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Don't Listen

by John Rockwell

'Bird Brain Diet Cures Fear of Flying'

Grueck liked that headline. It slapped the dust out of his eyes and pulled them to the next line. Or what would have been the next line if he could have thought of one. The rest of the screen was still blank, like his mind. The words just wouldn't come tonight. He didn't have to finish it of course. Freelancing as a part-time psychic reporter wasn't what you'd call noble work after all. But if he quit now he might never get a chance to scoop reality again, and sometimes it was fun.

The flash of foresight he was waiting for lost out to a flashing message light. The computer wanted him to quit fooling around and get back to his real job. That job was never fun. Being an astronomer on the graveyard shift called for the kind of intelligence humans rarely possessed. It was found much more often in sleepwalking moles. There were times when he felt like they would have been better off hiring one, and times when he felt they had.

He yawned and nearly knocked himself out with the effort. When the stars stopped doodling around in front of his eyes he pressed the display button to see why the computer was bothering him. For the first time in a long time, in fact for the first time ever, it had a good reason.

"Device #18065: Translatable message received. Course of action desired -

1. Display message.
2. Display source of message.
3. Target other devices on message source.
4. Ignore message.

Options(s): _____"

This wasn't the kind of thing he could just brush off, not when the device it was talking about was a radio-telescope scanning stars so far away no one had even gotten around to naming them yet. He chose the first two options.

"Source: Grid 298. Coordinates: X=175, Y=22.

Message: Knock knock.....knock knock.....knock knock....."

The word kept repeating, daring him to answer. He knew what he was supposed to say but was damned if he'd say it. There was no telling what was out there waiting for an answer. If anything was. For all he knew it could be one of his colleagues playing a practical joke, though that didn't seem very likely. They joked about as often as he volunteered to give poetry readings to Australian aborigines. The thought of it being some kind of test made more sense. Credit was cash to his supervisors and it wouldn't be beyond them to spread around a few phony bills just to see who'd try to pocket them.

Treasure or test? He had five hours to figure out which one it was, and how honest he was.

The easiest way to prove it wasn't a test would be to get a longer message and find something in it that no one on earth could possibly have thought of. He aimed the twenty-seven radar, radio, and optical telescopes

under his control at the source of the signal to see what else the computer could dig up.

It quickly found conversations, thousands of them. He flipped a switch to start recording them and told the computer to show him the first sentence in a random sample.

- "1. I've wanted one of those for years.
2. Do wap, do wap, do wap.
3. It just doesn't taste the same if it's been killed first.
4. We'll be over tonight about eight.
5. If God wanted us to walk He would've given us legs.
6. It's not the heat, it's the humidity.
7. The announcement's set for five tomorrow.
8. Forty-three workers drowned on the Kyles Wall today.
9. You won't feel a thing.
10. They don't know what they're doing."

There wasn't much there that couldn't have come from earth, he thought, disappointed. The bit about the legs was good though. He played back that conversation, and followed it up with the one about drowning on a wall. Put together, they painted a picture of a very wet world. The more he listened, the more it sounded like a very real one too. The consistency, and weirdness, argued against any other explanation.

The world was called Eastaboga by the people who lived there, only they weren't people at all. At least not in the human sense. If he interpreted their casual references about each other correctly, they must have looked kind of like jellyfish, only thicker. Sort of peanut-butter-and-jellyfish. They lived on an ocean world where the water was only three or four feet deep at it's deepest. The only dry land was a network of walls the Eastabogans had built themselves, first to fence in their favorite fish for harvesting and later to fence out the other Eastabogans who wanted to grab an unearned share of that harvest. At some point the walls had become borders, giving them something else to fight over. Unlike here though, the wars finally

stopped. He heard enough to figure out that that was due to the invention of something called Monoblast. He couldn't find out much more about it than it's name, but his eavesdropping still paid off.

Like most intelligent races, the Eastabogans had made a mess out of their world on the road to civilization. For awhile they were surrounded by garbage - on the ground, in the sky, in the water. The whole place stank and the first jellyfish that was born with a nose told them so. After centuries of clearing the world's huge kelp forests to make room for themselves, they began to think of the kelp as more than just 'that slimy green stuff'. They finally saw it as life - their life. All along the kelp had been silently trading it's oxygen for their carbon dioxide. Each time they cut down another stalk they lost another trade. A million stalks might not have mattered, but cutting billions did. Since jellyfish brains ran on oxygen they knew they that if they kept on going like that sooner or later they'd have to make a choice, breathe harder to stay smart or breathe normal and get dumb.

The announcement he'd taped solved their problem - they had discovered how to build a better tree. This new tree was a chemical power plant that could turn common pollutants into oxygen several times faster than a forest of seaweed could on it's best day. The science guild that created it knew they'd need the support of the other science guilds on Eastaboga to put the solution in place, so they sent the formula out over an open channel to get it. Grueck taped that too.

Stealing didn't come easy to him. He nervously copied the tape onto a diskette, stuck the diskette into a magazine, and then tried to calm down. The world of the Eastabogans seemed real enough, but traps were real too. He jumped up out of his seat and ran over to the tape racks. Grabbing one from a few weeks back, he switched it for the one the signals had been captured on. As soon as he sat back down he quickly realigned all of the telescopes, fastforwarding them to where they would have been if he hadn't stopped them to take a look at Eastaboga. When he finished that he hopped out of his

chair to cover another track. It went like that for most of the night. Sit down, jump up, cover another track, sit down, jump up, cover another track. By morning his legs were as tired as his head from all the worrying.

He surreptitiously watched the day shift for any signs of a conspiracy as they came in and didn't see any. There was nothing out of the ordinary as they took their places and the program director went through the usual chant with him.

"All quiet?"

"Yup."

"Any problems?"

"Nope."

"Okay, go get some sleep."

Sleep was the second thing on his mind. Finding out if the formula worked was first. As soon as he got home he put the diskette into his computer and called up a database that specialized in chemical analysis. One of the programs there took the chemical combination he gave it and projected the results. In this case it was garbage in and big bucks out. The result was oxygen. All he needed now was a way to make sure the money wound up in his hands.

He needed some sleep too though, and spent the next six hours lying in bed trying to get it. He would have spent nine to ten hours in bed if the director hadn't called.

"What's up?" Grueck asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"I need you to come in early tonight. There's something we've got to talk to you about before your shift starts. Can you make it?"

"Sure. I'll come in around six. Is that early enough?"

"That'll do."

Grueck dragged himself out of bed after the director hung up. There was no reason to stay in it now, worrying could be done just about anywhere. Not that he had anything to worry about. The Eastabogans were real, their formula proved it. No one on earth would have kept quiet about something

like that. So if they were real then this wasn't a trap, and if it wasn't a trap he didn't have anything to worry about. Except that meeting.

The time for the meeting came a lot quicker than he would have liked, but there was no stopping the clock. When he walked in the director looked up from the printout on his desk just long enough to let him know he wasn't smiling. "Close the door before you sit down."

He tried to shut it without making a sound. The quieter this went the better.

The director read another page of the printout. Then another. And another. He kept reading until there was nothing left read, then flipped back to the beginning. Grueck was afraid he'd start reading the whole thing over again. He didn't. Instead, he folded his hands on top of it and looked up to see what he could read on Grueck's face. This reading took less time and didn't have a happy ending either. "I thought you said nothing happened last night?"

"Nothing did."

"According to this log something did. I'd say we made a pretty remarkable discovery. What else would you call this 'bird brain diet'?"

Grueck felt every muscle in his body let out a whew. "I'm sorry, I didn't think you'd mind if I played around with that story in my spare time."

"I don't remember putting any 'spare time' in your job description. This is a government project, which means the taxpayers are paying for it. Don't you think they're already wasting their money on enough crap without you adding to the load?"

"Well, if you put it that way..."

"There is no other way to put it. Look at this junk I pulled out of the computer." He flipped through the pages in front of him, calling out the headlines as he did.

"Walking Shark Terrorizes Mountain Village.

Army Tests Nuclear Hand Grenades.

Government Study Concludes Young People Live Longer.

McFingers - New Guinea's First Fast Food Restaurant. 'We Cater to Cannibals.'"

He rolled up the printout and jammed it into the trash can. "This is your only warning. If you even whisper one more stupid idea your job will go where your stories just went. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes."

"Good. You can start work early today. I figure you owe the taxpayers the time."

Grueck didn't argue. He knew there were probably a lot more secrets he could steal from the sky and didn't want to lose his key to it. He went back to work and made sure his spare time was filled with doing nothing, just like his boss wanted. And not just that day either, but every day for the next four months. That was how long it took for him to find a small company involved in environmental cleanup, spend all of his savings on it's stock, and then anonymously provide it with the formula. The company didn't have anything to lose by testing it and when it did it found out the same thing Grueck had - it worked. They patented it, made it public, and promptly grew from a small to a medium-sized company. Grueck's net worth grew right along with it.

No one found out he was the one who'd sent them the formula and he intended to keep it that way. He didn't want people watching him while he was trying to watch the Eastabogans. The day he cashed in his stock for fifteen times what he paid for it was the day he turned the telescopes back in their direction. He was just in time to catch a commercial.

"Folks, don't just sit there and watch your car rust. Come on down and trade it in for a SunEater, the world's first plant car. Buy one of these babies when it's a sub-compact and in no time at all you'll own the finest luxury car available. The longer you own it the bigger it gets, and the bigger it gets the more it's worth. How can you beat a deal like that? These cars make money faster than a loan shark in heat. Other dealers say their cars are in a special class all by themselves, but how many can say

they're a brand new species? I'll tell you how many. None! Ours is it folks! So come on down today and get a SunEater while they're still as small as the price. You might not be able to afford one tomorrow."

The salesman hooked at least one person in the audience - Grueck. He wanted to find out how those plant cars were made, and how anyone could make money selling them on a world made out of water. He found out the answer to his second question first.

The same walls that divided countries into states and states into cities on Eastaboga also gave it it's roads. And universities. They were the only place you could go to to invent something that couldn't be invented underwater. Although the average jellyfish, like the average man, had better things to do than to help his world advance, those who could honestly call themselves smart fell into a much larger class on there than they did here. There were more than enough of them to crowd out any commoner who tried to get near the walls. Unless that commoner was a salesman of course. It seemed the only thing this scientific elite liked better than inventing new things was buying new things.

Grueck followed talk of the plant car along the airwaves until he came across someone who was telling someone else how to build one. He recorded that conversation and then put the telescopes back where they were supposed to be. One breakthrough a night was enough.

This time it took over a year for the company he invested in to turn a profit, but when it did his bank account shot up to dizzying heights. He still kept his role a secret though. He was waiting to get something from the Eastabogans that would be so incredible that both his fame and fortune would last forever.

Monoblast turned out to be just what he was looking for. It was as good as world peace and worth twice as much.

The director didn't seem to notice his smile when he came in the next morning. "All quiet?" he asked, beginning the usual chant.

"Yes."

"Any problems?"

"Not for me."

The director gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean my problems are over." He handed him a copy of his last stock statement showing a net worth in the millions. "I took your advice and started only saying things that made sense. You can see for yourself that the companies I said them to did pretty damn good. They made millions and so did I. Thanks."

The director stood there staring at the statement with a stunned look on his face.

"Maybe some day you'll figure out how to listen," Grueck said, leaving him behind.

The discovery of Monoblast had to be handled a little differently than his first two secrets. For one thing, if it was made public too fast it would be worthless. Peace had to come in stages if he was going to make any money off of it, and the first stage required the building of a bomb. Unlike most bombs, this one didn't have to explode. All it had to do was make the world explode.

Grueck spent the next year adapting the Eastabogans' design to Earth's geography, and then spent another two years making sure the engineers he'd hired built everything exactly to spec. That job would have been a little easier if he'd known how his inventions were supposed to work instead of just knowing that they did. As it was, he had to bluff and guess his way through every conversation he had with the project foreman until the man started guessing on his own and finished it.

When everything was finally ready there were two new egg-shaped spheres the size of a house sitting on each of Earth's magnetic poles and millions of strange wristbands in the hands of the world's poorest people. By this time word had gotten out that the anti-pollution trees and plant cars were his inventions and they were dying to know what he was going to come up with next. They expected whatever it was to be great and he didn't intend to

disappoint them. The minute he was convinced he'd done everything right he called a press conference to let them know just how great it was, and by extension, how great he was.

"I'd like to make a short statement first," he said, quieting the roomful of reporters, "and then I'll answer all of your questions. Most of you know me by my inventions, not by my ambitions. That will change right now. My greatest ambition has always been to create world peace. I know, it sounds like something you've all heard before in a beauty contest. I'd never win a beauty contest though, and these words have never had the meaning they have today. So I'd suggest you listen now. You can always laugh later if the mood strikes you.

Those egglike structures I've built on Earth's magnetic poles have coiled the world's magnetic field into a tight spring and locked it in place. If anything happens to them, the coil will spring, forcing the field to flip-flop every few seconds. Those of you who have a scientific background should be able to figure out what this means. For those of you who haven't, I'll explain. When you flip the field of a magnet the magnetic domains in it make a small pop. Flip it often enough and fast enough and the object will pop. Quite literally."

The reporters looked at each other, wondering if it wasn't Grueck who'd flipped.

"I see we have the need for a demonstration." He pushed a couple of buttons on the wristband he was wearing, then waited. Within seconds the floor shook briefly, as if a very small earthquake had just hit right below the building. "Pretty amazing stuff, isn't it? Imagine how it would feel if those eggs let the whole coil loose instead of just a couple of turns in the loop." He let the picture sink in before going on. "By the way, that quake was felt all over the world and right now people are probably going crazy trying to figure out what caused it. Only the people in this room know the answer to that so if you get nothing else out of this conference today, you'll at least have that scoop." He paused to let sink in too.

"Now, I'm not some kind of kook who sits around thinking up ways to destroy the world and then makes it an easy thing to do. Rest assured that anything short of a nuclear explosion won't make a dent in those eggs, so you don't have to worry about them being accidentally destroyed."

"Why did you put them there in the first place if you didn't want us to worry about them going off?" one of the reporters shouted from the back of the room.

"I said I didn't want you to worry about them going off *accidentally*. I do want you to worry about them being set off, or shut off, *on purpose*. Not by me of course, but by the people I've donated these wristbands to. Each wristband is a voting machine, monitored by the eggs through the magnetic field. Once a person puts one on and registers their fingerprint using the dial on top, they can vote to destroy the world simply by taking it off. The math works out like this. The number of signals being sent are compared to the number that have been started. If the ratio drops below fifty percent then boom, the world goes away.

I'll take your questions now."

The room went silent while his announcement sank in. World peace had always been a nice thought, but never a serious one. Now that it might be they didn't know how to take it. Gruek's earlier inventions had proven his abilities, and helped thousands of people in the process. They couldn't just hand the world over to him though. Sooner or later he'd turn out as bad as all the other saviors that had come before him. With that in mind, they began earnestly looking for flaws in his plan.

"Dr. Grueck," one of them said, standing up, "I think I probably speak for a lot of us here when I say that this idea sounds, well, to be honest, more than a little crazy. Do you really think the world's most powerful armies are just going to sit back and let you force peace on them?"

"I really don't think they have a choice."

"Of course they do. They could just pack up the eggs and dump them in a warehouse somewhere and forget about them."

"Hmm, that's a good idea, but it's also an old one. The eggs keep track of their position relative to the poles. If they ever get more than a hundred yards away they'll shut themselves off. It'll be the same as if they were deliberately destroyed."

"Don't the poles move by themselves anyway?"

"Not any more. The eggs stabilized them when they stabilized earth's magnetic field."

Seeing no way around the eggs, they turned their attention to the wristbands. "What if we made a whole stack of those wristbands and then turned them on to keep the eggs happy?"

"It wouldn't do you any good. They have to be on an arm before the fingerprint can be read, and only one signal can be sent per fingerprint. The wristbands can also tell the difference between a human arm and a mechanical or animal arm so you can't just stick them on a bunch of fake arms."

"What happens when someone dies?"

"Someone's born. Give them a wristband."

"But what happens if enough people die to lower the population level?"

"I guess we'd be in a lot of trouble then, if I hadn't already thought of that too. Nature could cut our numbers as naturally as man could, so there's an algorithm that allows for a gradual decline. As far as epidemics go, let's hope we only have small ones."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself. Especially when you're bound to become a target if you're not full of crap. Why do I get the feeling you haven't told us everything yet?"

"Perhaps because you're not an idiot." He pulled back his shirt collar to show them a larger version of the wristband hanging around his neck. He had a regular one on his wrist too. "Several times a day this collar does a quick blood scan to make sure I haven't been drugged. It beeps if I haven't been, giving me two minutes to touch the dial on my wristband. If that sequence gets interrupted you can expect to hear from the eggs."

"What happens if you're in an accident?"

"If I were you, I'd make sure I wasn't. Don't get me wrong though, I know I'll die some day. Before that happens I'll pass this collar on to someone who'll look after the world."

"Lord over it you mean."

"Now now, don't get hostile. I'm doing this for your own good."

"There, you see. You're already putting yourself above us. You should have said for our own good, like you still thought you were one of us."

"That's hard to do when I'm so much smarter," Grueck said, showing his irritation. They should have been thanking him instead of criticizing him.

"And much more sensitive too," another man said. "Now that you've got us over a barrel I guess we better cater to your every need, right, so you want get pissed off and blow us all up."

"I'd have to be very unhappy to do that, because I'd be blowing myself up too. It's not as bad as you apparently think though. There is a force that will keep my hunger for power in check."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"My ego. I want to be remembered as the man who brought peace to the world, not the man who blackmailed it into submission. Of course, I will expect a little compensation for my effort."

"Okay, here we go. What's it going to take to keep you happy?"

"Not much. I didn't charge the poor anything for their wristbands, but I will be charging everyone else five bucks apiece. That's not such a bad deal is it? For five bucks each you get to save the world and I get to live comfortably. And I won't even force you to buy one. You could still accomplish the same thing by sharing some of your wealth with the poor. Keep them happy and they'll be less likely to vote you out of existence."

He stepped down off the podium and left through a back door. As soon as he was gone the reporters swarmed around the man he'd left behind to start distributing the wristbands. They were still a cynical lot, but not to the point of betting against someone who'd just proved he could cause a worldwide

earthquake with the push of a button.

A lot of people saw it their way during the days that followed. After a group of scientists came out and said there was a good chance his machines could do exactly what he claimed, the rush became a stampede. Pretty soon it was hard to find someone who wasn't wearing one. A lot of people played both angles, getting a wristband for themselves and putting a little more into the pot for the poor.

The end result was world peace, and people weren't quite as happy with that as they'd always thought they'd be. It wasn't the lack of war and lost opportunities for a violent death that bothered them, it was having peace shoved down their throats. Being forced to share what they had with the poor was equally grating, if not more. He might have said it was voluntary but how many people could you afford to let starve when they could get even with the flick of their wrist?

Despite the resentment the rich and middle-to-do felt toward him, they still agreed they should keep him as happy and as safe as possible while he had those machines on his side. The poor didn't have any argument with that either. That's why no one complained when the government put him under it's protection at the taxpayers' expense. He was safer that way. He had no complaints either. The two Marine divisions assigned to protect him stayed out of his way and made it much easier to go wherever he wanted. People tended to respect a man whose bodyguards came equipped with their own tanks and air support.

The only other thing he asked for that wasn't up for sale was the telescope project. He could have built his own but that would have wasted time. He wanted to get back to listening to the Eastabogans as soon as he could. No one could figure out why he wanted it, useless as it had turned out to be, so they shrugged their collective shoulders and gave it to him. The minute he got it he sent everyone home and left the Marine outside to make sure they didn't come back.

In the silence that followed he began turning the telescopes back toward

Eastaboga, musing over his newfound power as he did. It felt good to know he could have just about anything he wanted by asking for it. No house was too big, no car too fancy. If he felt like going out to dinner with one of his favorite movie stars someone would arrange it, and then pick up the tab. If he saw a woman he fancied...well, who knew what would happen. He could get away with making demands that would get lesser men arrested. That brought a smirk to his face. There was a long list of women he'd like to spend at least a night's worth of time with. As long as he was discreet, it wouldn't really matter what he did. He was still running down the list, trying to prioritize his desires, when the telescopes merged on Eastaboga and a message suddenly popped up on the screen.

"Hello Dr. Grueck." The words had come unprompted. Seconds passed, and then another string followed. "Well, aren't you going to say hello back?"

"Hello," he typed slowly, looking around the room to see if there was a camera watching him.

"There, that's better. We were wondering how long it would take your curiosity to steer you back to us."

He frowned and typed "Us?".

"Yes, us. You know, your friends. The Eastabogans."

This definitely wasn't good. The Eastabogans weren't supposed to know about him and no one else on earth was supposed to know about them. He had a sinking feeling that it really was one of them talking to him.

"You know who I am?" he asked out loud.

"Of course we do. You were the one we chose to help us."

While he was reading the words it suddenly dawned on him that whoever he was talking to had just answered his spoken question. He hadn't typed it into the computer. "Who am I talking to, and how can you hear me?"

"My name is Jawhaloe, and we can hear you because our receivers are much much better than yours. We've been able to pick up individual conversations for quite some time now. Three hundred of your years, roughly speaking. And I'll tell you what, most of what we heard was pretty boring."

"So why did you keep listening?"

"Because sooner or later we knew someone like yourself would start listening to us too. In fact, we were so sure of it that we created a powerful transmitter to broadcast the conversations we wanted you to hear."

"I appreciate your efforts, but why bother? If you've been listening to us that long then you've got to know we don't have much to offer in return."

"Sure you do. The description of our world was quite accurate. We lack many of the raw materials that you have in abundance. This seemed like a good way to borrow some. We're even going to give you another gift free of charge. It's the blueprints for an advanced cargo spaceship. It shouldn't take you long to reach us once you've built it."

"Why don't you just build one and come here?"

"We could, but that wouldn't be very efficient. We don't travel very well and couldn't build more than a couple in any case. You, on the other hand, can build hundreds. There's no need to be modest about it either. We know you can."

"I guess we probably could, but why would we want to?"

"Because we're friends?"

"Sorry, but I don't have any friends."

"Then how about doing it out of gratitude? I suspect we've made you far richer than you ever imagined you'd be."

"A simple thanks should take care of that."

"Charity?"

"Too many poor people here already."

"How about fear of death then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we only gave you half the truth. The eggs you built work but your wristbands don't. Ours do, and they're hooked to your eggs. So let me put it to you this way - do you want to be friends or do you want to be scrambled?"