

A black guitar case is shown floating in space, tilted diagonally. The background is a vibrant, multi-colored nebula with shades of blue, purple, and orange, interspersed with bright, star-like points of light. The overall scene has a cosmic and ethereal feel.

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

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“There are no rules here. We are trying to accomplish something.” - Thomas Edison

Part One – Thesis

Chapter One

There are different kinds of heroes. There are heroes who race into burning buildings to save infants and kittens. There are heroes who stand up to corruption and intolerance. There are heroes who serve the poor of Calcutta, like Mother Teresa. Or heroes like Father Damian, working with the lepers of Molokai. Then there are the heroes who slave away at a thankless job for years, doing the honest thing, never tempted to take shortcuts or kickbacks. Or the Walter Mitty's of our world who imagine great wonders and accomplishments, saving us all from evil schemes of master criminals. Sullivan was none of these.

“Further Along”, the song goes “we’ll understand it...why others prosper though in the wrong.” Whenever Sullivan thought about the inequities and injustices in the world – a world consumed by personal and corporate greed – his blood would boil.

Now it must be recognized the Sullivan was a bit paranoid. Wherever he went, or worked, he felt that he just didn't fit in. He was even convinced that if Big Brother ever swabbed him for a DNA sample, it would confirm just that.

While Sullivan had no major debts, no major vices, and for that matter, no major accomplishments, he had achieved a plateau of reasonably comfortable, albeit boring living. Others living closer to the edge might have even envied him, but none would envy his nine-to-five existence.

For years he had scoffed at the Internet and “social networking”, considering such gimmicks as FaceBook, MySpace and Twitter as outposts for the socially inept or self-absorbed. But one day he had a life-changing idea.

Inspired by the writings of Spider Robinson, a Long Islander turned Canadian, he decided to test Spider's central fictional hypothesis – that there was intelligent life out there – intelligent life that was not alien to us (pun intended). Spider had posited an Interstellar Postal Union, which enabled him to communicate beyond our little blue marble – at least in books. Sullivan figured Postal Unions were passé now, what with e-mail bankrupting traditional means of communication.

So Sullivan (don't ever call him Sully) set up a FaceBook account, and announced to the world (and beyond) that he was volunteering for alien abduction – provided they didn't use the anal probe. It was the only real risk he had ever taken, short of parking 2 hours in a 90 minute zone. Then he waited.

Waiting came easily to Sullivan. His job primarily required waiting for other people to make small decisions so that he could then take small actions, such as documenting those small decisions in forms, databases and training curricula. So wait he did.

As luck would have it, he did not have to wait long. Two weeks later, after a particularly enervating day at work, he returned to his modest apartment to find a very average person waiting for him. This average person was of average height and weight, indeterminate age, and unremarkable face. Clutching a very ordinary-looking briefcase, his visitor asked if he were the Sullivan of FaceBook fame. “Who wants to know?” “Someone who can make a difference,” the stranger replied.

It was hard for Sullivan to think of his visitor as a stranger, since he was totally ordinary in demeanor, voice, wardrobe (Wal-Mart grade suit, non-descript shoes and open-collared white dress shirt – button-down of course). Sullivan liked button-down collars, so their encounter was off to a good start. Sullivan upgraded his visitor to “non-stranger” status.

“I saw your FaceBook page,” the non-stranger said. “Do you really believe there are aliens among us, other than half the adult population of Mexico?” “Certainly,” Sullivan replied. “How else can you explain that we did not blow up our planet years ago?”

“What do these aliens look like?” the visitor asked. “They would have to look just like us, so that they could fit in, and not draw attention to their presence,” said Sullivan.

“Why would you volunteer yourself for abduction,” asked the non-stranger (let’s hope he introduces himself soon so we can use his name in this dialog). “Because I’m bored to death, and it’s taking too long to get to that fulfillment,” said Sullivan.

“Would you want to give up all this?” asked the visitor, looking around Sullivan’s modest studio apartment. A small-screen TV, vintage stereo, tired laptop and ratty LazyBoy recliner commanded most of the space in what passed for a living room. “On second thought, I withdraw the question,” he concluded.

“My one question,” Sullivan intoned, “is why would aliens want to abduct anyone? For medical experimentation, recombinant DNA, or focus-group test marketing of a better operating system than Windows?”

“Others have already accomplished most of those tasks, save the better operating system. What we are really interested in is more in the area of cultural exchange and anthropology.”

“Before we continue this discussion, how about a name?” Sullivan requested. “It will make it easier for the author to record our dialog.”

“You can call me Bruhker,” the now Bruhker replied, relieving future readers immensely. “Bruhker with an hk, not ck,” Bruhker insisted. A subtle distinction to emphasize his unremarkable alienness.

“You’ve heard of all those programs for young college graduates who spend a year or two in Japan? Teaching American English to the Japanese? Well, we’ve got a similar program in place. A program of mutual benefit to all concerned.”

“So this isn’t one of those situations where I get whisked away in my bedclothes in the middle of the night?”

“Goodness no, we take a much more civilized approach. There is a weight limit of course, escape velocity being what is, but you will be allowed to bring along a decent wardrobe and a few personal items. Our standard contract also includes cold storage of your valuables during your absence. All we ask is your signature on a non-disclosure agreement, and waiver should the unexpected occur. Of course if the unexpected does occur, the non-disclosure agreement would be moot.”

“Escape velocity? You mean you don’t whisk people around via wormholes?” “Too unstable,” Bruhker replied. “We’d run the risk of sucking out all of Poughkeepsie with it.” Sullivan was intrigued, not only because he didn’t live in Poughkeepsie, but because this guy could be for real. “So you are willing to consider my request to ‘get away from it all’. This undoubtedly incurs expenses for you. What do you get out of it?”

“You need to understand our own social dilemma,” Bruhker replied. “Sure, we come from a more advanced civilization, with economic prosperity and political stability. But our society has reached a plateau of torpor and complacency. The large majority of our population are content with gourmet food and plush shelter, gainful employment and modest entertainment. But there are those of us who chafe under cornucopia conditions. And our artistic creativity is stifled by opulence.”

“Wait a second,” Sullivan interjected. “Are you telling me your world is as boring as my job? Then what would I be escaping to?”

“That would be entirely up to you. Our hope is that your time among us will inspire others to break out of their narrow confines, seeking adventure, taking risk, trying new things.”

“Tell me,” Sullivan interposed. “What prompted you to come to our planet, if your own is a utopia? Does peace and prosperity make you psychotic?”

“Far from it, Mr. Sullivan. But it does encourage the adventurous among us to seek out new experiences. To ‘boldly go where none have gone before’ so to speak. Our Foreign Service provides the perfect outlet for those who crave excitement, do not fear adrenaline, enjoy the daily drama of ‘fitting in’, and appreciate truly exotic cuisine. And our employee cafeteria has excellent brioche.”

“So if you ‘beam me up’ or whatever you do, where do I go, and what do I do when I get there?”

“Well, do you have any transferable skills? We don’t need any forms designed, annual reports written or databases crafted.” “Glad to hear it,” Sullivan replied.

“Have you any athletic prowess, artistic talent or musical skill?” Bruhker queried.

“I’ve never bench-pressed a Buick, and the Famous Artist School rejected my matchbook entry, but I do play a passable guitar,” Sullivan responded.

“Our Foreign Service runs an excellent language school, as might be expected. Indeed, some of our earliest ambassadors have gone on to successful literary careers off-world. You would be surprised how many of your own playwrights and poets are really our own people. Fitting in, while standing out.”

Sullivan pondered. “So then, your presence on our world involves multiple purposes? You’re not just here to keep an eye on us, deciding when we might become a danger to more than ourselves?”

“Just so,” Bruhker replied. “Our own world has become somewhat monistic – one language, one government, one diet, and one style of architecture. It took millennia for us to reach that point of efficiency. But there are those among us who crave diversity.”

“Now wait a second. I saw a Twilight Zone episode where humans wound up in a zoo, living an Ozzie and Harriet existence, while bug-eyed aliens gaped at them through the windows. What assurance can you give me that won’t happen to me?”

“First of all, we aren’t bug-eyed. What you see in me is not a disguise, but the result of parallel evolution. Second of all, we passed laws centuries ago prohibiting such treatment of off-worlders. It is not a Faustian bargain – besides you are the one who proclaimed to the entire Internet that you want out.”

“Some time away would be good for me. In another fifteen years I could quit my current soul-sapping service, and settle into mind-numbing retirement. But by then Florida will be under water, drowning all the blue-haired ladies, and turning their golf courses into bogs. How long would I be gone?”

“Given the energy cost to escape from your gravity well, we ask for a six-month commitment, though there are many of your kind who have been with us for years on end. Some fall into comfortable torpor, while others lead incredibly productive and exciting lives among us. How you respond to our environment is up to you.”

Now Sullivan kept a few thoughts to himself (an infrequent occurrence in his otherwise opinionated life). Was this guy for real, and what was he getting into? Did they just want to harvest his organs for transplant or smorgasbord? Would they miss him at work? Would he care? Could he get a good cup of coffee out there? And most important of all, was chocolate an Earth-only delicacy?

Sullivan had no fear of space travel. He never got seasick or carsick, had all his shots, including the current flu vaccine. His boring existence and modest income “inoculated” him against the by-products of all those pleasures of the flesh. Lungs untouched by smoke. Liver unscathed by demon rum. His venial sins never became venereal. A sense of pitch that kept his guitar in reasonable tune. And he had no overdue library books. All the auguries were in harmony.

“Where do I sign?” he inquired. “Get me out of here.”

Chapter Two

Sullivan had never been big on vacations. The added expense to go somewhere far away. Back aching from cramped snoozes on noisy jets and stuffy noses from their recycled air. Bad food and lumpy beds, plus mildew in the ice machine. Not to mention the prep time before the journey – catching up on your work, tossing out perishable food, holding your mail. And the tedious chores on your return – retrieving your mail, throwing out the furry food you missed first time, returning to a brand new backlog at work. And the credit card bills to follow.

But this time was different. For one, the Transportation Security Administration could learn a few things about airport security. Sullivan's carry-on luggage (including his Martin Dreadnought Guitar) was whisked quickly to the secret launch location (and no, we're not going to tell you where that is). Lots of leg room in the cabin, and he got one hell of a window seat.

There were other nice touches. Bruhker sublet Sullivan's apartment to house another "exchange student" while Sullivan picked up extra guitar strings. The in-flight movie: "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" suggested Bruhker had a sense of humor. Sullivan regretted not bringing his bathrobe, but then remembered he didn't have one. That was the only regret Sullivan could summon on that fateful day.

The question is, could it really be considered a "fateful" day? When you do something on a whim, is predestination involved? Did insanity run in Sullivan's family? Damned if he knew, being an orphan. They said his parents died in a plane crash, but what about those infant pajamas he remembered with the big S on his chest?

The launch vehicle followed the Foreign Service protocol – blending in. It reminded Sullivan of a friend's vintage '57 Chevy that was not all it seemed (with its 327 engine and 5-speed stick shift). The g-forces he experienced at launch were about the same. On the outside, a Lear Jet. On the inside a space shuttle that found its way to the dark side of the moon in short order.

Then it was on to the larger vessel that cleared the solar system, its escape blocked from earthly view by the conveniently located Moon. Sullivan lapsed into slumber just as the ship hit hyperspace.

Time for another chapter.

Chapter Three

First, an apology for the brevity of Chapter Two. There is a strong suspicion that pharmaceuticals compromised Sullivan's memory of the journey. His perceived brevity of that exodus may be a by-product of that chemical intervention.

Now, on with the story. "No preconceived notions" was Sullivan's mantra for the trip. He'd read enough science fiction novels, and viewed enough movies of future civilizations that would have led him to some impression of a world devoid of nature, with cities designed by germo-phobic anal retentives. Looking like a clean East Germany. Sullivan withheld his judgment, allowing his sense of wonder to take charge.

Did you ever breathe really clean air? I mean r-e-a-l-l-y clean air. No hint of diesel fumes or landfills. No leaf mold or restaurant dumpster aromas. No scent of skunk or stagnant pond? Perhaps just a hint of pine, on a cool winter day. The kind that reminded you of the York Peppermint Patty commercial?

How about air that was scrubbed clean of any perceivable impurity? Well that was what Sullivan inhaled when he first set foot on his brave new world. The bravery in this instance either related to his courage at setting out on his journey, or the courage of this new world, accepting him into their bosom (presuming they had bosoms).

Sullivan eyed an urban area devoid of power lines or telephone poles. There were some ramrod straight roads likely to appease the most anal-retentives, offset by gently arched roads off those main drags, for the more artistically inclined. It reminded him a bit of Camelot or Mont St. Michele (not to be confused with Chateau St. Michele, which had confused Sullivan on occasion). Taller buildings to the center, stepping down to structures of more human scale on the perimeter. Uniform green spaces beyond the city, punctuated by trees in seemingly random order. Of course, there is a formula for 'random'. (Ask the teenage bagger at your local supermarket. There is a Fortran formula for chaos which has more than a passing resemblance to U.S. foreign policy.)

There were many people walking in his range of vision, yet very few vehicles, and most of the latter appeared to be commercial conveyances or group transports. The weather reminded him of Poughkeepsie on a good day – shorts and shirtsleeves predominated, with an occasional light sweater or jacket. Poughkeepsie would be flattered by the comparison.

Schlepping his guitar and carry-on luggage, Sullivan proceeded through what must have been Customs, except everyone was smiling. There, a representative from the Foreign Service awaited him with a packet of information. "I am Dorsa," the trim and neat female informed him. "For your first month on Virja, I will help you acclimate to our culture, customs, diet and etiquette. You will be staying in a dormitory at our Language School while you acquire necessary skills. We will also be evaluating those off-world skills you bring with you to determine how they can best be assimilated into our culture."

Sullivan was proud of the fact that he could finger Major 7th chords, not to mention a smattering of Augmented and Diminished chords (though the latter were rarely called for in his usual vocal diet of folks songs, Beatles classics and Simon & Garfunkel hits). He also knew his way around the QWERTY keyboard, though this would prove of little utility here, and his computer skills were somewhat fledgling. (Note: Java code is not a secret formula at Starbuck's.).

“How far is it to the school?” Sullivan inquired.

“Just about everything on Virja is within walking distance of wherever you are,” Dorsa replied. “For energy efficiency reasons, our urban planners determined there was little reason to expend energy going to someplace else, because every place is pretty much the same. Every home lives within aroma range of a bakery. Every office or factory lies within walking distance of a worker’s home. And what with modern communication systems, many of those offices are virtual offices to follow you wherever you go. Soon we hope our next stage in automation will also permit virtual factories.”

Sullivan was a bit concerned about offices following him around. He was always grateful when he could leave his work behind at the end of each day. Go home, nuke some grub, tune his guitar (especially that dodgy middle D string) and surf the web. Hopefully his evaluators at the Language School would consider his musical talents more critical than his office skills.

True to her word, Dorsa escorted Sullivan about a quarter-mile on foot to the Language School dorm, where he was assigned a private room on the second floor. Efficient, yet attractive space – a step up from his old college dorm (which he had to share with a lunatic). A computer with an incomprehensible keyboard hinted at what would await him for the next 30 days. Sullivan was nevertheless relieved that the bathroom contained recognizable appliances, and the bed was quite comfortable and impeccably clean.

So much for shelter, what about food, Sullivan pondered. “You will have to adjust to our planet’s daily timetable,” Dorsa offered. “It is comparable to about 30 hours in your time reference, including a 10 hour sleep cycle. Any less than ten hours and human productivity and immunity are compromised. So ‘lights out’ is strictly enforced. Besides, there is no solar power available at that time. There are no night shifts in office or factory, for that would just drain our batteries, and compromise our cold start each morning.”

“A bell will ring for each mealtime, to help you acclimate. The main dining hall downstairs has an extensive menu of compatible cuisine.” Dorsa raised her eyes briefly, as if retrieving an inner thought. “You will have just enough time to unpack and wash up before the next meal.”

Dorsa excused herself, leaving Sullivan to his own devices (to wit one guitar and one computer with incomprehensible keyboard). He unpacked his meager belongings, grateful for clement weather, and eager to experience truly out-of-this world cuisine. Then the bell rang.