

NINE HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

BY LEWIS SHINER

1 ON A WEDNESDAY in November of 1957, nine-year-old Danny Armbruster disappeared from a subdivision outside Mesa, Arizona. His parents had expected him back since nightfall. Danny, meanwhile, had picked up a bullhead in the front tire of his bike and was having to walk it home.

The sun had just gone down when Danny saw the light in the sky. For a second he thought he'd gotten turned around and it was the moon. Only it was the wrong shape for the moon, longer than it was tall. And the color was an intense blue-white, like the glow of the welding torches at his father's plant.

The light continued to grow and began to wobble slightly. Danny caught a glimpse of a deeper, reddish color on the underside. Suddenly he knew he was looking at a flying saucer.

He could make out the shape of it now, like two dinner plates front to front. A cone of light sprang out of the bottom and swept toward him over the desert. His common sense told him to head for home, but he was afraid to run under the ship. He thought of a kangaroo rat he'd seen once, paralyzed by the lights of the car, going under the wheels despite his father swerving to miss it. It was like it had lost control of its own desires.

This can't be happening, he thought. Can it?

The machine settled onto the desert. Bits of dirt and rock were sucked up into the weird glow and pinged away into the darkness. Danny felt grains of blowing sand nick his face and arms. For some reason he made no effort to turn away or cover his eyes. He just stood in silence until three small men in silver suits came to lead him onto the ship.

2 A MAN FROM Project Blue Book came to talk to Danny's parents. Since the two Sputnik launches by the Soviets that fall, there had been a massive "flap," or wave of sightings. He listened to Danny's mother describe the eerie lights in the sky and took pictures of a charred mesquite bush near the road where Danny's bicycle had been found. The pictures were sent on to the Foreign Technology Division at Wright-Patterson AFB. Danny's mother never heard from the Air Force again.

The police found no fingerprints but Danny's on the bike, and the FBI declined to investigate when no ransom demands were made.

A year after the boy's disappearance, a middle-aged man in battered clothes came up to Danny's father in the parking lot of the plant where he worked.

“Don’t worry about your boy,” the man said. “The space people have him. He’s all right. Really. He’s getting to see things ... things you could never imagine.”

“Who are you?” Danny’s father said. “What do you want?”

“I want you not to worry,” the man said, backing away.

“Hey!” Danny’s father shouted. “Come back!” He chased the man for a block or more, only to lose him in a crowd. Danny’s father called the police, who were unable to locate the man.

Danny’s father decided, after several sleepless nights, not to tell his wife about it. In the past year they had been harassed by dozens of letters and phone calls from “contactees” and they only seemed to prolong his wife’s suffering. Eventually he forgot the entire incident.

3 THE ALIENS WERE about four feet tall, wore silvery uniforms, and had pale gray skin. Their foreheads were large, their noses little more than the sharp intersection of the planes of their cheeks. Their eyes were outsized, dark, and widely separated, and their lips were so thin that their mouths seemed to disappear when they were closed. At first Danny couldn’t tell any of the aliens apart.

They took him into a room that was as shining and white as a new refrigerator and strapped him to a table that was not quite long enough for him. He didn’t think to resist at first, but as the things they did to him got more and more unpleasant, he began to be afraid.

They filled his mouth with a gummy pink substance from something like a toothpaste tube. Danny choked on it. The alien ignored all his struggles and held Danny’s mouth closed for several seconds. Then he pulled the wad out and dropped it into a slot on the wall.

The touch of the alien’s hand was cold, damp, and scaly, and when it reached for Danny again he tried to pull his head away. Another alien came forward and guided a metal skull cap onto Danny’s head while the first one held him motionless. Danny felt a prickling in his scalp, then a wave of intense pleasure, like the last bell on the last day of school. It was followed just as suddenly by a feeling of weightlessness and nausea. Danny threw up and the aliens backed away, letting him turn his head so the stuff would run out of his mouth.

In a few seconds they had reduced him to the level of an animal, shivering, terrified, unable to speak or move. They put adhesive patches on the skin inside his elbows and behind his knees, rolling up his jacket sleeves and pants legs to do it, then tore the patches off and fed them into the wall. They took blood from his left ankle, then pulled his pants down and poked at his genitals with a metal rod.

When they finished, two of them carried him out of the laboratory and through a series of white-walled rooms. The numbness in Danny’s brain had worn off. “What are doing?” he shouted. “Where are you taking me?” Their only answer was to put him in a tiny room and leave him alone there.

4 DANNY CRIED HIMSELF to sleep, lying on what seemed to be a padded shelf that grew out of the wall. It was the only thing in the room that was not hard, white, and shiny. In the morning they brought him into another part of the ship. One of the aliens handed him a cup with something in it that looked like a vanilla milkshake and smelled like Cream-of-Wheat. His stomach seemed to accept it, and it did clear the bad taste out of his mouth.

The room didn't have any chairs in it, so Danny stayed on his feet. He couldn't see any kind of controls or instruments, only a pedestal in the middle of the floor that held a fan-shaped sculpture. It looked like white plaster. The wide end of the fan merged with the ceiling.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" Danny asked. He was taller than any of the aliens, and now that he'd rested he wasn't quite as afraid. "My parents are going to be looking for me, you know. You can't just hide me here forever."

"You will not be going back," one of the aliens said. It wasn't speaking English, but the meaning of what it said seemed to come into Danny's head anyway. It was a little like a movie he'd seen once, where the people were speaking French, but the real words were written on the screen and he almost felt like he understood what they were saying.

"Look," said another one of the aliens.

The wall in front of Danny darkened. In seconds it was black enough to show pinpoints of light. With a sudden spasm in his leg muscles, Danny realized he was looking out into empty space. In the distance the stars were smeared with an orange haze. It looked like a water-color painting, thickening to make dust-colored mountains and waves, then thinning away again to nothing. Several of the stars behind it shone with a fierce blue-white glow. In another part of the sky Danny saw an oval of light, its arms spiraling out into nothingness. The space between the stars was blacker than anything Danny had ever seen, and bright colors of the stars took his breath away. The longer he looked, the more of them he could see.

He watched for a very long time, trying to get used to the idea of what they meant. Finally he turned back to the aliens and nodded to them. As they led him back to his cell he was crying again.

In time he got used to the physical hardships - the ceramic-looking bucket instead of a toilet, the lack of baths or fresh clothing, the monotonous diet. By and large he had the run of the ship, though he never saw anything that looked like a control room.

The worst of it was the boredom. The aliens walked around him like he was a piece of furniture, and never talked to him unless they had to. There was nothing to read, nothing to watch except the nearly motionless expanse of stars.

One day he lost control, in the middle of the big room with the screen and the fan sculpture. "Damn you!" he said, screaming and crying all at once. "Goddamn you to hell!" It was the worst thing he knew to say. "Don't you care? What kind of people are you? Don't you have any feelings? Don't you care what happens to me?"

One of the aliens stopped. “We are not people,” it said reasonably. “And no, we do not care.”

Much later, long after he’d lost count of meals and naps, after he’d lost all sense of time whatsoever, something new appeared on the screen.

A planet.

Danny slept a half dozen times before the planet grew large enough to fill the screen. As the ship closed in, Danny kept expecting the green-gray blur of the surface to resolve into recognizable detail. Instead the alien ship simply dipped into the living soup of the planet’s atmosphere.

In seconds he was unable to see anything but whirling yellow feathers and smaller green, furry seeds. They flew toward him at a fantastic rate of speed, hung motionless against the surface of the screen for a few seconds, then were whipped away by the turbulence. Slowly Danny made out a shadow in the background. He understood that the image he watched was like TV, that the things he saw there couldn’t actually break through to reach him. All the same he found himself squirming in fear.

It looked a little like the giant insects he’d seen in dinosaur books, only much, much bigger. It was only when the thing stopped and hovered directly in front of the camera that Danny could see all the hideous differences. A huge, oval mouth, surrounded by loose flaps of skin, took up most of what seemed to be the head. The rest of its body was lopsided and covered with white dust or mold. It sucked puffballs and green seeds continuously into its mouth. Halfway down its belly something like an open sore dripped thick liquid into the air.

“What is it?” Danny asked one of the aliens.

“It is what it is.”

“That’s a stupid answer.”

“What you are to your planet, it is here.”

“You mean, that thing can think?”

“It has a language. It fights wars. It has a God.”

The next time he slept, Danny had a nightmare about the monster’s God. Ever since his parents had admitted that Santa Claus and the tooth fairy were not real, he’d wondered if God wasn’t more of the same thing. He’d never had the nerve to ask his parents, and now it was too late.

5 SOMETHING ELSE HAD HAPPENED to Danny in the endless time since he’d been brought into the ship. Wispy, colorless hair had begun to grow on his face and body, and his voice had started to crack. The thing he still thought of as his weenie would sometimes swell up and become very sensitive, especially in the mornings. He found that by lying on his stomach and moving a certain way he could relieve the pressure, though he felt guilty afterwards about the mess.

He went through a period of severe disorientation. He spent hours touching the fine hairs on his face, longing for a mirror. It seemed to him that he spent more time sleeping than awake, but without a clock he couldn’t be sure. He forgot his mother’s middle name.

He worried about his teeth and gums until he developed sores inside his mouth. He showed them to one of the aliens and told it he was sick. The alien took him back to the hospital room and filled his mouth with the gummy pink stuff. "You are not sick," the alien said, after the stuff had been fed to the wall. "It is in your mind."

Danny went a little crazy. He lunged at the alien. Before he could do more than raise his arm to throw a punch, he felt a vibration go up his spine. He passed out and woke up in his cell. He beat on the walls and screamed until he was too exhausted to move.

In time they let him out again. He had learned not to assault them, but it hadn't made him less sullen and irritable. He was close to trying it again anyway when something more interesting came up.

It was another planet, blue-green, hazed with clouds. He refused to leave the area in front of the screen, staring endlessly for the first sight of something that would tell him he was home. Instead he finally woke from a doze to the sight of a single vast, unfamiliar continent below the ship. He went to his cell and cried helplessly from one meal to the next. When he came out again, it was to watch the ship descend over a city of cubical white buildings.

Three aliens led him from the ship to a maze of hallways. It ended in a room that had clearly been designed for him. It had a bed, even though the bedspread, pillows, and sheets were all part of the same molded piece. It had a desk with paper and pens, shelves with real books, and best of all, a bathroom with a toilet, a shower, and a toothbrush. Several sets of loose cotton pants and shirts were laid out on the bed. Two screens set into the wall showed an Earth-like field and a clear blue sky. When the overhead light was turned off the screens showed a moonlit version of the same scene. He had day and night again, even if he had to make them himself.

The door, of course, locked behind the aliens when they left.

He washed and put on new clothes and started on the books. Most of them had multiple copies, as if the aliens had hijacked a trainload of them and piled them on the shelves without thought. One group seemed to be a shipment of war novels, another was diet and exercise books. Other clusters were science fiction, Peterson field guides, and one entire shelf of paperbacks in French.

He went through the novels first, skimming, looking for the parts where men and women were together. He learned a little, only enough to make his curiosity worse.

He'd been there long enough to be tired of the books when the door opened and a girl walked in. Danny was sitting at his desk, writing a letter to his parents that he knew they would never see.

He was stunned by the sight of her. He thought at first that he had made her up. Then she combed through her dark, curly hair with one hand and pulled it back, kept pulling it back until he could see her entire hairline, and still she pulled on it, until tears came up in her eyes.

Danny knew he couldn't imagine anything that strange. "Hey," he said. "Are you okay?"

She was maybe a little older than Danny, her small breasts just showing under the long, shapeless dress that she wore. She did not seem to be all right

at all. Her eyes were puzzled and her mouth was slack. Her body was thick with excess weight. Danny wondered how she could have gotten fat on the aliens' tasteless food.

He went over to her and gently worked her fingers loose from her hair. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't show any real interest until he started to back away. Then she made a bleating noise and threw her arms around him. She smelled clean and Danny found himself getting excited by the touch of her, even though the weird way she acted made him nervous.

"Can you talk?" he asked her. He worked her arms loose and sat her on the edge of the bed next to him. "Can you say anything at all?" Now that he was over the initial shock, he could see that she was not all that nice to look at. Her eyes were small and puffy, her nose flat and thick, and her skin was shiny with oil. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Muh-muh-rnuh..." the girl said.

In a moment of insight, Danny realized that she hadn't survived the things that he'd been through, the repeated shocks, the isolation, the horror of the aliens always around.

"Mary?" he asked. "Is that your name?" When she didn't answer he tried to smile at her. "Well, that's what I'll call you, okay?"

She seemed calmed by the sound of his voice. When he stood up she let him go. He kept an eye on her as he walked to the door. "Hey," he said loudly. "What am I supposed to do? Can you hear me? There's something wrong with this one. You understand? She's broken. I can't fix her, if that's what you want."

He got no answer. He went back to his routine of reading and drawing and pacing the room. When he tried to talk to her she simply stared at him.

Eventually he took a bath and went to bed, dressed for once because the girl was there. She had fallen asleep on the bed. He lay down carefully so he wouldn't wake her and turned off the light.

Sleep wouldn't come. Every time the girl shifted her weight his eyes came open and his heart beat loudly. He felt like he'd been lying there for hours when he noticed that she wasn't asleep any more. By the sound of her breathing he could tell that she'd turned to face him.

Then she began to touch him. Danny was embarrassed at first, then a little frightened. But her hands were knowing and insistent, and he felt sick and feverish and could not make himself pull away. She took his trousers down and began to stroke his penis. He felt the pressure build up inside him but before it got messy she rolled onto her back and began to pull at him.

"What?" he whispered. "What do you want?"

She kept grabbing at his waist and his legs until he finally rolled on top of her. She took hold of his penis and began to pull at it. He started to lose his erection, not understanding what she wanted, ashamed because he didn't know what to do.

She took his right hand and placed it over her breast. He felt the end of her breast get hard and it made the same thing happen to his penis. She pulled at him and he felt his penis slide into something warm and wet. Her hips moved jerkily under him and he exploded inside her.

Lights flashed in front of his eyes. He gasped for breath. He smelled something he'd never smelled before, an earthy, exciting odor that at the same time left him repelled and sad. The girl groaned and started to snore. Danny's head cleared. He was appalled at what he'd done. He had made sex with this ... this *thing*, that was ugly and brain damaged, little better than an animal.

He went to the bathroom and washed himself, then lay down on the part of the floor that was sculpted to look like a rug. To his own surprise he was asleep in seconds.

The shame was still with him when he woke up. He ignored the girl all day, and when he was ready for bed he turned out the lights and lay down nervously where one edge of the bed met the wall. She reached for him and he pushed her away. The second time she came for him he pushed her so hard she slid off the bed and sat on the floor, crying quietly. Danny stayed on the bed, arms folded, unable to sleep. After a while he turned the lights on and read. When he absolutely couldn't stay awake any longer he put his head down and slept on the desk.

When he woke up she was gone.

6 AFTER THAT, whenever he found himself thinking about the girl, remembering the smell of what they'd done, or the feeling of her breast in his hand, Danny would exercise. One of the health books was about something called "yoga," and Danny found out the harder he practiced at it, the better he felt.

He began to build himself up. He knew he was getting taller by the way his clothes fit him, and before long he could see the shape of his body change, his stomach flattening and the muscles turning to hard outlines under his pale skin. He would cover the drain in the shower and look at himself in the pool of water there, sometimes until he forgot where he was. He was fit, he thought. Fit and ready. But for what?

He had nicknamed the alien who brought his food Fremount, after the character in *Pogo*. The little alien wouldn't reveal his real name and answered only the most direct questions. One day another alien brought the cup. This one had more wrinkles around its eyes and a forward tilt to its walk. Danny named him Howland Owl.

"Where's Fremount?" Danny asked.

"Drink this and come with me."

Danny swallowed the food in two gulps. The alien led Danny down a series of white corridors. At the end was a room divided in half by some kind of glass. On the other side was a dwarfish, naked creature with a face like a Neanderthal. Its entire body was covered with long, widely separated black hairs.

"You may talk," Howland said.

"Hello?" Danny said.

"He gives you greetings," Howland translated, looking at the dwarf. Danny guessed that the mind-talking worked the same for the dwarf as it did for Danny. Both of them could understand anything the aliens thought.

Howland turned back to Danny. "It asks you how you retain your water."

“What?”

Howland repeated the question.

“I don’t understand,” Danny said. “What does he mean?”

Howland made no response.

“Ask him...” Danny said, “...ask him if he has a family.”

Howland relayed the question, then said, “It says it will have had. It asks if you are light.”

“Light?”

Howland moved its hands as if it were stroking a large globe. “Light,” it said.

Danny felt his eyes begin to sting. “Tell him to make sense. I can’t understand what he’s asking me. Can’t you see that?” He wanted to hit something. Mostly he wanted to hit the hairy little dwarf. He would have taken a swing at Howland if he’d thought he could get away with it.

Howland brought him back to his room. His next meal was brought by Fremount, as usual.

7 DANNY MADE A CALENDAR. Every time he slept he marked off a day. He knew it wasn’t accurate, but it helped tie him to the passing time. By his reckoning, the visit with the dwarfish alien was followed by nearly two years where nothing broke his routine. He exercised. He read. He sat in the lotus position, thinking about as little as it was possible for him to think. In the dark he dreamed about his parents, his best friend Tom, about pot roast and candy bars, about snow and forests and mountains, about dogs and fish, about school, about half-remembered girls and women he had known.

Waking up was always the hardest part.

He seemed to have stopped growing. His beard, when he didn’t use the depilatory cream the aliens gave him, came in dark and full. Dark hair covered his legs and crotch. Whenever he asked them, the aliens cut his hair with some kind of pistol that had no blades and made no noise. Lately one or two of the fallen hairs would be white.

He read and he exercised and he wrote letters and drew and he tried to keep the voices in his head quiet.

Until the woman came.

His first reaction, when she knocked on his door and simply walked in, was shyness. His brain was numb. Eventually he realized that she had been talking for some time and he hadn’t heard a word she’d said, or even noticed what she really looked like.

She was at least pretty, by anyone’s standards. Her hair was long and reddish brown, her eyes a clear gray. It seemed to Danny at first that she was younger than he was, but it turned out they had taken her in 1957 also, and she had been 12 at the time.

Her name was Autumn.

“That’s a beautiful name,” Danny told her.

“Yes,” she said, “it is.”

Danny couldn't think of anything worth saying. When his silence went on too long, Autumn stood up. "I'm just down the hall," she said. "Come and see me sometime." As if they were two people who'd met in a hotel somewhere.

"I can't," Danny said. "I'm locked in."

Autumn opened the door. "No you're not," she said, and left.

Danny stood where she'd been and sniffed the air. He believed he could detect a lingering sweetness there. He felt flushed and off-balance, and his heart beat so loudly and so strangely that he thought it might give out any second.

He sat in the lotus position and fought for control. He concentrated on not moving until enough time passed that it didn't seem so urgent any more. Then he waited a little longer. Then he got up and went to her.

Miraculously his door opened to his touch. The corridor had changed since the last time he'd seen it. Now there was only his door and one other, twenty yards away. He walked to the other door and knocked and Autumn opened it.

Her room was identical to his, except that the books on the shelves were different. She sat on the bed and brushed her hair, over and over, while he looked through the books.

"You've been here a long time, haven't you?" she said.

"Yes."

"Long enough to read all those books of yours?"

"Three or four times."

After a while he sat on the bed and touched her hand. She didn't pull it away, but she didn't move closer to him either. She just sat there and smiled at him in a vague sort of way. He wanted to put his penis in her, but she was so self-possessed, so alien in her own way, that he didn't know if he should try. He didn't even know if he should ask her.

They talked about other things until they both were falling asleep between sentences. She told him how she'd been on a ship the entire time until she met Danny. That she had grown up in Chicago, that her parents were musicians, that she would have been a dancer but she'd grown too tall.

When Danny went back to his room he dreamed about the two of them in a huge house that had grass for carpets and slow, strange animals for furniture. He woke up refreshed and excited and went to her room, but he could see around the edges of the door that her lights were still off. He went back to his room and exercised until he was tired enough to sleep a little more. On top of all the other strangeness, it bothered Danny to see how different their rhythms of day and night were.

They spent another day talking, some of it reading quietly, and another long night apart. All the time a peculiar tension built in him, and on the third day it broke.

They were looking at his books together when her shoulder brushed his. He turned and put his hand around her elbow. She looked at him and smiled. He touched her breast, his fingers shaking, and she smiled again. He put his arms around her and kissed her clumsily, and she put her arms around his waist. He led her to the bed and took her clothes off. He almost wanted to cry when he saw how soft and smooth and tautly muscled her body was.

"Have you ... have you done this before?" he asked.

“No,” she said. Her eyes were a little out of focus and her voice shook.

As he knelt between her legs he was suddenly frightened. He turned off the lights but it didn't help him get hard again. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. “I don't really know what I'm doing either.”

“It's okay,” she said. She held him and he ran his hands through her hair, wondering at the way it smelled. Love, he thought. I'm in love. Is it really this easy? What happens now?

He never fell asleep, just seemed to float, and thoughts went spinning around in his head. After a long time he wasn't afraid any more. Autumn's place was tight and very dry and not at all the same as Mary's had been. Afterwards there was blood on the bed. Autumn said that was all right, that it was supposed to be that way.

For a long time Danny couldn't get to sleep. He wished he had somebody to talk to, somebody to explain the things he felt. If he was grown up now, why did he still feel like a little boy? If it was right for him to do what he did with Autumn, why did he feel so guilty?

In time the sex got better and the guilt just went away.

He told Autumn that he loved her. He told himself it didn't matter that she didn't say it back to him.

It was about two of Danny's months later that Autumn told him she was pregnant. It had been a happy time for both of them, Danny teaching her yoga, Autumn teaching him to dance. They read together, slept together, even showered together, and now they were going to have a child together.

“Are you sure?” he asked her.

“Pretty sure. I didn't bleed last month and I feel sick when I wake up, and, well, I can just feel it.”

“That's wonderful!”

“Is it?”

“Isn't it?”

“Look around you! Do you see any doctors? Anybody who knows anything about human medicine at all? And if the baby is born, *if*, then where is it going to grow up? In these two little rooms? And never see a real sky or trees or birds or other people?”

He held her until she cried herself out. “It'll make us a family,” Danny said. “That's all that matters, that we're a family and that we love each other, right?”

Autumn didn't answer.

During the pregnancy they quarreled more and more often. Autumn would only make love after Danny sulked for days at a time. She was clearly frightened that something would go wrong, and any time the rhythms of her body changed she would panic.

When her labor began in earnest, she began to scream hysterically. Danny was in his own room, where he'd been spending most of his time lately, and he got to her about the same time the aliens did. One of them looked like Howland Owl, the one that had taken him to see the dwarf. They said nothing to Danny, just led Autumn away.

Time slowed. Danny waited uneasily in Autumn's room. Everything he tried—reading, meditation, sleeping—ended with him pacing the floor. When Autumn finally came back she was pale, exhausted, and no longer pregnant.

"The baby...?" Danny asked.

"They took her."

"Took her?"

"I heard her cry. She was alive, she was crying, and they took her away."

Autumn lay down and went to sleep. Danny stretched out beside her and it seemed he'd just closed his eyes when Autumn's screams woke him.

The aliens came for her and they wouldn't let Danny go with them. He sat on the edge of the bed until Fremount brought his food.

"What have you done with her?"

"She is sick," Fremount said.

"And the baby?"

Fremount turned away.

"The baby!" Danny shouted. "What about our little girl?"

The door closed in his face.

They're going to keep the baby, he realized. If they had been humans, they would at least have had the decency to lie, to tell him she was dead. But they were aliens and they didn't care. For the first time since the ship he hated them, blindly, savagely, and the hate kept him going until they brought Autumn back.

She was completely empty. She refused to eat, sitting all day in her room with her arms wrapped around her legs, staring into space. If he tried to comfort her she jerked away at his touch, startled by it. She slept badly, moaning and thrashing herself awake. The only thing Danny could do for her was stay away.

Eventually she began to eat again. Her sleep became quieter. She slept most of the time. When she was awake she managed an occasional smile. She even let him make love to her, but only when she was bleeding. "No more babies," she whispered to him afterwards. "Not ever again. They won't take anything from me again."

8 IN AUTUMN'S ROOM was a shelf of physics books. After Danny had read everything else, he started on them. They were tough going at first, but he needed the challenge.

One day the alien called Howland Owl came for him again. He brought Danny into a long, narrow white room. Nine of the aliens sat along one side of it, like a jury.

"What do you see," one of them asked, "when you perform sex?"

"See?" Danny asked.

"Do you see God?" asked another one.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Last night," said yet another one, "you performed sex and the woman said, 'Oh God.' What did she mean?"

"You were *listening*?" Danny said. He was not very surprised, really.

"Answer the question," Howland said.

“You’re crazy. God doesn’t have anything to do with it. It’s just something people say.”

“Then when *do* you see your God?” another asked.

Danny hesitated, then said, “I don’t have a God.” He waited for lightening to strike. When it didn’t he was almost disappointed. “If there was a God I wouldn’t be here. If there was a God it wouldn’t have let you take my daughter from me. God is just something they tell kids. It’s supposed to make them think that things make sense. Just another fairy tale.”

“Do many of you feel this way?”

“Many people? I don’t know. Maybe they all do.”

After a silence, Howland said, “Come. I will take you back to your room.”

“Just a minute,” Danny said. He picked one of the aliens to stare at. “I want to see my daughter.”

The alien returned his stare. “The child does not belong to you.”

“Like hell,” Danny said. “What are you afraid of? Why won’t you let me see her? For God’s sake, she’s my child!”

“Why,” the alien said, “do you ask a favor in the name of a God you do not believe in?”

Danny charged the alien and woke up on the bed in his room.

He told Autumn about the interview. “I know,” she said. “I went through most of that on the ship; That’s what they do.”

“Snoop? Steal babies?”

“Haven’t they ever told you? They look for God. I don’t think they mean it the way we do. I mean, they’re not looking for a big old man with white hair. But that’s their job.”

“Their job?” Danny started to laugh. “All of them? All of those ships, those other planets, those other aliens? Their job?” Tears rolled down his face. “That’s why they kidnapped us? To look for *God*?” He cried until his whole body felt dried out, then he slept, longer and deeper than he had for a long time.

A while after that he tried to talk to Fremount about their ships. “It says here,” he said, pointing to the physics book, “that nothing can move faster than the speed of light. What about your ships? How do they do it?”

“I will ask,” Fremount said.

Later an alien that Danny had never seen before came to the room. “I will help you with your questions,” it said.

Danny named the alien PT. Bridgeport. “Is it true your ships go faster than light?” he asked.

“Faster?” the alien said. “How do you mean faster?”

Danny had the same sinking feeling he’d gotten talking to the hairy dwarf. Very carefully he explained the speed of light, using Astronomical Units since the aliens would have to know the distance from the Earth to the Sun.

“Are you trying to tell me,” Bridgeport said at last, “that light is either a particle or a wave?”

“Yes.”

“But it isn’t. Light is a state of the aether.”

Danny went back to the book and showed the alien the Michelson-Morely experiment that disproved the existence of the aether. Bridgeport picked up the book and read several pages, its bulbous eyes flicking back and forth across the lines. "It says here that FitzGerald could explain those same results as compression of the aether."

A few meals later Danny asked to see Bridgeport again. He showed it something called the Double Slit Experiment, where, under certain conditions, a stream of photons would create an interference pattern. The results seems to vary depending on what the experimenters tried to prove.

"I don't understand," Danny said.

"Nor do I," Bridgeport said. "I have performed an experiment similar to this, and these are not the results I obtained. May I borrow this?"

Danny pointed to the duplicate copies on the shelf.

"Be my guest. But haven't you read it already?"

"Why?" Bridgeport asked him. "What could we possibly learn from your primitive science?"

When Bridgeport returned, it seemed tired, or older. Danny had been around the aliens long enough to realize something had gone wrong with its body.

"Well?" Danny asked.

Bridgeport was quiet a long time before answering. "Now, when I run the experiment, I get an interference pattern, just like in your book. When I leave the room and my assistant runs the experiment ... there is no pattern."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"In your book. The man Heisenberg. He says the outcome of an experiment is determined by the desired results. That is more or less what he says. It seems this is even more true than he realized."

"But ... which is the real answer?"

"Both. Either. Any answer you like."

"My God."

"No. There is no God in this. If there is today, maybe not tomorrow."

Bridgeport started for the door.

"Wait," Danny said. "Come back. I want to ask you..."

The alien was gone.

Next mealtime, Danny asked Fremount for Bridgeport. "That one is dead," Fremount said.

Danny was stunned. "Dead? But how?"

"I am no longer allowed to talk to you," Fremount said.

Danny went to Autumn's room. They spent so little time together that their schedules had become out of synch. This time Danny found her awake.

"I think I killed one of them," he told her.

"How?"

"Physics," Danny said. "Or maybe religion. I'm not sure I know the difference anymore."

"Good," Autumn said, going back to her book. "Kill them all. All of them."

9 A FEW MEALS LATER they came for him. They led him out a new doorway into another maze of halls. The first he realized he was on a ship was when a wall near him turned dark and he saw the stars again. They hadn't warned him to pack anything or even let him say goodbye to Autumn.

After that first surge of anger, his heart pounded with new hope. He searched the ship, finally found an alien, and poured out his questions. Were they taking him home? Was Autumn on board? Was his daughter? How long would it take?

The alien ignored him.

He exercised and meditated and slept. He thought about Autumn more than he wanted to. He kept count of the number of times he slept, into the hundreds, then lost count. He started again, got into the hundreds again, then gave up for good.

He hung on.

When he finally saw a blue world in the viewscreen he was afraid to hope. He sat cross legged on the floor, searching for a landmark, remembering the last blue world. And then the clouds broke and he saw the telltale shape of the Mediterranean and the long curve of Africa dropping away and he cried for the last time in his life.

The saucer let him off in Texas, dressed in his loose white robes. They gave him a few hundred dollars in cash and some small disks of pure gold. He'd read about time dilation and the twin paradox and hoped the money would still be good.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?" he asked one of the aliens as he stood in the open port of the ship.

"Goodbye," the alien said.

Danny walked over a hill and saw a ribbon of asphalt that led off into the distance. He sat in the hot sand at the top of the hill and smelled the sunlight.

He had spent long hours thinking about what he would do if he ever got home, how he would lie low, spend his time in the closest thing to a library he could find, learn enough to blend in. The one thing he was not prepared for was to find that the world had not changed.

He stood in a Greyhound station in Temple, Texas, looking at a newspaper dated June 6, 1958. He thought about Bridgeport's experiments. He wondered if it was 1958 only because Danny's imagination hadn't been strong enough to take him farther into the future.

He used some of the cash for a Salvation Army suit and a bus ticket to Arizona. He kept the gold in his boots and barricaded the door of the motel room where he spent his first night back on Earth.

He couldn't get over the richness of the smells in the air.

By Albuquerque he had the flu. He spent a week in a motel, convinced he was dying. In the delirium of his fever, objects lost their focus. Everything turned into random patterns of energy, mere conditions of the aether, and he felt himself sink into the bed. He was terrified. It had become a question of faith, not in God, but in something more basic, and his faith was slipping. Suddenly he knew how Bridgeport must have felt.

I am going to believe, he told himself. I believe in furniture and in floors. I believe in clothes and food and bodies with skins that keep them from sinking into mattresses. Whether they are real or not, I believe in them. My belief will make them real.

A few hours later his fever broke and he slept.

Back in Mesa, he watched his parents for several weeks. They were now much younger than he was. Finally, unable to resist, he tried to talk to his father. His father seemed frightened by him, so Danny left him alone.

He bought several books and magazines that promised to explain UFOs to him. He managed to read half of one of them before throwing them all away.

He took a job working for a landscape company in San Diego where he could work outdoors, within the sound and smell of the ocean. He was liked but never befriended by his fellow employees. The owners respected his good physical condition and his love for growing things and tolerated his occasional periods of dreaminess.

He spent his last years in a rest home in Scottsdale, Arizona, finally marrying another patient there. Until the week of his death he paid for an ad in the personal columns of newspapers in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The ad read: "Autumn, please call me, Danny," followed by his address and phone number. None of the replies was genuine.

His funeral, in December of 1975, was small. His wife, and some of the other rest home patients, attended. After the service a strange light was seen in the sky. It hovered, then disappeared at a tremendous rate of speed. The Air Force declined to investigate.

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