

Orange Car with Stripes

by Tom Lichtenberg

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Pink City

Everybody knew this Spallanzini guy, but that's not too surprising. Everyone who lives or works in Pink City pretty much knows everybody else who lives or works there too. It's not really even a city; it's more like a prefabricated community that practically popped out of a kit. There's a Green City too, and a Yellow one and a Blue one. Everything you need is right here. You've got your individualized habitat, your cubicle, your coffee shop, golf carts and scooters that take you everywhere you need to go. Most of the people work for the General Corporation, doing whatever it needs them to do. They're all unspecialized workers, jacks of all trades, masters of none. This way nobody bends the pay scale too far. It's easier that way all around.

Spallanzini was always an outbird. This is what they call those few who work inside but live outside the confines. Inbirds of course are just the reverse. Outside Pink City, things are different - values, priorities, concerns. Most people prefer to belong, and to belong completely. When you're in you're in and it's cozier that way. Outbirds never quite fit in all the way.

As an outbird, Spallanzini had commuted several years without becoming entrenched. He filled his slot. Every institution needs its mascots. He was Professor of Defunct Sciences at The New Harbinger College. Some questioned the utility of instructing students in outdated and discarded scientific theories and techniques, but overall the College decreed that learning how to fail, how to learn from failure, how to improve, how to overcome, was a valid and even instructive exercise. Spallanzini was a perfect fit for the job. He was somewhat overweight. He wore a thick beard. He was exceedingly impressed with his own intelligence. In short, he met the job requirement for a fat, bearded, know-it-all.

The cause of his dismissal was 'confusion'. They don't like confusion in Pink City. They like their appearances to be non-deceptive. What you see is what you get. The rules are simple: be what you are supposed to be. If you are not that, or cannot be that, or cease to be that, you must be deleted, removed, expelled. It's not too much to ask.

G Spot

Spallanzini played his part for a long time, and he did the job well. There were no complaints. Wherever and whenever the situation called for it, there he was, plugging the gaps. You could catch him on the local talk shows, providing his expert opinion on every possible subject whether he actually knew anything about it or not, or you could attend his lectures, or watch his special presentations online. You could buy his books, bestsellers like 'How To Be You', and 'Leave Your Dreams Alone'. He would take queries online and respond to each and every one, confidently advising people to leave their spouse of twenty years, abandon their child if need be, as long as they remained true to themselves. You do have to be who you are, after all. He took the guesswork out of life's many mysteries, assuring folks for example that there really is no such thing as a G Spot, that alien life forms would likely not speak English, that the stars do not in fact revolve around the Earth. Oddly, these questions and more are asked by every succeeding generation, as if no one had ever learned anything at all. It has to be learned all over again. And it's true that everyone cannot read all the books. A community needs its professional know-it-alls, as long as they're reliable.

At home, life was good for the Spallanzinis. Elaine, the missus, worked diligently as a homemaker, and spent most of her days viewing the Atheist Shopping Network and feathering the nest with their approved non-sectarian products. They had two children; Janelle, twelve, and Marco, nine, who attended the community schools in the small woodsy hamlet of Los Arboles, where the family had lived for many years. Spallanzini commuted the twelve twisty miles in his economy car each weekday. He attended meetings, prepared and delivered lectures, performed his pundit duties, pontificated in public, dispensed advice, corralled his correspondence, and stayed late on campus to extend his

wisdom overseas. A picture perfect life, it seems.

The problems all began over dinner one night in late summer. The family's close friend was Thomas Kuntz (pronounced Coonts), homosexual pastor of the Fourth Redemption Church and Professor of Comparable Religions at New Harbinger. It's said that his courses were like a celebrity death match of creeds, pitting one faith against another, issue by issue, with student scorecards, cheerleaders, and uniforms. Kuntz was fond of saying that even though your religion might be stupid, it doesn't mean that you are. In Pink City they appreciated such sentiments. The people are tolerant, but have their prejudices too. Even in the most perfectly agnostic community, such defects can't be helped.

Spallanzini was in a funk, a particularly feisty nihilistic mood. All evening long he'd been cranky and rude. Kuntz had prepared a special lamb feast for the family (in celebration of nothing at all) and was more and more annoyed by his host's unpleasantness. Elaine kept trying to lighten the subject, and the children only wanted to get away.

'What did you put in these potatoes?' Elaine asked Thomas. 'They're scrumptious'.

'Potatoes are like people', Gian Carlo interjected. 'You can dress 'em up all you want, but they're still just weeds that grow in the dirt'.

'Marjoram', Thomas answered, glaring at Spallanzini. 'They are good, aren't they?'

'Quite' said Elaine, also frowning at her husband, who sat across from her on the round patio table with his arms folded pompously across his annually expanding belly. Gian Carlo reached for his glass of red wine and took a slow sip. Another unpleasant thought was clearly forming in his brain.

'Anyway', said Thomas, 'wherever did you get the notion that people are weeds or growing in dirt? It makes no sense.'

'Ashes to ashes', Spallanzini retorted.

'Weeds?' Thomas repeated. He and his friend had a long history of contentious conversations, as befitting a preacher and his atheist pal. Usually these discussions were centered around the concepts of the soul, immortality, and divinity. Thomas was hardly doctrinaire; in fact Spallanzini was by far the more dogmatic of the two.

'I'm just saying', said Gian Carlo, 'that when you get right down to it, there's nothing complicated about people. At bottom they're all the same. It's only the window-dressing that makes them seem so - appearances, cultural pollutions, accidents of time and place. Take away the cruft and underneath it all ... potatoes'.

'Would anyone like dessert?' offered Elaine.

'Can I be excused please?' pleaded Janelle. Dinners were a torture for her, especially dinners when her father was present. Upstairs her cellphone awaited, with friends who could be anxiously contacted by speed dial.

'Me too' asked Marco, a small, rather shy boy whose ambition was to be exactly and precisely invisible. He'd been studying and researching the matter meticulously, with absolutely no success or luck so far.

'No dessert?' Elaine questioned them, surprised and not surprised. She knew that escape was a far, far deeper desire for them than chocolate or even ice cream, and so she let them go with a nod of her head and a shrug.

'I'd like to see you prove it', challenged Thomas.

'Prove what?' Gian Carlo replied. He was always so sure of himself that he didn't even have to know what he was saying in order to believe it to be true.

'Potatoes', Thomas said. 'That underneath it all we're all the same'

'Oh, I'm certain your theologians have crawled all over that one, like ants on sugar", Spallanzini said.

'No matter, Kuntz replied. 'I believe the opposite, that each and every soul is ultimately singular.'

'Ha', Gian Carlo proclaimed. 'What nonsense. Do you really think so? And yet our deepest darkest secrets, which we protect with all our might, they always turn out to be the obvious, the trivial, the most mundane. She loves me, she loves me not. Revenge. Resentment. Self-interest.'

'A test', Thomas declared, 'A challenge. Do you agree?'

'What kind of test?' asked Spallanzini.

'A simple test', said Kuntz. 'You pick someone, anyone, at random. A stranger. Someone none of us know anything about. You find him (or her), you find out all you can about him (or her), and ferret out his deepest darkest secret. I will bet you that this secret will be anything but mundane, anything but obvious, anything but trivial.'

'And if I win?' Gian Carlo asked.

'Then I will deliver a sermon of your choosing, of your writing. I will go before my congregation and say anything you want me to. Anything at all. And if you lose, then nothing. You risk nothing at all. It's not a bet, just a test.'

'Oh really?' Spallanzini warned to this idea. 'Anything at all? Oh, that'll be good. That'll be good.'

His depressing mood was lifted, and Elaine was grateful to their friend that she didn't have to sit through yet another evening of his bitter brand of banter. Instead, the three chatted merrily the rest of the night about their usual favorite topics. Movies, and who was terrible in them. Television shows, and how pathetic they were. The countryside, and how beautiful it was. The ocean, Pink City, New Harbinger, and all the gossip about their other friends and colleagues. But no one forgot about the test. Spallanzini guaranteed it would be a simple thing, and that very soon Professor Kuntz would be shocking the hell out of his obedient little flock.

Marginal

Later that night, after pretending to make sure the children had done their chores, brushed their teeth, and properly prepared for bed, Gian Carlo was in the master bedroom digging through his dresser for his favorite Teddy Bear pajamas when he noticed a copy of his book 'Taking a Chance on Chance' lying half-opened and dog-eared on the nightstand. He realized he hadn't re-read that particular treatise in awhile and made a mental note to check it out again, before the next thought occurred to him. What was it doing there now?

'Honey?' he asked, 'what's with the book?'

He gestured toward it and Elaine, who was also getting ready for bed, poked her head out of the bathroom to see what he was talking about.

'Oh', she mumbled with a mouth full of toothpaste. 'Wait a minute'.

She went back to finish brushing, which took her exactly two minutes every time, and Gian Carlo had almost forgotten the matter when she finally returned to the subject.

'It was so interesting tonight about the potatoes', she said.

'Potatoes?'

'Yes, at dinner. Just this afternoon I was slicing up some margarine for the coffee cake when the phone rang, and it was my old friend Marjorie, who I haven't talked to in years, you know, and then when I was asking Thomas about the potatoes and he said 'marjoram' I thought, wow that's weird, because there's hardly any other words that begin like that, and to have the three of them all in one day and two at the same time even, it seemed like such an unlikely coincidence'.

'Of course', Gian Carlo huffed, 'if it didn't seem unlikely, you wouldn't

call it a coincidence. Next thing I know, you'll be babbling about synchronicity and dealing out tarot cards.'

'I love that word 'synchronicity'', Elaine exclaimed, 'it's so suggestive, don't you think?'

'To me it suggests a really gullible person', Gian Carlo replied, 'just as I say in that book. The only thing coincidental about coincidences is the connection you make in your mind about random events, and given the billions of things that happen all the time, it's extremely likely that some of them will form impressions that seem coincidental.'

'Sometimes it seems like it's more than that', Elaine suggested, to a glare from her husband.

'I still can't find my pajamas!' he pouted.

'They're in the wash', Elaine replied. 'Wear the Dino ones. They're cute.'

'I don't feel like a Dino tonight', he said, and Elaine was thinking, well, you're looking pretty massive, but she just sighed and didn't say it out loud. She climbed into her side of the bed, grabbed the 'Chance' book, puffed up her pillows and began to read.

'It's still very interesting', she said, and since she was talking about one of his own books, Spallanzini didn't want to deny it, but it crossed his mind that Elaine could be a little weak-minded sometimes, and he'd better keep an eye out to make sure she didn't start slipping into supposition, superstition and all-around silliness.

In the end he did settle on the Dino pajamas, and, after deciding that pajamas were not sufficiently worryable, got into his side of the bed, rolled away from his wife to avoid her reading lamp shining in his eyes, stuck his head between two pillows, and fell fast asleep right away.

Marge

Gian Carlo Spallanzini always slept well, snoring loudly beside his wife, who had long since relied on extra-strength ear plugs to make it through the night. When he awoke in the morning, she was already downstairs making breakfast. Elaine Spallanzini had a split shift lifestyle - mornings and evenings for the family, the rest of the day for herself - and she took her homemaking duties seriously. There was never a morning without a family breakfast, never a night without a gathering for dinner. She believed in the principle of eating together. The rest of the family endured it.

Janelle especially hated these rituals, and only survived them through the miracle of smart phones. She had one hand on the phone and another on her spoon throughout breakfast, and her wireless headphones helped mask the fact of the family around her. Every now and then she was forced to participate in talk, so she made it as brief as she could.

Marco was all for getting through it as well, but he always brought something in the way of a contribution to the table. Usually it was something especially gruesome. This morning was no different.

'There was a head-on collision on Skyline' he announced through a mouthful of sugary cheerios.

'Goodness', exclaimed Elaine. 'I hope that no one was hurt.'

'Everybody died', he chortled. 'All of 'em, dead!'

'Marco!' Elaine reproved him. 'Such a tone. That won't do.'

'I wonder if their spirits ran away from their corpses', Marco wondered aloud, just as his father came lumbering into the kitchen, scratching himself.

'Spirits don't run away', contradicted his sister, 'they fly'.

'Do not', Marco countered.

'Do too', she stuck out her tongue.

'What are you two talking about?' demanded Gian Carlo.

'What spirits do when you die', Marco said. 'I say they take off and run. Jojo says they fly, but people don't have wings, so that doesn't make sense. Maybe bird spirits fly, but people have legs so they run.'

'Call me Jojo again and I'll kick your little ass so hard you won't be able to sit for a week,' Janelle shouted, 'and how'd you get to be so stupid, anyway? Spirits aren't people, they're inside of them.'

'Where did you pick up this nonsense?' Gian Carlo demanded, sitting down at the table between the two kids. 'There's no such thing as spirits. You know better than that.'

'My friend Marge told me different', said Janelle, 'and she gets all A's in school.'

'Your friend Marge is a moron', Janelle's father said, and Elaine piped up,

'You have a friend named Marge? I didn't know that.'

'What? Do I have to give you a list of my friends? Do you want all their phone numbers too?' Janelle said, in her best bitter mother-daughter tone.

'Of course not', replied her mom. 'It's just that I too have a friend ...'

'I'm sure', Janelle interrupted. 'I have to go now, okay?', and without another word she pushed her bowl toward the middle of the table, stood up, and stalked out.

'Janelle, your bowl!' her father yelled after her, but the last thing they heard from Janelle was the sound of the front door slamming as she left.

'I have to go too', declared Marco, and he gathered up both his and his

sister's cereal bowls and dumped them into the sink.

'Bye', he mumbled.

'Bye dear', said Elaine.

'Huh', said Gian Carlo, when the room was clear of kids. 'I'm going to have a serious talk with those two. Their grades are bad enough, but now this? Talking about spirits? They ought to know better.'

'It's still a good question', ventured Elaine. 'We ought to ask Thomas about that. He believes in the soul. I wonder if he thinks that it flies or it runs.'

'Ridiculous', said her husband.

'Or maybe it crawls', Elaine added, trying to joke. Sometimes she was able to get a smile out of him, but not this time.

'What would you like for breakfast?' she asked. Gian Carlo looked up, surprised.

'No idea', he said. 'Maybe nothing. I've got a lot on my mind just now', and he got up and made for the shower. Elaine saved a smile for herself. Almost done! A little bit of cleanup, and the day was all hers. She had plans. She had fun things to do. Gian Carlo wouldn't be home until six, and the children would be gone until five.

Rats on Wheels

Once safely alone in his BMW s30i, Gian Carlo Spallanzini felt truly himself again. The family thing was always a trial. Mornings and nights were hardly his favorite times of the day. He preferred his commute to those mealtimes. The drive from Los Arboles over the hill to the civilized world which lay waiting below took somewhere around twenty minutes each way, but they were never the easiest minutes. Most drivers thought twice before taking that route. Winding and narrow, the road was dotted with shrines perched on top of drops of sheer cliff. The paved part itself was an obstacle course, often littered with suicyclists, rats on wheels, double crossers, flare devils, and assorted other potential road kill. Gian Carlo had classified those life forms himself.

Suicyclists, of course, were the bicycle riders in their bicycle outfits, riding slowly and side by side on a road where there was simply no room for them, with blind turns every quarter of a mile or so. Rats on wheels were the motorcyclists who insisted on tailgating, then passing illegally, and frequently winding up dead. Double crossers were the Sunday drivers going twenty in a forty-five zone, but who then weave across the double yellow lines in order to save a half second, and the flare devils were the remnants of flares from all of those common disasters.

There were the usuals as well, cars he saw daily, going each way. It was a small town, Los Arboles, a bedroom community. Most of its residents worked over the hill, in Pink City or elsewhere beyond. Gian Carlo knew almost everyone by their car, if not by their name. The Silver Honda people. The Jeep Rollovers. The Porsche Brigade. The Lemons. Most of the cars were going his way. There were a few he saw regularly coming; the orange Camaro with white racing stripes, the propane gas trucks, the delivery vans, Mister Stinky who cleaned out the septic. Just doing

their jobs, like he was.

He looked forward to his job every day. It really was a labor of love. He could pick and choose among the many different roles he played, switching between them so he never got bored. He could do a little writing, or prepare for a lecture, meet with students or meet with colleagues, do a little research, or even some light reading. His field was unlimited, consisting as it did in all previously believed-in but now outmoded ideas: Flat earth theories, Creation, The litany of gods once worshipped by men, Alchemy, Astrology, Numerology or Tarot, Divination of every denomination. He had explored all of these and more nooks and crannies of traditional ignorance, and was considered by many to be a leading expert in the field. It made him feel good, to be considered so highly.

Yet Spallanzini was not a vain man. He was quite knowledgeable, it's true, but didn't think himself arrogant. He genuinely enjoyed sharing his learning. Sometimes he grew cynical, it's true, as he had been the previous evening. Recalling that conversation, he remembered "the test" proposed by his friend, and turned his attention towards the matter of who he would select.

'I'll keep a look out', he promised himself, thinking that he'd know the right person when he saw them. He didn't want it to be anyone too obvious. At the same time he did want somebody normal, whom everyone else would agree was like that. A man on the street. An ordinary Joe. Deepest darkest secrets! he scoffed to himself. It's always the typical thing. Sex. Guilt. Fear. It's what keeps all those preachers in business.

How to Be a Cult Leader

Driving over the hill was when Gian Carlo did most of his lecture preparation. He especially liked to talk into a little pocket recorder, which he would leave with the department secretaries to transcribe for later editing. On this particular morning he was rehearsing a presentation he planned to make later that week for a little series of lectures he liked to call 'The How-To Somethings'. He was poking along behind some little old Chevy, no need to get too upset. Plenty of time, he reminded himself. At the landslide reconstruction stoplight he pulled out his little device and began to record.

'Today we're going to talk about a new subject: How To Be a Cult Leader. Now, a lot of people like cults. They're very popular. They've been around a long time. There have been a lot of cults. I don't know if anyone's ever counted them all up, to see exactly how many cults, but believe me, there have been a lot of them, and it's something that's never old, you can always start a cult. You could start one tomorrow. It'll be a big deal, and being the leader is the best part of a cult. Of course, a cult has to have followers, or else it wouldn't be a cult, but, I think you want to be the leader.

There's different ways you can do this. I have a few selections here from my library to illustrate the kinds of cults there are and the kinds of cult leaders too. Now for one thing, you could write a cult classic. It could be a book or a movie, like John Franklin Bardin - very good, cult classic, cool stuff. It can be a religion, like Rastafari, it's a cult because it's not big enough. Once you get big enough then you're a religion. Small equals cult. Big equals religion. Like Christianity or Islam.

Or else you can be some kind of a kook, like Wilhelm Reich here, and have a little cult without any followers. You wanted to have followers but you didn't get 'em. They didn't stick. But that's usually the kind of thing you're going to aim for. You're going to have your own cult, it's

going to be about you and your ideas. The main thing about your ideas is they should be familiar to people, so it's not just out of the blue. You can steal other people's ideas from other cults that have come before you, so you might want to do some research about some other cults, get some good ideas from them, and take what you like, and if there's ideas you don't like, just put them away, pretend you didn't see them, that's what we usually do.

Now another thing about starting your own cult is, you might want to grow a beard, grow it longer, kind of a guru like effect, unless you're a woman, in which case you can go with the long-flowing locks and stuff. Another thing you can do is change your name, get some weird sounding name. If your name is already weird, then you don't have to change it, but you might want to make it something like, uh, Plankton, or, oh I don't know, something like Goo Laa Baa, there's lots of good names. You come up with your own. I'm not very good at names, obviously, so think of one of your own.

So the main thing you want to understand of course is why do you want to become a cult leader? Now, usually people want to be a cult leader so they can have sex with all their followers, make a lot of money, and see their name in the newspaper. There are other ways to make a lot of money and get your name in the paper, but if you want to have sex with all your followers, you pretty much have to be a cult leader. That's a given.

Also, you might want to have a press agent, so that people can find out about you, and finally, you want to do something really stupid so you can get the attention of the media, because the media really gravitates towards really stupid things. You might want to, you know, kidnap an heiress, buy a lot of guns, hold up in a compound. You've got to have a compound, of course. You might want to hold somebody hostage, or make a threatening phone call, anything to get the law enforcement on you, get the media on you. The downside of that is you'll probably die, but then you'll be a martyr, and cults with martyrs are the kind that usually stick around for a while and grow and have a good growth opportunity.

So anyway, I think that covers pretty much the basics of how to be a cult leader. I'll see you again next time, when we figure out how to something something else."

By this time he was already over the mountain, out of the trees and into the land of constant concrete and destinations beyond. A few miles down the freeway took him straight to Pink City. He was feeling good about his little talk. It'll make for a fun presentation, he was telling himself. Maybe I could make Thomas use a bit of that. He'd promised that he would say anything!

Happiness is when you do the things that make you happy.

Alchemy for Dummies

Lots of things made Spallanzini happy, like pulling into his very own reserved parking space merely paces from the door to his very own office, where he could swivel around in his favorite leather chair and contemplate the scenery, including a pleasant view of the mountains over which he'd just come. He rubbed his hands together as he contemplated his task, the selection of a random test subject, whose deepest darkest secret he would swiftly and unerringly ferret out.

Thomas had made the terms too easy, he decided. There already were people whose secrets he pretty much knew. Any classroom full of students would provide the opportunity. Didn't they all write essays where they revealed way too much about themselves? They were still practically children, after all. He even toyed with the notion of creating an assignment on the very topic itself, and the answers would be brought up to his desk and laid gently before him without any effort on his own part whatsoever.

Too easy, he smiled, but then he thought that that wouldn't be enough of a challenge, that it wouldn't really be fair. A stranger then, he concluded, but how do you discover the secrets of a stranger? Now that he was alone with the notion, it didn't seem quite so simple anymore. He wasn't naturally a detective. I could hire somebody, he thought, but would that count? What if Kuntz found out? He didn't mind cheating but he didn't want to risk the exposure.

And how do I prove what I find? You can't very well go up to someone and tell them that you made a bet with your friend that you could discover the deepest and darkest secret of some random stranger, and that it was you, and well, here it is, was I right? You're liable to get in trouble for that, if not just a punch in the face.

I'd have to be able to show him, to prove it somehow. Evidence.

Photographs. Catch them in flagrante. Ha, he nearly laughed out loud. I could pick out a priest and get him entering a strip club. I could pick out a suit and catch him "working late". I could take a shot of practically anyone at the race track. It would have to be something like that. Some places are frequented mainly in secret. He smiled to himself, but still felt uneasy. After all, he was someone who had never located an actual whorehouse. The only red lights he had seen were for traffic.

It was nearly time for his lecture. Last month it was 'Alchemy for Dummies'. That was one of his favorite subjects. He liked to assert that Science has been coming up with all sorts of ideas for the past few hundred years, but we know that it's all just a bunch of hooey because a thousand years ago they already knew everything you need to know, and they called it Alchemy.

He presented it like that to make sure that his audience knew he was joking, and yet, the comments he got back were invariably surprising. He tried to explain that the medieval world and before, a world without doctors or scientists, was a world without any real knowledge of the fundamental workings of life and the planet, and yet people today believe that things that were said by people back then were the literal truth, the gospel. If you met somebody today with the level of knowledge of the most learned person back then, you would realize they knew less than a contemporary kindergartner, yet this concept was hard to get through to people. Aristotle didn't know about cells. Come on. Spallanzini hadn't decided which of his many pet topics he'd pontificate on today. He often left it to the last second, to let it be inspired. He was always quite ready for anything.

He thought maybe he'd pick out someone that day, someone who'd be at the lecture, which were open to the public and, amazingly, the public did come. Some people had seen him on television. He had regulars, even. Some people were sent by the City, under the guise of 'continuing education'. He usually had twenty to thirty fresh bodies show up for his talks, if only to get out of work for an hour. One of them might just make a good target.

Leave Your Dreams Alone

Gian Carlo was not disappointed with the crowd that morning. More than twenty people, many of them first-timers, were crowded into the rather small classroom the College had reserved for his monthly lecture series. Donna, the secretary on duty, brought in enough chairs for everyone, and meanwhile there was a pleasant milling about, with Gian Carlo greeting some familiar faces, and smiling pleasantly at the new ones.

It dawned on him that he might as well go on a sort of fishing expedition. It was possible he could wind the whole thing up right away. The attendants were mostly middle-aged and older folk, many of whom were obviously taking advantage of the Pink City's motto of 'continuing education', which generously allowed town employees to take a half day off with pay in order to attend an approved educational experience, which might be a guided hike in the woods, or a documentary film, or a lecture on practically anything. Donna was processing their paperwork already.

Gian Carlo made his way to the front of the classroom and waiting patiently for the 'students' to take their seats before he made his introduction. Mr. Zanbar as usual sat front and center, his wide eyes and bald head commanding attention. Next to him, Miss Willoughby, the retired librarian. Behind her, Mr Comcat, the electrical technician, who never failed to ask at least one question and then repeat it several times. Spallanzini was trying to remember which among these had already heard the talk he had in mind, before he realized that it didn't really matter. He was going to go ahead with it anyway.

'Good morning', he began, and smiled as most everyone in the room returned the greeting with some kind of their own.

'I hope you all slept well, he continued, with a smile, and several

attendees chuckled.

'I say that because it's relevant to the topic I have in mind today. I want to talk a little to you about dreams. That's right, dreams. The kind that happen when you're sleeping, not the kind you hope and plan on during the day. Those kinds of dreams are interesting, too, but today I want to talk about the dreams that happen when you're sleeping, and what they mean to you.

Now I know this is a very old topic, one of the oldest topics in the world. Back before there was any such thing as books or any technology, before there was even language, there were dreams. Back then, and I am talking cavemen here, people would remember their dreams sometimes and wonder - what the hell was that? I have a little theory that dreams are the basis of all art. Necessity is the mother of language, but dreams are the father of poetry.

Why do I say that? Because they're so mysterious. I mean, most of the time we go around all day, we go here, we go there, we do this, we do that, and we basically think that we know what we are doing, at least most of the time we do. We like to think we do. But at night we get these secret messages coming to us from inside our own brain. You have to wonder why. Why are we sending these notes to ourselves. And how come we can hardly ever figure them out? Why do they have to be so obscure? I mean, if you want to tell yourself something, why not just come out and say it?

Well, for hundreds of thousands of years, all over the world, people have been trying to figure out dreams. And they've compiled all these figurings out and put them in books, so you can go buy a book that has 10,000 symbols in dreams and just look them up. If you're an Eskimo and you dream about polar bears eating fish, look it up. If you live in the desert and you dream about cactus, look it up. If you're Chinese maybe you dream about, oh, I don't know, bamboo. Or you're from New Jersey and you dream about you lost your keys. You can look it up. And usually it comes down to two or three things - money, or sex. Or money. Or sex. That's four things, or two. Is it two?

Polar bears and fish? It's probably money. Bamboo? It's probably sex. So you can look these things up and discover what your brain is trying to tell you in your sleep. Now I know most of you think that all this was explained a long time ago. There was Freud, and he said it was all the unconscious trying to get messages through. So that is exactly what I'm saying. But I also want to add one thing, and that is, you should really just leave your dreams alone. Don't try to make yourself have good ones, and don't worry too much about bad ones. You can drive yourself crazy that way. If it's good, then okay, you enjoy it. If it's bad then just throw it away, forget about it, like it never happened at all. So that's the basics of where we're beginning, okay? Any questions?

Gian Carlo always opened his lectures this way, with a series of provocative statements. He liked to shock his listeners into having at least a little reaction. Today he planned on getting at least some of them to tell him their dreams and who knew? Maybe that would reveal a secret he could use for the test.

Naturally, the first hand raised belonged to Mr. Comcat.

'Are you saying that dreams always mean something?'

'Yes I am. Yes they do. It might only mean that you shouldn't have eaten that midnight pizza ...' and he paused for the inevitable laughter, 'but definitely they always mean something'.

'Because I keep having this dream', Mr. Comcat continued, 'and it's always the same one, night after night. And I've tried to leave it alone, like you say, but the thing is, it won't leave me alone.'

'Is it something upsetting?' Gian Carlo inquired.

'No, that's the thing', Comcat said, 'I don't mind it at all. It's just boring.'

'Oh, that happens sometimes', he replied. 'I wouldn't worry about it. Think of it as being like a clock. Every day when you look at the clock it's a time that it's already been lots of times. Like right now. Ten fourteen. It's been ten fourteen twice a day for forever. It's just ten fourteen, no big deal.'

'Okay', Comcat said. 'I could see it that way.'

'Aren't those symbol books dumb?' asked a lady in back, who then introduced herself as Mrs Eleanor Blatt.

'What do you mean?' asked Gian Carlo.

'Well, the very same symbol won't mean the same to two different people now, will it? Suppose I dream of a hair pin. Suppose I had lost one that day. And suppose my little daughter also dreams of a hair pin, because she wants one.'

'I'd say your daughter has probably taken your pin', he replied, 'which is why you can't find it today'. Laughter filled the room at Mrs. Blatt's expense, but she was not deterred.

'My point is still valid', she bravely declared.

'You're certainly right', said Gian Carlo, and he launched into a discussion on cultural and personal relativity, and how no one inhabits quite the same reality as anyone else, and therefore generalizations are useless. All the time he was talking he was thinking about Mrs. Blatt and her hairpin. He thought maybe she lost it at her lover's apartment. Maybe she was worried her husband would notice. Deeper and darker secrets have turned upon less, he reflected.

In the middle of his rote ramblings he noticed that his friend, Thomas Kuntz, had come into the room. Rats, thought Gian Carlo, he's sussed out my intentions. Now he'll be spying to make sure I'm not prying.

He nodded in Kuntz's direction and gave him a smile, and kept talking about individuation and how it rebuked the notion of collective unconscious. He could talk about anything now, and with vigor. He was all warmed up and just starting.

Pho

It wasn't long before Thomas Kuntz got into the act and raised his own hand, causing a raft of murmurings to among the regulars. They'd seen this bit before. The battle of the heavyweight professors.

'Isn't it true', asked Kuntz, who always liked to start a question that way, 'that in the old days, people believed that dreams were messages sent to them by the gods, not by their own brains?'

'That is true for many cultures, not all', Spallanzini conceded, 'but the purpose of the dream was still always the same - to tell them what to do and where to go. And isn't it interesting that most religious people think of everybody else's religion as absurd, but not their own? Kind of a blind spot, really.'

'But if they believed that dreams were sent by gods', Mr. Callahan, the heating duct man, spoke up, 'that must have really freaked them out.'

'I'm going to go out on a limb and say that people have always reacted to dreams with the same sense of mystification, the same sense of bewilderment and the same sense that here was something you should either pay attention to or not, depending on the impression it made.'

'Do you believe', piped in Mrs Kavenaugh from the post office, 'that dreams can reveal a person's innermost secrets?'

'Psychologists do', Gian Carlo replied, 'they think that behind or inside every dream there is a kernel of truth that's dying to get out, some kind of memory that's being repressed, some kind of fundamental reality in there that's being ignored. Sometimes this belief tends to verge on the supernatural. Freud, for example, believed that no one could think of a totally random number. Any number you picked off the top of your head could be broken down into revealing a meaningful event. If you said 1492, meaning the year Columbus allegedly discovered America, it

could really be masking the fact that when you were 14 you were inappropriately fondled by your 92 year old grandmother.'

'You could play the ponies with that', chimed in Mr. Ricardo, always good for a laugh.

By this point the 'lecture' had broken down into a general conversation such as you could have at any coffee shop with any group of strangers. Everyone was enjoying it and by the end almost everyone had pitched in with a notion or two. Still, Gian Carlo could see that his tactic wasn't going to pay off. He wasn't going to coax any secrets out of anyone, especially not with Kuntz in the back of the room, smirking like that.

After he had filled the allotted time, and bade a personal goodbye to each of the students who wished one, Spallanzini and Kuntz were left by themselves in the classroom.

'Lunch?' Kuntz suggested, and Gian Carlo agreed.

'I saw what you were up to', Thomas continued and Gian Carlo had to smile.

'Worth a try', he replied.

'I can tell what you're thinking', Kuntz said as they made their way over to the noodle soup place.

'I don't doubt it', Gian Carlo muttered.

'It's not going to be that easy', Kuntz said as they settled in with their gigantic bowls of hot broth. 'But there's no hurry. Take your time.'

'I could just stake out some adult bookstore and snap a picture of almost anyone going in', Gian Carlo suggested, and Kuntz laughed.

'That wouldn't count', he replied. 'You have to pick someone out. Could be anyone, anywhere but you have to begin with the person, not the secret!'

'Easy for you to say. You just have to go in your booth.'

'Confession? I'm not Catholic, you know', Kuntz replied, 'but people do

take me into their confidence and that's why I know. That's why I said what I said. The things people tell me. Good God.'

'I still say it'll be something trite', Spallanzini insisted. 'When people come to you with their problems, they're in need, it's extreme. But if I pick just anyone, they won't be. They'll be going about their daily life, doing the things they always do, like us, eating here at this place. It's a Monday and we always come here.'

'People carry a lot of baggage around', Thomas said.

'Not me', said Gian Carlo. 'Sorry, my friend, but most of us just live our lives and there's nothing going on we don't know about.'

'Ha', Thomas said, 'Well, that's true about me, so you got me on that. I kind of wish I had some sort of secret sometimes. It would make things more interesting, wouldn't it?'

Missy Tonight

In the afternoon, Gian Carlo spent some time alone in his office, preparing for the next day's class on Astrology. He had to sort through the various piles of old books strewn about the floor and surrounding his desk, to find the exact two he needed. One contained the original natal horoscope of American President Calvin Coolidge. It was a matter of fact that such a thing was actually important to someone once upon a time. They were anxious about the course of the stars and how that might affect the Coolidge ruleage. The other volume contained the famous Sabian symbols, random out-dated and culture-bound images haphazardly associated with the days of the year. For example, March 8 had two sisters playing with dolls while nearby, and old man sharpens his axe. You could read a lot into a symbol like that, and still not be sure what it all had to do with anything.

When the phone rang, Spallanzini considered not answering it. He was on a good riff with that material, but he saw from the caller ID that it was Missy D'Angelo, and she was someone you didn't want to ignore. Missy was the seemingly immortal and incredibly mean old host of the talk show 'Missy Tonight' on the city-run Atheist Broadcasting Service. Everyone who was anyone, and many who were not, all wanted to be on her show, even though she was unrelentingly bitter and nasty, comparing everyone to people from her own long lost generation and finding them coming up short. No one could hold a candle, for example, to the incomparable Kitty Lake, legendary star of stage and screen from an era that no one seemed to know anything about anymore.

Missy would invariable bring up a name of one of those has-beens, and go off on a familiar rant when the guest, looking puzzled, would have to admit they had never heard of that person.

'What? Never heard of Jackie Bee? The Queen of all queens? Sakes

alive, what's this world coming to? It's all going to hell in a hand basket!'

Today she wanted to make sure Gian Carlo was still coming on the following Monday for one of his regular visits. He was one of her favorites. She could depend on him for some randy remarks that were bound to arouse some little controversy.

'So tell me hon', she inquired, 'do you want me to get you a Christian or a Jew, or maybe something different this time?'

'Oh, whatever you like', he replied. He tried his best to please her, although by now, after several years of these appearances, he was beginning to get bored with the show.

'I just want to make sure you do at least one of your what-the-hell-is-thats', Missy said, 'so I figure if you know what you got coming you'll be ready. Like last time with the thread thing. I loved that.'

'Oh right', Gian Carlo replied, remembering that bit about why the Jewish God was so worried about the exact count of blue threads in the fringes of a prayer shawl. He'd read about it in a book in a synagogue one time. Apparently God was a stickler for detail, and he got really pissed off if the thread count was off. So, "what the hell is that?" he had said, to Missy's delight, and the guest's irritation.

'Just let me know what's lined up and I'll be there', he promised. 'I won't let you down.'

'I know you won't, hon,' she told him. 'Just checking. If you have any preference let me know. Otherwise my boy will get back to you Friday, okay?'

Her 'boy', sixty-seven year old Ronald Humm, had been running her show for decades, along with most of the other shows on the service. Humm was one of the original founding fathers of Pink City, and the author of most of its charters. He was a small and bent old man, shy and retiring. You'd hardly ever guess at his powers. He had established the city as a haven for all non-believers, and although no one ever

enforced any rules about that, it was subtly known that if you wanted to live and/or work in Pink City, you'd be more comfortable there if you weren't religious. Not that they'd ever discriminate. That would be acting like 'them'.

Orange Car with Stripes

The day went by, his work periodically interrupted by visits from students and colleagues and emails and letters from admirers and detractors which ranged from the usual "you're so wonderful" to the "I hate you I hate you I hate you" variety. Some people thought he was a clown, that it was all a big joke. Some people thought he was serious and either seriously right or seriously wrong. Some people thought he was lame. By this time there were no surprises. He could gage the reaction to anything he might say right down to the millimeter of eyebrow lift. He was pulling the strings, pushing the pedals, playing the game that he played, and at least it kept him busy.

And yet, in the back of his mind all day long was the test. He thought about how maybe on 'Missy Tonight' he could get people to call in with their secrets. Would that count? Joanie in Nebraska, what's your secret? Carol in Wyoming. George from Baton Rouge, come on, tell us, nobody else needs to know, just the ten million viewers and me. But he knew that Thomas would veto that notion. He had to personally pick the person, pick them at random, and then find out all about them.

How was he going to do that? Sometimes a person's deepest darkest secret is something that happened to them in the past. You'd have to go back to where they grew up, interview people, play private detective. Damn project could take a whole year, even more, and what then? Why should he give up even one little moment of his nice tidy life just because he'd been taunted by Thomas? The guy had gotten under his skin.

He thought about Charlie McNicker, his old college friend, who was now a Commissioner of Police in Bright Haven. Maybe he would be able to help him. It wouldn't be ethical, strictly, but he could promise that he wouldn't hurt anyone. That wouldn't fly. He'd have to come up with some kind of alibi. But first, he was getting ahead of himself.

Spallanzini did all his best thinking while driving, so he put down his papers and books and went back to his car. He figured he needed an hour or two and the drive home was only about twenty minutes, so first he headed south on the freeway. I'll go to 990, he thought, and then turn around. That'll give me the time that I need. The traffic was light that direction, and the driving was smooth, but his thinking was not. What if I stop at a coffee shop, and just pick the first person I see, the person in line right in front of me. Then I will hang out and wait for what happens. Maybe they'll be meeting someone, and I can eavesdrop on their conversation. It would have to be women. Women talking alone to each other are more likely to cough up a secret.

Since he had no other ideas, he did that. He pulled off the freeway and into a strip mall, where he knew of a nice little bakery. He had a passion for donuts and double espressos and really this was just an excuse. He got lucky, too. Right in front of him in line was a woman in her thirties, talking loudly on her cellphone. Even better, Spallanzini thought. It was obvious she was talking to a friend. She was talking about Tony. She could never rely on Tony. Tony was never on time. Tony was always breaking his word.

Today, Tony said he would pick up the salad. Did Tony pick up the salad? No, he did not. Who had to pick up the salad? That's right. She did. Oh my God, and the salad was already wilting out there in the car. That's right. Better go. On my way. Love and kisses?

Damn. She was gone out the door and into her car before he could even pull out his notebook. He was ordering his double espresso. It's not like there won't be another, he reminded himself, and he sat at a table and waited. No one came, at least no one who suited the bill. He munched on his raised chocolate slowly, but still, he was waiting in vain. Two old ladies sat down and discussed haberdashery. This was not going anywhere. A mother and child struggled with the kid's sweatshirt. A man and his laptop engaged in some work.

After awhile he gave up and got back in his car, heading home. I'll just have to try again some other time, he thought. It's not the idea that

was bad, but it would take a whole lot of luck. You don't stumble across people's secrets that easily. Back up the freeway, clear sailing. Over the hill, going well. Coming the other way, the usual suspects, workers going home in their trucks, ranchers delivering hay to the wealthier horse people down in the valley, orange car with stripes, some stragglers returning from a day at the beach.

He was halfway down the hill before it hit him. Orange car with stripes! He'd been seeing that car almost daily for months, if not years. He could hardly remember when it started. At first he'd been curious about it. Where was it going every morning? Where was it coming from at night? Hardly anyone lived over there. Even fewer people worked over there, and of those, most had trucks, did construction or delivery, migrating duties like that. But this guy, and it was a guy, a youngish guy, olive skin and black hair like Gian Carlo, there must be a story behind it.

Aha! Gian Carlo was giddy. Now he could kill a couple of birds with one stone. He had always wanted to find out about that orange car, and now he had a reason to. Total stranger, picked at random. That would suit Thomas all right. And there couldn't be much to it. The guy was obviously a car fanatic. He kept that Camaro in pristine condition. Kept the white racing stripes on the hood clean and painted. Kept the hubcaps shining. Drove it like a maniac, sure. Probably just a mechanic. What kind of a secret could a guy like that ever have?

Piece of Cake

Elaine Spallanzini had organized a family dinner around the principle of spaghetti and meatballs. This was a surefire combination, as Janelle was certain to complain about the meatballs, and Marco was sure to criticize the sauce. Gian Carlo for his part would eat everything without complaint, and finish up the kids' portions too. One thing about that man, she reflected, he sure can eat. In a way she took it as a compliment of her cooking. In another way, she wished he'd lose some weight. When they'd first met years ago, he'd been lean and mean. Now only one of those elements remained. She herself kept in good shape, through her exercise equipment and strict rationing of portions. She wasn't going to let anything sour her existence.

Gian Carlo pulled up to the table with an appetite and dug right in. Janelle and Marco exchanged glances that suggested that dad was a pig so don't look. Janelle gently tapped her meatballs to the side of her plate but did not say a word about them. Elaine felt sure that something else was going on with her daughter that day, and it was hard not to pry. So tempting. My god. The things that kids put themselves through, the tensions and the battles. Elaine was as calm as a sunny spring morning.

'Hey, do you remember that orange car with stripes?' Gian Carlo suddenly said. Elaine was about to reply but then noticed her husband was talking to Marco.

'Yeah, sure', Marco said. 'The one that comes over the hill'

'We used to see it every day going to camp', Spallanzini explained to the others. 'I still do, going to work, coming home. We always wondered where he was going.'

'Oh yeah', said Marco. 'Remember I said he was going to work on a secret alien airport?'

'Uh-huh', Gian Carlo replied. 'I forgot. Hey, maybe he does.'

'Yeah right, dad', Marco uttered, without the old laugh in his voice that he used to acknowledge when dad made a funny. Marco didn't acknowledge that kind of thing so much any more

'Well, what about it?' Elaine asked.

'What about what?' Spallanzini said. 'Oh, right, the orange car. I've decided to find out where he goes.'

'Really? Why?' she was curious.

'For the test', her husband responded. 'Remember last night? Thomas' test?' I have to pick out a stranger and find out their secret. So I decided that I would pick him. Since we always had wanted to know where he goes anyway.'

'Be careful', Elaine said. 'Could be risky. You wouldn't like it if someone started following you.'

'Oh I will', he assured her. 'I won't take it too far. First I just want to see where he goes. After that, I don't know. Guess we'll see.'

'Great, now my dad's playing detective', Janelle blurted out 'That's sure to work out.'

'Don't you worry yourself, little girl', he teased her. 'It's not really your business, you know.'

Later on Elaine wanted assurances that her husband wouldn't do anything stupid. What if the guy turned out to be dangerous? What if he was involved with a meth lab or something? Really, shouldn't he find someone else, someone safer? Gian Carlo related his coffee shop venture. Elaine was in favor of that. Especially the overhearing of cellphones. You could get a lot of good dirt if you just listened up. People on cellphones don't care, they talk loud, they spill all their secrets in public.

'It's okay', he assured her. 'You know me. I'm a coward. I would never do anything risky!'

Besides, he was telling himself, now that I thought of it, I really do want to find out. He started retracing the road through the hills in his mind. It was winding and long, twisting through redwoods and oaks, eucalyptus and buckeyes, madrones. Now and then there were driveways intercepting at angles; some of those were probably private roads leading to clusters of homes in the woods. He had already ruled out the gardener idea. It wouldn't explain how the guy would keep coming all year. The handyman notion, the same. The man hardly looked like a nurse, coming to take care of some old folks. With that car? It was possible, still, if unlikely. There were no stores where the guy could be working. The only businesses for miles around were a grocery, a post office, and realtors, and he knew everyone who worked in those places.

The likeliest occupation was ranch hand. There were several horse-boarding ranches. As soon as he had the idea, he was certain of it. The guy definitely works on a ranch. It made sense. Works with horses or cows and loves cars. On the weekends he works on the Camaro at home in his driveway over the hill. Probably lives in Bright Haven, in one of those bungalows there, with his family, even his mom and his dad and his sisters and brothers and cousins. He didn't know why he thought that. It was just an intuition he had, that the guy was some sort of family man, married off young and with kids. There you have it, Gian Carlo decided. And as for the secret, he smiled to himself, as a ranch hand he probably knows about horses, so he goes and he bets on the ponies. And with the money he pockets from that, he visits some whore on the side. See? he told himself. Piece of cake.

Johnson Ranch Road

Spallanzini had seen this kind of thing before in countless movies and TV shows. It was called a stakeout. Basically, you park your car by the side of the road and wait for something to happen. Then you check it out. So that is what he did. He had the morning free so he drove his car up near the top of the hill, pulled around into a turnout on the downhill side, parked the car, and waited. He figured the orange car with stripes would show up soon enough. In the meantime, he listened to a talk radio show, one of those annoying call-in kinds where the host had to give equal time to every shade of stupid opinion. Gian Carlo had a basic rule about opinions - his was fine, other people's were probably not, unless of course they agreed with his, or came reasonably close. That morning they were talking about science, and whether or not it was good. It was cold in the car and he kept himself warm by muttering with rage.

Very few cars came by heading west and he'd been there half an hour when suddenly, the orange car came roaring past. Quickly Gian Carlo pulled into the road and tried to catch up. He had to drive faster than he normally would and was afraid he had lost it. The road was very windy up there and visibility was short, but soon he caught a glimpse of the car at the end of a straightaway section. He stepped on the gas to get closer. His tires were squealing and he was beginning to wonder what the hell he was doing when he went around the corner and just barely caught sight of the orange car, heading off up a driveway he'd never really noticed before. Gian Carlo slowed down and pulled over into the nearest turnout. Okay, he thought, now I know where he goes.

That wasn't enough. It really wasn't much of anything at all, he realized. The car had to go somewhere, but what was he doing up there? Spallanzini considered turning around and driving up that driveway himself. But that could be awkward. He could hardly claim he

got lost. You would have to make a conscious effort to even see that the driveway was there. He decided to explore it on foot. That way he could always say that he was out for a walk in case he got caught. Somehow he thought that would make it more plausible.

He got out of the car and walked back up the road to the driveway. It was marked by a sign that said 'Johnson Ranch Road'. Ha, I was right! A ranch. Funny I never saw it before, Gian Carlo told himself. He had driven right past it maybe ten thousand times. The sign looked like it had been there for years. The driveway was steep and was all dirt and rocks. Spallanzini was not in good shape. He hadn't gone very far before he began to get tired, and hot, and sweaty. He took off his jacket and carried it. He took off his sweatshirt and carried that too. The driveway seemed to go on and on and on. He didn't see any houses, or anything but trees, lining both sides of the road, and the tops of the mountains beyond. Still he pressed forward, wondering, what the hell am I doing?

It occurred to him that he hadn't really gone out for a walk in a very long time, maybe years. Way back in time, before the kids came along, he would walk with Elaine in the woods near their home. They'd talk about all sorts of things. He smiled as he remembered those days. They'd met while they were in school - he was a graduate student, writing his thesis on the history of scientific belief systems. She was an assistant in the chemistry lab. They could easily never have met. He'd gone to the wrong room looking for somebody else. She'd come in early because of the time change. Neither of them should have been there at all. The door to the lab was locked, so Gian Carlo was waiting outside in the hall when Elaine showed up too early for work. The she discovered she was missing her keys. In the confusion they'd gotten to talking, and by the time they'd figured out who was supposed to be where and when and had re-traced her steps and found the lost keys, they were already madly in love.

Twenty years go by fast, he was thinking, but the walk up the driveway did not. Gian Carlo had the feeling he'd been walking for hours, though really it wasn't that long. He finally came to a clearing, and the end of

the road. There was the ranch, complete with horses in their corrals, a big old red barn, a couple of tractors off to the side, and a couple of houses surrounded by chickens all rushing about. Gian Carlo approached the place cautiously. He was hoping there were not any dogs. He didn't like dogs very much.

There was no sign of the orange car anywhere. Where could it be? There'd been no other turnoffs he'd noticed. Maybe he'd missed one. He didn't see a garage either. There was something strange, though, off in the distance. It looked like a road of some sort, behind the corral which penned the brown and white horse. Gian Carlo walked along further. There it was. A fairly long stretch of straight and newly blacktopped road, going nowhere, nowhere at all. It just started, went straight for a hundred yards tops, and then stopped. There was nowhere it really could go. At the end was a cliff about forty feet high going straight up, and also at the end, a bulldozer was parked to one side.

Gian Carlo heard a door slam behind him and quickly he scooted behind a tree right next to the fence. The brown and white horse headed over to see who he was and Gian Carlo was hoping that no one would notice. He could see two men emerge from the larger of the houses. One of the men was the driver of the orange car with stripes. They seemed to be headed his way, across the driveway, towards the corral, and Gian Carlo held his breath. Then the two men turned in the other direction, away from the newly paved road.

Comcat

"Hello?"

Gian Carlo was startled by the sound of a voice from behind him. He turned and was stunned to see his faithful pupil, Mr. Comcat, standing right there.

"Why, Professor!" Mr. Comcat declared. "What on earth are you doing out here?"

"I was out for a walk", Gian Carlo replied, trying to stay calm. He had not planned on what he would do in this case.

"Well, it is a nice morning", Mr. Comcat agreed. "Although we are a bit out of the way, you might say".

"Yes, of course", said Gian Carlo. "I live not too far from here, in Los Arboles. I just happened to notice this little road for the first time today. So I thought I'd explore. I like to do that."

"Oh I see", Mr. Comcat replied. "Well, come on, let me show you around."

"Oh, I don't want to be a bother", Spallanzini said. "I'm sorry if I am intruding. I didn't mean to, really."

"Not a problem, not at all. In fact, I'm glad that you came. I've been meaning to invite you sometime. Yes, it's true", he continued as Gian Carlo looked puzzled.

"Today's not the best day, of course", Comcat said, as he led them towards the big house. "Nobody's out here today. Thursday, now that would be good. On Thursday the others will be here."

"The others?" Gian Carlo asked. "Do you mean your family? Is this your home?"

"Oh no, not at all", Mr. Comcat informed him. "None of us live here except Jack."

"Jack?"

"Yes, the ranch hand. He takes care of the place. The rest of us come when we're needed."

"I see", Gian Carlo replied. "I think I might have seen him. Does he drive an orange car? An orange car with racing stripes?"

"Oh no", Comcat laughed, "that's Elias. He also just works here sometimes. That man is a genius with engines. Can I offer you something? Some coffee?"

They were approaching the house. Gian Carlo was trying to think. Should I stay and try to find out some more about Elias or should I go and figure out what to do next? In the end he decided to stay for a while. Mr. Comcat led him inside the farm house and made him some coffee and toast and talked about everything else but the things that Gian Carlo wanted to know.

Comcat told him how much he enjoyed his lectures, how he'd read all his books, how he watched him on 'Missy Tonight' whenever he could. Comcat was retired now. In his day he had been an electrical worker. Started out small as apprentice. Worked up his way through the union. Had a good life, had a wife, they had kids. Kids were all grown and had kids of their own. Needed something to keep himself busy. Dabbled a little in this and that, attended some lectures, read a good deal. Gian Carlo pretended to be interested. The truth was that Comcat had always bored him to tears. Like most of the regular lecture attendees, Comcat had nothing to say. His questions were never interesting and he always repeated them. Always.

Spallanzini did his best to be polite. Once or twice he tried to ask about the ranch, but Comcat kept saying he'd have to come Thursday. As they sat in the kitchen Gian Carlo was gazing outside at the trees when he suddenly saw the orange car head out down the drive. Elias was gone, and he couldn't follow. Why am I wasting my time? he asked himself.

After several more minutes he reached a conclusion and announced it was time he was off. He had to get back to work. Comcat was not offended. He even offered to drive Spallanzini back down to his car, and Gian Carlo accepted.

He had to promise that he'd come back. Thursday. At ten. Drive on up. Don't be shy. I promise, Mr. Comcat concluded, you will be glad that you did.

Cheaters

Gian Carlo was nervous the rest of the day. His spying adventure left him feeling restless and craving for more. After all of the waiting and following and walking, he had ended up with a little to go on. Now he knew the guy's first name. Elias. He knew the guy worked at a ranch, but not as a ranch hand, it seemed. He already knew that the guy was some kind of car freak. Now he knew more. Was he working on cars at the ranch? And what was that strip of road all about?

The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that the place was the site of some kind of racing. Off road? But there was a road. Drag racing? Yes, that was it. At his office he searched online for more information on that, and there was a lot: videos, articles, accidents. Most of the illegal drag racing happened in cities, however. Mostly on deserted and late night streets. There was nothing about such things happening out in the woods, but why not? It would be harder for the cops to find out. They could more easily control the attendance. There seemed to be plenty of parking out there on the ranch. Maybe it was just getting started. He hadn't seen lights or stripes on the section of road, but it seemed just the thing, the right width, the right length.

He couldn't get any work done all day. He was lucky he did not really have to. It was Tuesday and he had decided he'd definitely go back to the ranch as Comcat had insisted. Until then, who knew? He could not think about anything else. He was mad at himself for not even getting the license plate number of that orange car. If he had it, then maybe he could, could what? He had no idea how he could find out a damn thing from that.

Cranky. His peace of mind was all gone. Usually he was on cruise control, always knowing everything he needed to know, always having answers at his fingertips, always with something to say about anything.

On the drive home he was distracted as well, and didn't even notice the orange car going the other way past him. He was dreading the usual family dinner. For some reason tonight it seemed wrong that he'd have to spend time with his family at all. They couldn't answer his questions. They weren't of any use.

To make matters worse, his kids seemed even dumber than usual. Marco had picked up some notion that everyone cheats, and since everyone does it, it must be okay. Janelle was right on it, bragging about how all the kids in her class knew the algebra test days in advance, and somebody even had all the answers. The only problem was going to be that the teacher might get suspicious if all the kids got all the answers correct, so they were all choosing up problems to miss. There was some controversy because the kids who usually got C's all wanted to get B's for a change, and that was making the kids who got B's wanting A's, and that made the kids who got A's get upset, because it wasn't the natural order of things.

Elaine was just nodding along, as usual, calm as a sunset. Gian Carlo got things all riled up by suggesting he would talk to the teacher and get the test changed. Janelle got furious about that and shouted "don't you dare!" and seemed genuinely worried that the other kids would find out that it was her dad who had done it. Marco couldn't understand what the problem would be if everyone got all of the answers correct.

'Coincidence', said Elaine. 'It would just be too much of a coincidence. The teacher would know they were cheating.'

'Exactly my point', said Janelle. 'That's why we're all planning on making mistakes.'

'What if it happened, though', Elaine mused. 'What if there was a test and one day all the kids got it right, and nobody cheated at all? Would it really be too much of a coincidence? No one would ever believe it.'

'Things like that just don't happen', Gian Carlo agreed.

'I don't know', said Elaine, 'even if everything's random, you'd think

that would happen sometime.'

'Some things simply can't happen', he insisted. 'Impossible is still impossible after all.'

'I don't know if there's any such thing', she replied. 'Sometimes it seems that there are no accidents, really!'

'Oh my God', Spallanzini said, 'you sound like one of my students.'

'That there's an order of things', she concluded.

'It's just people who make a sense of order out of things', he insisted. 'As I proved long ago in my thesis, remember? Wherever there is a strong will to believe, the facts all fall into place. You see it when you believe it.'

'That's backwards, dad', said Marco. 'It's supposed to be you'll believe it when you see it.'

'That's my point', his father replied. 'People see what they want to see, and that's all there is to coincidence.'

'If you say so', Elaine murmured, as she and the kids started clearing the table. Elaine did not feel like arguing the point. She had come to the conclusion long since that since her husband had to have the last word, she would just keep her thoughts to herself. And so they had drifted a bit. He thought that he knew what she thought, but she knew for a fact he did not.

Avaskieff

Wednesday was another bad day for Spallanzini. It all started off in the morning when he had a series of lousy dreams, culminating in one where he couldn't find his keys anywhere. Waking up, he forgot his own advice about ignoring bad dreams and found himself worrying that bad things were going to happen. What am I, superstitious all of a sudden? he asked himself. But he still felt very anxious. He drove more slowly than usual over the hill, half-convinced he was going to run over a suicidist on the road. He couldn't concentrate on preparing his notes for a lecture he intended to give called 'The Destiny of Fate', where he was going to describe how in the future no one would believe in such nonsense once they understood for certain that the universe is a fluid of oneness in which continual recombination is the norm and therefore there is no need for worry or concern of any kind. He didn't believe it that day.

Instead, it seemed that everything in his little world was flowing towards Johnson Ranch Road. He made up lists of questions to ask Elias when he met him. He nearly posed them all to Mr. Comcat who had emailed him to remind him of their meeting the following day. Comcat mentioned two name: Tsura Zorasa and Keehan Quinn. These apparently were the people he just had to meet. Comcat was very excited and repeated the invitation several times in the email. Gian Carlo wasn't interested in Tsura or Keehan, unless they could tell him more about Elias.

He struggled all day to do anything. He had meetings with students, with colleagues. They bored him with talk of their work and the things that were important to them. He had no appetite for lunch and declined Thomas Kuntz's offer of Pho. Kuntz even teased him a bit about the test, but Spallanzini snapped back at him to mind his own business, he'd settle it once and for all, and soon. Kuntz was surprised

by that answer. He had never seen his friend so unruffled.

Elaine called and asked him to pick up some things at the supermarket on the way home, so he did. He wandered down the aisles checking things off his list but was not really paying attention. He was planning what he'd do if he saw the orange car again that evening while on the way home. He would turn around and follow it home, just to prove to himself that Elias did live with his large extended family in some ramshackle house in Bright Haven, with half-repaired cars and recycled tricycles covering the lawn and the sidewalk. He knew he'd be right about that.

He had finished the shopping and opened the trunk of his car, and was unloading the grocery bags when he looked up and saw the same orange car right in front of him, going past him on its way out of the parking lot. Gian Carlo had never before seen it anywhere else but the highway. He quickly threw the last bag into the trunk, pushed the shopping cart out of the way, not minding it roll down the lot, and leaped to the driver-side door. He reached in his pants for his keys. And they were not there. His keys were not in his pants. He was stunned. He couldn't remember this ever happening to him in his life. He had never before lost his keys. He had never even lost his wallet. At most he might lose his favorite shiny metallic blue sunglasses, but he had never lost anything else.

Cursing, he looked up and saw the orange car vanish into the street. Now what? He was panicked. Have to retrace my steps, he decided, so he went back into the store, staring closely at the ground on the way, and walked up and down every aisle, looking carefully, but yet with no luck. A grocery clerk noticed his behavior and asked if he had lost something, and volunteered to check up front, which he did. None of the stockers and none of the baggers and none of the cashiers had seen them. Distressed, Gian Carlo decided to take a short break and look again after a coffee drink. On the way he retraced his steps once again to the car and then, there they were, on the pavement, right behind the car. Of course. He had used them to open the trunk! How stupid!

Gian Carlo did not want to go home. But he did. He suffered in silence at dinner as his wife and his kids discussed matters too trivial for words. Whether or not beauty is only skin deep, or whether in fact a bit deeper, maybe all the way down to the bone. About what would happen if people could read each other's minds all the time. Would anyone have any friends? About a famous artist named Avaskieff who obsessively kept working at all of his paintings and had to be forcibly restrained from continuing once the works had reached a certain point or else he'd go on and destroy them. He just didn't know when to stop. About a guy who was arrested for falsely accusing himself of a crime that never even actually happened.

Elaine wanted to talk about chance once again. She seemed like a dog with a bone about that. He had to go hide in his den. Even there he wasn't able to think and ended up watching a game on TV which was weird, because he hated all sports. Then he watched another game after that. He fell asleep on the couch, but fortunately had no more dreams.

Keehan Quinn

Thursday morning he was up bright and early, and ten o'clock seemed too far away. He paced around the kitchen and wouldn't talk to Elaine or the kids. Elaine remained cool and collected. She had seen him going through periods before where he'd be working on something and could not be deterred. She had to admit to herself this was different. The kids didn't notice at all. Dad was being weird, so what's new? He left the house at nine even though it would only take him ten minutes to get there. He drove to the Johnson Ranch Road and he parked on the side and he waited. He turned on the radio talk show but he didn't listen. He breathed on his hands just to feel the sensation. He rubbed his eyes and scratched his head. He knew he was being irrational.

He felt like he'd had too much coffee. Wired. Maybe that was the problem. He ought to cut back. After all, what could be so important about some guy who fixes engines and drives a sporty car and works on a ranch in the sticks? So what if there's illegal racing? What could that possibly matter to him? So he dreamed about losing his keys. What the hell was that? I need a vacation, he thought. At just before ten he started the car and drove up the road to the ranch. He parked out in front of the house and before he got out of the car he saw somebody open the front door and then three of them came out on the porch. Comcat was one.

The others introduced themselves as he approached. Keehan Quinn was a giant, six ten if an inch and three hundred pounds if an ounce. His head was swarming with masses of bright curly red hair and his face was all lost in his beard. His voice was loud and his manner was overly friendly. Tsuru Zorasa, in total contrast, was a tiny dark old woman in black who barely muttered and rarely smiled. The three of them ushered him into the kitchen where Quinn proceeded to talk up a storm.

'We're so glad you came', he was broadcasting. 'We've been pestering Comcat for months. Yes we have. He repeats every word that you say.'

'Oh', Gian Carlo said, not surprised.

'Every word, and then some', said the giant. 'We've been thinking of going ourselves. To your lectures, that is, but then, where's the time go, eh? Where's it go?'

At this he looked over at Tsuru who was preparing to pour out some tea from a pot into several small Japanese-style cups.

'I hope you like tea', she said, serving it.

'Oh, and cupcakes', Comcat jumped up from the table. 'I almost forgot about cupcakes.'

'Anyways', the giant continued, 'We get a good laugh from his stories, you know. The things that you say. Where do you come up with this stuff? It's amazing. It's really amazing.'

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean', said Gian Carlo, trying to think of a way he could work in his questions about Elias.

'It seems that every single week you touch on something we're busy with here', Keehan said. 'It's just like you already know.'

'Know what?' he asked

'About us!' said the giant, 'and what we are doing. Well, do you? Do you already know?'

'He knows nothing', Tsuru insisted, from her seat at the far end of the table.

'It's just all too much', said the giant. 'Like the day he went on about dowsing, the very same day that we made that discovery! You know as well as I do, Madame, that there's no such a thing as coincidence.'

'Ha!' Gian Carlo couldn't help scoffing. 'Now you sound just like my wife.'

'Is she in on it too?' Keehan asked.

'I really don't know what you are talking about', Spallanzini replied.

'The aliens of course', replied Quinn.

Crystal Ball

'Aliens?' Gian Carlo was confused. 'Do you mean Elias?'

'Elias an alien? What are you talking about?' asked the giant, equally baffled.

'Not that kind of alien', said Comcat to Gian Carlo, and then, explaining to Quinn and Zorasa, 'Elias is from Mexico. That's what he means. He thinks he's illegal I guess.'

'But he's not', Comcat turned and said to Gian Carlo. 'Illegal, I mean.'

'The aliens', the giant continued, leaving no chance to follow up on Elias, 'are from Galaxy Ninety Four Seven.'

'Ninety four seven?' In the back of his mind Spallanzini was wondering what Freud would make out of that number.

'Right. Exactly. So you do know?'

'It's what you just said.'

'Oh, okay. So you don't?'

'I told you already', Zorasa interrupted, 'This man he knows nothing about it. Nothing. Do you want me to say it again?'

'You don't have to shout', said the giant, although Zorasa's voice was barely a whisper.

'Ninety four seven', Comcat interjected, 'is the number we divined through the numerological calendar of the Mintiks.'

'The Mintiks?'

'The original inhabitants of this area', Comcat continued. 'Long thought to be a tribe of mere subsistence, it turns out that they knew a hell of a lot more.'

'We came across them through the dowsing', said the giant.

'Yes, indeed. I've been meaning to tell you', said Comcat. 'Ever since that lecture you gave on the subject. The pull of gravity, you concluded, along with a dose of suggestion, is all that is needed to make someone think that the pendulum's leading them somewhere. Those were your words, I believe?'

'Sounds about right', Spallanzini agreed. He had heaped on some special contempt for that subject. The very idea that someone swinging a stick back and forth could actually be tapping in to some mystical force underlying the order of things was patently absurd.

'He says it's a bit more than that', said the giant, strangely emphasizing the 'he'.

'Who's he?' Spallanzini inquired.

'Oh. Oops', said the giant. 'Never mind.'

'It's all right', Tsura said. 'He might think it's all right. We'll ask him. He might want to see you. But for now, we have something to show you.'

'Show me?'

'Yes, show you. The alien spaceship.'

'Show me the alien spaceship?' Gian Carlo was bewildered. Here he had thought he would find nothing more than some tawdry little episode in Elias' life, and now they were showing him spaceships? Just who were these people anyway? And who was this 'he' they kept talking about?

'Well, not actually show you the spaceship itself', Quinn replied. 'Or sort of, it's hard to explain.'

'Come with me', said Tsura, and she got up from her chair and strode out of the room. The men all followed behind her. She led them into a small room off to the side of the house, a dark little room with curtains covering the windows, a small round table in the middle, two folding chairs on either side, and a crystal ball in the middle. Tsura sat down on

one of the chairs and motioned for Gian Carlo to sit in the other. Terrific, he told himself, now we've got fortune telling going on, too.

'As you might have guessed', Tsuru whispered, 'I am a gypsy. I've been in this business for all of my life.'

She held up a hand to prevent his interruption.

'I know about you', she continued. 'I have seen you on the 'Missy Tonight' many times. You always have something to say. But not now. Now you sit quiet and listen. Because you don't know. You think that you know but you don't.'

Keehan Quinn and Mr. Comcat stood by the door, since the room was too small for them to squeeze in any further. Gian Carlo looked at the ball, which was cloudy inside, like a paperweight snow globe. He had written a paper about crystal balls. He knew all that there was to know about them, so he thought. Tsuru Zorasa continued.

'For many many years I rip people off. I can tell what they want to hear, so I tell them. I can see through their problems, their masks. All of the time it is trivial shit, money and sex, nothing more. Maybe they want to be someone. They want to be noticed. All of ambition and power, the need it comes down to just "mommy mommy mommy, look at me, look at me, look at me". They want to have lovers. They want to have dream life. They want all the things that everyone thinks they should have. So I deal out the cards and I tell them. I look in the ball and I tell them. I look at their hands and I tell them. I make them do really dumb stuff, like taping a hundred dollar bill to a peanut butter jar and putting three pennies inside and then give to me, I will guard. They will never see hundred again.'

'I tell you all this for a reason, for something that happened to me. Which is why I am here. In the ball I see this.' and she put her hand on top of the crystal ball and suddenly it cleared, and inside he could see quite distinctly what looked like a rocket. Or a tree. It was like a rocket made out of a tree. A redwood tree. It was moving in darkness, through space. Moving slowly but definitely moving. The stars behind the

rocket were changing.

'The ship comes', Tsura said. 'It comes here. For this we build strip that you saw. Landing strip.'

'Rockets have got to land somewhere', Quinn said, and then Tsura angrily waved him to silence again.

'But what does all this have to do with Elias?' Gian Carlo burst out.

'What is it with you and Elias?' Quinn wanted to know. 'The guy comes and fixes the tractors'.

'Is that all that he does?' Spallanzini was practically shouting.

'Speak not!' Tsura rasped. 'Leave this room!' she commanded to Comcat and Quinn. The two of them sheepishly left.

'Idiots', she muttered after they were both gone.

'But what ...?' asked Gian Carlo.

'That's not important', she said. 'He will decide whether or not he will see you.'

'Is he Elias?' Spallanzini wanted to know.

'Of course he is not', she replied. 'Is he Elias? Did you hear anything that I said?'

'A landing strip', he said. 'So that's what it is'.

'You must not tell anyone else', she demanded. 'If you do, well, that would be bad'.

'Don't worry', Gian Carlo assured her, 'I'm not going to go around telling people I met a gypsy who showed me a redwood tree inside a crystal ball that's supposed to be a spaceship from Galaxy Nine One One.'

'Ninety Four Seven', she corrected him.

'Whatever. I think I've seen enough', he said, as he stood and pushed away the chair.

'I will ask Goo Laa Baa if he wants to meet you', Zorasa informed him.

'Like I said', Gian Carlo retorted. 'Whatever', and he made his way out of the room. Quinn and Comcat were waiting just outside the door, and Gian Carlo had to push past them to make his escape.

'We'll let you know', Mr. Comcat called after him, but Gian Carlo wasn't listening. He was out on the porch and then down the steps and back in his car, and then he was out of there as fast as he could go.

Goo Laa Baa

Spallanzini's ears were buzzing as he drove down the hill to his office. It's some kind of a cult, he ranted out loud. Goo Laa Baa? Did she really say Goo Laa Baa? Where have I heard that before? It sounds so familiar!

If HE wants to see me. As if I care. What does any of that have to do with me? Dowsing. Numerology. Crystal Balls. Bah. Pathetic. That's what it is. Some crazy little cult in the hills out there building a landing strip for some alien spaceship that looks like a redwood tree. Mintiks? I've got to look that up.

And when he got to the office he did look them up and it was just as Mr. Comcat had said. The Mintiks were a subsistence tribe of Native Americans who moved their villages around with the seasons, to cash in on the current crops; to the beach at salmon season in the winter, to the meadows for grains and berries in the spring and summer, to the hills for acorns in the fall. As far as anyone knew, they had no written language, just an oral tradition assumed lost in the missions, a culture that was completely and thoroughly extinct but name-claimed by one family out on the coast, for purposes of a proposed casino venture. Nothing else was known about them. As for redwood tree spaceships, you could look it up and find nothing.

Don't tell anyone, she'd said. As if he was going to. Who would he tell, and why? Did he want to make himself look ridiculous? No, he would keep this to himself. And yet, he waited, checking his email frequently to see if there was anything from Comcat. He did manage to teach his regular class on relationships, this one entitled 'What To Do About Your Soul Mate', describing when it was and when it was not okay to stake a claim on someone as a potential soul mate. There were all sorts of faux pas to be avoided, not to mention legal issues. A couple of young ladies lingered after class to discuss the finer points of soulmately. Did a

soulmate have to be cute, for example. Did he have to dress well? One of them was considering taking the next step, but Gian Carlo reminded her that if the guy was indeed her soul mate, there was no need for rashness.

At one fifteen, after pretending to do some research, the word finally came from Comcat that Goo Laa Baa desired to meet Gian Carlo, that very evening, indeed as soon as possible. He was to come to the ranch straight away. He needed no further prompting. He was out of the office and back in his car and the next thing he knew he was driving up Johnson Ranch Road. The same group of three was waiting to greet him at the front steps. This time it was Quinn who took the lead, and directed him to the smaller house on the side.

'Goo Laa Baa' is in there', Keehan said. 'He finds it to be much more cozy'.

Great, Spallanzini was thinking, a cult leader ought to be cozy. By this time he'd conjured up a definite image of the mysterious Goo Laa Baa. He'd be a white man, of course, unless he was Asian. He'd have a long beard and no hair on his head. He'd be wearing all white. He'd either be skinny or fat, but in any case have a soft voice and speak slowly enough to drive anyone mad. He'd want money, no doubt. He wouldn't be sleeping with these particular disciples unless he had really weird tastes.

I have to go through with this now, Gian Carlo was thinking, although all he really wanted to know, even now, was what was Elias' secret? The rest of it hadn't really made much an impact as yet. When he walked into the living room of the small house, however, the world that he knew disappeared, and for good.

There was nobody in there at all. Not a soul.

Quinn had ushered him into the room and then left, dosing the door behind him. Gian Carlo looked around. The room was tidy and warm. A gas fireplace burned a friendly fake fire. Book cases lined two walls of the room. Yellow curtains covered the windows in front. Two

comfortable chairs dominated the floor space along with a beautiful stained glass coffee table placed in between them. And that was about it.

Except for the parrot which was perched on a stand by the fireplace.

'Spallanzini! Spallanzini!' the parrot suddenly squawked, and Gian Carlo nearly jumped in surprise. He hadn't even noticed the parrot. It was large for a bird, mostly green with red markings on one side of his head. His claws were bright yellow and his eyes were abnormally blue.

'You know who I am?' Gian Carlo said aloud, looking around, expecting to see a person who was somehow concealed in the room. He did not believe in talking to birds.

'Missy Tonight! Missy Tonight!', said the parrot, now hopping excitedly up and down on his perch. 'What the hell is that? What the hell is that?'

'I guess you're a fan', Gian Carlo murmured. 'Everybody loves that shit.'

'Fucking morons', said the bird, 'fucking morons.'

'What? Can you read my mind too?' said Gian Carlo.

'Easy as pie', said the parrot. 'Easy as pie'

'Do you always say everything twice?'

'No', said the bird, 'It's just what people seem to expect. They think I'm some kind of freak.'

'You're a bird', Gian Carlo replied. 'Seem to be a pretty smart one. I'll give you that.'

'Oh, you think I'm smart?' asked the bird. 'I guess I'll take that as a compliment. Best you can do? Pretty smart?'

'What the fuck do I know about birds?'

'What the fuck do you know about anything?', Goo Laa Baa replied. 'I'll bet you can't even guess where I'm from.'

'Oh, I don't know, how about the jungle? Don't all parrots come from the jungle? Unless you were born in a pet shop.'

'Good one', said the bird. 'Pet shop. Okay. Pretty smart.'

'Nothing too smart about that', Spallanzini replied.

'Of course', said the bird, 'because you're totally wrong. Totally and completely mistaken. Not just about me. Oh no. You're wrong about every damn thing. You can't even begin to believe how completely and totally wrong you have been, and continue to be' the bird said, raising one claw in a gesture just like the gypsy's, to keep him from interrupting.

'First of all', said the bird, 'they call me Goo Laa Baa. Don't know why. Somebody heard it somewhere. But you can call me Scooter if you like.'

'Scooter, right', said Gian Carlo.

'I wasn't born in a pet shop', the parrot continued. 'I come from a planet seven light years from here.'

'Oh, I see', Spallanzini replied.

'No you don't', said the bird, 'you're just humoring me. That's okay. I think you're funny enough as it is.'

'Parrots don't come from outer space', insisted Gian Carlo.

'This one did', said the bird. 'Took me a week and half just to get here. Do you have any idea how long that can be? Seemed like a month at the least.'

'And how exactly did you get here?' Gian Carlo wanted to know.

'I flew', said the parrot. 'What the fuck? I'm a bird.'

'Birds can't fly through space', he replied. 'There's no air, for one thing.'

'Do I look like I'm breathing?' asked the bird, and Gian Carlo moved in a bit closer. He studied the bird carefully now. He saw no signs it was breathing at all.

'I don't have any lungs', said the bird. 'I just happen to look like one of your African Parrots. Just my luck. Imagine, you go to all the trouble of making an interplanetary voyage and you get there and no one's surprised. They don't even notice. They think you're one of their pets. It is really so fucking annoying. I can't tell you.'

'I can see how that would kind of suck', Gian Carlo agreed.

Scooter

'Now sit down', Scooter said, 'I invited you here for a reason. There are some things I've been wanting to tell you, ever since the first time I saw you on TV'.

Gian Carlo took a seat on one of the comfortable chairs, and the bird flew up off its perch and landed on the back of the other chair facing him.

'And no', said the bird, 'it's got nothing to do with that young man or his car.'

'I forgot you read minds', said Gian Carlo.

'If you could just tum it off for a minute', the parrot complained. 'That's the problem I have with you humans. You're so busy thinking about crap all the time. You can't even see your own world. It's out there, believe it or not. It's going on all the time but you people, so stuck in your heads, you can't see. Like now. You remembered your dream. What the hell is that? Isn't that what you'd say?'

'It's my line', he sheepishly acknowledged.

'It's garbage time for the brain. That's your dreams. Forget about it, okay?'

'So I guess I was right about that', Spallanzini replied.

'Like a broken clock', said the bird. 'Otherwise. Listen to me. You got a lot of it wrong. It's just not what you think. Like astrology. That's a good example.'

'Astrology? Are you kidding me?'

'Check it out. It's a matter of scale. If you've got less than two hundred individuals, in a relatively stable society, and you pick the correct constellations, it all works. Really, it does.'

'I don't ...', began Spallanzini but the bird cut him off.

'You also got it all wrong about alchemy. I heard what you said. Actually there is a philosopher's stone. It's not some crazy ass symbol. It was chalk mixed with Dodo saliva. It's too bad extinction ruined that little trick. It really could turn any metal to gold, when administered properly of course.'

'That's crazy', Gian Carlo managed to say.

'I could go on', said the bird. 'But listen. I just want you to know that you got it all wrong. You're not seeing the past as it was. You're seeing it through the ignorance of now.'

'Okay', said Gian Carlo. 'I'll bite. Since I'm wrong about everything, how about the big thing? How about God? Do you have the answer to that, Mr. Scooter?'

'Just plain Scooter is fine', said the bird, 'and as a matter of fact I do. It's a virus, okay? I know, I know. Where I come from, everyone's just as stupid as you people are here. That's why I left. I was sick of the place. Then somebody told me about your dolphins, so I came. You ever tried talking to a dolphin? It's just click click dick click click. Ridiculous. Now I don't what I'm going to do.'

'What about the tree?' Spallanzini asked.

'The tree?' asked the bird.

'The redwood tree space ship. In the crystal ball?', he replied.

'Oh, that's my friend Plankton', said the bird. 'He's a bit slow but he is on his way. Damn. If I could tell him to turn back now I would. He's got no idea what he's in for. Look around here. There are a lot of your things you call trees that look just like him. Of all the luck.'

'This is crazy', Gian Carlo got up. 'I don't even know why I'm here.'

'You wanted to know about Elias', said the bird.

'That's right', said Gian Carlo. 'I can't guess what you'll tell me about him'.

'Just go home', said the bird. 'It's been a long day. Just go home and we'll talk again soon.'

'Great', he replied. 'That's just great', and he walked out of the room and out of the house and went straight to his car without answering any of the questions that Comcat and Quinn were peppering him with all the way.

Enter the Dragon

I'm going insane, he decided. Or else it's just an incredible hoax. Who could even go to all that trouble? Who could put together that car with that ranch with that bird and those people? Kuntz maybe? He does know Comcat, that's certain. But no. Not that bird. It's just all too much. He drove home in a most foul mood. Everything seemed to be stupid. From what the bird told him, all his teachings were wrong. What did he know about anything? Isn't that what the bird said?

What the bird said? Who gives a crap what a bird says. It's a bird, for Christ's sake. Birds don't come from outer space. Birds don't read people's minds. Birds don't know jack about alchemy. Birds. What the fuck?

Gian Carlo Spallanzini pulled his BMW s30i into his driveway and parked, got out and beeped the thing shut as he walked briskly down the path to the front of his house. He opened the door and went in, surprised at not hearing the television blaring. Usually Elaine had it on during the day, tuned either to shopping or news. He thought maybe she'd be in the kitchen, but she wasn't, so probably she was somewhere upstairs. He had to tell someone the story. Had to get it off his chest. And who better than her, than his wife? He remembered again the long talks that they'd had in the old days. Maybe he'd ask her to go for a walk. Wouldn't that be a surprise. And they'd talk. It was time, time to get it all out, come what may, so he proceeded upstairs figuring that if she was up there she was probably in their room at the top of the stairs. The door was closed. That was odd. He opened it and could not believe what he saw.

Elaine was in there, all right. She was in there and naked. She was in there, on the bed, on all fours, with her butt in the air and her head on the pillow. She was in there but not by herself. Kneeling behind her and equally as nude, was Elias, the driver of the orange car with stripes.

But. But. But. It was what he could see and all he could see and for the first time perhaps in his life he was speechless. The couple hadn't seen him come in. They didn't know he was there. They seemed to be in right in the middle of an extended and familiar session. Elias was doing something that led to the sound of her sighing and moaning. Elaine was enjoying herself, that was clear. Gian Carlo had never before seen her this way. He had never before even heard her this way. She had a look on her face, with half-closed eyes and a smile that was almost a frown. Elias was taking his time. He was focused on giving her pleasure.

The bedroom was warm and sunny and light. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. Gian Carlo just stood in the doorway, watching them, not aroused but in shock. Then after all I was right, he was thinking. After all of that, and everything else, it comes down to this. The basics, the typical, the obvious, yes. The deepest and the darkest of all.

'Oh my God, stop', Elaine said. Somehow she'd become aware of his presence, and she reached a hand back to push Elias out of the way. He fell back on the bed and followed her eyes to the door. She sat up and pulled a sheet over herself.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'What?' Spallanzini managed to sputter. 'What am I?'

'Never mind', she replied, looking peeved. She turned to glance at Elias and gave him a pat on his thigh, reassuringly.

'But, but how?' Gian Carlo stammered.

'Well, when you went and picked someone at random, how did I know it was going to be him?', she said.

'But, but' Gian Carlo didn't know what to say.

You've really made things difficult lately', she continued. 'But anyway, remember the G Spot. That thing you always say that doesn't exist? Well, I can tell you for sure, it does', and she smiled and gave Elias a peck on the cheek. Elias smiled but he didn't say anything. He seemed completely at home. It was as if Spallanzini was the intruder.

'I guess I was wrong', said Gian Carlo.

'Ha. I never thought I would hear you say that', said Elaine. 'You were wrong? Honey, the things you don't know, you just wouldn't believe'.

'I can see that', Spallanzini replied.

'It's just as well', Elaine said, seeming to talk to herself. 'Usually I can tell exactly where you'll be and when. You're so predictable. But I guess it was going to happen someday.'

'I, I', Gian Carlo began, but he couldn't continue. The scene was so wrong. Gian Carlo stared for one moment longer, and then turned away and left.

He walked down the stairs and he walked out the door. He beeped open the BMW doors. He got in the car and drove off, thinking that maybe he'd drive for awhile, that maybe he'd be driving all night, that maybe he'd just go and never come back, and in that case, where to, maybe north? It had been a long time since he'd been to Mount Lassen. Six, seven hours, okay.

It really didn't help to notice the god damn orange car with stripes parked right around the corner from his house. How come I never saw it here before? he wondered. How many times has it been here? Is this where it usually goes anyway? Was it just a fluke it went up that Johnson Ranch Road that one time I followed it? Any other day it would have led me right back here to my own home? Damn.

Exit the Goat

The long drive did a lot of good in terms of calming him down. All along the way to the northern mountains he jabbered out loud in his car. What is it about cheating anyway? What's the big deal? Everybody cheats. Even my own kids say so. Why not let people have their little secrets? It's only sex anyway. What if it was food and she had a private chef and she really loved his food? Who would care? What is the deal with marital infidelity that it goes and ruins everything all the time? Is it just the dishonesty? But then it comes down to secrets again. The kids don't care if mommy and daddy are fucking each other or not. As long as they get their allowance and rides to their friends' houses, what difference could it possibly be making to them?

Some marriages survive. They go through the various stages of adultery. Forgiving if not forgetting. And some marriages just make room for it. Okay, go ahead, just not in the house, all right? Go to the other guy's house or anywhere else. They know their spouse is screwing somebody but let's not talk about it, none of your business, you know? Maybe we could do it like that, he thought. Elaine didn't seem to really care. No wonder she's so calm all the time. Every day when I come home she's just had an orgasm. Maybe two could play at that game.

And maybe that's one more reason why these things rarely work. Pretty soon it's time for revenge. You did it to me, so I'll do it to you. The thoughts kept going around in his brain, so busy thinking, repeating itself, he wasn't aware of the road or the car or the world, just like Scooter had said.

Scooter. He decided he didn't believe in the bird. No way that the bird was from space. That thing about breathing. What did he know? Maybe the bird was just holding its breath. A cynical bird, to be sure. It was just playing games with his mind. Astrology works? Philosopher's

stones? Chalk mixed with Dodo saliva? What the hell was that?

And no one would ever believe him. If he showed them the parrot he knew it wouldn't squawk, so to speak. It would sit there as dumb as a doornail, laughing at him the whole time. Redwood tree space ships, landing in the woods. No doubt all of that was just a cover for the real operation, the illegal drag racing. Why else would a guy good with engines go up there?

Good with engines, my ass. He really gets them purring, I'll bet.

I've seen just how good he does engines.

Him with my wife and that look on her face. That's some kind of powerful drug.

The hours ticked by as he drove through the night. He didn't stop and turn off to Mount Lassen. He kept heading north, past Mount Shasta, on to Oregon, into the night.

Fat and Bearded

Some people say he just cracked, but he changed, that much is for certain. Spallanzini was gone a few weeks, and when he returned he was different. He was quieter, for one thing. Also it seems he'd lost weight, and he'd shaved. He went on losing weight the rest of the time he remained in Pink City, until by the end he was thin as a rail. And he asked a lot of questions, and he listened. This was not the position he was hired for. He was no longer filling his slot.

He now taught those same sciences as if they weren't actually defunct. He gave lessons in tarot card reading. He taught palmistry, numerology, entrails. He demonstrated unconvincingly that mixing up chalk with pigeon spit could actually tarnish some metals. He refused to even speak to his friend Thomas Kuntz. The worst of it came on 'Missy Tonight' when he refused to insult any guests. Missy D'Angelo had specifically invited some of the foulest, most ridiculous evangelicals, the kind who believe that their God cares very much about who you are sleeping with, and how and when and precisely where various body parts are allowed to conjoin. Spallanzini said it was possible. Who knew?

This was not something they wanted to hear in Pink City.

Missy responded by kicking him off of her show. He seemed happy to leave. His lectures became less well attended. He tried to publish a book called 'Orange Car With Stripes' but his publisher said it was silly, that no one would ever believe it, that come on, really.

They had to kick him out. There might be a place for him somewhere, but not in Pink City. They still need a fat bearded know-it-all. He or she doesn't actually have to be fat, or even have a beard, just as long as they do know it all.

Spallanzini moved up to the ranch and as far as anyone knows, he's

living there still. He was happy just shoveling horse shit, painting white stripes and stringing up lights on the landing strip there, and making dumb videos nobody sees. When he comes down the hill, nobody knows him. He keeps to himself and he likes it that way. I guess you could say he's gone home.

THE END

Check out the spell-binding sequel companion story, "Missy Tonight", in which even more stuff happens.

Thanks for reading! Reviews and comments of all kinds are always welcome and appreciated. For more Pigeon Weather Productions, please visit <http://pigeonweather.wordpress.com>

