

ROBERT REED - Treasure Buried

R & D WERE UP AGAINST THE titans from Marketing, seven innings of groin-pulling, hamstring-shredding, take-no-prisoners slow-pitch softball, and Marketing had stacked their team. It was obvious to Mekal.

"What do you think, Wallace? That kid in center field? He's got to play college ball. And their shortstop, what's her name? With the forearms? I bet if you stuck her you'd get more testosterone than blood, I bet so. And Jesus, that pitcher has got to have a dose of chimp genes. You haven't been moonlighting, have you, Wallace? Arms like those. Reaching halfway to home plate before releasing. But hey, Meiter drew a walk at least. If they don't double us up, I'm getting my swings. So wish me luck, Wallace. I'm planning to go downtown!"

Wallace nodded, uncertain what "downtown" meant and certainly bored with the pageant happening around him. He was aware of Mekal rising to his feet -- a tall

rangy man old enough not to be boyish anymore, yet not softened enough to be middle-aged -- and then Wallace wasn't aware of anything besides the sunshine and his own convoluted thoughts. "Chimp Genes" reminded him of a problem at work. Not Wallace's problem, but he was the resident troubleshooter and the Primate Division was having more troubles with their freefall monkeys. The little critters weren't behaving themselves in orbit, either their training or their expensive genes at fault. They were put into the space stations to help clean and to keep the personnel company. Friendly, cuddly companions, and all that. But the prototypes were shitting everywhere and screaming day and night. And Wallace was wondering if it was something subtle, even stupid, overlooked as

a consequence. Zero-gee, freefall . . . was it some kind of inbred panic reaction? Maybe the monkeys had troubles with weightlessness. What if . . . what

if they felt as if they were falling, tailoring and instinct making it seem as if they were tumbling from some infinitely tall canopy -- a thousand mile drop, the poor things-- and with that sweet possibility in mind Wallace heard the crack of a composite bat, Mekal standing at home plate, screaming:

"Go go go you ugly fuck of a ball!"

A blurring white something arced across the soft blue sky, geometric perfection

drawing Wallace's attention; and then the center fielder jumped high against the

back fence, ball and glove meeting, his grace casual to the point of insulting and the inning finished. Five runs down already, and Mekal stormed back to the dugout in the worst kind of rage -- silent -- standing without moving for a long

moment, unable to focus his eyes or even think. It was that famous Mekal intensity. In R&D he was feared and sucked up to, some employees openly hoping that the man's temper would cause some vital artery to burst in his brain. Not necessarily killing him, no. But causing a constructive kind of brain damage, removing the most offensive portions of his personality --

-- and then there was a voice, close and almost soft. The voice said to Mekal, "But you almost did it." A woman's voice. A girl's. Nobody Wallace knew, and he

turned his head before shyness could engage, the girl watching Mekal with a mixture of concern and wariness. "Maybe you should warm up," she continued. Then she added, "Dear?" with a quieter voice.

Mekal came out of the spell, finding his old resolve. He snorted and said, "Yeah, right." His glove . . . where was it? Then he said, "Wallace? Tell you what, since you're here and all, why don't you chart Marketing's hits? All right? Which field and how far, that sort of data. Give us an edge next time.

Will you do that for me, pal?"

"I'll try. Sure."

"Try?" Mekal laughed and shook his head. "Do!"

"Good luck," offered the girl; and again Wallace looked at her, her pretty face a little too round for the current fashion, her long blonde-white hair worn simply, blue-white eyes radiant, both hands reaching through the chain-link and their smoothness implying true youth, one finger adorned with a diamond-heavy ring a gold band nestled beside it. She said, "Darling -- ?"

"You'd better get back in the stands," Mekal told her. "It's all right. I'm fine. Fine."

She nodded, tried a smile and then tried to say, "Just do," with her husband's intensity. That was Mekal's rallying cry in R&D. "Just do." Except it didn't have the impact, coming from her mouth. A couple other R&D players smiled at the sound of her voice, and Mekal made the dramatic walk to the pitcher's mound. As much as Marketing, the R&D players were glad that the long fly ball had been caught. Wallace could sense it, smell it. Because if Mekal won this game single-handedly, they knew he wouldn't be bearable for at least a week. He'd prance and grin, making life miserable in the labs, which is why some of them giggled now, taking their warm-up throws out of the dirt and joking about the oncoming rout.

Wallace himself didn't dislike Mekal. Not really. He assumed some kind of insecurity fueling the man, some partly hidden weakness or flaw, and with that in mind Mekal was bearable. Sometimes amusing. Even friendly, given the right circumstances. But then again, Wallace was a legend for his easygoing attitudes. His ego genes were deleted, making room for more important talents. A different kind of fuel driving him. . . .

And now Mekal's wife retreated, Wallace studying her bare legs -- a little thick but firm -- and the way she carried herself, not with submissiveness but with an enduring patience, allowing a couple screaming children to play chase around her legs and then stopping to help some grandmother off the wooden bleachers. Mrs. Mekal; a strange concept. But then Wallace was always surprised by people's private lives . . . and now the girl took a seat up high, near the center, her gaze steady and honest and her applause genuine whenever R&D managed to make an

out against the juggernaut from Marketing.

"What the hell are we doing, people?" Mekal screamed from the mound, his face ready to burst with all the blood. "Be crisp! Be alert! Execute, execute! Eight runs down is nothing!"

Another pitch, then the ominous swift crack.

"Just do," Wallace muttered to himself, diagramming another blast into left field. "Just do."

He solved the monkey puzzle -- it was the freefall sensation, in part -then helped Simmons and Potz in the Microbe Division, learning enough about green algae genetics to see new possibilities; and somewhere in the midst of work, without planning it, he asked Potz about Mekal's young wife. How long had they been married, how many children?

"Three years, and none." Potz gave her coffee a quick suspicious glance. "Rumor says that Mekal lacks. Wants kids and can't. Only you know rumors, it could be a lot of hopeful thinking from the downtrodden. The prick shoots blanks, and all that."

Wallace absorbed the comments, nodding and then saying, "He doesn't wear a ring, does he?"

"Probably allergic."

"She looks young. What is she, ten years younger than him?"

"More like fifteen. Met her when he was doing one of those community relations lectures at the college." Potz plucked a thick brown hair from her coffee cup. "Not mine. Yours? No? God, I was in Meiter's lab this morning. He had that yeti skullcap on a countertop, and you don't suppose . . . ugh!" Then she sipped her coffee anyway, smiling eyes on Wallace.

He didn't notice her expression. He was thinking hard about several things, some of them invisible even to him. Wallace was famous for his long pauses and the sluggish, thoughtful voice, particularly when some problem deserved his full focus. The yeti skullcap, yes. He had to find time to go over the genetic maps with Meiter, its authenticity established but the Company unsure what to do with their investment. Rumors said that the Tibetan monks had sold it to them for a small fortune. Their people were arming against the Chinese again, selling art and oddities worldwide. What if they'd sold other yeti artifacts to their competitors? It was a problem, all right. Cloning the yeti would bring it back from extinction, which was good news. But were the genes too close to human? That was the main issue now. There were half a billion rules and regulations concerning genetic work with human substances. Maybe it would be best for their competitors to move first. Let their fancy lawyers hit the beach, and all that.

That's how the Executives would be thinking now. Besides, where was the profit in cloning yetis? They'd make a splash, sure, but not like ten or twenty years

ago. Resurrecting the dead -- one of Wallace's favorite things -- had reached its high water mark when the Japanese cornered the market on carnosaurus. Tailored monitor lizards, in effect. But how could shy near-humans compete with that scale of things?

Eventually Wallace was aware of sitting alone, Potz and her coffee gone and his stomach aching from hunger. He had forgotten lunch. What time was it? Three? He went to the cafeteria, bought candy bars and Pepsi, then returned to his office intending to work. Only he found himself daydreaming about Mekal's wife, his imagination taking him as far as a conversation at the ball park. Of course the chance of Wallace ever having the chance seemed remote. He was famous for his imagination -- indeed, almost everyone in the industry knew one or two Wallace stories -- but to save his life he couldn't envision anything more than speaking to the girl, and then just for a few moments. In passing.

"So forget it," he warned himself. "Get to work, will you?"

Potz had given him some data. Wallace sipped warm Pepsi, then a cold dose of old coffee, punching up files he had begun during graduate school. They were like old trusted friends, these files. Trusted but secretive. Genetic maps flowed past him on the screen, in vivid colors, thousands of base pairs forming unique, easily recognizable patterns that were almost repeated in other species. Related ones or not, it didn't matter. Every eukaryotic organism on Earth had excess DNA. Most of it was leftover stuff from ancient times. Early life had been sloppy, genetically speaking, full of useless genetic noise that natural selection had flattened into a kind of hum. Flat, harmless. A lot of the DNA was poly-A -- adenine bases repeated for huge spans. But what Wallace had noticed when he was twenty, what had struck him as puzzling, were chunks of DNA buried in the poly-A. Bursts of static, sort of. There were several thousand base pairs, some of it common to all eukaryotes. Yet the stuff produced no polypeptides, nor did it seem to influence the expression of any other genes. What could be so important that it was shared by green algae and PhDs? He had no idea. Which was why he recorded new data whenever possible. For more than a decade, Wallace had plotted the differences between all sorts of species, finding no evolutionary patterns. None. It was such a useless but distinct bit of genetic noise -- a biochemical shout, more than anything -- and he found it humbling to consider the problem every little while. Like now. Potz's algae data added to the puzzle, and Wallace perched over the screen, hoping against hope for some kind of inspiration.

What made no sense, he knew, was misunderstood.

Misunderstood, or wrong. And either way Wallace felt a sacred duty to solve or to fix.

"What are you doing?" asked a girl's voice.

And now Wallace began explaining the problem to the imaginary Mrs. Mekal, her

standing over him with the blonde-white hair hanging limp, the soft ends brushing against his cheek and feeling very nearly real.

WALLACE WENT to three other softball games. R&D won once, managing to squeak past a pack of gray-haired Executives 11-10, but Mekal's wife never showed again, even in passing. Which seemed to help, because Mekal wasn't quite so unbearable. He even managed to control himself when they won, limiting his high-fives because the winded, red-faced opponents were still and always his superiors. Their position on the pecking order was secure, and Mekal wasn't an idiot. Yet his good mood persisted into the next morning, him bringing doughnuts

for two hundred and inviting some of his closer associates to his home next Saturday night. "A social thing, for a change." He grinned and asked Wallace, "Are you interested?"

"What time?"

Which surprised Mekal, but just for a moment. "So you're feeling social, huh? Well then, good. Eight o'clock. Bring a date if you want. Your choice."

No date. He could have picked one of two girls that he saw casually, but either

would have been a distraction. A filter. Instead he drove himself to the big house built on a leveled blufftop, Mekal at the door, Wallace walking into the big living room with its picture window, him drinking in the view of dusk and the river, wondering all the time: "Where is she?" It was eight o'clock and half

a dozen minutes. Almost no one had arrived yet. What Wallace had hoped to find was noise and confusion, using them as a smoke screen to cover his shyness and the uncomfortable silences. But people never arrive on time for parties; he'd forgotten that salient fact. And he turned just as the gift emerged from the kitchen, his scheme gone. Deflated. He offered the weakest smile, and she handed

him a heavy glass filled with sweet punch brighter than blood. "You look thirsty," she reported. "He said, 'Give Wallace a drink, ' and you're Wallace, right?"

"Yes." Nobody else around. Just them. . . .

"I'm Cindy. Cin, for short. Whichever." She smiled, showing perfect teeth as small as a child's. "How does it taste, Wallace?"

He sipped and said, "Very good. Thank you."

"My husband made it. Some special recipe of his."

Suddenly it didn't taste as delicious, but Wallace kept drinking. He was quite thirsty and afraid that Cindy--Cin--would leave him now. She would feel that her

duty as hostess was finished, or some such thing. So he turned back to the window and said with force, "It's a lovely view you have."

Were the words as contrived as they sounded?

But she replied, "Thanks," and nodded happily.

"And it's a beautiful house."

"You've never been here before?"

"No."

"Well, thanks again then."

Yet when he examined his surroundings -- the living room and dining room and the faraway front door -- he saw nothing that reminded him of anyone except Mekal. Things were clean, but the furnishings and wall hangings exuded maleness, a faintly Western atmosphere, everything possessing utility and an indifference to bright colors. The sole feminine touch was Cindy; she was dressed in a very feminine gown, light and blue like her eyes, and more than a little clinging. Yet the girl -- she looked like a college student playing a grown-up -- obviously didn't belong here. She was alien. Wallace could see that much, so much so that he fought the temptation to say, "Get out of here! You don't belong here! Run!"

Their conversation continued, deliciously ordinary; and in the middle, without any warning, Cindy assured him, "He thinks the world of you." Then she winked, just slightly. "Which is something for him."

Mekal. She meant Mekal. Wallace didn't know how to respond, moving his empty glass from one hand to the other.

"You help everyone in R&D, he says. 'Wallace is the intellectual grease for us!'  
Actually, I think he's a little jealous, although he'd never admit it to anyone.  
Never."

"I suppose not," said Wallace.

"You know my husband. . . ."

To which Wallace thought: "You and he don't belong together. This is a mistake, you two. All wrong!"

He felt it -- knew it -- almost shivering from the stress of keeping his knowledge inside himself.

He wasn't thinking about love, even his own love for the gift. He was oblivious to it. If someone had told him, "You're smitten, Wallace," he would have denied it, never sensing that he was lying.

And besides, love wasn't the point.

The point -- and no other seemed more important in the world -- the point was that Cindy and Mekal were existing against the laws of nature. Marriages should be working unions. The poor girl was chasing a fatherly figure, no doubt. And Mekal was scrambling to regain his youth. It was a shame, he felt, and a little sad; and he found himself frowning while Cindy said something about it being nice, company coming like this, and she wished they could do it more often, and would he like some more punch? Snacks? "Help yourself," she told him. "Make

yourself at home."

"Come see," said Meiter. "We got it this morning."

It was a month later, softball season finished and volleyball season starting; and Wallace looked up at Meiter, coming out of his daydream and asking, "What are you talking about?"

"The hand! It's here!"

The yeti hand, sure. Wallace remembered hearing the minors, antiaircraft missiles exchanged for a dismembered chunk of fossil tissue. Meiter took him to the freezer, letting him peer in through the frost. "See? Mangled but whole. And old. Maybe thirty thousand years old, we think. Some kind of anaerobic circumstances preserved it. Peat moss. A deep cave. Something. Whatever it was, there's virtually no decay. We're already running the first maps. Fossils don't give whole cells, but the hand's never read the textbooks. We've got nice fat whole ones. No need to jigsaw things together, it looks that good!"

"It looks human," Wallace mentioned. "Doesn't it?"

That disturbed Meiter. "Oh, I don't agree." Then he asked, "How would you know, anyway? It could be an apish hand just as well --"

"Maybe so."

"And the good part, the best part, is that it's female. The skullcap's male, and here we've got a lady. They're separated by three hundred centuries, which assures genetic diversity. Meikal's saying that the big kids upstairs are thinking about making a splash, playing up our charity in bringing yetis back. They're even talking about buying up part of Nepal, making a preserve, planting new forests and using human volunteers to carry the little critters part-term. Neat, huh? You bet it is!"

Wallace looked at the ugly bunch of bone and brutalized meat, knowing it was human. Chromosome numbers were the same between humans and half-humans; he didn't fault Meiter. But what was, was. What any person believed never changed what was real and true. That was the first lesson that he carried into work every day -- the towering impotence of his hard-held opinions -- which helped him think and rethink, always seeing the old as new.

Later Meiter came with the sorry news. "A human hand," he said bravely, "but it's not all lost. It's got some primitive genetics, which means the academics will be curious. Human evolution and all that stuff."

Wallace had a thought.

He asked, "Are you going to keep mapping? Because I'm not sure anyone's ever done a total map of such an old, high-quality fossil."

"And tie up the machinery? Take lab-tech time?"

He couldn't have given any reason; Wallace had only a feeling, distinct but

imprecise, that something useful might come out of it.

"Listen," he said. "why don't you keep people at it? If you need, I'll get Mekal's signature. Okay?"

Meiter hesitated.

Then Wallace said, "Just do!"

Meiter laughed. "All right. We've got a block of empty time soon. Someone gives me shit, I'll send them to you."

And a couple days later it was done. Wallace asked his computer to find such-and-such series of bases among the poly-A -- you never knew where it might be -- but soon it became obvious that thirty thousand years ago, in at least this one unfortunate woman, the telltale bit of DNA was missing.

Yes, he thought, it couldn't serve any important genetic function.

And yes, probably no other res catcher on the globe would care about such a tiny treasure.

Yet Wallace found the enthusiasm to open every file, working through the night and the next day, then losing track of an entire weekend, again and again asking himself why every living organism now had this one genetic shout . . . and finally perceiving a simple, coherent answer that he checked and double-checked and then triple-checked, becoming more certain every instant. At long last . . . " Good God!". . . placing both hands flush against the top of his desk, rising and trying to find the doorway to his office of six years. . . .

It was a night of supreme clarity; and Wallace knew he was at his pinnacle. Never again, no matter how long he lived, would he succeed in anything so glorious, so wondrous.

Yet while he wandered the hallways, hunting for anyone to tell his news, if only a napping guard, he had a new thought, stopped and dipped his head, concentrating hard on a new possibility.

Five minutes, and he'd superseded his first success.

Hands shaking with excitement, tired eyes weeping, Wallace felt the ceiling split as his joyous spirit sailed free . . .!

"You look like shit," Mekal reported. "Glance at a mirror, Wallace. I'm worried.

My prize heifer, and you look wrung out and half-dead. Not to mention your aroma, which isn't pretty either."

"I need sleep," Wallace conceded. "I'm going home now."

"On Monday morning? You can't just leave us dangling!" Mekal waved a finger at him. "Hampston and Yates hit another wall with their pigeon project. Not with the natural genes, but it's the tailoring part. I know that's not your area,



but  
this is a contract job and the client's getting nervous -- "

"Tomorrow," he promised. Then he said, "I just wanted to talk first. I've got a  
problem of my own, a little thing . . . but it might be important. I don't  
know  
why, but I keep getting this feeling."

"Well, great!" Mekal meant it. "Jesus, we get bonuses because of your hunches.  
Soon as you're done with the pigeons, I'll schedule you some extra time."

"I've had time. I can't figure it out."

"Really . . . ?"

"Maybe, I was wondering . . . you could try, maybe. How about it? I'll give  
you  
the file codes, my notes, and you work on it. At your own pace. Give me a  
vacation from the damned thing, okay?"

"Really?" Mekal was more surprised than suspicious. Wallace giving him work?  
Trusting him with a puzzle beyond Wallace's reach? It took Mekal several  
seconds  
to engage his ego, then he nodded and accepted the challenge. "What the hell,  
sure. I'll muscle in time. Cin's got volunteer stuff tonight, she'll be out of  
my way . . . yeah, I can give this bird a try."

Which he did. For several days he played with the bird's wings, looked into  
its  
eyes, and accomplished nothing. For more than a week Wallace avoided his  
associate, eavesdropping on the man's use of his files but nothing more.  
Wallace  
had set things up to make nothing too obvious, yet he'd left enough hints to  
lead in proper directions. Or had he? What seemed transparently obvious to  
Wallace was baffling Mekal. Mekal wasn't stupid by any means; but sometimes,  
watching the man pull and replace files, Wallace felt like bursting into his  
office and shouting at him. Telling him, "It's so damned obvious. Just think  
about it this way!"

"What I think," Mekal reported next week, "is that it's useless crap. It's  
something persistent, sure, but that's because of structural properties.  
Nothing  
else."

"Not true," Wallace replied without doubts. "And why's it everywhere? Can you  
explain its distribution?"

"I know, I know. It looks odd, you're right. The same parts are always the  
same,  
regardless of species. The middle stuff varies, and I can't explain why. Maybe  
a  
dead old virus code --"

"Inside oak trees and people?"

"A universal virus, maybe?"

"But not inside a woman who died thirty thousand years ago. Nor in any of the  
incomplete fossil samples."

"A genetic fart then." Mekal tried laughing.

"You're going to give up?" Wallace spoke as if injured. [He wasn't. He was panicky.] "I've been working on it for years. You've already done a good job excluding things, narrowing the suspects. Can't you keep at it some more? A little while?" He paused, then asked, "Just do? Can you?"

Just do.

There was an instant when Mekal seemed disgusted and thoroughly disinterested; but those two words had their effect, percolating into him, pride or fear of failure causing him to say:

"All right. When I've got time. But that's all I promise."

And with that Wallace returned to his office and carefully, on the sly, inserted

a few more telling clues into some files not yet accessed. Hoping it was enough.

Hoping, yet in the same instant sensing that it wouldn't be. Not quite yet. .

.  
.

ANOTHER TWO weeks of nothing. Wallace was stuck on the pigeon work, and Mekal worked harder than he'd ever admit, using his nights and both weekends and his face drawn and tired when he approached Wallace, asking if he'd come to tonight's volleyball match. They might need him to sub, or at least score. How about it? So Wallace came, and after the first game Cindy arrived, coming from an aerobics class with sweats over the colored tights. Too bad. But Wallace was

in heaven when she took the empty chair beside him, remembering his name and then cheering for her husband in the second game.

They were matched against the bastards from Marketing again. Everyone on Marketing was at least six two, it seemed, and they had flutter on their shoes.

The game was forever on the brink of a slaughter. Mekal's heroics kept them within seven or eight points. Then as a long volley looked won, Cindy bent close

to Wallace and said, "You know, he hates when I watch. He's afraid he'll look --"

There was a scream, a spongy white ball bouncing to death and Mekal on the hard

floor, gripping an ankle and his face the color of cottage cheese. A bad sprain

was the verdict. He was helped from the court, and Cindy dashed back from somewhere with ice and towels. Wallace watched as she doctored her husband, her

concern obvious and her manners motherly; and she seemed to know when her attentions embarrassed him, because suddenly she returned to her seat beside Wallace, watching Mekal in the corner of her eye but otherwise letting him sulk

alone.

"I don't even know her," Wallace told himself. "I've spent what? Maybe ten minutes in my life spent talking to her, and what am I thinking? Am I crazy now?"

Potz had come off the bench, luckily. Three years of high school volleyball showed in her digs and the clean arcing sets, and R&D managed to stage a comeback. The game was hanging in the balance for what seemed like forever.

At one point Mekal tried walking, the limp weak and painful to watch.

He ended up sitting on the opposite side of Wallace, watching everything with a mixture of agony and feverish intensity; and maybe that's why Cindy tried to change the subject, sensing that it would be best to deflect everyone's attention, if only for a bit.

"So how's your pigeon business going?" she asked Wallace.

He tried to remember what pigeon business. His mind started and stopped, then moved again. He said, "Better, mostly."

"Mekkie told me about it --"

Mekkie?

"-- and it sounds exciting. And lovely. How many passenger pigeons are you making? I mean in this test flock."

"Fifty thousand," Wallace allowed.

"That's very noble of you," she assured both of them.

Then Mekal snapped, "It's for a pizza chain. It's so they can sell more pizzas."

"Nonetheless." She refused to be cynical. "A good thing is a good thing, no matter its motives."

Wallace felt a little weak. She sounded so young and noble and sweet, and he nearly forgot to record the next goal.

Then Cindy was telling him, "I've troubles understanding genetics. Mekkie's explained them a thousand times. Base pairs and dominating--"

"Dominance," her husband corrected.

"-- but it's all such a muddle to me. I guess I'm just too slow to pick it up."

"No, you're not," Wallace responded. "I'm sure you're not."

"No?"

"I know you're not."

Mekal seemed oblivious to them, his brow furrowed, eyes tracking after the arcing ball.

Wallace had an idea, an inspiration. "How about if I explain genetics? I'll tell you how I think about them."

Cindy smiled while looking straight ahead. "Okay. Do."

"Think of DNA as another way of talking. That's all. Chromosomes and the rest of it are just machines that record the words in the DNA. Genes are a set of instructions meant for the future. They tell new generations how to build proteins, metabolize, then reproduce when it's their turn. The actual parts are simple. What's complicated is that there are so many parts, you see? I don't understand more than a fraction of the whole setup, and it's my job. Which is why I feel pretty humble most of the time."

"Do you?" she asked.

"Oh, sure." He paused, deciding what to say next. Then he heard his voice coming out of him, seemingly of its own volition. "Think of your genes this way. Your parents and grandparents and all the way back . . . all those people are talking to you, millions of biochemical voices working together, and the words are wrapped up in machinery more complicated and much, much more reliable than any machine people have ever built."

"That's something to think about," she said.

Mekal stretched out his sore leg, saying nothing.

"We're full of stuff, and a lot of it isn't even used anymore. For me it's like hunting for treasures, doing what I do." Then he decided to forget caution, pressing ahead. "I just had a weird thought. This is the same subject, just a different way of looking at it. Suppose someday we go to another star and find life on a planet. It's more primitive than Earth, but maybe someday it'll get to building campfires and condos. Who knows? So anyway, we decide to leave a message for the future. We can carve stone, I suppose, but what if the stone weathers away? We can put a message on the planet's moon, but no place is really safe. I mean, what we want is to be able to tuck our message where nothing can destroy it. We make a simple code, but where can it go? Where would a code be repaired and replicated without our having to worry --"

"In the genes? The alien ones?" Cindy seemed genuinely excited, asking him, "Am I right? That's what you're saying, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." It was the logic that Wallace had employed several weeks ago. "If I ever find myself in a starship, it's something I'd consider."

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

Boom went the serve, flat and fast, then dipping to the floor. Point! Game! Match!

But Mekal didn't curse or even grimace. Indeed, when he rose to his feet, icewater dripping from the towels around his foot, he managed a limping gait while gazing into the distance. At nothing. Then he said, "All right, this is done. Why don't we get home, Cin? What do you say?"

"You played well," she offered with a clear, confident voice.

And he said, "I guess so," shrugging his shoulders and starting for the door.

"I  
suppose."

Mekal vanished from public view. Sometimes Wallace would keep tabs on the man's computer usage, but it was obvious that he'd had the long-last breakthrough. Now he was busy using code-breaking programs, bringing in consultants from mathematics and physics as well as patent law. There were rumors of big events. Potz reported nocturnal meetings with the highest of the high Company officials, a few select government people in attendance too. There was diffuse noise about a major discovery, Mekal in the middle of things; yet the rumors never did the truth any justice. Sometime in the last thirty thousand years alien beings had come to Earth, seen possibilities, and left behind coded messages inside every living organism. Nobody could invent such craziness over morning coffee. And found by Mekal? That would have strained any credulity that remained.

Eventually came word of a big announcement, a press conference combined with a meeting of key Company people. It would happen Tuesday, then no, Friday. Friday. And it was Thursday afternoon when Mekal came into Wallace's office, closed the door with care, then sat and said, "Listen," and said nothing else. He sat with his hands limp in his lap, his mouth open, his eyes vacant and very nearly exhausted.

"You getting anywhere on that problem I gave you -- ?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I have."

"Good then."

Mekal licked his lips, then said, "It's your data, of course. I sure intend to give you credit for the data, and you're the person who thought it might be important."

"Is it?"

Mekal blinked and said, "Huh?"

"Important?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it is." He outlined the bare bones of what he had discovered. It was maybe half of what Wallace had deciphered for himself in a single night; but then Mekal added that there was a lot more, now that experts from everywhere were involved. "And you'll get flail credit for your part. I want to assure you  
-- "

"Thanks."

Mekal was shaken by Wallace's attitude, by the utter lack of hostility toward him.

"It sounds very, very interesting," said Wallace. "What kinds of things do the aliens say to us?"

"Inside primates, all primates, are star charts. For instance. The messages are set up along taxonomic lines --" just as Wallace had suspected -- "and other groups have mathematics and digitized photographs. Beetles are going to contain the bulk of the text. A thousand kinds of technology. It's like . . . the whole thing . . . we've got the keys to the universe, you know?"

Wallace nodded, eager to show a smile.

"Oh, and you can sit up with the rest of us tomorrow. Take your bows with the others."

"Thank you, Mekal."

It was killing the man, him listening to the ceaseless good tidings. He almost growled. Then he rose to his feet, wanting to leave.

"A good thing I kept after you, huh?"

Mekal paused, looking back over his shoulder.

"Wasn't it?"

Mekal said, "It was."

"Congratulations."

The tall man didn't have any more words inside him. It was all he could do just to grip the doorknob and turn it, acting as if it might be wired with explosives, opening the door with a smooth slow motion and hesitating, looking up and down the hallway and hesitating, then stepping into the open with one last backward glance, the face allowing itself a grateful smile with the eyes wide. Thunderstruck.

MONTHS PASSED. Wallace didn't again see Cindy until the pigeons arrived, in the spring, the Company organizing a picnic directly below their route. The flock had been released in second-growth timber in the South; their embedded genetics told them where to fly, leading them toward a state park in northern Michigan. Naturally the picnic featured pizza and several self-congratulating speeches about the project's successes. Wallace's name was mentioned. Applause rose, then fell, then someone shouted, "Here they come!" and the first wild passenger pigeons in more than a century were passing directly overhead.

It was a strange sight. The birds formed a great disk in the high blue sky. The disk was supposed to resemble an airborne pizza; those behavioral genes had been the toughest puzzles. Wallace pointed and told Cindy, "The clumps are the anchovies," and she laughed quietly, almost without sound.

Mekal couldn't make it. Cindy had explained that he was in Europe again,

giving

lectures and meeting with some German concerns. The alien messages and technologies had been ruled public property, but the Company had the only extensive records available as yet. The Germans didn't want to be left behind, and afterwards Mekal was flying to Japan --

"Sounds busy," Wallace had said.

"Too busy, I think. But he seems happy." Cindy was wearing jeans and a soft red sweater, and she'd glance at Wallace now and again, on the sly. Sometimes he thought he detected a whiff of loneliness in her voice. Other times, nothing.

"I

know it's hard to imagine," she had said, "but he's enjoying more success than he ever dreamed possible. And that's something, considering Mekkie. But you know

that. You're his friend and all." She smiled, her pretty face a little fuller than he remembered. But so pretty, so young, and those eyes reaching straight into him.

"I know Mekkie, all right," he said.

Sometimes Wallace envied Mekal's fame, and that surprised him. He hadn't thought

it was in his nature to care about such trivial things. He had to tell himself,

"No, it's enough that you know who made the discovery. What is, is. The world's

assessment doesn't have any relevance at all." And the truth told, Wallace would

have hated the celebrity's life. Being carried around like a trophy, acting as the voice of the Company, and the unending crush of reporters and strangers, their motives unknown. It seemed like a picture from Hell. He would be the most

famous scientist since Einstein, but Einstein lived before television and marketing, talk shows, and overkill. Posters of Mekal were selling in the millions. He was a public relations dream -- a solid, fiery, and manly scientist

--and it would only increase if the rumors of a Nobel Prize came true.

No, Wallace was thankful for his anonymity.

Particularly now, he thought, standing with Cindy, close enough to smell her perfume and feel her gentle heat.

There were rumors about things other than the Nobel Prize. About Mekal and women, for instance. Every hotel room was filled with flowers sent by admirers.

Tabloids linked him with various models and young actresses. Even Potz was supposedly involved, she and Mekal trying out his giant new office one night, the tale coming straight from the janitor who stood in the hallway, leaning against his broom and listening. And of course Cindy had to know at least some of the stories, making Wallace feel sorry for her. Yet he had set up these circumstances, hadn't he? He had guessed what would happen, knowing Mekal. Success can twist and transform people's lives. Fame doesn't corrupt character,

but it surely reveals what is already there.

The pigeons were gone, tracking perfectly -- a giant flying billboard selling pizzas all the way to a never-seen homeland.

Such a bright day, blue and calm and just a little cool; and Wallace stared across the green countryside for a long moment, smiling to himself, letting himself daydream.

"Well, I'm glad I saw them," said Cindy.

The pigeons.

She hugged herself and said, "Maybe I'll go home now. I can't seem to get warm."

"Maybe I'll leave too."

They started for the parking lot below. For Wallace every step seemed full of possibilities. Mekal gone; his wife alone and lonely. He was aware of her watching him in profile, measuring something; and finally she told him, "You know, he's afraid of you. I don't think Mekkie's slept one good night in months."

"Afraid?"

"Of course he is." She stopped and looked around, making sure they were alone. "You must think he's an idiot, but he's not. You gave him all that evidence, those clues, then you stood by while letting him take the credit -- "

"He earned everything" Wallace said with a firm, level voice.

"You hate him, he thinks. You're planning to destroy him." The girl's face was sorrowful, her own sleeplessness showing. "What he thinks is that you've got evidence somewhere. You deciphered the aliens' message first, and when you want, you're going to make him look like a cheat."

"No," he replied. "I'd never do anything like that!"

She said nothing.

What stunned Wallace were the little jolts of anger directed at him.

"Then what were you planning?" she asked him.

He opened his mouth, then she shut it.

"Because I'm not stupid, Wallace. You might think so --"

"No, no. Not at all!"

"-- but you're not fooling me. You knew what you were giving him, I was there, and don't tell me you didn't. Don't."

So this was it. A minute ago he had been daydreaming, he and Cindy making love on her living room floor; and now the daydream felt like a premonition, clear and certain. He reached and grasped one of her hands, squeezing hard. And in broken, quick sentences he outlined the basics of his bold scheme.

What surprised him was her lack of surprise.

Cindy let him hold her cold hand, blue eyes fixed on him, and after a minute she



interrupted, telling him, "Stop." She told him, "You're claiming that you've intentionally crippled my marriage, because it didn't satisfy your expectations, because you thought I'd be happier with someone else," and she pulled back her hand, shutting her eyes and holding them closed.

And Wallace panicked. He had to say something, give her something to deflect her anger. That's why he told about Potz and Mekal, painting it as if he were the person standing outside the office door. He wanted Cindy to see -- see and admit -- that her husband wasn't worthy of her, that she could find a man who would treat her as she deserved --

-- and she slapped him with the once-held hand, the crack worse than the pain, his head jerking back and her speaking quickly and loudly, assuring him, "I never want to see you again. I don't want you in the same place as me, ever. I just wish you knew how much I hate you, you bastard. You god damn bastard!"

She turned and walked, then began to run.

And Wallace tried speaking, his mouth ajar and his brain empty. What could he say? Then he was crying, touching his wet face with both hands, feeling certain that he would die of shame any moment. Only he didn't. Couldn't. Thousands of genes inside him, trillions of copies of each, and with their ancient instructions they kept him alive, making him breathe and grieve while people stood at a safe distance, watching and pointing, talking among themselves.

< Converted by HTMLess v2.5 by Troglobyte/Darkness. Only Amiga... >