

Excuse Me Sir, Do You Have Some Space-Time?

by Rian Davis

Michael Bragg moved slower on the treadmill as it hummed along in its cycles. Every step was monitored and recorded by the machinery; his heartbeat was measured by the metal receiver attached to his right palm. Two cameras—as soulless as a glass eye—floated just above his forehead and out of reach, each one positioned on either side. He had been running for five minutes when he suddenly stepped on the track wrong and nearly fell over, but the safety lever came on just in time to prevent him from falling, saving him from a nasty fall which would have probably done some serious damage to his legs and back, not to mention his transplanted heart.

He reached for a towel, which was sitting on a plastic chair next to the treadmill. Then he activated the small metal box that checked his body's vital signs. It had a particularly droll sound to it, and when it was operating, he could feel the small vibrations just inside his chest like a restless snake.

That thing had better not quit.

Once finished wiping off his sweat with the towel, he moved to the shower to shower and change. It was exactly seven thirty on a Saturday morning, and he would be at his desk long before eight.

The coffee machine jingled about an hour later: the pot was done. As usual, there was no one around. During his five years at Bane and Shelley Corporation, he had never known more than a few people to ever gather around. In fact, as he looked around him, he could see very few desks lighted up. Despite the weather being sunny, rows and rows of dark cubicles stared back at him like lightless eyes from the shadows.

Why have I never thought that was strange? There are over five thousand employees in this company, and I rarely see more than a handful at any given time.

He moved towards his cubicle. From the outside, there was nothing significant about it. In fact, he had sometimes overshot it a couple of times and moved into the next cubicle, which belonged to someone who loved cats.

What was her name—the woman in the next cubicle? Something that began with an M, that was for sure. Mary, Mandy, Megan—what was her name?

But her name was Marilyn—that was it. Wasn't she from Baltimore or something? He couldn't—for the life of him—remember exactly when the last time he had seen her was. Rubbing his head, he tried to push a mongoose of a headache away. The work on his desk stared back at him in the shape of a thousand budget reports, project ideas and memos about various topics related to products—past, present and future.

He spent all morning doing his work. It took very little concentration to do what was required, and his mind began to drift. As always it settled on her—the woman five floors above him, and at least ten rows from the elevator. The cubicles up there looked the same as his did, but there was one difference: theirs were colored brown, while his was colored gray (or was it simply dusty?). He didn't bother checking—it was too dark anyway, and his lamp illuminated only what he needed to look at on his desk, and he couldn't move it very easily. It was very heavy.

The bright images of thousands of letters reflected by the light caused his eyes to dim a bit after looking at the dark area surrounding his cubicle. He pushed the papers aside, and used one or two to block the lamp while turning on his computer screen.

It jumped to life like an early morning puppy, and he opened the spy program that had been in the back of his mind all morning. Instantly, he got a view of her. The image was taken from one of the security cameras perched overhead her chair, and all he could see was the very top of her head.

She was working very diligently on something, but he couldn't make out what it was. He knew from watching her for the past few months that she seldom left her cubicle while at work, and in fact, he seldom saw her when she wasn't at work—apparently she even worked more than he did.

When she wasn't working, she loved to go to the movies—especially on Saturdays after work.

Soon, she was gathering her things, getting ready to go out. He knew where she was going, and he made preparations to leave too. Once he was sure she was really going out, he flicked the screen off and grabbed his coat. Unsure of whether he needed it or not, he put it on anyway—just in case.

He went towards the elevator, but when he had passed three rows of cubicles someone stepped in front of him quite unexpectedly, causing a shock: it was Maxwell.

“Where are you headed,” he said brusquely.

He was technically Michael's senior, but he wasn't sure what department he worked for, so he was not aware of how he fitted in terms of command structure. He only knew he was his senior based on his title: Senior Project Manager.

“Oh, heading home I suppose.”

“Really? You seem to have something else on your mind?”

“Oh?”

“What plans do you have this fine Saturday afternoon? Doing anything, like seeing a movie?”

“Oh, I don't know—perhaps. Well, I've really got to be—”

“Five twenty,” Maxwell said.

“What?”

“Five twenty, I said. I saw you looking at your watch, so I thought I'd help you out.”

“Thanks. Well, I've got to be going.”

He moved past Maxwell, or at least tried to before being interrupted once again.

“Seeing anyone?” Maxwell asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“At the movie—I meant are you seeing anyone at the movie?” Maxwell asked with even more persistence.

“Oh, well I don't know, perhaps,” said Michael.

“So you are going to a movie then?” Hearing this, Michael knew he had been trapped.

“I suppose so,” Michael said with a faint voice.

“What movie will you see?”

“Goodbye, Maxwell,” he said without further glances back.

He had had enough.

She was sitting in the front row as usual, and he sat exactly five rows behind. It was a movie about time travel. It was called “Have You Got Any Space-Time” and was about a super intelligent alien being that would wonder through the galaxy, communicating with life forms of all sorts, but especially humans. It liked to ask them questions that it already knew the answers to. In particular, it asked them whether they were busy or not, and if they were, did they have time to enjoy life.

The story didn’t really explain in detail why this alien life form was so concerned with the affairs of human beings, but it did make a convincing portrait of an intelligent alien. What purpose it had was left to the viewer. As for Michael’s thoughts, he gave up trying to understand the musings of the characters in the movie, and instead, was focusing on *her*.

She sat there without moving even when the movie had some more tense moments. Behind him an old woman yelped in surprise. The “bad” aliens had apparently come onto the scene, but still she sat there as if asleep. The movie screen was awash with fuzzy shapes and loud sounds.

Then she moved. He wasn’t sure why it was, but she did. Moving to get a better look, he tripped over someone’s popcorn, and when he looked up again, she was gone.

His first reaction was to sit down again—the movie still had about ten more minutes, but he had lost interest in it. Instead, he was more concerned with whether she had seen him. He thought about it a moment before the voice whispered at him.

“Michael, over here.”

Slowly, he turned to look. It was as if a ghost had called his name.

“It’s me,” she said. It was her.

“What are you doing here?” was all he could say.

“You followed me,” she said. “Or rather, you were supposed to follow me.”

“Supposed to? What on earth—?”

This was all really too much for him. His heart was tickling inside him somewhere.

“Calm down. I’ll explain everything if you’ll just trust me. They were watching you, and they wanted to get to you through me.”

“But who are you? I thought I knew who you were but...”

“I’m Marilynn, but don’t you remember? I’m from the cubicle next to yours.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. It—”

“Hang on—just one minute,” she said. “They know everything about you—I found that out. Your health records, your financial situation, your eating habits—they know it all. And they can decide the rest. Are you going out for dinner on Monday? Are you going to view classic movies after work on Friday, they—”

“Oh please, stop it,” he said most unhappily. He was as unsettled as it was without her adding more fuel to the flame.

“But I can’t begin to imagine what they would want with me. I don’t even know who they are, but how, I wonder, is it that they know all these things like you say? Why you? Why me? Oh god, my heart.”

He was in agony.

“They decided to monitor you. I shouldn’t be telling you any of this—they told me not to. But it’s something I feel I have to do. They didn’t tell me the reason. They just said that you were ‘suspicious’.”

“Oh god, what have I done?”

“But don’t worry. As far as I know, you’ve done nothing wrong so far. They knew that you would watch me, so they made you think like you took all the steps when in fact, they dangled my image in front of you and watched you go to work.”

“What do you mean by ‘dangled’?” he groaned.

“The meeting—the fact that we share groups together. The fact that we’re next to each other—all of that was designed by them because they knew that you would respond to me.”

“But why did they choose you?” Michael asked with increasing horror.

“The only thing I can think of is that they ran an analysis, using all the data they had on you so far and came up with a result that suggested I was the best candidate,” Marilyn said.

“But I’ve done nothing wrong. Why would they come after me? I don’t even know who *they* are.”

Marilynn stopped for a moment and said thoughtfully, “But surely you must know—it was an earlier project called Space-Time.”

He paused in thought.

“That sounds familiar, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it. And besides, wasn’t that the title of this movie? Something to do with that name—space-time?”

“This movie? It’s called Lucy Goosey, and it’s a love story. I don’t know where you could have gotten that from.”

He slunk back into his seat, hopefully away from her gaze. He didn’t want to be looked at, at that particular moment. He didn’t want to be seen by anybody at all. There was a particular feeling that too many heads were pointed at him.

“I need—a walk,” he said in a voice that was nearly a whisper.

“But wait, what will you do? They’ll be onto you.”

“Live my life, I guess,” he said.

It was an unsure answer, but the only one he could give. It was the only one that was natural—and that is what he needed, something *natural*.

There was nothing left to stop his resistance to getting up and leaving. He headed towards the restroom while Marilyn followed him from behind. She called out to him with vague enticements that were obviously meant to draw him back, but he needed to be alone for a while.

The bathroom was long and dark—perhaps they were doing some remodeling. He walked towards the sink, but it didn’t seem obvious where it was. It became darker. The faint light from before receded until finally he could no longer see what was in front of him. Marilyn’s voice had long since retreated into the darkness, and he sat down against the wall.

There was a distant echo of dripping somewhere.

He held his hands in his face, feeling both stagnant and anxious.

“Hold out your hands,” a voice whispered.

It sounded like his best friend from high school—that unmistakable voice.

“Sorry?”

“Hold your hands in front of you. Take a look at them.”

“But I can’t see anything.”

“It doesn’t matter. Your mind can see them. Now do it.”

He did as he was told, and he could see them in front of him somehow.

“There is your salvation, my friend. Good luck.”

And the voice was gone as quickly as it had come. He pushed himself up, and moved towards the door.

It was a long way back. When he stepped into the lobby of the theater, everyone had long since departed.

He moved towards his car, an old rusty thing that barely even started anymore. It had never let him down though.

When he got home, he pulled the blankets off his bed, and buried himself underneath them, like some Egyptian mummy, entombed beneath layers of bedrock.

The next day, the sun was out, and he got up quickly, grabbing things from his tiny apartment: a dish, some clothes, towels, and other items that he would need on his journey. It was going to be a long one. He moved towards the door, grabbing the only picture he had ever owned. It was of him and his mother—she had long since passed away. They were both happy and—natural.

He moved to his car and drove away. He would think of the destination later, but for now it was enough that he was on the road.