

Lateral Movement

Bobby said, “If I spot a UFO, I’ll be good.”

“Dad, let’s get real here,” Karen said. “There are so many exciting options . . . I’m assuming you’ve been reading my emails. Websites, and dates, recommendations---they’re all there.”

Bobby had her on speakerphone. He was half paying attention and half watching the TV show with the two doofuses who drive around the country and pick through people’s barns and basements.

“I have indeed,” he lied. “But nothing’s jumped out, particularly.”

“You know something? You’re ticking everyone off again. Think it through.”

The fat guy was holding firm, trying to save twenty bucks on some old machine part. Bobby said, “I appreciate what you’re doing, Honey. My thing though is, what for? Why scramble?”

“No one’s saying that at all,” Karen said. “We just think, at this point . . .you should be having . . . some great experiences.”

“Before I deteriorate.”

“Okay, fine.”

Bobby said, “It not being an emergency, exactly . . . but kind of like, let’s get a move on.”

“Jesus, here we go,” Karen said. “I’m gonna have Leon call you later.” She hung up.

Bobby’d received his diagnosis eighteen days ago. Now his kids were imploring him to do stuff, to have some adventures while he was still intact. Visit New Zealand. Go on a tour that took you to six major league ballparks. Snorkel in Kauai. Live it up in Manhattan for a couple weeks. Even sky dive if he wanted.

What he’d done, once his news had sort of sunk in, he talked it over with a bartender he liked at a Mexican restaurant on Petaluma Boulevard.

“I have a friend of mine,” Bobby said. “Once at a little get-together he told me that if he had a terminal disease he’d kill his neighbor . . . The guy’d been doing things to irritate him for ten years. Small shit, but it built up.”

Rodrigo the bartender nodded and said, “You meaning you hob a leest?”

“A what?” Bobby said. “Oh, a list . . . No . . . But I can see how you could.”

Rodrigo didn't say anything. He started drying some beer mugs.

Bobby said, “There'd be five or six names on mine I guess . . . two for sure though.”

“Yes?” Rodrigo said. “You know some people, you wanna hurt them?”

“Not so much *want to*,” Bobby said, “but maybe I should.

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It wasn't the shortest way to go to Vegas, but he drove to Reno first and checked in at John Ascuaga's Nugget. Thirty-nine bucks a night mid-week, how could you beat it. Fancy room in one of the high towers, a wide-angle view of the snowcaps to the west and the ranch land to the north stretching into Lassen County.

Bobby always had a good feeling about this place. When he was young and hauling hay in an old '51 F6, he and Theresa would come up to the same Nugget, but in those days the accommodations were across the street in these little roomettes. He was trying to figure out

where they once were out the window, but wasn't sure. There was a movie complex down there now and some fast food joints. He remembered freezing cold nights when they'd duck from the room into the casino and there was a simple 24-hour coffee shop that had the best chile rellenos and pecan pie he'd ever tasted.

Theresa died in '95. He'd screwed that up, was on his third wife by then, June. He missed her.

Wife number two, Ellen, was the mother of his kids. She was sympathetic to his situation but that was the extent of it. No 'let me know if you need anything's. Not much warmth there. There may have been at one time.

June reacted differently, was genuinely upset, wanted to come down from Portland and help him. The problem was he never really cared for June. She talked all the time, and it was so goddamn frivolous, and she had let herself get heavy.

Still, it would be nice to have some company right now. He went downstairs and had dinner in the oyster bar. They'd moved it from its original location at the edge of the blackjack pit, but it was the same place and still good. Afterwards he wandered into the lounge for a

nightcap, a folk-rock band on stage with a female lead singer who wasn't bad, and he called June. She said give her a couple days to get organized and she'd be there, which was fine with him, no rush checking out.

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“What I'd like to do,” Bobby said, “is see a UFO and then stop off in L.A. and maybe kill a guy.”

June was in the passenger seat, sucking on a lifesaver. “Very funny,” she said.

Bobby said, “My dad was a space nut. It's a shame he didn't live to see what's coming back these days from the Hubble Telescope.”

“That's not UFOs though . . . What's that picture out now? The one with Forest Whitaker?”

“‘Arrival’. I saw it, it's bad science fiction . . . But you go on YouTube there's all kinds of stuff. NASA footage, airlines pilots who saw shit, and then of course Area 51, our deal here.”

June said, “*Your* deal, I'm afraid. But I'm enjoying the drive, it's lovely.”

They were on US 95 South, three hours into it, nothing but high desert out there, but Bobby agreed,

there was a soothing quality. “You’re looking a little thinner, you know it?” he said.

“You would have been prouder of me a month ago,” she said. “I went low-carb, but I’ve been putting some back on . . . We’re really going to Los Angeles though? After? That would be fun. I haven’t been there since 1984.”

“Before my time then . . . You went in the ocean?”

“No, we were inland. I understand there was more smog in those days, too.”

“I’d thought we’d spend a few days at Manhattan Beach,” Bobby said. He’d found one of his guys online. The prick was apparently living there now.

“How wonderful!” June said. “And you remember I’m a trivia buff. Did you know that’s where the Beach Boys surfed?”

“They didn’t surf, that was all fake,” Bobby said.

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They spent the night on the Vegas strip, Caesar’s Palace, Bobby always curious about the place. It was classy but a little corporate-feeling compared to the Nugget and the rooms didn’t have windows, at least not

theirs. In the middle of the night June got out of her bed and into his.

“Okay now that’s very premature, wouldn’t you say?” Bobby said.

“Not to me,” she said.

“I mean I’m going to be around for a while. I told you they gave me eighteen months . . . on the outside . . . but a year at the minimum.”

“Give or take.”

“What, we got a comedian here now?”

“I’m not holding you because I feel sorry for you.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

There’d been a physics guy named Bob Lazar who claimed he studied a not-from-this-world craft inside Area 51, and Bobby believed him.

This was back in the 80’s. What screwed Lazar in the end was he brought his friends out from Vegas on a couple nights to watch test flights people weren’t supposed to know about. The question was, test flights

of what? Bobby figured whatever they were it was all good.

You took I-15 for 25 miles and then 93 North for 90 until you came to a fork in the road, State Highway 375. It was mid-afternoon. “They call this the Tikaboo Valley,” Bobby said. “You seeing anything at all yet? I can’t really look because I don’t want to hit a cow.”

June said, “Nope. Nothing in the sky, and I’m not seeing any cattle either, quite frankly.”

“Well they tell you to be on the lookout, this stretch . . . You thirsty?” It felt like the middle of nowhere, but there was a little town coming up, if Bobby had it calculated right, 50 residents and a cafe, that was popular with the UFO-hunter crowd.

“I’ll admit, that does sound inviting right now,” June said. “But something you said . . . you’d kill someone?”

“I’m not sure . . . You dismissed that as a big joke.”

“Yes, but I’ve been turning it over a bit . . . I’m not saying I can understand it exactly . . .”

“But you can see it.”

June didn’t say anything.

“There’s a logic to it that you wouldn’t have considered . . . Right? . . . Because I’m personally going down the tubes either way.”

“Please will you stop saying that.”

“This guy, he did something to someone I once knew . . . It festers . . . He shouldn’t be walking around.”

“. . . as though nothing happened,” June said.

They were turning into the gravel parking lot, the little cafe sign flashing on and off, missing some bulbs.

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “Jeez, you sound like me now.”

There were two old-timers sitting at the counter and that was about it. “How would you do it?” June said, after the waitress took their order.

“I don’t know . . . Size up the situation, then work it out . . . Maybe a baseball bat.”

An RV pulled up outside and two couples came in talking loud and laughing. They were telling UFO stories. One of the men said he’d seen one twenty years ago in Prescott, Arizona, but none since.

The waitress took their plates and Bobby asked what she recommended for dessert and she said the pecan pie, and he said that sounded just fine.

If it wasn't as good as he remembered the old Nugget being, it was pretty darn close.

"How's yours?" he asked June.

"Amazing, actually," she said. "Who would have thought."

"And the coffee, just the right strength to wash it down . . . The whole nine yards pretty special."

"Let's go to Nova Scotia," June said.

"Say, *what* now?"

"It's not complicated," she said. "We get back in the car, we figure out where north east is, and we angle in that direction."

Bobby let it hang for a while. "Well, we might get lost along the way though," he said.

"We might," June said.