

We, The People

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They look like people, but they are not. I could not point to any physical trait that sets them apart, which is what makes it so insidious. It is largely their smell and the energy in the air around them that distinguishes them to me.

They smell sour and moldy, like damp leaves and curdled milk, sometimes more one than the other. It is not pleasant. And if I stand too close, I get a prickly feeling all over my skin and the hairs stand up. From time to time I get a surge of what feels like electric current from one of them and I am barraged with bizarre images. I am certain they are very old and from very far away.

I believe they came here to Red Willow from Roswell in the 1950s. It's never been clear to me, with the U.S. military in complete control of the situation from the get-go, how they managed to let any of them get away, much less allow them to begin taking over things.

All my inquiries regarding the current situation directed to any and every government agency, under whose purview extraterrestrial infiltration might fall, have gone unanswered. I can only assume the entity in charge is at the highest level of national security, maybe unknown even to the president and military commanders. I wonder if they know how serious the situation is here in Red Willow.

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Lately I have found it increasingly difficult to be among them in a public place. Their smell has grown more intense and unpleasant. I do not know whether, having been among them so long, my sensitivity has increased or if the strength of their distasteful pheromones has multiplied with their numbers. They are now clearly in the majority. At times I am convinced I am the only red-blooded human being in all of Red Willow. I do not remember the last fellow human I met.

On Friday I did my monthly grocery marketing, preferring to encounter them as infrequently as possible. I chose a small, expensive, organic market because it is the least swarming with them.

My last stop was the meat counter. I saw the butcher and the customer, a fortyish woman in a sleeveless dress, exchange what I would call knowing glances. The woman reached up to take her package from the butcher, exposing me to the emanations from her underarm. I grabbed my nose, but not before I'd gotten a whiff. It was enough to knock a buzzard off a shitwagon.

Afraid I would get sick in the store, I ran out to the parking lot and gulped in several lungs full of fresh air. I was still a little woozy and light-headed. I debated going back inside to

retrieve my cart of food once I saw the woman leave, but I decided not to chance it. I thought before of ordering dried food in bulk from the Internet. The time had arrived.

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I would no longer purchase or consume food among them. I tolerated open-air events fairly well, provided I could sit near an exit for a quick getaway. Even so, I stuffed my nostrils with cotton and sealed them with plumber's putty.

There was a tavern in a Quonset hut that sponsored banjo and fiddle music—not my cup of tea—but I needed to get out once in a while and pretend I was among real people. This particular night the band was electrified and I liked them better. Brief Heavy Downpours, they called themselves. What began as, I thought, an amplifier feedback squeal, turned into a cranium-rattling low hum. I could not hear myself think. I realized they were all doing it. They were all humming, all the same note, trying to drive me out of my mind. But those who looked like people succeeded only in driving me from the concert.

Since then I have not gone anywhere they might be found in numbers. I think of moving to some other town or county, but I'm sure they have taken over most, if not all, of the country, including Washington.

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Last week, under cover of darkness, I sat in my car in the parking lot of *The Two Maggots*, an oddly-named French restaurant. I used a movie camera with a long-range antenna so I could pick up everything they said and did. If I was lucky, their defenses would be down and their masks off. But they ate ordinary-looking food in an ordinary way, chewing and swallowing, and drinking their water, or wine, or coffee. It looked as though they were truly ingesting their meals and, of course, eating way too much.

Their conversations were so damn ordinary and banal that I was convinced they were trying to make me crazy. After finishing every bite on their plates, they complained how sub-standard the fare was and made cracks about the skinny waiter. *Guess he doesn't eat here.*

Night after night I went back, recording more footage, hoping to catch them in at least one slip-up, grabbing something with a tentacle instead of a finger. I'd have the evidence I needed to present to the military. During the day, I reviewed the movies in slow-motion in case there was anything I missed. I knew I needed to eat better and sleep more, but I was desperate to get the government moving on reversing these dire circumstances. I hoped it wasn't too late.

About a week later, as I again sat parked at the edge of the restaurant lot with my lights off, I must have fallen asleep. One of the waiters, a strange-looking skinny fellow in a black Nehru jacket with red trim, stood beside my open window.

“Is everything all right, sir?” he asked.

It was too late. The smell was the most atrocious ever, and I blacked out. When I came to, I was on my back, sliding into the back of an ambulance. If not for the oxygen mask they had on me, I would have swooned again being in such close quarters with the two attendants. Now they’d got their hands on me and there was nothing I could do to evade them.

I watched the ceiling tiles and fluorescent tubes fly by as they wheeled me to the X-ray room. They hooked me up to an IV and, judging by the effect, pumped some sedatives into me. Fog gathered at the corners of the room and soon spread over everything and everyone.

I had a bizarre dream of flying among the emerald green crystal spires of a great city reaching up through the clouds. There were two suns, a small yellow one and a big red one. I had no sense of being in a vehicle of any sort. I was flying on my own in a red-and-black suit with ribbed membranes from my hands to my feet that caught the wind and enabled me to maneuver. There were flying people everywhere, swarming on the towers like insects.

One sun set and then the other, and a dozen moons rose. As I tried to follow them across the deep purple sky, I slipped over the horizon into an even deeper sleep without dreams.

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When I awoke, there were two figures silhouetted against the light streaming though the window curtains. I could make out nothing of their features. The oxygen tubes in my nostrils at least prevented their stench from reaching me.

“Mr. Patrick Shacktey?” one of them asked.

I nodded. As my eyes adjusted to the bright daylight, I could see their faces and I could tell who was speaking.

“We have been looking for you for over seventy years, Sha-Kti-Pta,” the stouter one said.

“Impossible,” I said. “I’m only thirty-two.”

The slighter fellow stepped to the bedside and looked down at me.

“You escaped the facility at Roswell in 1956 and have been on the lam ever since. You do the math, Sha-Kti-Pta.”

“What did you call me?”

“We called you by your name. You are the last of the four escapees. Other agencies have been forwarding your missives to us at NIL, the National Identity Library, but we’ve been unable to trace you without a return address—until now, thanks to an alert hospital technician.”

The name by which they called me had a vaguely familiar ring, but, then, it was rather like my real name. Now I knew which agency had been stonewalling me. I’d never heard of the National Identity Library. That’s how they wanted it, no doubt.

The other fellow, similarly dressed in a white hazmat suit with his helmet in the crook of his arm, stepped up to the bed.

“Of the nine on your mission, five were killed when your craft crashed here in New Mexico. You four survivors were under observation when an insider, sympathetic to your cause, provided you egress from our facility. Does any of this sound familiar?”

I had to admit it did, but I was not going to give them any satisfaction. I must have read about it somewhere. I couldn’t figure out their angle.

“We don’t know why each of you developed amnesia and an almost complete identification with human beings. The psychiatric staff at NIL call it something akin to the anaclitic dependence of an infant on its mother. The longer you were among human beings, the more intense your identifying as human. You were among us the longest, Sha-Kti-Pta.”

They watched me intently, scanning my face as though they were studying a map. The second fellow slipped an X-ray film into the lighted panel on the opposite wall and switched it on. I saw my name and date of birth in the upper corner. It meant I was well over eighty.

I closed my eyes and saw myself driving a maroon ‘49 Hudson down the Paseo in Red Willow. Only the Mountain seemed the same, and, yes, I was the same.

“Please look at the X-ray, Sha-Kti-Pta. *Your* X-ray.”

I saw there were three pairs of lungs like beans on a stalk. The kidneys, liver, and lymphatic system were a single filtering organ. The heart also had six chambers instead of four and the stomach was much smaller. I realized this was what I looked like inside.

I also realized I could read their minds if I wanted, but, if I did so for longer than a glance, the violence and chaos I witnessed could drive one insane in a very short time. They wondered whether I believed them. They thought they might have to provide more evidence to convince me who I was.

The first fellow opened the door of my room and motioned down the hallway. He rejoined his companion at my bedside.

Three young men walked in and stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the foot of the bed. I knew who they were. They dressed alike in red-and-black. They were my students, Lan-Cep-Ark, Oz-Kar-Deg, and Ba-Si-Em. I addressed them by name to show the NIL agents that my memory was returning and that I had a pretty good grasp of what was going on. My students and I began our internal humming, inaudible to humans.

“Now that we have you all in one place, it’s time to send you packing. Your students, with assistance from our military, have rebuilt your craft. It has been tested. You are good to go, Sha-Kti-Pta.”

“But, sirs, we are here to share our knowledge, and wisdom, and technology with you.”

“Yes, we are aware of your mission. Thanks, but no thanks. Your way certainly relies much less on what we’d call technology. Cerebral propulsion? Seriously? You’re into self-discipline and mental control, and it would take decades for anyone to master them. We appreciate your good wishes, but telekinesis doesn’t quite cut it here on Earth. We’re into bigger, faster, more expensive, and complicated machines. That’s what makes *us* go.”

“So,” the first fellow said, “after a debriefing, we’ll load you and your saucer onto one of our probes bound for Mars. No one will know and no explanation will be necessary. Once behind the Moon, you can be on your way at as fast a speed as you care to go. We hope you’ll regard your stay here as pleasant, but we remind you the Solar vicinity is not open to tourism.”

Lan-Cep-Ark unfolded my own black-and-red uniform and helped me into it. It included a vapor field that provided me my own atmosphere. It smelled like home: clean and piney, though we had no pine trees, and thunderstorms were even rarer than in Red Willow.

Telepathically my students expressed their concern to me about leaving these talking monkeys to their own devices. I had to remind them how often our mission directive emphasized freedom of choice for those we contact.

The two agents rode with us in the sealed van taking us back to Roswell. It was a long trip, one we could have made in a few seconds except for the weight of our baggage, the two agents from NIL. Oz-Kar-Deg attempted to get them to accept our assistance in getting us to the launch pad pronto by means of teleportation.

“Frankly, we find it difficult to accept what we have no explanation for,” the first agent said. “One day our technology will surpass yours, but without all the hocus-pocus. I’ve no doubt of that.”

“Provided,” I told them, “you don’t first blow yourselves to hell with that technology.”

Both agents laughed aloud. I didn’t want to tell them that foresight was among the other useless talents my people cultivated. They would not have heard the message, I’m afraid.