple dome, lit by little bulbs that reflected on the shiny black marble circle beneath.

Soft, tinkly music drifted from hidden speakers.

It smelled of incense and disinfectant, and there were cardboard turkeys and puritans taped to every available surface.

A tall step ladder was set up beneath the dome. A lady in an ornate robe was at the top, screwing a bulb into the sky, humming along to the Muzac, engrossed in her task.

The Doctor looked around and frowned. "Humans!" he said. "Always looking up to see where they should stand!"

The lady heard him and looked down.

"Oh!" she said. "I didn't see you there. Have you been helped?"

We approached as she reached to screw in another star. "I'll be right with you," she said, her voice echoing slightly in the open space.

She looked familiar, this lady, and it took only a closer look at her face to place her. This had to be Peace's elder sister, or maybe her mother. She looked too young for that, though. Distracted by these thoughts, I barely registered that the Professor was moving ahead quickly. I heard the *crack!* of snapping wood and saw the ladder spin and lean. The lady squeaked and grasped the only thing within reach – the little model flying saucer. The ladder crashed to the floor, the Professor adroitly dodging it as he positioned himself beneath her.

She gently spun there, twenty feet up, turning her head to address us as we rotated into view.

"Don't worry! We'll save you!" I said, all heroic, looking for something to help.

The Professor doffed his hat. "Hello!", he called up. "I'm the Doctor and this is my friend Ace. I wonder if we could have a moment of your time?"

I swear, she stopped spinning right then. The Professor blushed and averted his eyes.

"Hello, Doctor. Hello, Ace. I'm Sally Spenser, High Priestess of the I.D.B.S.B. A bit too high for comfort at the moment, hah! Little help here, please?"

The Professor told her to just let go and let him catch her: a suggestion she was not amenable to, as he wasn't even looking at her (I realised later he could see up her robe) and was certainly not strong enough to catch her by himself. It didn't matter. Ace was on it. I yanked a curtain from the wall, exposing cheap cinder block behind. When I got back he was casually telling her we'd met Peace.

“Grab hold this end,” I told him. “Tight!”

“Peace is her daughter,” he told me as we stretched the curtain... and then the wire, holding the little saucer that was holding Sally, snapped.

I reach frozen Lake Helen, over three thousand meters in the sky, after hours of trudging up and across loose slopes and patches of ice and stone. It's a relief to see a flat surface. My legs are aching. I take a short break, massage the cramps from my calves, and study the summit.

Something up there sparkles.

Now we were sitting in Sally's office and I was listening to her and the Professor talk about mysticism and outer space¹. Her escape from certain injury or death was forgotten as soon as the Professor introduced us as spiritual seekers on pilgrimage.

So they nattered on like old friends about souls and Space Brothers as I flipped through pamphlets ('Seeker! Is Your Soul LOST In SPACE?'), sipped an apple juice (wishing it was another of those Mountain Dew drinks I'd gotten from the machine at the hotel) and wondered why the Professor hadn't pointed out that the ladder leg had clearly been cut. He's playing a game, I thought. There's some connection between the aliens, the temple, Peace and Sally. Maybe the aliens were coming to Shasta, joining the temple, and slowly disposing of the humans? If the attempt on her life had failed, would a duplicate Sally soon be running things here? What better place for alien invaders to hide, here, where they wouldn't be taken seriously? It made perfect sense.

“Excuse me Professor, Mrs Spenser?” I said, “I'd like to stretch my legs, okay?”

The Doctor dismissed me. “Go ahead, Ace. I'll see you tonight.”

“And I'll see you tomorrow at dinner,” said Sally, “if you'd accept my invitation. No one should spend Thanksgiving without turkey and stuffing.”

“Not only do we accept, gratefully,” said the Doctor, “but I'll do you one

¹ You didn't skip the cut & paste articles, did you? They'll fill in the blanks for you. There's another one coming: it's pretty long but I've divided it up into chunks.

better. I'd very much enjoy helping you prepare. I'm quite the wizard in the kitchen, as Ace can attest."

It was news to me. "Yeah, that sounds great. You. Cooking. Can't wait for that."

Sally beamed. "It's settled then! Splendid! Peace is off work at five, dear, if you need company."

"Is it okay if I look around the temple 'til then? It's awfully interesting."

"It's a study hall, dear, but yes you may. I'm afraid it's nearly empty at the moment, though, with the holidays. Just be careful not to intrude on anyone's meditation, and remember that girls have to stay on the first floor. Only boys are allowed upstairs."

I saw the Professor's ears twitch. "Oh, really?" he said. "How interesting... why is that?"

Dead serious, she said. "Because only men can be enlightened. We don't serve the Illuminated Space Sisters, after all, do we? Only men may share in the cosmic communion."

"But you're the high priestess!" I said. "How can you be high priestess if you aren't enlightened? That's stupid!"

"It is not stupid, young lady! I am the keeper of the archives, guardian of the lore and minister to the life-worn! My inability to physically share in the cosmic mysteries does not lessen my role in the purpose of the Brotherhood!"

"So you have to keep house just because you don't have a..."

The Professor stopped me. "Well, Ace, I'm sure it's not 'stupid'... There's probably a very reasonable explanation... bio-vibrations keyed to a specific genetic template, I'm guessing." He turned in his chair and gave me that squint that said 'go sniff around'. "Maybe someone who's been upstairs can explain?"

Sally looked sincerely distressed. "I know it sounds sexist, dear. I thought the same thing. Peace thought the same thing. But she accepts it now, and when she's high priestess she'll enforce it just as I do."

Then she shared a wink. "Besides, who says some women aren't enlightened already? You called me Mrs Spenser, but I've never been married. I'm Miss Spenser,

and happy to be.”

Memories are piling up; I can't find my rhythm. Every rock I dislodge bounces and scurries to mix with its brothers down slope. I envy them, it's so easy to just roll. It would be a relief to give up and follow them down below. But I won't. I'm hearing my name more often, no longer merged with the wind but carried upon it.

An hour ago, the object in my backpack played an eerie fanfare and began humming. I wonder if it knows where we're going.

I won't bother describing the Order's temple much further. Just picture a posh temple out front, with offices, libraries and dorms hidden behind in a plain three-story building, and you've got it. Only the temple's fancy. Once you're past the gilt and marble out front it's all fake wood panelling, venetian blinds and shag carpet, like a middle-class American's basement rec room. I even saw a ping-pong table.

Most rec rooms lack a forbidden third floor, so of course that's where Ace headed. I easily found the stairs and gained the second floor but that's where my trespassing ended. I walked the central hall twice, checking each door, but every one was locked. They were helpfully labelled – meditation room Vitus Alpha Andromeda... residence hall Saturn... Janitor... and so on – but none said, 'this way to the secret inner sanctum'. There also seemed to be no one else up here. It was dead quiet except for the tinkly Muzac. The third floor, by its inaccessibility, seemed to lay dangerously heavy overhead. I felt like it was watching me.

Slightly bothered, I went back down where it didn't seem as haunted. The Professor and Sally were laughing like old mates from behind her closed door. I was mildly creeped out by the realization that, despite everything, the Professor was still a bloke and enjoying a chat with a pretty woman, so my thoughts and I resolutely moved on.

I lingered outside the next office. Someone answered the phone and I heard a rapid murmuring, like a used car salesman underwater, but I couldn't make out anything. The sign on the door read 'Jack Kraft – Exalted Consort'. Nice work if you

can get it.

The next office simply said, 'Luuna'. According to the pamphlets in Sally's office, this was the Ascended Space Pontiff, the Immeasurable Luuna. She who knew, by cosmic revelation, the innermost workings of galactic society and the human soul. Her real name, I later learned, was Gladys Kraft, and Jack Kraft was her husband. More on them in a sec.

I had a mad impulse and was about to knock when I heard a vacuum cleaner start. Make friends with the staff, I thought. Good idea. So I left Luuna to the universe and went to find the janitor.

"The automobile accident that nearly claimed Gladys Kraft's life is officially still unexplained. The fledgling California Highway Patrol reported Mrs Kraft losing control of her vehicle on a straight stretch of Highway 5. She has not elaborated on the circumstances that led to the accident. She was discovered five hours later, twenty yards from the crash site. Though apparently uninjured she was in a deep coma that persisted for three months. When she awoke she was no longer Gladys Kraft, housewife, but the Immeasurable Luuna, envoy of the Benevolent Space Brothers.

Mysteries remain. What led Gladys to quietly leave her sleeping husband at such an early hour? How did she come to be found twenty yards from the accident when there was no evidence of her being thrown from the car? Given her mild injuries, why did she become comatose? Most of all, why does she now claim to represent an interstellar society in all human affairs?

Time posed these questions to Luuna in her opulent, newly-built Mount Shasta headquarters. "My accident is important only in that it allowed my mind to be cast free of it's fleshy tethers," she says, referring to her coma. "I became an empty vessel for the Brothers to fill with their message of peace and enlightenment. While there are answers to the questions you ask, they are not for the uninitiated, nor are they relevant to our Earthly mission. Only the message of the Brothers needs concern you."

from 'Good News from the Saucer-Men of Mount Shasta?' (Time Magazine, 24 Aug 59)

I navigate the ridge to the Heart and for a moment a slim, blonde mirage dances across the skyline like a drifting zephyr. I wait, remembering Peace, but it does not

return. I look back the way I've been and watch the cloud shadows creep across California, then turn my face upward.

A brother, looking worried, rustled by as I moved down the hall and to the open door at the end. A single, dim light shone in the near-empty space. A small figure sadly pushed a vacuum to and fro. Imagine your dottiest aunt on Coronation Day, okay? She wore a white, sparkly fairy gown and tiara, and I realised that this wasn't the janitor at all. This was she, the Great Illuminated Space Pontiff herself – the Immeasurable Luuna. Mistress of the innermost secrets, bestselling author of over 200 books. The galaxy's honoured representative on Earth. Doing the rug like a sad domestic.

"Oh! Excuse me!" I said. This was like catching your vicar coming out of the adult boutique. Just wrong in too many ways. I was backing out of the room when she turned off the vacuum and sweetly smiled at me.

"Hello, dear!" she said. "Would you like to know a secret?"

A door banged down the hall.

"Hello, Ma'am, and yes, I'd love to know a secret."

She whispered. "Jack and I are to be married! He kissed me at the sock hop!"

Oh, this was uncomfortable. I was only sixteen. Crazy was out of my league.

What was I supposed to say?

"Do you know any other secrets?" I asked, hearing footsteps approaching, "like somewhere to hide?"

She clapped her hands. "Yes!" she said. "Come here, dear. Right back here. Do you like my dress? I don't remember getting it but it's pretty, isn't it?"

I followed her to a dark corner of the room. There was a door there. 'Janitor'.

"Behind the door is a vacuum, and behind the vacuum is another door," she whispered. "See?"

An authoritative male voice bellowed from the corridor. "Luuna!"

She gasped, "Hide!" and pushed me into the closet. I stood there in the darkness for a moment. I felt a strange fear, like someone was in there with me. Then I jumped as the door opened again and Luuna pushed in the vacuum. "Shh!"

and I was in the dark again.

“There you are,” I heard the man say. “Oh, no. Is that you, Gladys?”

“I was just cleaning up, Mister Kraft. I’m sorry if I made too much noise. Is Jack here?”

It was quiet for a moment. I thought I heard the man whisper something, then –

“I don’t think it’s proper for you to hug me, Mr. Kraft! Please!”

“Oh, for God’s sake. You’re my... you... damn it! Luuna, are you there?”

I jumped as I heard a distinct, sharp slap. The vacuum thumped the closet wall. I froze.

“What was that? Are you alone here?” the man said.

“Jack? Are you trying to be funny?” said Luuna. “Ow! Oh, damn. How long have I been here?”

“I’m not sure. Listen, I think there may be someone else here. Do you remember anything?”

“Maybe... was Peace here? Gladys might have seen a girl... “

“You go ask Henderson. I’ll look around here,” said Jack.

I saw a line of bright light appear under the door. Footsteps approached and the knob rattled. I heard a jangle of keys.

But my fingers had found the latch. I slipped through the door behind the door and softly shut it behind me. Then I crept up the long carpeted staircase to the third floor.

“Miss Sally Spenser, the teen who discovered the accident and alerted authorities, remained in contact with the Krafts and now functions as high priestess to Luuna’s ‘Space Pontiff’. She rejects the label ‘cult’. “Despite our titles and accoutrements, we are not a religion,” she says, “therefore we cannot, by definition, be labelled a cult. We do not solicit funds from our members and we do not claim tax-exempt status. We are a scientific study group, serious researchers into the link between personal and political peace. We do not seek publicity, as you know,” she says (Time’s requests for interviews were refused for several months; only the

intervention of Jack Kraft made this article possible), "nor do we solicit members. Every individual you may meet on these premises came to us of their own accord, and on the understanding that we do not maintain permanent housing for members. This is not a monastic order."

from 'Good News from the Saucer-Men of Mount Shasta?' (Time Magazine, 24 Aug 59)

The Professor and Sally were interrupted by a soft knock.

"Priestess? Her Grace would like a word!"

Sally smiled at her new, old friend. "I'm afraid duty calls, Doctor."

"Doesn't it always? I'll see you..." he glanced at the door "...tomorrow.

Around ten, then?"

"Wonderful!"

She called out. "Henderson, it's open... Hello! Please tell Luuna I have been entertaining a distinguished visitor but will attend her momentarily. Thank you!"

Henderson looked at the Doctor. "Sir, I'm afraid we've lost the young girl who accompanied you here today..."

The Professor dismissed his concern. "Oh, that's just Ace. I'm sure she's somewhere. If you see her, tell her the Doctor is off to the shops, the ship and then the hotel."

The pilgrim smiled at the Doctor. "Excuse me, sir. The 'ship'?"

"Oh, didn't Sally tell you? I'm from outer space."

"Oh, you kidder, you!"

"Surely that's a matter of perspective, sir?"

"Henderson, that will be all."

"Yes, ma'am."

They waited, listening to Henderson draw away.

"Tonight, then?" said Sally. "Good-bye!"

"Yes, good-bye."

Deep in thought, the Professor almost stumbled into the three weirdos as he left the temple. If they spoke, he didn't tell me what they said. I imagine he brushed past them as if they weren't important.

“But what of Luuna’s claims of a Galactic Brotherhood that will save mankind, and the Soul Evolution deemed necessary to this end? Is this not a beacon to the unhinged and eccentric? Sally Spenser laughs.

“Are you calling us crazy? Listen, I hear it every day. But I’ve seen Luuna’s predictions and teachings borne out every day. We have cured tendencies, addictions, phobias and obsessions. Yes, we have people who could be described as ‘unhinged’ pass our doors; it’s an unfortunate circumstance of our association with what you gentlemen call ‘Flying Saucers’. We’ve all heard the nutty ‘contactee’ stories of Adamski and his kind, people who claim to have ridden in saucers to planets of nudists and such. This appeals to certain individuals, it’s true, and they do come to us. But when they leave they are full of peace and ready to face real life. They’ve gained perspective through their studies here. For the record, by the way, we remain fully clothed at all times.”

from ‘Good News from the Saucer-Men of Mount Shasta?’ (Time Magazine, 24 Aug 59)

“Where is the Gallifreyan?” the giant floating turban-head silkily boomed. “I demand his presence!”

Got your attention there, didn’t I? Truth is, I wasn’t sure I could bring myself to write ‘giant floating turban-head’, but there it is. Twice.

I’d hustled up the stairs and taken the turn at top to see another short corridor, and a door set halfway down. Behind and below I heard the latch click and steady steps ascending. The door was unlocked and I slipped through.

I sensed a huge space, perhaps the entire third floor, but it was too dark to see. I felt my way along a wall, feeling curtains and columns. Then a spray of soft, greenish light erupted from the floor in the middle. It revealed a double row of cots, surrounded by strange machinery, stretching into the dim distance. The light spun and coalesced into a bizarre, impossible shape. Fully two meters high, half of that turban, under-lit and leering like a camp hypnotist, a giant floating head dramatically widened his eyes at me.

“You are not meant to be here! There are to be no females in this place! You... ah, look who is in your mind!”

For the life of me, I wasn’t scared in the least, not even when an invisible hand lifted me from the floor. It was too ridiculous. The face drifted closer. A

pinwheeling vortex appeared in each eye.

“Where is he? Tell me!” he bellowed.

“Quiet, you, you head! He’s right behind me and I’m trying to hide, here!” I said. “Keep it down! And cut it out with that eye thing!”

“Fear not, little unimpressed one! I speak only to your mind! Jack Kraft cannot hear me! Jack Kraft is not the one I seek!”

Oh. Big Head wanted the Doctor, then.

“Yes! Yes! I seek the Doctor! Where is the Gallifreyan? I demand his presence!” He drew me close. I was wondering if it would be worthwhile to pop him in his giant nose when the lights came on.

“Hey ya, Smokey,” said Jack Kraft, nodding to the head, “seen a kid running around up here? Girl kid?”

“Hello, Jack Kraft. No, I have seen no one.”

A voice in my head said, (“Do not speak, stripling! The powers of my mind cloak you from his sight!”)

“Hey, that’s new,” said Jack. “Throwing your voice now? You sound like a radio guy. All the hits, all the time, huh?”

“Thank you for the compliment. I am merely fatigued, is all. The psychic waters are turbulent, of late. It is less taxing if I excite the air molecules and allow you to hear me.”

“Well, it’s a swell trick. The boys will be here in a minute, right on schedule. You haven’t been waiting long, I hope.”

“Thank you, Jack Kraft, but I have just arrived. Will Luuna be joining us today?”

Jack sat on one of the cots and lit a cigarette. “Um, Luuna left the building today, if you get me, just like you said might happen. I’m thinking we might have to close up shop, soon.”

(“He has forgotten you,”) the voice informed me, (“and Luuna’s absence assures your safety.”)

(“He looks sad,”) I thought back.

“Smokey,” said Jack, “you listening? If you’re that tired, you won’t have any

trouble doing your thing, will you? We can wait a while, if you want. Her Battiness doesn't need to know."

"Trouble yourself not, my mortal friend. As has been long agreed, so shall it be done. Hark! They approach!"

("Hark?")

("Hush, little fleshy one!")

("Who you calling 'fleshy'?!")

Jack ground out his smoke, kicked the butt under a cot and waved away the smoke. The three weirdos came in. They were chattering excitedly.

"Welcome back, boys. Hope you had a good time today."

The three assured him they had. "You have an excellent planet, sir!"

"Well, that's swell. We like it fine, ourselves. Okay boys, you know the rules. Turn out your pockets... good. Now, Smokey there will scan you to see if you left any evidence of your visit behind..."

The one called Cap warily eyed Smokey. "I resent having my mind invaded by this... thing."

"You signed the contract."

"There are those who would be very interested to know that there is a surviving Lemurian, you know. Very interested."

Smokey glowed a bit redder and moved toward him. Jack waved him back.

"You also signed a confidentiality agreement. So did he, sort of. C'mon, kid, stick to the deal, or do you want him mad at you?"

Cap glanced sceptically at the glowering and now flaming head.

"No... a deal's a deal. Look into my mind, spirit, if you must."

"I have done so already, insolent one. All is in readiness for the travellers to depart, Jack Kraft."

"Thanks, Smokey. Flame off, will ya? Get in your assigned cots, boys, and put your helmets on. Just relax, and say 'howdy' to planet Sto for me."

Jack went to a bank of switches near the door. Soft, ethereal sounds began to play. He placed a stick of incense in a holder on each cot. My nose began to tickle. I saw lights pulsing behind the helmet visors. He attached a lead from each helmet to

the apparatus by each cot. He hit a final switch, I heard an eerie fanfare and a steady beeping. The three convulsed for a moment, then lay still. Jack cracked his knuckles and looked at his watch.

("Are they okay?")

("Don't interrupt! I am boosting the projectors! Now!")

The bodies convulsed again, and soft snores came from the helmets. Jack began checking each occupant, feeling their pulses and heartbeat.

("Now, depart while he is occupied! I shall expedite your escape!")

("What happens next?")

("Nothing! Nothing happens! The humans have journeyed the simulated universe and their primitive brains are filled with inner peace. It's very nice!")

("Why do I have to go?")

("I must speak to Jack Kraft in private! Go, find the Doctor and tell him what has transpired! No more questions!")

("Oh, all right. Just answer me one more.")

("Oh, youth! Haste!")

("Is your name really 'Smokey'?")

("Is yours really 'Ace'?")

I am between landmarks in a place where nothing is named. I clamber over rocks and avoid unmarked snow, mindful of the hidden crevasses beneath. I move steadily, methodically, trying not to think of the absurd spectre in the temple. I shake my head and chuckle as I mount a ridge.

Suddenly I sense a presence behind me. Alarm jangles in my mind. There! Between the forest and myself, a distortion in the lower air. With the ease of long practice I remove a glove with my teeth and shoulder the rifle. I draw the bolt and wait. The distortion coalesces and glides smoothly toward me, resolving into a tiny figure in a fairy dress and tiara. I have no hesitation. I shoot and the figure falters. I ready another shot. It advances and I fire again. It shatters to shiny fragments that swirl into an invisible drain in the air. With a tiny pop! it and my fear are gone. My shots still echo.

Only then do I realise I have discharged a weapon on a snowy mountain. I huddle behind the ridge, but no avalanche comes.

What of the darker suggestions of a Communist agenda in Luuna's writings? Aren't members urged to sell their possessions and form independent communities? Is Luuna's Galactic Brotherhood not a blatantly Socialist government?

"There are no Reds here," says Jack Kraft, who closed a successful travel agency to manage the temple's finances. "Listen, when you came in here, did you see the Cadillac parked out front? One of three, friend, and that's the runt."

Miss Spenser adds, "You're overstating the case. It's true that there are now three small colonies dedicated to Luuna's teachings, but we took no action in their founding and we have no legal or practical connection to them. We sell them books, is all."

Kraft interrupts. "They don't get a discount, either."

Miss Spenser laughs. She and Kraft have an easy, father-daughter camaraderie. "Are we Communists? No. It's perfectly true that Luuna has suggested our graduates band together in shared communities, but her inspiration was not Marx, Stalin or even the Brothers. It was Christ. Book of Acts, Chapter 2, Verses 44 and 45. Look it up. You aren't calling Jesus Christ a Communist, are you?"

from 'Good News from the Saucer-Men of Mount Shasta?' (Time Magazine, 24 Aug 59)

Hours passed and darkness fell as I wandered the town. I don't take orders from floating heads, and I wanted time to myself. The town seemed to wake up. I guessed it was because everyone was coming home from work. Lights came on, distant music thumped and snippets of laughter drifted from houses as I passed. I felt disconnected from it all, like an outsider, and that got me thinking about everything I'd learned.

The temple was a front for some kind of alien tourist agency, that was clear. It seemed sort of harmless... if Smokey was on the level, the pilgrims weren't hurt and maybe were helped. They just had their bodies borrowed for an afternoon of sight-seeing. Surely that was small-time evil, not the kind of thing the Professor would investigate. There had to be something else going on, but what? I was so immersed I stopped paying attention to where I was walking.

I began to mentally divide everyone I'd seen into good guys and bad guys. I liked Sally and Peace. Someone had tried to kill Sally, so that put her on our side, and Peace went without saying.

I wasn't sure about Smokey and Jack. Put them in the middle column. I liked Smokey – I'd been in his head long enough to sense he didn't want to be helping the Krafts. But if he had those powers he could have been tricking me. Damn. I felt sorry for Jack, though I wondered what would have happened if he'd caught me. Smokey went to a lot of trouble to hide me from him, so maybe Jack wasn't the poor victim of circumstances I'd imagined.

That left Luuna. I'm not stupid – it was obvious that Jack's wife Gladys was being controlled and that the lady I'd met was she, not Luuna at all. So that's our culprit, I thought. A mind possessing villain from outer space. Sorted.

I patted an imaginary deerstalker and puffed an imaginary pipe. And realised that, deep in thought, Holmes had wandered onto the moors. I'd left the lights and sounds of town. I was alone, in the dark, surrounded by forest. A distant owl asked. "Who?"

That's when the Space Cadillac silently pulled in front of me. I froze in the tail lights and heard the door open and a rustling fairy dress. Luuna strode to the rear of the vehicle, framed by the pulsing light from the saucer. Her face was shadowed by the halo of her back-lit beehive but her eyes glinted. She lifted a fancy sceptre, the end flared, and I was gripped by an invisible hand. For the second bloody time that day.

"Hello, little thief. I believe you have something of mine, don't you?"

I struggled, strained. She was powerful.

"It's oh so impolite to repay hospitality with theft, don't you think, you sneaker?"

Wait a minute. What had I stolen? I tried to argue.

"Oh, no, no. Hush. The proof of your guilt is right there in your rucksack."

She stopped a few paces away and peered up at me. Behind her, approaching fast, I saw headlights.

"Such a shame. Lost in the forest, savagely beaten to death. Peace will be so

sad.”

The car roared past, out of my vision. Brakes squealed. Luuna’s eye’s shifted for a moment and her grip slipped. I fell down and back, saw my chance and scrambled for the tree-line. A car door opened. I rolled into a ditch and chanced a backward look.

Luuna cried. “You!” and moved, stiff-legged and determined, toward the unseen driver. She pointed the sceptre.

A thunderous crack split the air and I saw Luuna’s head snap back and she staggered. I scurried from the ditch and entered the trees. There came a second shot and a soft thump. I stumbled into the darkness.

I found a hollow between a boulder and tree and nestled there, panting. My heart thumped. My legs trembled. My mind raced. My ears rang, but I heard stealthy movement approaching. I burrowed deeper, felt safer, then I thought of the Professor and felt the tension drain away. “Think, Ace, think!” he’d say, and probably rap his knuckles on my head. So I thought. Luuna was the big bad guy, yes? Yes. She just tried to kill me, yes? Yes. Someone just shot her, yes?

Oh! I’d just been rescued, hadn’t I? And I’d run away like a little kid scared by the noise. Shouldn’t I just announce myself?

Think, Ace, think... No. It would be stupid to just expose myself. There were too many things happening. Luuna, the mind-controlling alien, could have jumped into her assailant, couldn’t she? That could be Luuna sneaking around there now, looking for me.

If it was, she was moving away, back toward the cars. I waited, began to feel like myself again. Why did this terrify me, anyway? I’d seen people die and I’d had my life threatened, but it had all been from weird, outer-space menaces. Frightening, yes, but just like Smokey in the temple, so strange that they didn’t seem real. But this was a gun, a bullet, a spray of blood. Very real. Well, Ace, time to face reality.

Time’s brief visit to the Illuminated Disciples of the Benevolent Space Brothers draws to an end. Jack Kraft accompanies us to our car. The air is crisp and clean, the

night sky is breathtaking. Kraft offers us his hand.

"Thanks for dropping by, fellows," he says. "I hope we get the cover."

He is silent for a moment.

"I know all this outer space stuff sounds nutty to you. Imagine hearing it from your wife. But I have to tell you, the boys that leave here? They're better for it. They come here broken but when they leave they're fixed. That's all that matters, right?"

When pressed about his wife's eccentric cosmology and philosophy, Jack Kraft grins.

"I just run the office. You'll have to take that up with Gladys," he points to the star-filled sky, "and the boys upstairs." '

from 'Good News from the Saucer-Men of Mount Shasta?' (Time Magazine, 24 Aug 59)

I inched back toward the road, being as quiet as I could, intent on the scene below. Someone was dragging Luuna's body to the second car. I carefully eased myself into the ditch, inched forward, and put my hand on what was, unmistakably, someone's bum.

It jumped and I snatched my hand away.

"Ace? Is that you?" came a whisper.

"Peace?" I could see her now, the dim light reflecting tear tracks on her face. "What are you doing here? There's a nutter with a gun running around and Luuna's been shot."

"I know. It's her," Peace said. "Watch!"

I heard the a car door open. There was a soft grunt of effort and then a figure, rifle slung on it's back, entered the saucer glow. It was Sally, Peace's mum. She leaned into the Caddy; the engine quit and the saucer blinked off. Then she went back to her car, returned with a spray can and a rag, and cleaned the blood off the back. We lay there and watched, Peace gripping my arm.

Finally, Sally was done. She gazed around once, started the car, then did a u-turn away from town. We watched the tail lights shrink in the distance. I was standing up when Peace said, "Wait. She's stopped at the bridge."

"Peace, Luuna..."

"She's coming back. Down, Ace!"

Sally's car sped past without slowing. It turned the corner into town.

Peace sobbed, her body shaking. I kept my distance. I wasn't very good with other people's emotions, back then.

"Peace, I know how it looks, but Luuna tried to kill me. Your mum saved me."

She stopped shaking and was quiet for a moment. She murmured something I didn't catch.

"What?" I said.

"I said, that's a lie!" Peace drew away from me, raw anger in her voice.

"Luuna is the greatest person alive! How dare you say she tried to kill you!"

I was taken aback. Where had this come from? Wait! She was calling me a liar? I was on my feet in a second, fists balled.

"It's true! She had this wand thing and she said I'd be found beaten to death!"

"You must have deserved it then! What did you do, Ace?"

"I didn't do anything and you can't say I did! You didn't see her! I almost died!"

We glared. Peace blinked first, turned her back.

"A trick, then. She was pretending. She wouldn't have killed you. Not Luuna."

She swayed on her feet, then sat heavily on the edge of the ditch.

"I grew up with her, Ace, do you understand? I never had a dad. I love my mom, but she's always been the boss and she knows me too well. Luuna was my Aunt Luuna, you know? She was the one with the stories and the toys, always smiling and laughing, even when she was training me."

I felt my anger ebbing away. A cloud drifted over the moon and in the dark our voices were disembodied.

"I remember. Your mum said you were training to be the new high priestess."

She snorted softly. "That's what she thought, yeah."

"Huh?"

Her face was an unfocused pale oval.

"I was in training, all right, but not to be high priestess. I was in training to be the new Luuna."

The moon reappeared. Peace turned her face to the light and she rose. "In fact, I guess," she said. "I *am* Luuna."

A million miles away there are lights, and movement, and shouts, but I am not there.

"Open your eyes, Ace. Look at me and tell me what happened yesterday."

"I searched the temple but there wasn't a third floor but then I came down and you were busy flirting with Sally Spenser so I explored and met Luuna but she wasn't really Luuna she was Gladys and Jack was coming so I hid in the closet but there was a secret door and it led to the third floor and there was a big head named Smokey the lemur up there who was weird but nice and then Jack came in and he was sort of sad."

"Go on."

"Then those weirdos showed up and they were aliens using the pilgrims to visit Earth and Smokey helped me escape and told me to tell you what happened but I ended up outside town and Luuna tried to kill me but Sally shot her and then Peace showed up and started acting creepy and then... you showed up? and I fell asleep in the car? and now I'm in the hotel and it's morning and... Hey! Did you undress me? Professor!"

Thanksgiving Day, the next morning. I was sitting up in bed but not properly awake. The Professor was straddling a chair, chin on his arms, listening intently to my 'report' as his eyebrows danced. Smiling at my indignation, he said. "Ah, there you are. And I wasn't flirting, I was investigating. And it's Lemurian, not lemur. A lemur is an arboreal cat-like primate from Madagascar. A Lemurian is a member of an extinct race that colonised this planet billions of years ago."

"So what happened to them? And they aren't extinct."

"Same old story. Every solar system has one or two like it. An advanced race with amazing powers is destroyed for evil or hubris. Their continent sinks or their planet's destroyed, they all die. Legends and cautionary tales, mostly; I've never seen it happen. The Lemurians are extinct, though. Every single one. Dead as dodos. Even the two you've met."

He grinned at my expression. "No more questions. Plenty of time for that later. Get up and dress for dinner. And don't bother looking for your old clothes. They're in the Tardis laundry because they were covered in mud. You still are, so stop lollygagging and hit the showers."

The Professor stood. "I'll leave you to your modesty. Knock when you're done, then we'll head for Sally and Peace's house. Oh! And Ace? Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Ace, aren't you at least curious where I attained this automobile?" He asked an hour later as he nimbly drove through town.

"What's the use of asking?"

I was sulking. The Professor had deflected, ignored or pretended not to hear my non-stop barrage of questions as we'd lugged a cooler from the hotel and drove toward the Spenser's. Now I was giving him the silent treatment.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Oh, all right. I took the bait, knowing there was a hook. "Well?"

"It's Sally's car. She lent it to me last night." He stared sideways at me. "And don't ask."

Have I mentioned I used to have temper management problems?

"Arrgghh! How am I supposed to watch your back if you never tell me anything? 'We lead dangerous lives, Ace'. Well, bollocks to that! You aren't the one who almost got killed last night! I'm the one leading the dangerous life! You're the one running around three steps ahead with all the answers! Would it have killed you to tell me that Luuna was a dangerous Lemurian ghost? So I could, I don't know, maybe not die? Or would that have ruined your secret master plan?"

The Professor braked the car in the middle of the street. Suddenly, he looked very small. "Ace..." he began, gently.

"Hmmpphh!" I stared at the rear-view mirror. A Dodge drew up and he waved it past.

"Ace, I didn't know. Honestly. And ignorance saved you. If you'd known her for what she is last night you'd have lit up psionically and piqued her curiosity. If

she'd peered deeper in your mind..."

Wait a minute! What had Luuna said? 'Little thief'? What was in my pack?

There was a honk, and he waved a Ford past. A man who looked like Santa leaned out the passenger window. "Engine trouble?"

More to the point, what had the Professor put in my pack?

"Hey, it's that little saucer! How did that get there, Doctor, I wonder? And my Nitro-9! I get to keep it?" I said.

"Put that away, Ace. It's going to be important," the Professor said. I think he meant the saucer, but you'll note I didn't ask him to clarify. Out the window, he called. "No, thank you. We're fine!" The Ford with Saint Nick pulled away.

He turned to me. "Well, Ace?"

"I don't know... Doctor, I was really scared. And she was after me because of something you did. I wanted you there so badly."

"Ace, I promise you. You'll be scared again. You'll be in danger again. We might even have this conversation again, sadly. You know me. But I promise you – you are my Ace, my only Ace and I swear to you that if you trust me and do what I say the monsters will never get you."

I dimly registered another vehicle approaching.

"Is it always going to be this weird?"

"Probably."

"Were you like this with Mel?"

"She left me for Glitz, Ace. Glitz."

Yeah, that made the skin crawl. Speaking of which...

"So Luuna was a Lemurian, huh?"

"Yes. Ancient legendary evil. Just like your friend Smokey."

"But she's dead, right? Or..."

The Professor looked in the rear view and grinned.

"She'd better not be dead. That could make dinner rather awkward, don't you think?"

There behind us idled the Space Cadillac.

"Right on schedule," the Doctor said. "Now! Are we good?"

I had to laugh. Damn him. Did he know I'd throw a fit, right here, so he'd have an excuse to stop? Or was it just a coincidence?

"Professor, you owe me a big one, you hear? Start the car! Thanksgiving dinner, here we come!"

Freezing mist shrouds the Red Banks ridge, 3780 meters in the sky. This close to the summit, the sky feels larger than the mountain; even though I cannot see it, I can almost feel it lifting me from the trail, trying to give me to the wind. I feel light, like my body is fading, but in my head a bright pain blossoms. At my feet is a line of footprints. I realise I have turned around.

I marshal my thoughts. The sky's not trying to kill me. I'm dizzy, my head hurts and I'm disoriented. This is altitude sickness. I find a nook to the lee of the wind and lean on the rock face. I pull off my gloves and my hands go hot, then numb. I fumble with the catches on my pack, finally getting it open. Oxygen first. Then the very special Peruvian tea I dared to sneak through customs. Breathe, drink, breathe, drink. I grow warm, and weariness seeps into my bones.

"Well, there's our sleepyhead!" said Sally. "How are you feeling this morning, dear?"

"She's fine," said the Professor. "Good as new."

"Well, you were covered with cuts and bruises when I put you down last night, you poor thing." Oh God, Sally was mothering me. Alarmed, I backed away a step. A tiny hint of hurt crossed her face.

"I'm okay, really," I said. "Um, thanks, okay, Miss Spenser? But we've got all this food, here..."

"What did I say? She's fine." said the Professor. "Come on, Ace, kitchen's this way. Sally, the others are right behind behind us."

I followed the Professor to the kitchen, *and slowly sink to my knees on the mountain*, and I wonder where Peace is. I heaved the cooler onto the kitchen counter, *and I curl to my side on the mountain, and aches fade away*. Far away, in another room, I heard greetings at the door.

The Professor snapped his fingers in my face. One! Two!

“Ace! I need you! Front and centre!” he barked.

“What?” I looked around, momentarily panicked. I was in a kitchen. The Spenser’s kitchen. Everything was where it was supposed to be. Despite the warmth from the oven, I shivered. The Doctor guided me to a stool and I gratefully sat.

“Doctor, what happened? I felt like I was gone for a minute.”

He studied my face, his eyes gone flinty. “Take a deep breath, Ace. What do you smell?”

“I smell... turkey cooking. I smell potatoes, coffee, cinnamon... Oh!”

“Yes?” He smiled.

“I feel better!”

“I thought you would. There’s nothing to bring you back to Earth like the smell of a Thanksgiving feast. Did I ever tell you that the first Thanksgiving wasn’t in Massachusetts at all? Here, give me that phial, and keep an eye on the door.”

I watched him as he opened the phial and decant its contents into one of the dishes. “Hm,” I said. “Remind me not to eat the potatoes.”

“Do not eat the potatoes,” he amiably replied. “No, it was in Florida, fifty-six years earlier. Some time in September, I believe. The Timucuan and the Spaniards who founded St. Augustine had a peaceful meal together, and the Catholic priests said a mass of thanks. Is the coast clear?”

“The coast is clear. So what happened then?”

“To the Spanish?”

“No, dummy, the Timucuans.”

He pocketed the phial, then peeked into the oven. He signalled me to watch the hall.

“Oh, they’re extinct. Disease, war, exploitation, the usual with your species. Same thing nearly happened the next time.”

“In Massachusetts!”

“No, in Virginia. The point, Ace, is that when different societies...”

“Wait a minute! What about Frobisher?” I asked, remembering Canadian Thanksgiving.

“What?... Oh, Martin Frobisher!” said the Professor. “Oh, Hello, Jack! Happy

Thanksgiving!”

“Hi ya, Doc,” said Jack Kraft, making a beeline to the fridge. “Same to ya. What’s cookin’, girly? Good to see you up and around. You oughtta live in the woods, ‘cause you sleep like a log.”

I tore up my mental enemies list and threw the bits to the wind. I summoned my sweetest smile (I do too have one!).

“Hello, Mr. Kraft! It’s good to see you again.”

“Again? Did I miss something?” Oh, whoops.

“I think we both did, sir.” I said, and we both turned to the Professor, who was absentmindedly juggling three yams. He noticed our stares and chuckled nervously.

“The trick is to keep two in the air,” he said, catching them neatly. “Ace, why don’t you find Sally? I’m sure the table needs setting.”

I slid off the stool. “All right. You two are obviously about to have a conversation I’d find very interesting, so it’s imperative I go.”

Jack handed me a glass of iced tea. “That’s the spirit. On your way, give this to Gladys, will you? And send the three pilgrims back, too, if they’ve arrived. That’s a good girl.”

Behind him, the Professor smiled apologetically, and mimed taking a deep breath.

The smells of turkey, potatoes, coffee and cinnamon tickle my consciousness and I struggle to a sitting position. I can still feel the symptoms ticking away, but they’ve abated for now.

I can’t have lain there long, but the mist has been swept away and there’s a ghostly trace of warmth in the bright sunlight. I flex my stiff fingers and toes, stretch my legs and struggle to my feet. I take one more pull from the thermos and set the oxy regulator. I shake the glaze from my gloves and pull them on. I challenge the sky and it withdraws.

I think of a stone on a lawn far away, and the person waiting for me there, and the blank space where someday a date would be carved.

“Not today, Ace” I think. “There’s a few miles in this old girl yet.”

I start the ascent to Misery Hill.

“I simply struggle to stay awake,” said Gladys, gingerly accepting the glass of cool tea. “But you people are so interesting and so kind to me! I hate to miss a single moment.”

“It’s all right, dear, we understand. You’ve been through quite a lot,” said Sally. “We’re just happy you’re here now.”

We were in the Spenser’s spacious living room: Gladys reclined on the sofa as Sally changed the bandage on her head. Gladys frowned. “This is your home, nurse? Have you seen mine? Jack built me a mansion. It’s lovely.” She blinked back tears. “Oh, I wish I could remember living there! Such luxury!”

“Sally, can I talk to you?” I asked, eager to leave the room. “I’m supposed to set the table?”

“I shouldn’t leave her alone... I’ll only be gone a moment, Gladys. Why don’t you rest your eyes?” Sally said. “It’s this way, Ace.”

As we left, Gladys studied her hands, sadly puzzled, then lay back and closed her eyes. She looked tiny and lost. She’d been so terrifying last night.

“Right through this arch, Ace,” said Sally, suddenly all business as we swept into the huge dining room. “Everything’s in the cabinet there; use the orange china but not the silver flatware. Set it up for ten.” She turned and had her hands on my shoulders before I could evade her. She searched my eyes. “I know you have a million questions, Ace. But you shouldn’t be thinking of them and I’m not allowed to answer them.” I shrugged her off.

“Yeah, I know. I’m the last to know anything.”

Softly, she said. “Actually, I think that would be poor Gladys, don’t you?”

I now understand how Gladys felt. As I clamber over the ridge my mind is occupied by equally bright points: the memories of thirty-five years ago and the inescapable now. The intervening years have faded to vague impressions. Right now, here and then, I’m struggling to remember what fork goes where.

"Why do you even need two?" I wonder out loud.

("The short one's for salad. It is commonly placed next to the plate.")

("Hah! I knew you'd show up! Thanks, Smokey!")

("No, to the left of the plate... That's it.")

("Bugger! So how's it hanging? You in the 'don't tell Ace' brigade, too?")

("I'm afraid 'it' has failed to perform any physical function for a considerable number of years, rude one. I thank you for reminding me. And, yes, I am afraid I cannot assuage your impatience for answers. But, Ace, answer one of mine?")

("Why not?")

("How are you feeling?")

("I'm okay... My mind keeps wandering... I keep thinking I'm on the mountain... It's kind of hard to focus. Where are you, anyway?")

("Suffice it to say I am approaching you now. As for your mental state, child, you did have a restless night.")

("Did the whole lot of you just sit around and watch me sleep?")

("Pay attention to your footing, Ace.")

Thirty-five years in the future I stop and realise I've almost stepped on a soft snow bridge. I'd have fallen through, and it is a long way down. ("Thanks, Smokey,") I think, and place the last glass on the table. All done.

When I walked through the arch to report, Sally and Peace were helping Gladys sit up. Gladys smiled at Peace.

"I know you, don't I, dear?"

"You should, Aunt Luuna," said Peace gently, sitting with her.

"Oh, don't start with that 'Loony' nonsense again! I've no idea what that means!"

Peace smiled warmly at her, then tentatively over at me.

"I'm sorry. I'll call you Aunt Gladys if you'll call me Peace. Now, if it's okay with mom I want to go talk to Ace, there."

"Yes, that's fine. Don't go far, dears."

"I thought I'd show Ace the fleet."

“That’s just... Oh, wow!” I said a minute later, when I saw what was in the driveway.

“There’s two of them?”

Precisely parked in the wide driveway were two Space Cadillacs.

“Allow me to blow your mind: there’s *three* of ‘em. Uncle Jack says the third is on it’s way. Didn’t say who was driving, though. I thought we were all here.”

Smokey said, ‘I am approaching you now.’ Was it possible?

Peace was still talking, faster and faster. “What will the neighbors think, right? Let’s see, that’s Alpha. It’s a 1957 Coupe de Ville. Note the subdued fins. Now check out the beauties on Beta. That’s a top of the line 1958 Eldorado Brougham, that is. She’s Uncle Jack’s favorite, I think. You haven’t seen either of these. The ‘59 Sedan de Ville, with the biggest fins of all, that’s Gamma, she’s Luuna’s favorite.” She drew a shuddering breath. “That, that’s the one you saw last night... Oh, Ace, what the hell’s going on? What’s wrong with me? Nobody will tell me what happened last night and I keep thinking I’m somewhere else and, and...”

She swayed on her feet. I caught her, meaning to step back when she was steady, but she wrapped her arms around my back and nestled her head under my chin. I tentatively stroked her hair as she shook with sobs. “There, there.” I said, lamely. I couldn’t understand how this was the same girl I’d been so afraid of last night. I sort of understood how the Professor felt, dealing with my outbursts. What would he do? Be the strong one?

“I don’t know what’s happening, Peace, nobody will tell me anything, either. But look at me!” She blinked back her tears and gazed up with soft, gray eyes. “Whatever happens I’ll make sure you’re all right. Me and the Professor, that’s what we do. I promise!”

I saw doubt and said it again. “I promise, do you hear?”

I pulled her close and rested my cheek on her hair. Something kicked inside me and I heard her go, “Oh!” and something passed between and united us. For a long, puzzling moment we were the only person in the universe.

Then I heard a familiar waltz and there was Gamma weaving drunkenly up the drive. It shuddered to an off-kilter stop, lurched ahead another meter, then stopped again. The engine stuttered and died and a figure leaped out like a reluctant

sailor back on land. A trim man in a tuxedo, cape and turban, who cried. "Infernal machine!" and kicked the door shut.

"Is that you, Smokey?"

"Greetings, Ace. And you are Peace, I assume." He studied us for a moment and cleared his throat. "I pray my arrival has not intruded on some manner of adolescent, hormonal experimentation?"

We separated quickly, red-faced, and Peace said to Smokey. "Dream on, slimeball. You ain't intruding on nothing. You know this joker, Ace? And who said you could drive Gamma? Hell, who said you could drive, period?"

Smokey said, "Quite!" and he and his tattered dignity breezed past us and through the open front door. I heard a distant chorus of greetings. I turned to Peace, who was carefully looking the other way. She saw me looking and shrugged. "Never mind him," I said. "He's a bit of an arse but he's okay, I think."

"I know him, but I've never met him," she said, "and does that make any sense?"

"I think so," I said. "Have you ever been upstairs with the boys?"

Her expression was unreadable. "You mean at the temple, right?"

"Yeah. What'd you think I...?"

"Nothing! The answer is, 'no'. Aunt Luuna goes up there, of course, with every pilgrim, and... my mom did once, before I was born."

I let that Important Clue sail right past in my eagerness to tell her about Smokey.

"Guess what? I went up there yesterday and that's where I met Smokey. Except he was taller, sort of. You really don't know what happens up there?"

Her eyes flashed. "I know I've been told my whole life that it's dangerous and forbidden! I know the strictest laws of the Brothers forbids the female animal from partaking in the cosmic communion! I know --"

"Oi, Peace, you're doing that freaky Luuna thing again!"

She looked shocked for a moment and then smiled, embarrassed.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. I had so much training, it's so easy to be like her. It's like sliding into your oldest, most comfortable pair of jeans."

She smiled at a private thought. "Come on, let's get off our feet." We sat on Alpha's bonnet, a flag of planet Baraclese between us, and she took my hand in both of hers. I let her; touching didn't feel as strange as before. Her hands were thin and cold.

"What were we talking about, again? Oh, yeah, the boys upstairs. I know that going near the stairs was an instant scolding from Uncle Jack. But mostly... you know, Ace, I never once felt like finding out. Isn't that weird? If you were me, wouldn't you try to sneak up there at least once? Oh, wait, scratch that. You did."

"Yeah, but what I'm saying is, I think Smokey let me."

"What, that hypnotist guy? Who is he, anyway?"

"He isn't human, I'll tell you that. You didn't see him yesterday." I shook my head at the memory. "Don't let that 'Amazing Mystico and Janet' routine fool you. He's... powerful. I think he kept you downstairs all those years, kept you from being curious. Listen, why don't I tell you everything that happened yesterday? Just promise me you won't get upset."

"You think I might?"

"I would, if I were you," I admitted. "Still want to hear it?"

She nodded.

"Okay, first thing you have to know is that the Professor and me are a team. He's the brain and I'm the muscle. We aren't tourists. We're... I don't know, kind of like detectives..."

Now, you're probably wondering something. What, exactly, was going on there with me and Peace? I'd chatted with her in the diner and she'd freaked me out a little. I'd met her in a darkened wood and she'd freaked me out a lot. These are not circumstances that generally lead to huddling together on a sun-warmed car bonnet, with her holding my hand and flirting with me (not that I, Britain's Miss Oblivious, realised).

But here I was, easily chatting about my adventures with the girl who, for all I knew, was my chief suspect. Suddenly, since we'd hugged, really, there was something between us, some secret communication. She was both alien and familiar,

uncharted territory that was nonetheless enticingly familiar, like the curving trail up I follow up Misery Hill. My breath grows short again, and I pant in my mask. My heart hammers with exertion. But I don't care. I am almost there.

The Sun has dropped behind the mountain. I am in cold shadow.

I grit my teeth and take measure. A hundred meters away, the mountain ends and the sky begins. Where they meet, a black object is suspended. Indistinct figures mill about it. One detaches and comes down to greet me. So close, now. As I struggle upward my heavy feet crunch through the crust, but she keeps pace atop the snow alongside me, grave and attentive until my story ends.

"'I am Luuna'. I can't believe I said that," she said. "The last thing I remember is seeing Gamma outside the Diner after work. Then I woke up in bed this morning with mom asleep in a chair beside me. Hey, is that jacket warm? What's it called?"

"Puffa-jacket. Yeah, it's warm."

"I've always wanted a leather one, but mom says she wouldn't be caught dead wearing one."

"I used to be in a pretty cold place. I don't really need this. You can wear it, if you want." I started to shrug off my jacket when Sally called. "Come and get it, ladies! It's not getting any warmer!"

As we swept past into the warm house, Sally held the door. Her expression, I remember thinking, was bittersweet, like reuniting with a dear old friend at a funeral.

The Doctor held the back of a chair at the head of the table. "Come and sit, Ace," he rumbled. I obeyed, and saw Jack performing the same service for Peace at the other end. She beamed at him, he squeezed her shoulder and he did the same for Sally.

As I said, I was at the head of the table, a bay window with a fantastic view of Shasta at my back. A vast array of food stretched before me. There should be servants, I thought, but there was only us. To my right sat Jack, Gladys (in a smart pant-suit), Smokey and Sally. To my left was the Professor and the three weirdos. I wondered why they were there, and sensed something different about them. They

lacked the ebullience of yesterday. Now they seemed quiet and watchful. I wondered if this was their real, human personalities, or if they were hosting another set of tourists. I saw the Professor frown at them and was about to ask what was bothering him when I realised Sally was standing.

"It's customary on Thanksgiving to, well, give thanks. I guess the question here is, to who? Peace and I aren't religious, I'm afraid, so if one of you would like to say a few words, I'd be grateful." She smiled at the assembly and sat. To my surprise the Professor stood up and cleared his throat.

"Hello again," he said. "I'll make this brief."

I coughed meaningfully and everyone chuckled.

"Oh, yes, very droll, Ace. I know everyone is hungry. But before we start perhaps we should reflect for a moment on the meaning of this quaint ceremonial meal. We celebrate a sadly uncommon event, the time when two cultures meet and, rather than quarrel over resources, share them instead. Here we have representatives of not two, but four worlds, sitting down in harmony."

Peace mouthed, "four?" to me from her end of the table. The Doctor caught it and scowled. "Yes, Peace, four. I speak of Earth, Gallifrey, Zillotti and..." there was that slight frown again "...Sto. Now, please let me finish."

"Hang on there, Doctor," interrupted Jack. "What's a 'galley fray'? Sounds like a fight in a ship's kitchen. I know those other names, but that one's news to me."

Smokey turned to him. "Gallifrey is the Doctor's home world, Jack. It's home to the Time Lords, perhaps the wisest, most advanced and, I must say, recently hubristic mortal races."

"I'll be damned, Doc," said Jack. "I thought you were Scottish. Huh!"

"Well, now I've forgotten what I was going to say."

I laughed. "I think we got the point, Professor. One big happy family, right? Sit down and eat."

"Oh very well," he grumbled. We all were still for a moment, one of the pilgrims frozen in the act of reaching for a roll. The Professor realised everyone was waiting for him to sit. He sat. "I'm finished! Eat! Eat!"

We all dug in. I was famished. I was on my third helping of turkey when I

remembered I hadn't eaten since yesterday's breakfast. No wonder. I watched everyone enjoying the potatoes and wished the Professor had slipped a mickey into the cranberry sauce instead. I consoled myself with sweet candied yams.

Everyone drifted into small conversations. The three weirdos picked at the food and whispered to each other, studying the others at the table. Peace and Sally were speaking in low, serious tones, and I saw Sally sneak glances my way. Smokey was regaling Gladys with magic tricks; her eyes shone and she clapped her hands in delight. The Professor was assuring Jack that Gallifrey was legendarily hostile to tourism when I saw an opening and ventured a question.

"So, what's that all about, anyway, Jack? Tourists from planet Sto. How on Earth did that get started?"

"That's a long story, kiddo. What do you think, Doc? Time to show our cards?" He glanced at the Professor, who nodded and said, "Yes, Jack, I suppose it's time. Sally, you'd better fetch the pies. We're starting."

The Doctor stood and patiently waited. I'd seen the Professor do this before: as I watched, amused, everyone became aware of him and lost track of their conversations. Looking mildly surprised to be the centre of attention, the Professor said, "Very well, Ace, Peace, everyone. Here are all your answers. Some I think you've guessed, some will be news. Yes, Ace, the Illuminated Disciples of the Benevolent Space Brothers is a front for an illegal tourism racket. Rich individuals from the planet Sto pay an exorbitant fund to have their consciousnesses transferred to waiting humans. They wake up in the temple, tour the town..."

"The Four Star package get's 'em a weekend in 'Frisco."

"... or 'Frisco (thank you, Jack), while the human's consciousness goes... where does it go, Smokey?"

Smokey squirmed. "Into the mountain, Doctor. We have a scale model universe inside, an old teaching tool for the kids." He looked around. "Really, it's more impressive than I make it sound, and perfectly safe. One could explore for millions of years and not see it all."

Jack spoke to the three pilgrims. "Sorry to say it, fellas, but our boys get the

better deal. You pay Luuna's agents on Sto a fortune to wander around Earth for one to three days, then you go back to your nine to five, or whatever you call it. And you can't tell anyone because it's against the law? Too bad. Our boys pay a reasonable boarding fee, get a God's-eye view of the universe, and can blab all they want."

"And you, Mister Kraft?" asked the black pilgrim. "Have you seen this universe?"

"A good salesman never samples the product, my friend."

"A commendable dictum. Tell me then, as our contact on Sto could not, how did this enterprise begin? I understand it commenced with a ground-transport accident?"

Jack whispered to Gladys and they conferred softly. He gave her an encouraging nod and she spoke to us.

"I hardly know what to say. Tell me, you three young men, you are really spacemen from another world? That's marvelous! And my doctor is a spaceman, too! You see, before I met dear Jack, I was in love with the idea that there were many worlds out there, full of wonderful people. I read all the magazine stories, you see, and all the books, everything. Not the sort of thing a young lady should devote all her time to, but I was enthralled. Then Mr. Arnold had his sighting, not far from here, and suddenly life from space wasn't scientifiction any more! I'm afraid I drove poor Jack to distraction!"

"I married you anyway, Gladys."

"It seems like yesterday. We'd been together, oh, five years or so, when the dreams began. At first they were mere glimpses that I struggled to remember. But I began to welcome them, those flights through the universe! Oh, they seemed more real than our life together. I'm sorry, Jack."

"I told you last night, it's all right. It wasn't your fault. Tell them about the accident."

"Oh! Well, suddenly one night I found myself driving toward Shasta! I was so startled, and the light was so bright, I immediately pulled off the road. But that young lady was standing there," she pointed at Peace, "so I turned the wheel and drove off the other side of the road. I got out of the car, and the bright light came

down and, well... I was in a little room with a vacuum cleaner and a man in a robe. It seemed very important to clean, so I did, and the man rushed away and then I saw that girl, you there, and I helped her hide, and your daddy hugged me. Oh, it's so confusing. The next thing I remember was the doctor and nurse bandaging my head and leg. It's 1978. I've been asleep for twenty years, and I'm so old," she whispered, "and I think I may have done terrible things."

"Oh, Gladys!" said the Professor. "You are the only innocent person at this table. Your only crime is possessing a heart that is open to the wonders of the universe. And that, young lady, is no crime. Jack, I think Gladys may need to rest."

Jack made Gladys comfortable on a reclining chair dragged from the living room. Sally returned with a tray laden with pies.

"I'm up next." She cut portions of pie and passed them as she spoke.

"My past isn't important. Don't ask. I was on the road, going from nowhere to nowhere, when I saw three bright lights in a triangle, coming up fast. I saw it clearly. The bottom lights were Gladys's headlights, of course. The other, the one above, was flying. It was small, no bigger than your hand, but bright as the moon. Gladys told you about the accident, but she doesn't know what happened next. She got out of the car, walked into the trees and sat. The light dimmed and followed. I watched as it landed, silly as it sounds, on top of her head. Then the light went out.

"I ran to the truck-stop a few miles up the road and told them there had been an accident, and the lady wasn't moving. They called for help, and I made myself scarce. I didn't want to explain to the police what an eighteen year-old with no identification was doing out there. It took a while, but they found her.

"I went to the hospital the next day. They let me sit with Gladys. That's when I met Jack, there. He was helpless without Gladys, and I had no home, and we liked each other very much. At first, he thought he owed me one, but by the time Gladys awoke, he and I had long since adopted each other."

Now, this was interesting and everything, but taking too long. I was about to speak when a tremulous voice floated from the recliner.

"Excuse me, but what about this Luuna? What happened after I woke up?"

Jack said, "You asked for a pencil, Gladys, and some paper."

Sally said, "When I got back with the doctor you'd already written half the introduction to volume one."

"And, you refused to be examined until you'd finished. I told Sally, right away, that something was different. That's when she told the truth about the accident."

"That must have blown your mind, Uncle Jack," Peace said.

"It still does, kiddo," said Jack, "but that was just the beginning. She was in bed for three months, you understand? But she walked out of the hospital that night. Walked! The doctors said it was impossible, but she said damn their eyes and did it."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"Well, me and Sally drove her home. You couldn't tell her 'no'."

"Ain't that the truth," said Sally.

"It was a while before the mask really came off. I watched her close, after what Sally said. At first, she tried to be sly. She'd answer to 'Gladys', pretend to know her old folks and friends, stuff like that. But some things... she wouldn't compromise. She kicked me out of our room on the first night. Made it very clear it was permanent and suggested, honest to bejeezus, I take up with Sally."

Peace said dryly. "People in town..."

"... have overactive imaginations, dear," said Sally. "I meant it when I said we adopted each other."

"Yeah, kid. That just ain't how I saw your mamma. I ain't no family man, never wanted to be, but I got nothing but pride when I look at her. You, too. You're so much like her when we met, it about breaks my heart."

Oh, God. This was turning into an episode of Coronation Street. 'If you've been affected by what Mike did to Diedre with the pogo stick...' I was glad to see the Professor looked impatient, too.

"What about Luuna?" I asked.

"Yes," he added, "when did you find out the truth?"

Jack seemed unable to speak, so Sally told us. "For about a month after she woke up, she'd had been typing non-stop, only taking breaks to pretend to be

Gladys, eat, sleep a couple hours, or demand more paper or, once, a new typewriter. One night, the typing just stopped. It was startling. We ran upstairs to see if she was all right. She was surrounded by stacks of paper, looking very pleased with herself. It was volumes one to thirty-two. Over two and a half million words. I picked one up at random and saw the author credit. I showed Jack. And she sat there, oozing satisfaction. From that day on, she would only answer to 'Luuna'."

"That's the same night we took her to Shasta, " said Jack, "and life was never the same. We drove to that old ranger station at Bunny Flat, and there was a man there, waiting for us in the dark. It was weird, because the lot was empty, and I wondered how he'd got there. He walked right up to Luuna and said, 'This is madness, Luuna, we dare not risk exposure', or something like that. Luuna turns to us and says, 'This man will aid our enterprise. He has no choice. Our other ally will be along shortly.' That's how we met Smokey, there.

"Right on cue, there's a whoosh of light and there's an alien standing there. Looked just like you or me, you understand, and I'd be a liar if I didn't recognise a fellow slick operator right away, but still... alien. You just knew. That was Ren Orion, our man in Havana. Or Sto, if you wanna get technical."

Why was the professor surreptitiously studying the pilgrims?

"Well, you know about the deal. We all had our jobs and we got to it. Luuna wrote, lectured, acted batty and lovable, did the figurehead thing. Smokey built the machines and did his mind swap stunt, though Luuna always wanted to be there for incomings. Before you know it, we had a publishing empire and the pilgrims and the tourists came in droves. We made sure it was cheap to be an illuminated disciple. The books made a tidy profit and there's a discreet Swiss bank that converts Sto medallions to American dollars, you know, so we all got very, very rich after some creative accounting. That was my job, that and greasing palms in town so nobody hassled the pilgrims. Sally was a wonder. She had good ideas about everything and even Luuna learned to listen to her. She held it together, saw everything coming, you couldn't faze her. But she was also high priestess, so she ran the temple and prepped the pilgrims."

Sally snorted.

“Prep the pilgrims’? You make it sound easy! I hope you all realise you can’t just plop a mind into another person’s head. It takes a lot of effort to make the host reach the right level of preparation. Any old Joe off the street won’t do, no siree. There has to be a certain... stillness in the host in order for the transfer to work. Otherwise there’s too much clutter left over after the consciousness has been removed. Jack, remember that one fella back in ‘63? Studied here for six months, classic textbook case, then found out his sister had died right before the transfer. Went on with it, thought illumination would help him cope. Poor Stoling jumped right into his psychic pain residue.”

Jack cut in. “Yeah, that guy! Killed ten people before Luuna nailed ‘im. Boy, that was a mess. But after Smokey sent him home, both of ‘em were right as rain. Didn’t remember a thing. And before you ask, we took good care of the families with a little charity fund.”

Now might be a good time for Dr. McShane (N.M.C.) to point out that Sally was not totally straight with us. The Lemurian method – meditation, yoga, counseling and, I’m guessing, something in the incense – was an effective way of preparing a human brain for alien possession, but not the only one.

Successful transfers, those in which the visitor is able to fully inhabit the body, can also be effected when the host and usurper coexist for extended periods of time; the invader, in this instance, has an empathic understanding of the emotional residue of the host. No matter how neurotic the host, the usurper is prepared and may assume full control.

Certain types of brain damage or degeneration in the host, such as senility or coma, also allow possession, though their physical symptoms will still be present.

There are two types of Lemurian possession where the host mind can co-exist with the trespasser, though the desired bodily control may be limited or absent.

In the first, a mind can be inserted into a host without the removal of the original psyche. In this case, the alien is effectively powerless; in the host, minor loss of coordination, concentration and ego may occur.

Also, a copy of a consciousness will invariably occur in the undeveloped mind

of an unborn child when the mother is subjected to the procedure, though the full flowering of the parasite mind may not manifest until young adulthood, at which time it is strong enough to assume control when the host sleeps, is rendered unconscious, or removed. When close contact between the original and copy occurs an intense empathic link is formed in the hosts.

No matter the circumstances, two requirements must be met. A disembodied Lemurian consciousness must preside over the proceedings, and a mechanical focusing device developed by their science – looking, perhaps, like bedside apparatus or a tiny model flying saucer – must also be at hand.

Jack lapsed into silence. I whispered to the Professor. “But what about last night? What about Luuna? Is she gone?”

He looked at me gravely. “I’m afraid we’re going to find that out very soon, Ace. Watch Peace.”

Sally served coffee. Peace took a sip and set her cup down.

“You just gave up on Gladys and helped Luuna?” she asked in a measured tone.

Sally served herself and sat. “You think we had a choice? How often did you sneak upstairs at the temple?”

Peace glared at Smokey, who tugged his collar and looked away.

“Okay. Fair enough. But what about the empire? What about the Space Brothers? Is everything I’ve been taught a big fraud? Are all the teachings lies? Did Luuna just make all those stories up?”

Smokey spoke. “Please, child. The stories are true. Once, an empire of a thousand planets spread across the galaxy. There was a golden age of plenitude. But...

“But what?”

Smokey sighed. “But... it was over a billion years ago. There is no more empire.”

“What happened to them?”

“They fell prey to melodrama on a galactic scale. The great empire of the

Space Brotherhood, established and administered on noble principles of equality for all, fell under the sway of a charismatic leader with a secret ambition.”

“What ambition? To take over the empire?”

“Oh, no. To destroy it.”

“How?”

“By inciting them to invoke the Rite of Final Unction on the one world in all the heavens that actually had the power to resist illumination.”

“Imbeciles!” said the Professor, and I heard his tone and knew.

“They attacked the Time Lords!” I said.

“Yes, Ace, but we were forewarned. We sent their ‘unction’ right back to their invincible fleet. It burned in space with no survivors. Pity. Without the fleet, there was no glue to hold the empire together. We watched it fade, prey upon itself, crumble from within; in a paltry million years it was gone and the galaxy slept again. I’m sorry, Peace.”

Peace stared at her empty plate.

“Professor,” I asked. “Who was this maniac who tried to take on the Time Lords?”

“Ah. Why don’t we ask someone who was there? Smokey?”

The Lemurian said. “Must I, Doctor? It has been a very long time.”

“They need to know who they’re dealing with, Smokey.”

“Very well,” said the Lemurian. He stood and began to orate dramatically as he circled the table. As he spoke, we heard sounds in our minds; energy blasts, explosions, murmuring crowds.

“When Zillotti Colony V was destroyed, those of our people who escaped went underground. But one of us, our greatest historian, the one who had pleaded most persuasively to accept the Brotherhood’s offers, grew mad with vengeance. Machines were built in secret, mysteries of the mind were mastered. A ship went to the Brother’s home world and soon the legend of the Faceless Prophet grew. After many years of service the Prophet accepted the merit reward of supervision of the fleet. This was the desired outcome. In secret, the Prophet returned to our people and told us vengeance would soon be won and our destruction avenged.”

He stopped speaking, deep in thought. Sally touched his arm, offered him a slice of apple pie. He sat and ate, continuing the story by telepathy, less dramatic than before.

“I was the Prophet’s son. The last child born to us, a true native of this world. I saw evil in the plan. I had met the Lords and Ladies of Gallifrey; they had committed no crime against our people. Even though I knew the fleet would be destroyed, great damage would have come to Gallifrey. After the Prophet departed, I sent a warning of the coming peril. Later, I sifted the wreckage, finally finding the Prophet’s last fragile particle of awareness, and bore it away home. After millions of years of careful cultivation I was pleased to find my efforts repaid, and Luuna lived again.”

Peace looked up, startled. “What? Are you telling us Luuna’s your mother?”

“Oh, certainly not!” said Smokey, laying down his salad fork. “Luuna is my father.”

Jack Kraft sprayed cider across the table. “Jesus! That explains a few things,” he said. “Hey, Gladys! You had a man in your head! Ain’t that... Gladys?”

There was no response from the chair except a soft snore. A few of us chuckled quietly, and I reached for my tea when I stopped, puzzled. I saw concentric circles form on its surface. “Doctor?” I said, my voice distinct in the sudden hush, and then the dishes began rattling and my chair shook. The three pilgrims leaped to their feet and someone yelled: “Quake!” and the Professor pulled me under the table. Somehow I had the presence of mind to grab my pack. We huddled there as the earth groaned beneath us. Dishes danced off the table edge, timbers creaked and somewhere in the house something heavy crashed to the floor. The Doctor and I were not alone under the table. Smokey was calmly finishing his pie with a distant expression on his face. Jack was trying to cover Peace and Sally, but he was looking toward the recliner. “We’ve forgotten Gladys!” I shouted at the Professor. We scrambled out of our shelter and stopped, staring. A moment later Jack, Peace and Sally joined us.

Jack shouted over the din. “Where is she?”

The recliner lay on its side, empty. Gladys and the pilgrims were gone.

Peace yelled something about keys and stumbled out to the hall. The cars! I

followed her, dodging a falling bookcase, sensing Sally behind me. The front door was open and I saw Peace, frozen on the sidewalk, looking open-mouthed at the house. A sharp lurch almost knocked me off my feet but I managed to grab the door frame and throw myself outside, where I immediately grew dizzy from the total lack of movement.

Remember what I told you about stepping over the Tardis threshold?

“Oh, no way!” I said. The house visibly trembled, and I heard rumbling and crashes inside, but out here the earth was utterly still except for a faint sympathetic vibration. To enter stillness so suddenly was hypnotic, so when Jack pushed me aside I was taken totally by surprise. I went down hard, winded and stunned. It was over before I got back on my feet.

I heard Jack’s angry shouts and a scuffle. Peace shouted. “Leave him alone!” and I heard a car door slam and she shouted. “No! Uncle Jack!” Tyres spun on concrete, gained purchase and squealed, and Alpha surged across the lawn and bounced onto the road. I struggled up just in time to see it speed around the corner.

Peace raced up. “They’ve taken Uncle Jack! They hurt him! We have to catch them!”

Suddenly the Doctor was beside us, his face a mask of anger. “We will, Peace, we will! Sally, time to go!” He patted his pockets. “Keys?”

“You gave them back! They’re inside!” cried Sally. She looked at the shaking house, then back at Peace. She had the oddest expression on her face. Then she grabbed Peace in a fierce hug and whispered something in her ear. Peace stepped back, confused. Sally shot the Doctor a hard glance and I saw him quickly nod. She looked at the house, squared her shoulders and ran inside.

The Doctor took us each by the hand and pulled us away from the house. Neither of us protested. I was still a little dazed and Peace seemed like she was in another world. We reached Gamma and leaned against her. I clung to the Professor’s hand, gasping for breath while spots danced in my eyes.

I feel very far away.

I have reached the summit. The mountain falls away on every side of me. Four wispy

figures move encircle me and I feel my body reviving. I watch the setting sun glint off the chrome highlights on the black object as my heartbeat slows and strengthens. The air in my lungs is rich and full, and the pain in my head fades to nothing. My entire being is suffused with wondrous expectation. A question comes to me from the oldest of the beings.

("You're there now, aren't you?")

"Yes, I am. What's happening?" My voice sounds enclosed, and I see a shimmer surrounding the summit.

("Oh, drifting residue from a temporal waveform, augmented by altitude sickness and the lingering after-effects of extensive telepathic trauma, is entangling original events and your memories of them. It happens.")

"Not to me, it doesn't."

("Let us be grateful it does, young friend. It allows you to live, and allows us to act.")

"Act? What do you mean, act?"

("Be quiet, Dorothy McShane. I am protecting you from the blast.")

"Smokey? Make sense, you toe-rag! What blast? And what do you mean, act?"

("I mean, an act of restitution, perhaps?")

"Wait! Restitution for what?"

The Professor dropped my hand, shocked surprise on his face. He'd felt something. Peace looked at us and in that frozen millisecond I saw the orange reflection bloom in her eyes as the house behind us erupted in a towering fireball. It was in slow motion, like in an action movie. I could see the blast wave sweep toward and around us; the flames came next, then the debris. But we were safe. An invisible dome protected us and Gamma.

Peace lunged toward the inferno and the Professor grabbed her waist. She struggled and his grip loosened. I shook off my torpor and tackled her legs. We all fell. Peace's exertions weakened as the totality of the destruction sunk in.

We were well inside the circle of ruin. There was nothing left except

blackened bones of framework, licked by weak flames. The Professor lay his head on Peace's back and stroked her, his eyes burning into mine. His expression terrified me.

"Doctor, Sally..."

"She's gone, Ace. I'm so sorry, Peace." I saw him deftly press three points on her spine and he released her, gesturing that I could, too. We sat up and looked at each other: we'd survived again. But we were forgetting something...

Suddenly Peace was standing above us. "What are you just sitting there for? What about Uncle Jack and Gladys?"

"Oh, sod! How are we supposed to catch them?" I cried.

It was at that precise moment that, with a series of clunks and an abrupt purring roar, Gamma's doors opened and she came alive. As we piled in I had an absurd fleeting recollection of Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang and wondered if the Professor ever owned a car like her, and then the doors slammed, we spun in place and shot like a rocket toward the temple. Seat belts snaked around us and locked. Good thing, because we may not have survived: Gamma drove like a maniac with a severe phobia of roads. We hurtled in a straight line through parking lots, backyards and across streets. We bounced inside as the town sped past. Peace, her eyes still wet with tears, looked at me and laughed – and then we all did. Somehow, despite the tragedy we'd just left and the uncertainty of what we'd encounter at our destination, we were enjoying this insane, dangerous ride. Then, with the remains of a shattered fence still hitting the ground behind us, we shuddered to a screeching halt. Gamma shut off with a ticking sigh. Our belts uncoupled and the doors flew open.

We barely glanced at Alpha as we dashed into the building and through the temple. We raced up the hall. We were temporarily delayed as we all tried to pass through the closet at once, but pounding up the hidden stairs seemed to take seconds. Just as we reached the upper door we heard two loud reports. The door was locked.

"Ace!" cried the Professor. "Deal with this door!" I reached into my pack. He pulled Peace back around the corner as I set a five-second fuse, placed the canister

and scrambled to join them.

The nitro-9 obliterated the door and a good part of the wall and floor. Ears ringing, we leaped over a gap into the room and stopped in horror.

It was a glimpse of Hell. A sphere of flickering red light illuminated the center of the room, its glow casting the beds and machines in sharp relief against the darkness beyond.

At the center of the glow was the blood-red, flaming aspect of Smokey I'd seen the day before. The three pilgrims writhed in agony below him. Jack and Gladys lay together on the floor in a spreading black pool of blood. Peace ran and knelt by them.

"What are you doing, Saint Germain?" bellowed the Professor.

"Do not interfere, Time Lord!"

"But this is murder!"

"This is retribution! Retribution and protection for my people!"

The Professor ducked under Smokey and rolled to the nearest bed. His hands flew over the apparatus. Smokey wailed and flickered green for a moment and the pilgrim's body stopped convulsing. He drew a shuddering breath, and then the flames erupted again.

"No! What are you doing?" boomed Smokey as the Professor lunged for another bed. He stopped, grasped in mid-air, and was flung into the darkness. I was in motion before I heard the distant clatter of his landing. I reached the bed and did what I'd seen Jack do. Nothing happened. I felt Smokey's attention focusing on me and remembered what he'd said yesterday, 'Don't interrupt! I am boosting the projectors!' Oh, bugger, what was I supposed to do? What had the Professor done?

("Peace is the answer, child.")

("Is now really the time for hippie philosophy? Honestly!")

("No, Peace. Go to her.")

("Oh. Hey, who the hell are you?")

I felt an invisible touch as I saw Peace moving toward me, purpose in her eyes and outstretched hand.

'I am Luuna' she'd said yesterday.

("I am Luuna") says the voice in my head.

Peace and I are lifted before the snarling red face. Our hands reach, miss, reach, clasp. His mind shatters the barriers. Two who were four become one.

I am Luuna.

"What?!" I cry, on the mountain. "Luuna was in ME?!"

I look down on my child, he who never outgrew the needs of the flesh. But I cannot judge him. Just as he'd quickened the womb of a peasant girl centuries ago, I had done the same with Sally Spenser and produced the container Peace.

"He was. The Doctor put him there."

"No! I can't believe it! I won't believe it!"

"He had to! He could not put him in Peace – the combined spirits would have been unstoppable! He could not have put him in Sally; she would have been immediately engulfed. He could not take her into himself – the risks were unimaginable. But you were safe. You were strong. You were the perfect prison."

The little Time Lord has crept back and is adjusting the two remaining beds. He is an annoyance and I prepare to swat him.

"He zapped Luuna into me with that little saucer?"

"He did, Ace. He recognised the device's function when it fell to the floor and then he slipped it in your pack."

"That's why Luuna called me a thief! How did she know?"

"I told her. The saucer held the spirit of Gladys Kraft; when it fell she was released for a time and Luuna was transposed. You were unaware, but I repaired the device as you hid in the closet."

Will I break his bones? Scorch his mind? Pop his hearts? Turn his blood to acid?

"Oh, you ratbag! You sent me to the forest, didn't you?"

"And informed Luuna where you'd gone, yes."

"You're a proper Quisling, you are."

I make my decision, ignoring the clamorous voices within.

"I acted from loyalty to my father and my people. I have seen the error of my

ways. Did I not reach through time and call the Doctor in the Tardis? Did I not save you from the explosion?"

"The one you caused? Killing Sally? If you say so... Hey, how did the Professor make the saucer work?"

"While you wandered the town, he returned to his machine and fashioned a remote control. He and Sally pursued Luuna and Peace to the forest."

"Then Sally shot Luuna to save me, got it."

"What? No, Dorothy, you did, a few hours ago, between the Heart and Red Banks."

I summon the raw energy, shape it with my anger, direct it by my will. I flex, push and...

("Not so fast, Princess Party-Pants.")

--the psychic blast is diverted and rips into my son. Like a screaming meteor he flies and explodes against the distant wall.

("Wicked! Let's give him another one, Peace!")

("He's fighting us, Ace! He's strong but he won't win!")

My energies are summoned without my consent, but the control is weak and slippery. It is driven by their glandular anger, which is of the body, which is weak and uncertain. My righteous anger, which is of my mind, is strong and precise. I retaliate, almost gently, and my two little puppets stagger.

"I shot her through time? And you contacted the Professor through time? And did all those other things?"

"Is this relevant? Luuna rallies below!"

I rummage in my pack. There!

"Yes, it's relevant! If I can shoot a bullet through thirty-five years, what do you reckon I can do with this?"

"Ah."

As I am distracted I see the Gallifreyan leap and roll to his feet behind the girl Ace. He draws the device from her storage pouch. I summon a strike that will explode his body from within.

"Ace! I know you can hear me! Everyone ate the psychic enhancer in the

turkey but the antidote was in the potatoes! Use your anger! Fight her!”

He powers the device and the young ones attack.

“Dorothy on the mountain!” shouted the Doctor. “I know you can hear me! Use it! Use it now!”

He presses a hidden button and I am pierced by grasping hooks of psychic vacuum. Desperate, I try to knit the attacking energy from the young ones to a new configuration. I feel my tactic succeed, my strength grow, as I feed their anger into mine. My unstoppable will focuses on the Time Lord.

(“Oh, no, you don’t! Eat this, turkey!”)

I am rocked by an unexpected attack.

(“Peace! Don’t be mad! Hit him with this!”)

I will not be imprisoned!

I press the hidden button, and the spirits on the mountain lend strength to the transference. Doubled in time, the device sinks its hooks into the mighty Luuna and pulls.

I am Luunaaa...!

The Lemurian, or Zillotian, whatever you please, is drawn through the Professor’s device, through the intervening years, and into mine. It plays a fanfare and beeps. I regard it; such a small, unremarkable thing, but so much power within. Like Ace.

Finally, the Professor couldn’t take my smug satisfaction anymore.

“All right, Ace,” he growled as he busied himself sending the remaining Stolings home. “Will you please tell me what you and Peace did?”

“What do you think, Peace?”

“I don’t know, Ace. He’s not been too forthcoming with us, has he?”

The Professor frowned as he summoned the pilgrim’s spirits back from the mountain. “I’ve already explained why I couldn’t tell you about Luuna, Ace.”

“Not everything. Tell you what. You answer, oh, three questions of mine and I’ll tell you. Fair enough?”

He sighed, beaten. “Fair enough. Now, if you two are feeling strong enough,

we need to get these men out of this building. I don't know if you've noticed, but your nitro-9 and Smokey's flames have set the rafters afire. Come on now, one pilgrim each."

At the bottom of the stairs, I asked him, "So, what was Luuna planning, anyway?"

"Oh, the usual. He thought if he could plant colonies of pilgrims around the world, he could convince his fellow Lemurians to possess them *en masse*, creating an army to conquer the galaxy."

"What a prat. That's a right boring plan."

"He did fund it by means of tourism. That's pretty original, right?" said Peace.

After leaving the pilgrims to fend for themselves outside, I asked him, "Who were those guys, anyway?"

"Oh, that was Ren Orion, Luuna's Stoling business partner, and two pet thugs. I believe Smokey meant for them to kill us, but they had other ideas. There are ancient families out there who still remember the Empire, and blame the Lemurians. Their thirst for vengeance, no matter how abstract, could have put a lot of money into Mr. Orion's coffers. Don't worry about the Lemurians. Ren and his cronies are in the mountain."

"Well, that was properly illuminating," I laughed.

Halfway there, I asked, "Hey! Who cut the ladder leg?"

Peace said. "I did! Or I will."

"What?"

"Keep up, Ace!"

After trotting past the diner and into the alley, I asked, "Hey, what happens now? What's Peace supposed to do?"

As he unlocked the Tardis door, the Doctor said. "Peace?"

She looked at me and then at the Doctor. He nodded. "Well, I'm coming with you."

"What? That's wicked! I think..." I was torn. It could be fun to have a mate in the Tardis, but me and the professor were a team...

She smiled at me, understanding immediately. “Don’t worry, Ace. It’s just one short trip.”

“And now we must part, Dorothy McShane,” said Smokey, and I know it is so. I watch him trudge away. He turns once, sorrowfully, when I call to him.

“Smokey! Don’t be a berk! You did it! You made it out okay!” He bows, but I think he’s smiling, and he sinks into the mountaintop.

I look to the three other radiant beings and see the black rectangle has settled in the snow. It resolves into solidity and I laugh and clap. Her stars and flags have been removed, but the clear, glowing saucer still crowns Gamma’s top. I run a wondering hand over her gleaming bonnet and smile at my three old friends. “She’s gorgeous!”

Gladys beams. “I’m sorry we could not be better acquainted, dear. But I hope you get on well. Be careful going down the mountain, now!”

Below my feet the mountain rumbles as ancient, monstrous gears struggle to turn. The mountain begins to iris open.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“The Zillotti are going home, dear. What did that Smokey say? ‘Back to the cradle, back to the flesh,’ or something like that.”

“You guys are going with them?”

“Oh, heavens, no.”

She points at the sky and the emerging stars.

“Not with all that to see.”

Jack helps Gladys into the car and catches me in a hug. I laugh.

“Jack, you’re almost solid!”

“Yeah, I’m getting good at these stunts, right? Smokey says I’m his best pupil. Listen, girlie – thanks for everything. Keep watching the skies, maybe you’ll see us looking back at you.” He kisses my cheek and enters Gamma. She purrs to life.

He leans out the window. “Look at that, will you!”

Two by two, in an ever-widening V, the saucers abandon Shasta. I watch them a moment: impossibly huge, impossibly silent; something magical going out from the

world.

I turn, feeling sadness, and the third figure stands there, arms open. She is insubstantial, like a faded memory.

“Didn’t we just do this?” Sally asks. “Or are we about to?”

We were standing on the edge of a straight mountain road, the Doctor and I by the Tardis doors and Peace a few paces away, studying the horizon.

“Didn’t we just do this?” Peace asked. “Or are we about to?”

I wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know... I still don’t understand why you have to do this!”

“Because I already have, Ace. If I don’t, there won’t be an anomaly and we’ll never stop Luuna. It’s... it’s what happened, it’s what will happen, and it’s what’s happening now.”

“Doctor! Didn’t you say you can never meet yourself?”

The Doctor put his arm around my shoulder. “There are certain circumstances...”

Peace laughed. “And, really now, giving birth to yourself has to count as a ‘certain circumstance’!”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“But what do I call you? Are you Sally or are you still Peace?”

“Oh, Ace! I’m Sally and I’m Peace. I’m everything I am and everything I’ll be. But really I’m just me.”

Far to the south a triangle of lights mount the horizon. Sally squares her shoulders.

“Well, that’s my cue! You guys had better get going, and I’ll see you in a few years!”

She begins to lightly tread along the road, humming softly.

“Be careful!” I call out.

She stops and I hear her laugh. “Stop worrying, Ace! I was a fun kid, it’ll be fun to raise me! Besides, you know what? Just between me, you, him and the trees? Some of mom’s girlfriends were pretty hot!”

The Professor chuckled at my stunned expression and pulled me inside, patting my shoulder.

“Huh! Live and learn! Right, Professor?”

“Speaking of learning, Ace, I seem to recall a deal involving three answers...”

“Did you ever tell him?” Peace asks, as we watch the last of the fleet vanish among the twinkling stars. The gears grind again and the mountain is silent.

“Yeah, eventually. Made him stew in his own water first.”

(“All locked up! Time to go!”)

“You’re taking him with you?”

“Yeah. Zillotti’s not his home. Earth was, but not anymore. Where else would he go?”

“Just don’t let him drive, okay?”

Peace laughs and gives me a ghostly peck on my cheek.

“Same old Ace.”

The Cadillac’s engine races.

“Jack and Gladys are ready to hit the high way,” says Peace, “so I guess this is good-bye for real, now. Thanks for everything, Ace. I love you.”

If I cry now my tears will freeze. It’s going to be a long walk down in the dark. Don’t need my eyes frozen shut.

“You’d better get going, then. Love you, too, Peace. I’m really glad Smokey saved you guys.” I step away and she enters the Caddy. The saucer atop glows and spins and lifts the car into the sky. They wave from their open windows, Jack honks the horn twice, and she shoots into the heavens. I wave until they disappear.

I haven’t taken twenty paces down when the Space Cadillac swoops and lands in front of me. The window rolls down and Jack says, “Where are my manners, kid? Need a lift?”

I’m not tempted for a second.

“Thanks, guys, but I walked up and I’ll walk down. Quit wasting time here, you sods. You got places to go, and so do I.”

As Gamma lifts slowly into the air, I hear Peace say. “See? I told you she

wouldn't."

An alien bazaar, one week later.

"Doctor... look. It worked, but it's corny."

"Ace, you promised. There might be something in it for you." He jingles a little pouch. "See? I brought money!"

"Oh, all right. I'd better tell you now, because it's getting sort of dim."

"Yes, the time anomaly is affecting your memory. Perfectly natural."

Already my memory was breaking down. For decades I would have only the vaguest, puzzling recollections of my time in Shasta; only climbing the mountain brought them back.

"All right, then. You were yelling, 'Use your anger, Ace' or some shite like that. Thing is, that monster was taking that anger from me and that other girl and adding it to his powers. I wasn't hurting him, I was helping him."

"Go on."

"And then I realised the monster was going after you next. I could feel it. It looked at you, so I looked at you... and suddenly I wasn't angry anymore. Everything you'd done to help me and everybody else just filled me with gratitude! And the monster choked on it. Then I knew what we had to do. Me and that girl..."

"Her name was Peace."

"Yeah, me and Peace, we nailed the monster with the spirit of Thanksgiving!"

That's it, really. Not much more to say. Time marches on and we're the parade ground. You can still buy happiness at the Brotherhood Temple, but it costs ten dollars and tastes like a hamburger and chips. Gladys, Jack and Sally, their murders unsolved, are pop symbols, famous dead frauds whose legacy is in public domain (I still own a 'Luuna luuves U' hoody).

Peace is still listed as a missing person and possible suspect. The residents of planet Sto of the Casivanian Belt still contrive to visit Earth. That was them, poor doomed sods, on the flying Titanic a few Christmases back, despite what the TV told you. I've got my sources. Charity opens doors, you know.

There's just one more thing. I've been putting it off, because looking back it's probably not my finest Sherlock Holmes moment. Makes me look thick, in fact.

I never told you how I got the saucer, did I? First part of the story, really.

I'd been to visit Mum, put some flowers down. This was a week before Shasta. I'm in my quiet place, thinking bittersweet thoughts that are none of your business, okay? Then a shadow falls across the stone. I look, and there's this lanky, big-faced kid in a cowboy hat and coat standing behind me. Intruding.

"Shove off," I tell him. "Give a woman some privacy." I'm being polite, you see.

"It's me," he says. And something about being a doctor.

"Listen, you," I say. "You're going to need a bloody surgeon in about ten seconds if you don't get a move on."

Then Robert, driver of the day, hustles up to rescue me. I tell him to hold back; I don't need rescuing. The kid mutters something I don't catch, looks around the cemetery, and a shadow falls across his face.

"Fine," he says. "This is me going. Never here, that's me."

He stops and studies Mum's grave for a moment, sees my name and birth date already etched on the double stone. Frowns, then remembers something. He pulls a small paper sack from a pocket and sets it on the ground.

"Here," he says, "from an old friend. You'll know what to do." Then he walks off into the forest. Robert and I exchange 'loony' faces and chuckle.

"Takes all kinds," I say. "Wonder what's in the sack?"

I peek inside and I'm sixteen again.

"Robert! That kid, what did he say after you came up?"

"Hmmm? Oh! He said, 'Same old Ace'. Does that mean something to you, Miss McShane?"

I'm looking in the bag, at the two objects inside, and my heart is sinking. Breaking, really.

Because it means everything in the world to Ace. It's Ace that curses herself for hearing 'doctor' instead of 'Doctor'. As she turns to race into the forest, just to talk to him, just to tell him how much she loves him, it's Ace that hears distant lonely

engines grind, warble, fade and leave her behind. And it's Ace who has to be helped to the car and crumples in the back, weeping, wrapped in an unfathomable feeling of loss.

But sod that. Really!

One minute later it's Dorothy who places calls, cancels meetings, changes itineraries, makes arrangements. It's Dorothy who takes the little saucer to Shasta and climbs the mountain.

And it's Dorothy who sits here, now, writing at her desk, almost done, wondering how it will end.

But who paused, now and then, to look up at the other object from the bag?

That little model police box that fills her with such anticipation?

Was it Dorothy? Was it Ace? Or, after all this time, can it just be me?

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