

MRR

His awareness awoke slowly, but steadily, and with each new second he became more convinced that he was at least alive. The terror that he had experienced as the procedure began remained with him, though, and he was still fighting sheer panic. *I am Mrr*, he said to himself, mostly for reassurance. *I am Mrr. I am not afraid.*

As each moment passed without death, he felt a little better. There was still a tingling in his nerves and some paralysis, but the overpowering sense that his demise was imminent started to ebb. He kept his eyes closed tightly as his fear eased even more, slowly.

The light breeze on his face felt cold and helped him re-focus and re-adjust to a totally different reality. It took a full three minutes for him to feel strong enough to move. To his relief, his body did respond to instructions. He tested his legs then crouched down, digging his fingers into the cold floor which moved as he pushed it—an odd sensation. In the last few minutes, terror had moved to panic, then fear, and as the remaining apprehension left him, other thoughts took its place. Reality was becoming clearer and he needed to adapt.

As the sensory and physical issues resolved themselves, his mind started to work. He suddenly realized: *Domm! It actually worked!* He stood and sniffed the air, pure, without a trace of Benzotharicaine vapor. How sweet it was. How full and thick. Although he was violating CATOS 78, he dared to breathe it in deeply.

A few more minutes passed and Mrr felt comfortable, almost normal. Feeling had returned to every part of his body and he was

ready to open his eyes. He heard noises, odd sounds that he had never heard before, which was good—his hearing appeared to be intact; that was encouraging.

It was time to discover if light waves could stimulate sight. Mrr opened his eyes, cautiously at first, then fully. And he was again relieved. The first thing he saw in the semi-dark he identified as a plant, which was exactly like the drawings on the artifacts. Leaves, real leaves, green leaves, were moving gently in the slight breeze.

Plants. The revered word. Such a beautiful factory! He looked around in the moonlight forest. It really was true then: plants with leaves were everywhere. He absorbed the wonderment for a moment and then forced himself to calm down and evaluate the situation like the scientist he was.

Observation one: The transformation had been a success; he was alive in a place other than the Dome and was able to touch and feel and hear and see things.

Observation two: He looked down at his body and took inventory, testing his muscles and his other senses. Everything had come through intact. He was, however, quite naked. His fellow scientists were afraid that synthetic fibers of his skin suit would deteriorate in the trip or meld to his skin.

He looked at the test cloth in his hand, which was intact; an excellent third observation: fabric could survive.

The evening sky was deep and rich, a dark blue of a different color than he could ever remember seeing in the EnviroSimulator, rich and vibrant. The moon was brilliant with whites and greys. It

was more beautiful than the simulation designers had even considered possible; the reality was better than the imagination. The air was so clean and, he paused, searching for the ancient word: *natural*.

But he was beginning to feel a chill and he knew that he would have to find shelter since his body was not accustomed to temperature changes. According to the plan, he would have to find local clothing very soon. How he would do that, no one could counsel him with any authority. Slowly, the naked man looked around, again marveling at the situation: he truly was outside, outside in a different world, in a real atmosphere, on a low hill above what the scientists had hoped would be Warminster, Pennsylvania. The glow and sparkling lights in the distance were very much like the simulation, so his next important observation was that he had appeared at the proper place.

Mrr remembered the Enabler and his hand went to his right forearm where it was securely positioned in a special flesh pocket. When he felt it's comforting presence, he breathed a shallow sigh of relief—it was important to confirm that electronic instruments could survive the process. Opening the pouch, he withdrew the tool, examining it in the moonlight. It was intact and the operating light was lit, its four inch length humming quietly. *Good. So far Chael's predictions were accurate.*

He looked around and pointed the Enabler at a large rock. After setting the function selector to 'warm', he released the disable switch and pressed the activator. Without a sound the rock began to glow

and within seconds it was warm enough to cut the chill from the air. Relieved, he replaced the device and turned his attention to the mission.

Marge Morrison loved the outdoors. Her house sat two miles from any residential development and about five miles from civilization if you drove the winding road down the hill and if, of course, you considered Warminster to be civilization. She had lived here with her parents for twenty-two years, her husband for another fourteen and with herself for the last four. Marge was content and happy. She had the woods and its creatures and her special garden, the books from the Book of the Month Club, her inheritance, and occasionally, when they felt the need, the company of Bill Macklin, the charming and mysterious U.S. Senator who lived about a half-mile away. Being widower and widow, they shared a comfortable relationship of convenience, a good feeling of mutual enjoyment; not love—they were both getting too old for that anyway. For them, love was for when he was in town and when they needed it. She had grown up in the late 60's free-love generation with hippies with hair braided with flowers, peace signs and hip-huggers. Not much remained of that Marge, she thought, except the marijuana on the porch that she grew for her occasional enjoyment.

As was her habit, she was nestled into her favorite tree swing in the dark, watching the moon and listening to her friends, the birds, before she went in to bed. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the breeze as it caressed her long brown hair. Her long, trim legs were

curled up under her. The odd sound, a peculiar humming and soft pop of about twenty minutes before, was gone from her thoughts.

A sudden movement and sharp sound nearby startled her. She did not expect any bears in late spring—they were all off raising cubs. Maybe it was her friend, Bill. She lowered her legs to the ground and peered into the darkness, keeping very still.

Mrr had to sit down twice in his short journey. The lightheadedness was expected due to the heavy oxygen content, but Imoth and the other scientists said he should adjust within hours. Just ahead, there was what he assumed was a contemporary living quarter, a ‘house’, and it appeared to be deserted. As he glided forward, he stepped on a branch, which snapped loudly, stinging his feet. He froze, intent first on the novelty of things that could break, and then the odd and unusual sensation of stinging, of pain. Only then did he question whether or not someone might have heard. He stood very still, listening to the night. After a few minutes, he was satisfied and started to move to the house to investigate. He walked with carefully measured movements, graceful in their efficiency.

A naked man was the last thing Marge expected to see. Although she had begun thinking of Senator Macklin more and more lately, it seemed to be more of an intrusion to her routine than a welcome vision. She shook off the idea that it was her imagination and stared at him through the moon-lit darkness, keeping very still. The man moved smoothly to her bedroom window and looked in. She knew

that if she stayed quiet, he may go away, but then again, she thought, he may go in the house and rob her. Had he been clothed, it might have been easier to decide what to do. The man's nakedness gave the whole scene an odd sense of silliness.

Marge watched as he made his way to the back door. He seemed puzzled. He didn't reach for the doorknob, but instead stepped to the door and waited, then stepped back, and stepped forward again. He seemed confused and frustrated and he put his hands on the door then repeated the step back step forward, movement, as if that would open it. He looked around and started moving in the general direction of Marge. As he stopped and turned to face the house again, she rose slowly and moved to a tree, climbed silently to the first branch and tried to blend into the forest.

He had been about ten feet from Marge when he stopped. He was a tall man with lean legs that supported magnificent broad shoulders and a large chest. His dark hair was cut strangely: long on the sides but short from his forehead to the back his neck—like a reverse Mohawk. His nose was thin and straight, well sculpted from his pale white skin, and his mouth was full and wide. As best as Marge could tell in the dark, he was a handsome man with a gentle look and bearing. She guessed his age in his late thirties.

She started feeling somewhat less troubled by his presence. Perhaps he is a camper, lost or robbed. As she was contemplating her visitor, her concentration on her perch lessened and her foot slipped its hold on the bark of the tree and she fell loudly to the ground.

Mrr spun around and saw her in the darkness. There was a long

silence as they examined each other. He stood perfectly still, heart pumping from being startled, then from anxiety. The first moment of truth had come for him and he hoped the language experts had reconstructed the American vernacular properly.

“Hello,” Mrr said. “I am sorry for my appearance. I was attempting to locate some clothes at that house over there.”

“Uhh...that’s my house,” Marge said slowly as she rose and tried to arrange the strange situation into some sort of order. Her first impression was that he seemed harmless. Although his voice was full and smooth and strangely pleasant, he had a very peculiar accent that she couldn't place. She forced herself to concentrate on his face. “Don’t you have your own clothes?” she asked.

Mrr was relieved that she seemed to understand. “No, they were...lost. Do you have any clothes?”

How does someone just lose his clothes? It didn’t matter, really. The man needed help and Marge was a sucker for people who needed help. “Yes, actually, I haven't thrown out much of my husband's clothes. Maybe something could fit. What happened to you?”

He didn't hear the rest of the question, absorbed in trying to remember the word ‘husband’. Husband? Mrr knew he had learned that word in his studies. But, as often happens, unfamiliar concepts were hard to remember.

“Husband?” he said, his head cocked slightly to the right. Then he remembered: *people used to live together to have their own children. Husband and...and...* he couldn't remember what the

woman was called. His training was so rushed and so incomplete; there was so little time to prepare for the mission.

“Yes, he died a few years ago, long before his time, but I still have some of his clothes.”

Died before Transition?

Although the circumstances were certainly peculiar, something in his manner made Marge feel unafraid. Was it gentleness? Whatever the reason for his predicament, it was apparent that he was a lost and needy soul. “Let’s go inside and I’ll find you something.”

“I thank you,” Mrr said.

Marge walked past him and he followed her to the house. As she opened the door and entered, Mrr stopped and stared at the knob, touching it and turning it, as if it were a totally foreign object. He caught her looking at him, stopped, and followed her inside.

When she turned on the kitchen light he was standing in the doorway, a total lack of self-conscious in his nudity. *My God. What a magnificent man* she thought as she scanned his lean, hard body in the light. He must be a swimmer, but, maybe not; he was lacking much muscular definition. His skin was flawless and his legs were thin but, overall, he was beautiful. *I may have to call Bill tomorrow.*

She forced her eyes away and went to the storage room, opening it and pulling boxes from its depths. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him staring at everything, touching the table, the upholstered chairs, as if he had never seen them before. Amnesia? Maybe.

She found some underpants and a pair of jeans and a checkered blue shirt. Harry had been a little shorter and stouter than this man,

but they would suffice until he left and found his way home. She watched him examine everything as she returned to hand him the clothes.

She watched as Mrr awkwardly tried to put on the clothes. As crazy as it sounded, it was as if he didn't know *how* to wear clothes. He struggled first to understand the concept of underwear. Marge had to coach him, barely concealing a giggle, but underneath the novelty there was growing concern.

As Marge helped him and buttoned his shirt, she touched his body. Its warmth unexpectedly aroused her. She tightened the belt as far as it could go and when he was fully dressed, they sat down at the kitchen table, his lost dog eyes leveled at hers.

“I am sorry to have bothered you. But I am grateful.”

His odd manner of speaking was rhythmic, yet clipped. He looked so pathetic in the droopy shirt and pants that were six inches too big at the waist and three inches too short. She had to suppress a laugh.

“At least the shoes fit,” she said, pointing to his feet.

Mrr looked down, understood, then smiled and nodded. “Shoes. Yes. They are...hard, but good.”

She sat back. “I don't have any manners,” she said suddenly. “My name is Marge, Marge Morrison.” She stuck out her hand. “Who are you? What happened to you?”

He stared at her hand, puzzled, then at her face, then back to her hand. Recognition came suddenly to him—‘handshake’. He took her wrist in his hand and shook it. This time she was unable to keep

herself subdued and she laughed. *What the hell?* His eyes, startled and lost, rose to hers.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Who are you? Where are you from? What happened? Can I get...” She was starting to babble, so she stopped.

As she touched his arm to reassure him, she felt a hard lump and recoiled, puzzled. He noticed her reaction and looked down at his arm.

“*Dommm!*” he swore as his heart froze. He had not left the Beacon; it was still in the flesh pocket on his left arm. Imoth had said that it was critical he put the Beacon in precisely the same place where he had completed the materialization. Without the exact position of the window, he could not return. Mrr looked up at Marge who had noticed his confusion, and became momentarily lightheaded, hoping he wouldn't pass out. But it was over in a few seconds and his mind moved to construct an answer.

“A bone, I am sorry to bother you. But, Marge, I must return to...” He stopped, knowing she wouldn't understand. Or would she? Or... He stopped: he didn't really know much of anything.

Nervousness and loneliness suddenly lowered a heavy weight into his stomach as he realized the enormity of his situation. He forced himself to breathe slower and after a minute the uneasiness fully passed and he could concentrate on the immediate problems. His confidence returned.

Marge saw his moment of panic. “Are you OK?”

“I thank you for your kindness.” He stood and turned to leave.

“Wait! Who are you? Where are you from? Have you been robbed? Are you hungry?” She stopped. She was still babbling like a schoolgirl. *Settle down, Marge*, she told herself.

He stopped and considered the questions. Good questions. Hungry? He had not eaten any Termilene before the transfer because Chael was concerned about his becoming sick. He knew his energy level was down and, although he had rarely felt the sensation, he thought that what he was feeling in his abdomen might be hunger. For some reason, maybe curiosity, certainly hunger, the idea of food cheered him up. Returning the Beacon could wait.

He turned back. “Yes, Marge. I am hungry. Do you have enough Termilene to share?” His eyes were wide and betrayed a boyish eagerness. She felt a protective urge, but his words were strange.

“Ahh, no,” she said quizzically as she shook off the strange question. “I don’t have...whatever you said...but I have some fresh Pastrami. I just bought it today. Sit down.” He obeyed and she moved to the refrigerator.

Mrr was angry with himself as he returned to the table and sat. *Stupid! Of course they wouldn't have Termilene here. I have to concentrate.*

“What is your name?” she asked. “I don't like eating with strangers.” She turned, catching him studying a salt shaker intently.

After an instant, he looked up. “Mrr,” he said matter-of-factly.

“What?” She wasn't sure she had heard him properly.

“Mrr.”

She removed the wrapped spicy pastrami and cheese and placed

it on the counter, then reached for the pumpernickel bread and the hot mustard. He followed her every move, obviously fascinated by food preparation.

“Mrr? What kind of name is that? Dutch or something?”

He was perplexed. Mrr was an ancient name, the most common name in existence at this time-place, or so the researchers had told him. Almost everyone had three, sometimes four, names and most started with Mrr or Mrs. What was wrong with it? Was it a woman's name? He tried to act nonchalant. “Why do you ask?”

She paused again, examined his face for a moment, shrugged, then went back to the sandwiches and made him a large one with plenty of pastrami and mustard. She made a smaller one for herself.

“This should fill you up, Mrr,” she said as she placed it in front of him.

He watched Marge intently as she picked up her sandwich, studying her every move. Mrr touched his own sandwich, checked her again, picked it up then placed it in his mouth.

As he closed his mouth on the food, he waited, motionless. The taste surprised him—Termilene had no taste. The texture of the sandwich was pleasant, but it was somewhat stiff. Unsure as to what to do next, he raised his questioning eyes to Marge who was, in turn, studying him as she held her sandwich in front of her. He pulled half of it out of his mouth and put it down on the plate, savoring the taste of the part that remained in his mouth as he waited for it to dissolve.

“Chew it, Mrr,” Marge said after a moment. *This is getting really weird*, she thought.

He was unfamiliar with the term 'chew'. Termilene would have been absorbed by now. His eyebrows rose higher and his hopeless eyes leveled at Marge. *Domm!* Why couldn't we have had more time for study? He felt pangs of hopelessness mix with a strange burning forming on his tongue.

She moved her mouth in mock chewing and he imitated her. Finally, he swallowed.

“Would you like some water, Mrr?”

He looked around for the public nozzle, amazed. “You have water in your quarters?” *What a rich place*, he thought. “If you will have enough left, yes, please, but I am sorry, I do not have to urinate,” he said, taking another bite of the sandwich.

“What?” She looked at his face, eyes wide. “Urinate?” Her initial reaction of humor now gave way to concern. *OK, Marge, this might be just too weird.*

“OK, look. I really need to know something.” She leaned closer as she delivered the water. “Who are you and where are you from?”

It was not anticipated that he would run into anyone prior to his finding clothes and observing the people of the town to slowly gain confidence and knowledge. He wasn't prepared with many answers. He tried to think of something to say.

His apprehension was apparent and his ominous silence caused Marge to feel more concerned for her safety. It was certain that he was hiding something, probably something frightening. Did he escape from Brooke Glen? Finally, she decided: concern won out.

“Finish the sandwich, Mrr, but then I think you better leave.”

She rose and headed for the back door. Mrr finished the last bite of sandwich and followed, relieved that the confrontation was over but very unhappy that he didn't handle it better. "You can keep the clothes," she said.

When they got to the door, he stood in front of it and waited, but then he remembered the knob, reached for it and turned it. Mrr smiled at her in self-satisfaction as the door opened.

"I thank you," he said, then left, walking up the hill in the direction from which he came.

She looked after him. *Maybe I was too hard*, she thought. *He did really seem harmless*. After a moment, after he had disappeared into the night, she closed and locked the door and went to bed.

Mrr stopped and stared at the clouds that were back-lit by the moon. The sky in the EnviroSimulator had clouds but they did not move, but they were a guess, anyway; close, but still a guess. He was fascinated with the tufting and the patterns of soft white puffs as they crossed the brilliant moon. The spot at which he transformed was not difficult to find since the rock he had heated with the Enabler was still glowing a dark red. Searching the ground carefully, he found his imprint and dug a shallow hole then removed the Beacon from his flesh pocket. Mrr pressed a button and the red letters showing the time and space coordinates displayed. He placed it in the hole and covered it up, marking the exact site with a small, smooth stone.

Climbing the hill had caused him to breathe faster than his normal pace and his unused muscles ached. The conveyors in the

Dome made walking any distance unnecessary, so climbing a low hill was a novelty, an unpleasant one at that. Since they had discovered the existence of the crucial time-window only five days before it was active, there was so little time to prepare and few surviving artifacts of information to help them understand the environment.

But he was committed to this place for the next 18.6 hours—that much was very clear. Also clear was the fact that his mission was critical to the survival of his people and without success they would perish within three years when the oxygen-generation material was depleted. Mrr was totally alone in a place more foreign than any other human of his time had ever experienced. Taking a shallow breath, he started down the hill toward the twinkling lights.

He had had to memorize so many things in such a short time that they had all began to swirl together in his brain. The precious artifact had read: “Burpee manufactured in Warminster, Pennsylvania, USA.” They did not fully understand the word ‘manufactured’ but the best guess of the scientists was that this is the compression process. The process of *decompressing* the plants was the big mystery: how did they become full, functioning plants again?

At the bottom of the dirt path next to Marge’s house, he came to a clean path, wide and hard. As he wandered down into the outskirts of the town, Mrr was startled by a very loud noise that came up quickly behind him. It was a moveable container with two very bright white lights in front and several red lights in the rear. Inside was a man, who yelled something as he passed. Mrr moved to the

side of the path.

This is the mode of transportation, he remembered. Many of these had been acquired by Rusters, but no one had ever seen one in operational condition. The hard surface he was walking on must be its track, *the 'street'*, he remembered. It was odd that the transporter was so loud, though. As it disappeared into the distance, he continued to walk along the street, but near the edge.

As he walked, he thought of Marge, how pretty she was, even with the strange wrinkles on her face. But the vision of Marge was quickly replaced by the face of Shar. He smiled briefly then drew his attention back to the present.

The houses were now much closer together and he marveled at the smooth expanse of tiny plants in front of them. But he couldn't see any that he remembered from the three artifacts that survived. It was mind-boggling that plants should be so plentiful and varied. This was not expected.

Suddenly, he became very tired. He had been walking for more than an hour, so he sat down on a bench and rested. His breathing was hard and he had trouble shaking the guilt feelings of using so much oxygen. *It is like breathing syrup here*, he thought. When he was a child in Normal School, his sponsor had caught him breathing hard from running and he had received a dressing down in front of the school; he was embarrassed for months. Now when he breathed in, it felt rebellious, but the memory of punishment was nevertheless still there. Feeling lightheaded, he lay back on the bench and was quickly asleep.

“Hey, buddy, there ain't no loiterin' here. Get the hell up and outta here. It's almost damn 10 o'clock!” Mrr opened his eyes and squinted into the bright light of day. Quickly realizing where he was, his first thought was that it was much brighter than he ever imagined it would be. After a moment, his eyes adjusted and he saw a very rounded man in a blue suit with shiny objects hanging from it. He studied his unfamiliar words: ‘Ain't’, ‘Loiterin’’, ‘Hell’, ‘Outta’ and tried to figure out the meaning. The man's attitude was odd: unreadable and belligerent, so different from the people in the Dome. Mrr studied the man's magnificent girth. *How could anyone acquire enough food to produce such a disfigurement?*

He thought he should show respect, so he used the formal language. “I am a thank you person,” he said as he rose to the puzzled look of the policeman. Pulling his eyes from the man's huge and quivering stomach, he tried to remember an appropriate polite greeting. “And have a nice day.”

The policeman stared curiously after him as he walked away. After a moment, he shook his head, turned and continued on his beat. “Hippie bastard,” he muttered.

Mrr's eyes slowly became fully accustomed to the blinding sunshine as he proceeded down the street in the direction in which most of the transport containers were going. Instinctively, he thought that important activities such as the creation of Burpee would be in that direction. After a while he noticed a strange dull pain in his stomach, but it passed quickly. He came to a fenced yard with a

wooden gate, and peered inside. To his surprise he saw pile after pile of oxidized steel. It looked like the underground caverns a Ruster had once described. *So many oxidized transportation containers. Why do they collect it? There would be no Rusters here. The air is so rich.*

This is so puzzling, he thought. There was so much the scientists didn't know; so much had been lost. Mrr looked around and he saw no guards to protect this massive display of wealth—there were no Benzotharicaine tanks, either. But, of course there wouldn't be: there was no need. Bound oxygen was not of such vital importance here; it was not the essential and overpowering element of society as it was in his Dome. They had natural oxygen here.

He shook off his thoughts and continued down the street. As Mrr reached the corner, another wave of cramps squeezed his abdomen and there was a tightening in his lower gut. He had never felt anything like this before and he was scared. *Am I getting sick?* He knew that the ancients got sick, and although no one at the Dome ever had, the phenomenon was understood. As quickly as it came, the cramps were gone. *It couldn't be illness*, he thought, Benzotharicaine in his system should block any harmful bacteria or virus, unless there is something that they did not know. *Is this only part of the adjustment to this heavy atmosphere?* He hoped so. *Dommm! If I am taken ill and unable to complete the task, the project would fail. I must hurry*, he thought, *I must complete my mission.*

He found another bench and decided to sit down until he felt better. After quite a while, he rose and walked over to the corner of

two streets where a friendly-appearing woman was standing. It was time to pursue his mission.

“Please can you tell me where I can get Burpee?” he asked.

She looked at him with eyes wide in an uncertain mixture of amazement and humor. Was he making a joke, or maybe he was crazy?

“Burpy?”

“Yes. How do I get Burpee?” he repeated.

“Maybe Mexican food?” she said with a shrug and a laugh.

Mrr didn't understand. “What?” *Mexican?* He was confused; did he say it improperly?

“What do you want, again?” She leaned closer to make sure she heard him right. “Did you say burpy?”

“Yes, please. I need a place where they compress plants,” he tried to explain.

“Ohhh.” She looked down at his baggy and wrinkled pants and his question became clear. *Poor man*, she thought, *to have such a speech problem and be so handsome*. “Over there.” She pointed at a red sign at a small shopping center halfway down the block that said *Dry Cleaners*. “They can press pants.”

Mrr was ecstatic. He couldn't believe his good fortune in finding Burpee so close and so quickly.

“Thank you,” he said, excitedly. He moved rapidly to the shop and stopped at the door, grabbing and turning the knob.

“What can I do for you, bud?” the shopkeeper said as he entered, smiling.

“I need Burpee. I was told you make it.”

The smile was replaced by a vacant stare as the hairy, fat man in his undershirt behind the counter grappled with the strange man in the baggy clothes and odd haircut.

“What?” He cocked his massive head, baffled. “You said burpy?”

“Yes. That lady said you make Burpee.”

“When I drink beer, yea. Who told you that?”

“Beer?” The word was unfamiliar to Mrr. “Would that get me Burpee?”

“Beer will give you plenty of gas.”

Gas? That word was very familiar; much of the old language had survived but had changed tremendously over the last two hundred years. However, the word ‘gas’ was clearly the same.

Benzotharicaine and Oxygen were gases—he was certain this information was important. But what did this have to do with Burpee?

“Do I need that gas to expand the Burpee?” he said.

The man moved around behind the steam pressing machine in an unconscious effort to protect himself. “Sure. Whatever.”

After a moment, Mrr asked “Where do I find some gas?”

There was a long pause as the man pondered his strange visitor. Finally, he figured that he had just probably misunderstood everything during the short conversation.

“If you want gas, go to the Shell station on the corner,” he said, pointing south.

“Thank you,” Mrr said. He turned and left, following the street to the Shell station.

Mrr stopped short as a man came out of the building. He was...black! *How could that be? Deformation? Mutation?* He was amazed and curious, but the explanation would have to wait for another time.

“I need gas, please.” Mrr said.

The man stared at Mrr and looked around. “I got gas in the pumps, but...where's yo' caw”.

Caw? “I do not have a caw.”

“Then, wha' you...” The man stopped and waved him away. He already had had enough of this guy with the strange haircut.

Mrr was about to insist on regaining the man's attention when a loud noise startled him. He turned and saw a large and oddly-shaped transport pulling up to the pumps. His eyes flew open. On the side of the vehicle were the ancient words: *BURPEE Company*.

“Hey, bro',” the driver said to the attendant as he got out of the van. “Gimme some gas, man.” He patted the side of the transport. “My van's thirsty.”

“How much yo' wan', Otis?”

“Fill that sucker up.”

Mrr stared at the event that was unfolding before him, amazed, but confused. The black man took the hose from the pump and, after removing the cap, inserted it into an opening in the side of the ‘van’. Mrr went to the driver, a tall and thin man with tufts of thin hair on his face, an odd protrusion from his neck, and a strange object with

the picture of a bird on his head.

“Is there Burpee inside?” he asked cautiously.

“Sure, dude,” the driver said as he grabbed the handle of the rear doors. “I have shitload a Burpee. What you looking for?”

“I don’t know,” Mrr said. “What do you have?”

The man looked closely at Mrr. “Cool hair, dude.” Then, after a short pause, the man answered. “Well, I got a whole load a Burpee.” He opened the van doors and revealed a treasure store of precious Burpee. In his wildest imagination, Mrr could not have conceived that he would see this much Burpee. Mrr’s gut twisted from excitement. Before him was row after row of envelopes, each one so much like the artifact. *What a fortune!* This vehicle contained what was obviously a large depository. It was more than he could have hoped for.

Mrr stepped back and surveyed the process the black man was performing, pumping gas into the Burpee. Perhaps the decompression was activated by gas. How long, he wondered, would it take?

“How long does it take?” he asked the driver.

“For what?”

“For the plants to develop after you put the gas in the caw.”

“Ahhhh,” he said as he backed away a step. “Well, the gas is for the van, not the Burpee. Where are you from, anyway?”

Mrr’s heart sank; he had misinterpreted the relationship of gas. He wasn’t getting closer to solving the mystery.

“I’m not from here. Again, how long does it take?”

“Depends. What kind? Flowers? Vegetables? Bushes?”

So many varieties! How would he know which to take back? He was getting lightheaded again.

“Different kinds?” he asked.

“Yea. You got your flowers, like Marigold or Zinnias or Petunias. Den you got your vegetables like tomatoes, your melons. Not to mention your bushes and vines and plants.”

“What kind do you have in there?” Mrr pointed at the racks of envelopes closest to him.

“All kinds, mostly flowers. They take a couple of months. If you want a big leafy plant, like a bush, they take longer.”

Months? Mrr was disappointed; he hoped that he could have witnessed the decompression of the plants before he returned to the Dome. He was certain, though, that he would have to select the plants with the largest leaves, since that was the mechanism that produced oxygen.

He was about to ask for the leafy ones when his stomach made a loud gurgling noise and he was racked by intense cramps that made him lean against the pump. The driver mumbled something, looked at Mrr, climbed into the van, and shut the door. “Put it on the bill, Jamal,” he yelled out the window to the black man and started to drive away.

The attendant came over to him and bent down. “You OK, man? You sick?” Mrr's stomach made more loud and angry grumbling.

“I need Burpee,” he said looking after the disappearing van.

“Yea, probably make you feel better. Just don't shit all over my

station, OK?"

What does that mean, he asked himself. As he tried to straighten up, he was overcome by nausea and lightheadedness and settled back down. He knew he couldn't complete the mission in this condition: it was getting worse. It was clear he had to rest but he didn't have much time. He had to get enough Burpee to transfer back through the window. But, more than that, he had to understand the decompression process.

Dizzy and slightly disoriented, he felt very tired again. He knew he needed help, but he decided to walk around the small town and explore, maybe find some answers. After a few hours, he gave up, finding nothing to help him understand the process of making plants and returned to the bench near Marge's house. He immediately fell asleep again.

He felt better when he awoke, but not much. It was getting darker as he started back up the street. He was hoping maybe Marge would help him figure this out. Although the walk back to Marge's house was a blur to him, he managed to take specific notice some of sort of ceremony as he passed a large field. A sign read: *The Warminster Eagles battle the Doylestown Indians today at 5pm*. As he stood by the fence, he saw a familiar sight and made a mental note to tell Imoth about it. Mrr observed the ritual for a while until he felt sick again.

By the time he reached Marge's house, it was almost dark and he was in mortal suffering. He collapsed at her front door.

Marge had heard him fall to the wood porch. “What the hell? Mrr? What's wrong, are you sick?” She took him inside and helped him lay down on the couch, standing over him. After a minute, he felt better.

“I might be sick. I don’t know. I’ve never been sick. I can’t die.”

“Die? What the hell is going on?”

He knew he had to gain her trust. “Marge. I would be very thankful for your help,” he began. “I must complete my mission, but I have so little time and I am so ill. If I die before I complete it, my people will perish a terrible death.”

What? She recoiled slightly and looked into his pleading eyes; he appeared so vulnerable, so sincere but his words were bizarre. She had no idea of what to ask next. *His people?*

“Who are you?” was all she came up with.

He knew he couldn't tell her the whole truth; she probably won't believe him, anyway. After a few minutes, he was feeling a little better again, so he decided that he had to tell her enough to gain her confidence and her assistance.

“Before I tell you who I am, I must ask you that nothing I say will be told to anyone else for as long as you live. You must be a promise person.”

She knew it was probably a mistake. No, on second thought she *knew* without the shadow of doubt that it was a mistake, but she nodded her head. “I promise.”

Mrr took a deep breath. “I am not from here. Where I live we can no longer breathe the air. The atmosphere was destroyed by a

catastrophe many years ago and there was a chemical reaction that eventually resulted in all the free oxygen being immobilized, oxidized.”

Marge sat down on the coffee table, eyes wide, her brain trying to sort out what she had just heard. “Another planet?” she said in a whisper.

Mrr held up a finger. “Let me finish. In a period of only about eight years after the catastrophe, all the oxygen molecules had attached to all the loose metals in the world. The ancient ones who survived realized the situation early but still barely had enough time to build immense domes for the survivors to live in. A new gas, called Benzotharicaine, was found to be the only element that would release the oxygen from the metals. Our ancestors built a system where rusted metal was collected outside the Dome, brought in and placed in rooms. Outside air was enriched with oxygen and made breathable by a relatively small amount of Benzotharicaine.

“That worked fine for about two hundred years, but now we have a major problem: the supply of rusted metal is running out. Our Rusters have collected most of it. The other Domes weren’t as lucky as we are; their supply was used up. My Dome is the last one.”

“They’re dead?”

“Yes. All occupants of the other Domes died, at least the Domes we knew about. My Dome lasted until now because we have a large deposit of metal in the caves of a nearby mountain. We have taken precautions to preserve the remaining metal, and for the last seventy-five years there has been tremendous restrictions imposed against

excessive movement. CATOS laws have been created and enforced. Certain things are crimes against the oxygen supply, like exercise, for example, breathing deeply, strenuous activity, anything.”

“How about...sex?” she asked, not knowing exactly why that popped into her head.

His empty eyes answered the question.

“No sex? How do you reproduce? You do, don’t you?”

“Through insemination; no one has parents, no families. By law, all women have to give birth to two children, which are taken to be raised by sponsors. But that is not the point. Very soon we will be out of oxygen and all will perish. We have learned through artifacts that the only way to create oxygen is through the machines called plants. We don’t know anything about plants more than that, no further information survived. I am a *Later* so I asked to be sent here to get plants; our world has none since the catastrophe.”

“A *Later*? What’s that?”

His groan told her that he had not heard the question, but his internal discomfort was obvious to Marge. “Do you have to go to the bathroom?” she asked.

He didn’t know what that meant, but he knew he had to do something. “I feel like I’m going to burst.”

Marge led Mrr to the bathroom and pointed to the open toilet. “Pull your pants down and sit on that.”

After ten minutes, he emerged. “I’ve never done that before, but I feel better.”

She started to laugh, but stopped suddenly. He was serious. “You

never took a dump?”

“No,” he said. “Our food is completely absorbed.”

She decided not to pursue this line of questioning. “Let’s sit down.”

They sat back down on the couch. “Do you believe me?” Mrr asked.

Very good question, she thought as tried to absorb the last fifteen minutes, very little of which made any sense. But it was Mrr's sincerity that made her go on.

“How did you get here?”

“We developed a transport,” Mrr answered.

“Look, Mrr. This is, of course, very difficult to believe. More than likely you are a not an alien, just a nut, but you are so damn sincere.” She knew this was a dream, or some bizarre joke but his eyes were so...honest. “Let's, for a moment, assume you're telling the truth. Just for argument: what does all this have to do with plants?”

“Burpee is compressed plants and I have to figure out how the expansion process works—how they decompress.”

“Burpy? Compressed plants?” She had no idea what he was talking about. “Expands into what?”

“Expand into plants. Become oxygen producing machines,” he explained, or thought he did. He was feeling worse again.

She noticed his discomfort. Maybe Pastrami was not the best choice for breakfast. “What do you eat on your planet? Are you not used to food?”

“There are only two foods: Termilene and, for special occasions,

Cadaviar. But....”

“Jesus! Cadavers? You eat cadavers?” She felt sick.

He looked at her with questioning eyes. “What is ‘cadavers’?”

“Dead people.” Her stomach hoped he wouldn't say—

“Yes. Of course.”

—yes. Too late. She bent over, nausea gripping her abdomen.

“Oh, God. That's horrible. You eat dead people?”

“What's wrong? Do you not eat dead things?”

“Not people, for Christ's sake. Animals!”

“What is the difference? We have no animals like you have.” He pondered the situation further. “What do you do with your dead people?”

“Bury them in the ground.”

His eyes widened. “Perfectly good bodies? I am confused. It can be such a complete source of nourishment, no waste at all. Termilene is directly dissolved and quickly absorbed. We have no waste products, except urine, which we drink, of course.”

Her mind tried to shut down then she thought: *perhaps this was joke after all. That's it. It must be a joke.* That made her feel better, but not much. It was then she remembered the peculiar hard object she had felt earlier on his arm. *Holy shit! Could it be true?* She stood then staggered to a chair and sat, feeling better with the added four feet of distance between them. *My God, she thought, maybe he IS an alien!* Her mind was close to overload now and as she pondered the true meaning of reality.

“You're telling the truth, aren't you?” she said to him. “Are you

really an alien?”

He didn't know what to say but, in a manner of speaking, yes, he was.

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. It was the policeman Mrr had encountered earlier in the day.

“Hi, Carl,” Marge said, holding the door open just enough so he couldn't see Mrr.

“Hey, Marge. Listen. I'm letting the residents in this area know that there are reports of a strange looking man in...”

Just then Mrr appeared behind Marge.

“That's the guy. Are you OK, Marge?”

Marge stepped back. “Yes, Officer Cavanaugh. This is a friend from college. He's staying with me for a couple days.”

Officer Cavanaugh looked Mrr up and down. “Well, OK. I'm just trying to avoid trouble.”

“He's no trouble, but thanks.”

“Hello,” Mrr said, forcing a smile. “Good to see you again.”

“OK. I'll be going now.”

The policeman left and Marge and Mrr settled back on the couch and chair.

“You shouldn't be attracting attention, Mrr. Not until we can work out some details about who you are.”

“I understand,” Mrr said, trying to reconstruct the conversation that was terminated by the visitor.

“Marge. I have to understand the process of plants and I must get Burpee. Where can I find Burpee? I cannot fail.”

It hit her like a sledgehammer. “Seeds?” she exclaimed. “Are you talking about seeds? BURPEE?” She spelled it. “The Burpee Company makes seeds. Seeds grow into plants, they aren't compressed plants. They take food and grow, like people do. Don't you have plants on your planet?”

Seeds? Grow? Familiar words. *Babies came from seeds and grew.* He looked up at Marge, confused. “Plants are alive?”

“Of course. Plants are not machines. They are alive.”

Mrr was overwhelmed. *Another lifeform?* Unbelievable! But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. That was the missing element!

Marge leaned forward. “You don't know anything about plants?”

“No, they all disappeared in the catastrophe. We know nothing of plants other than they once existed and the leaves made oxygen somehow. We assumed they were mechanical. We only have two pictures of plants and both are on artifacts—the treasured Burpee package—but very few words are readable.”

“Didn't your ancestors explain that?”

“Our founders erased almost all knowledge to protect the people. We didn't know plants were alive, but it does make sense.”

They stared at each other for a moment before she started to explain. “Plants grow in soil. That's where they get nutrients. You water them and they grow and create more seeds. You plant the seeds in soil, fertilize them, water them and they grow into plants which produce more seeds. And on and on.”

Water, he understood. “Is gas the fertilizer?”

“No, fertilizer is chemicals. It comes in bag, but farmers used to use cow shit before they had bags of chemicals.”

He didn't understand 'farmer', but saw an alternative to chemical fertilizer. “Can people shit be used? The man at the gas station said I was about to shit all over his place.”

Marge had to think a minute. “Probably. But...”

“Is that what I did in the bathroom?”

“Yes, Mrr, but...” She was about to elaborate and clarify when a loud sound like a chime broke the silence. It was an alarm from the Enabler. Mrr's eyes flew open. “*Dommm!* I didn't mark the time! I only have twenty minutes before I go back through the window.”

“What window?”

“The transport window that I came through. I must hurry. There isn't much time.” Mrr was uncomfortable again, but he tried to concentrate. “Where do seeds come from? The Bearer? Like people?” he asked.

“They come from other plants, yes.” Marge answered. “Seeds grow on plants then they fall off and grow into more plants. Eventually the plants die and the leaves turn brown. They should produce seeds first, but they eventually turn brown, too.”

“What happens after they die? What do you do with the brown leaves and seeds?”

She should have thought her answer through *far* better than she did. “Well,” she laughed. “With some plants, people burn it and smoke it.”

“Smoke?”

“Inhale it, but forget about that. Most...”

He held up his hand. “Please. I need to think.” All the elements were there. Water, he knew. Soil and fertilizer, he would have to find. He now understood it. Everything was perfectly clear. But there was so little time.

“Do you have seeds?” he asked.

“No. I can get some at the Walmart down the street, but it'll take fifteen minutes or more.”

“Please go. Please go,” he pleaded. “Hurry. I will wait for you up the hill at the window.”

She pondered the impossible scene before her: a strange man she had just met was begging her to go to the store to buy seeds to save his dying planet—and she was going to do it.

“I must have smoked some bad dead plants,” she said to herself as she raced out the door.

Mrr was alone. He checked the time on his Enabler. Fourteen minutes. He was not feeling much better, plus, he was on the verge of panic. Mrr considered his options: if Marge didn't get back in time, the mission would be lost and the next window would be in 10.5 years, far too late to save the planet from extinction.

He racked his brain. *What if she is too late?* Then a thought came to him. *She had said seeds grow on plants. If I send a plant back, it will have seeds in it.* He considered the idea and realized it might be his only chance. He ran to the porch and looked around. There were two neat rows of potted plants and each plant had five long and thin leaves with ragged edges. The plants were in a substance. *Soil? It*

had to be. He fell to his knees and examined one. He couldn't see seeds in the dark but he knew that they must be in there.

He also saw a bag with the word 'Fertilizer' on it. *Excellent!* He knew they could synthesize non-living organic material like the soil and the pastrami. *But what if they can't synthesize the fertilizer?* Chemicals were difficult.

"Pastrami," Mrr said to himself. "Pastrami can produce shit." *If they can't synthesize fertilizer, they have to produce shit.*

He stood and looked at the Enabler. Twelve minutes left. There was only one choice. Mrr ran back into the house, to the refrigerator and opened it. He removed the large bag of pastrami then ran back to the porch and grabbed as many of the plants that he could carry. With two free fingers, he grabbed the bag of fertilizer. If Marge didn't come back with the Burpee in time, Mrr would have to send everything back along with instructions. He knew it would mean that he would have to stay behind, but they would come back for him, if they survived. It was a chance he had to take.

He ran up the hill to the Beacon, coughing and gasping for breath, his muscles numb and weak. When he got there, he piled the plants, the fertilizer, and the pastrami on the Beacon and fell to the ground, exhausted. 5.5 minutes were remaining. He pulled out the Enabler and started to record instructions.

This is Mrr. I have very little time but I have discovered the secret of plants. They are not mechanical. They are a life form! Yes, they are a new life form. I have confirmed that their leaves somehow produce oxygen, as we thought. I don't know how.

I don't understand the reproductive system. Plants grow in soil; they make seeds and the seeds fall to the soil and grow into more plants. The plants I am sending are already in soil, which you have to synthesize, but in order for the process to work, you must also fertilize the plants. Fertilizer is made of chemicals, so I don't know if you can synthesize the fertilizer in the bag I'm sending. You may not.

If you cannot, you must synthesize the other substance, called pastrami. Have people eat the pastrami and somehow they will produce a substance called 'shit'. That can be used to fertilize the plants. Shit comes out of your body, and it is not a pleasant procedure.

Whichever fertilizer you use is deposited on the seeds in the soil and water is then added. I do not know how much.

Had he told them everything? No, he had forgotten one point.

I'm not sure about this, but I believe that when the plant finally dies, the leaves and remaining seeds turn brown. At that point, humans burn the leaves and seeds then inhale the smoke. It might be just a ritual or perhaps an essential part of the process. I don't know. It doesn't make sense.

He paused and took a deep breath and looked around. It was so beautiful here, he thought, so clean. There was another forty years before the apocalypse would occur and he knew he could live here if he had to and, of course, it appeared he *did* have to for some period of time, perhaps hours, perhaps days, perhaps forever. There was a few minutes left and he continued to record the instructions.

Because of the mass of the material being transported, I must

stay behind. Please come back for me at the next window. I will be waiting.

There is one more thing: a message for Imoth. Today I saw an artifact that you will be interested in. It was exactly like the long object in the museum with 'OUI SVIL UGGER' on the side, your favorite. It is an object of considerable respect in this time-place because I today noticed a large crowd of people surrounding a small group of young boys and there were many 'UGGERS'. All the people were cheering and worshiping. The boys swung them around in some sort of ritual. The ceremony was so important that they held it outside on a large outdoor area covered with a plant carpet. It was a square with white bags at each corner.

Your hypothesis may be right: it appears to have something to do with the rite of achieving manhood. One boy stood in the middle of the square and threw a ball to a boy at the primary corner. Every boy being inducted swung the UGGER and tried to hit the ball. When he did, he ran around the square and the other boys tried to catch the ball and throw it to another boy who would try to stop the boy from touching all of the bags. Each time one of the boys ran back to where he started without being stopped, he was inducted. They kept track of all the boys that were inducted on a large slate-board.

He looked at his Enabler. Ten seconds. Marge wouldn't bring the seeds in time.

Good luck. O2 to you all.

He removed his flesh pouch and put the Enabler in it, placing them both on the Beacon and stood back. A moment later there was a

bright light, a hum and a loud popping noise, and then the pile was all gone.

“Mrr? Mrr? Where are you?” Mrr heard the voice in the distance.

“Here, Marge,” he shouted. She ran up to him, lungs pumping and thrust the handful of Burpee packages toward him. “I bought seeds”, she said, gasping.

“Never mind. It is too late. When you didn't come in time I had to send the plants and instructions.”

“You pulled up some plants?” she asked.

“No. I sent the ones on your porch, and a bag of fertilizer, too. But, just in case, I also sent your pastrami so people could...”

“What?” Marge exclaimed. “You sent the plants on my porch?”

“Yes. Was that a problem?” Mrr was surprised. Are some plants more important than others? Did he violate laws?

“Mrr. That was marijuana.”

“What is marijuana?” he asked.

“What did you tell them to do with the plants?”

“Yes. I left instructions, including the burning of the leaves and seeds when the plant dies. I told them to inhale the smoke, but I couldn't explain the purpose. Was I wrong? Is that not part of the process?”

There was a long pause as she pondered the vision of a world where smoking dope was considered to be a necessary component of survival. *Just like the 60's.*

“It doesn't matter,” she said, shrugging. “It's OK.”

Marge shrugged, took Mrr's hand, and led him towards the

house.

Mrr didn't object. "I must live in your world for a while," he said, softly.

"Yes," she answered, not sure why the idea appealed to her. "I figured that out."