

FREE BEER AND THE WILLIAM CASEY SOCIETY

by ALLEN M. STEELE

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second short story of mine which was published in an SF magazine; the first, "Live From The Mars Hotel" saw print in the mid-December 1989 issue of Isaac Asimov 's Science Fiction, and "Free Beer and the William Casey Society" followed two issues later, in the February '89 issue of the same magazine.

The story was inspired by an off-hand comment made by Art Dula, a Texas attorney specializing in space law—yes, there is such a field—when he spoke at the founding conference of the International Space University, held at MIT in April, 1987. Art was delivering a presentation on commercial space activity, and during the course of his speech he happened to remark that the NASA space shuttles were capable of delivering 2,000 gallons of beer into orbit.

Everyone laughed, of course, and I wrote this odd figure down in my notebook. It wasn't until several months later, though, when I rediscovered my notes from the ISU conference, that this story occurred to me. I wrote a letter to art and asked if he was just making a rhetorical comment; he wrote back and told me that he wasn't, and explained his reasoning, which is faithfully reported in this story.

Bob Jennings, the proprietor of the Fabulous Fiction SF bookstore

in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the rest of the gang who hung out there on Friday afternoons, helped me develop some of the other bits and pieces. I set the whole thing in the near-future background I had created for my novel Orbital Decay (my first fiction sale, which wasn't published until many months after this story was published); as it turned out, it would be the first of several short stories and three more novels I would write in this future history.

It is now dated somewhat by the subplot regarding the late, not-so-great U.S.S.R. and the paranoia which underlined American relationships with the Russians. When I included this story in my collection, Rude Astronauts, I was tempted to update the story to compensate for recent historical events. I chose not to do so; any attempt to do so would be contrived at best, and I'd rather let this minor anachronism remain as a tombstone to the Cold War.

No one noticed this story when it was published in IASFM. I was still an unknown writer at the time, and it was overshadowed by a Hugo-winning novella which appeared in the same issue, Judith Moffett's "Tiny Tango." Since then, it has been translated into Portuguese and Japanese; when the British edition of Rude Astronauts was published, the artist who painted the cover chose a scene from "Free Beer" as the subject. Yet this is only the second time this story has been reprinted in the U.S. (besides Rude Astronauts...hey, did I mention that I just published a small-press collection?). It's one of my personal favorites, and I'm proud to have it reappear in Harsh Mistress.

-AMS

St. Louis, May 1993

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Cowboy Bob told me this story one slow Wednesday night while we were hunched over the bar in Diamondback Jack's, so I can't make a strong case for its veracity. If you drink and hang around in barrooms, you should know that half the stories you hear are outright lies, and the other half are at least slightly exaggerated. And one would have to be more than a little gullible to completely believe a former beamjack named Cowboy Bob. Gullible, stoned, or both.

If it weren't for the events which happened after Bob told me about the Bill Casey Society and the Free Beer Conspiracy on Skycan, I wouldn't be bothering to pass this yarn along. I'm a respectable journalist; I don't

trade in hearsay. But maybe there's a moral in the story. If not a moral, then at least a warning.

Diamondback Jack's was a hole-in-the-wall beer joint on Merritt Island, Cape Canaveral, about two miles down Route 3 from the Kennedy Space Center. It's a dive for space grunts, which means that it's not the sort of place to take the kids. In fact, tourists, space groupies, execs from the space companies, NASA honchos and most media people are unwelcome in Jack's. Not that the place is all that attractive: windowless, weather-beaten pine walls, oil-splattered littered sand parking lot, busted plastic beer sign, clusters of Harley-Davidsons and GM pickup trucks parked outside. It looks like the sort of northern Florida redneck joint where you can get a cold stare for requesting a Vodka Collins instead of a Budweiser or get hit over the head with a pool cue for fouling someone's shot. Appearances aren't deceiving, either. You're better off drinking in the fern bars down on Cocoa Beach.

But if you can survive a few consecutive nights in Jack's without being punched out or thrown out, you're on the way to joining the regulars: professional spacers whose lives revolve around the Cape and the space business. Shuttle pilots, launch pad ground crews, firing room techs, spacecraft mechanics, flight software writers, cargo loaders, moondogs, the Vacuum Suckers, and beamjacks.

Inside, Diamondback Jack's is all space. On the walls are framed photos and holos of Mark I, II, and III shuttles lifting off, of beamjacks tethered to sections of powersats, moondogs building the mass driver at Descartes station, Big Dummy HLVs coasting into orbit, and Olympus Station revolving like a huge wheel in geostationary orbit above a crescent earth. The bulletin board near the door is pinned with job openings and torn-out articles from Aviation Week. Behind the long oak-top bar, along with the varnished and mounted skin of the rattlesnake that Jack Baker claims to have killed while fishing in the Everglades ("Sumbitch crawled into my boat and I kilt it with my shotgun. Blew the bastard's head clean off."), are snapshots of spacers past and present, dead and alive, unknown and infamous: Tiny Prozini, Joe Mama, Lisa Barnhart, Virgin Bruce Neiman, Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, Monk Walker, Mike Webb, Eddie the Gentle Goon, Sandy Fey. There's a picture of Jack Baker, as a skinny young kid, standing with Robert A. Heinlein, taken at a science fiction convention many years ago. And there's a picture of Cowboy Bob, wearing a hardsuit with his helmet off, sneering at the camera. He's wearing his trademark Stetson in that picture.

I think Bob was born with that tan felt Stetson on his head. I don't think

it could be removed without surgery. Maybe he's got a pointed head underneath. With his white beard, wrinkled eyes and bad teeth, though, he's no singing cowpoke or last noble horseman. Bob was a space grunt. Once he told me he couldn't stand horses.

When I knew him, Cowboy Bob was one of those hard-up unemployed cases who were regular fixtures in Jack's, pissing away the money they had made years ago as beamjacks on the powersat project. Jack was one of those semi-skilled young turks who had signed on with Skycorp and spent two tough years in orbit on Olympus Station—Skycan, as the vets knew the giant orbital base. They went because the pay was good, or for the adventure, or because they were wanted back home by the law, the I.R.S., or their former spouses. The ones who survived the experience and didn't screw up came home to small fortunes in accumulated back-pay and bonuses. Those guys bought restaurants or small businesses, or just bought condos on the Cape and were lazy for the rest of their lives.

Some other vets, though, screwed up and lost much of their pay to fines and penalties. Those guys came back with not much more money in the bank than they had before they left. Most of the grunts left the industry. The ones who stayed, for the most part, tried to find ground jobs on the Cape, or went overseas to work for the Europeans or the Japanese. A handful of diehards tried to get another space job.

Cowboy Bob, the former Utah goat-roper who couldn't stand horses, was one of those in the last category. Skycorp wouldn't rehire him, though; nor would Uchu-Hiko or Arianespace. So he took small jobs for the little companies which did short-term subcontract work for NASA or the Big Three. But I don't think he ever left Earth again after he finished his contract on Skycan; his jobs were always on the ground. I always figured that was because of his drinking problem.

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So Bob spent his nights in Diamondback Jack's, swilling beer, talking shop with the techs and other unemployed space grunts, making sour-breathed passes at the college cuties who slummed in Jacks' during spring break, keeping his feelers out for job leads. Shooting the bull with anyone who would buy the next round. That's how he told me the story, that Wednesday night when the place was dead, about the Skycan beer scam.

He was already drunk when I sat down next to him at the bar. I signalled to Jack to bring me a Bud, and the first thing Bob said to me was

the sort of thing one would expect from an inebriated wreck. Cocking his head toward the door, he asked, "You just came in, didn't ya, Al?"

I nodded. "Did you see any cars parked out there?" he asked.

"Sure, Bob. Yours. Mine. Jack's. Whose car are you looking for?"

He cast me a look suggesting that I had become stupid since the last time he had seen me. "Brown Toyota-GM Cutlass. One or two men sitting inside." He paused, and added, "William Casey Society sticker on the rear window. Remember what I told you last Saturday?"

I shook my head as Jack pushed a tallneck in front of me. "I wasn't here last Saturday, Bob."

(Of course, I didn't say where I had been last Saturday. There's nothing wrong with attending a routine press conference at KSC, unless you're a patron at Jack's. Spacers and reporters have an acrimonious relationship going back to die days when Project Apollo press pool reporters gave NASA a new definition—Never a Straight Answer. Jack used to keep a bag of Morton's salt underneath the counter for the novice journalists who wandered into his bar looking for sources, to dump on their head as soon as they pulled out their notebooks "so the bloodsucking leeches will wither up and die." My presence was tolerated only because I was low-key about my profession and because I never brought my work into Jack's. So the less said about my stringer work for the *Times*, the better.)

"Huh," Bob said, wearing the vaguely puzzled expression of a heavy drinker facing short-term memory lapses. "Maybe I didn't tell you about it." He looked towards the door again. "Well, is there a car like that out there?"

"I didn't see one. But I don't think I'd recognize a Casey Society sticker if I saw one."

Now Cowboy Bob had my curiosity worked up. Perhaps that was his intent all along; get me involved in a conversation and cage drinks off me all night. I decided to play along. It was a slow, humid summer night, and I was in the mood for a tall tale.

I got Jack to bring Cowboy Bob another Miller's and I pulled out my cigarettes. Bob took a long hit off his beer, tilted the frayed rim of his hat back a half inch, and leaned a little closer to me. "Did I ever tell you about how we got 444 cases of beer up to Skycan? Well..."

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Ten years ago (Cowboy Bob told me) his crew was doing the final work on SPS-1, the first large-scale solar power satellite to be built by Skycorp. Almost five years and the labor of nearly three hundred men and women had gone into the project, not to mention about \$10 billion in corporate investments and government loans. The result was the 21st century equivalent to the Golden Gate Bridge: a landmark achievement in space construction. All that remained to be done before the beginning of the low-power tests was the final installment of the microwave dish antennas at both ends of the thirteen mile span of the powersat.

“So we were pretty proud of what we had done here,” Bob recalled. “There would be other powersats, of course, but this was the first big one, and we were the crew that was putting on the finishing touches. That called for some kind of celebration, right? So one night a few guys from the second shift got together in one of the rec rooms and started talking about what we wanted to do. As it turned out, everyone wanted a beer bust.”

The problem with that, of course, was that both Skycorp and NASA had stringent regulations against alcoholic beverages being made available to space work crews. The rules were tightly enforced; NASA inspectors searched all outbound orbital and lunar crews for booze, and Skycorp’s security cops on Olympus Station had already found and torn out two stills aboard the space station. Skycorp had tried to compromise with the beamjacks’ thirst by providing in the rec rooms non-alcoholic near-beer—a weak, watery brew which tastes like chilled boar whizz.

“That just wasn’t good enough,” Bob said. “I mean, we’d been gagging on that stuff for the past eighteen months. We wanted real beer. Budweiser, Miller’s, Bush, Rolling Rock, Black Label...anything!”

He hefted his latest bottle to show what real beer looked like. “At this point, y’know, nobody gave a damn about Skycorp’s rules. The job was done, our money was in the bank. Once the last bank of cells was laid down and the antennas were installed, we’d all be shipped home and it would be the end of a long tour of duty. So we were willing to take some risks, break some regs. Who cared? We were entitled to a good blowout, man.”

Getting beer onto Skycon entailed a smuggling operation, of course. In the past, Skycon crews had managed to bribe KSC ground crews into packing off-limits personal items into the orbital transfer vehicles which resupplied Olympus Station on a weekly basis. A network of reliable

connections at the Cape, therefore, was already in place. But the stuff which had been stashed into the OTVs before they were loaded into the cargo bays of the shuttles—tape players, cassettes, comic books, Monopoly games, and even the occasional fifth of whiskey or vodka—had taken up little room in the OTVs and could be easily hidden from NASA inspectors. The more the conspiring beamjacks thought about it, the more they realized that, in order to get enough beer into space for a proper party, this operation demanded smuggling an unprecedented volume of contraband into orbit.

“Dog-Boy pulled out a calculator and figured it out,” Bob continued. “A Mark II shuttle’s OTV had a cargo capacity of 65,000 pounds, which translated to about 1,000 gallons, water or beer. That was about 444 cases of 12-ounce cans.”

He paused and gazed at his empty bottle; I gave Jack the high sign to bring us another round. It looked as if I was going to have to pump a thousand gallons of beer into Cowboy Bob to get the story, which was probably what Bob wanted me to do. But the yarn was getting good and I wasn’t about to start being cheap. Jack silently put another round in front of us—he had already deprived Bob of the keys to his Jeep—and the former beamjack continued his story.

“Of course, Dog-Boy made that calculation just to give us an idea of what could be done. ‘Of course that’s absurd,’ he said. But once he told us it could be done...” He laughed, shaking his head.

“You only had about a hundred people up there,” I said. “Ten gallons of beer for every crewmember was a little overkill, don’t you think?”

“You’re missing the point, Al!” Bob slapped his hands down on the bartop. “It wasn’t a matter of whether everyone had a six-pack or a hundred gallons. We had just gotten through building a nineteen-square-mile structure in space. There was nothing we couldn’t do! We were the best space construction crew there had ever been! So it was...it was like...”

“A matter of pride.”

“Hell yeah! It wasn’t having beer that mattered. It was *getting* the beer, that was the principle. The challenge was the thing.” He shrugged and picked up his beer. “So what the fuck? We decided to do it.”

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So the handful of beamjacks involved in the discussion—Bob, Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, Eddie the Gentle Goon, Suffering Fred, a few others—got to work in plotting the Free Beer Conspiracy, as it came to be called. There were quite a few obstacles which had to be crossed, the largest of which was circumnavigating NASA and Skycorp. But the obstacle which they didn't foresee was the William Casey Society, personified aboard Skycan by one Leonard Gibson, sometimes known as Lenny the Red.

The William Casey Society, of course, was the extreme right-wing group which had taken up in the new century where the fanatics of the 20th century—the John Birch Society, the LaRouchians, the American Nazi Party—had left off. Named after an old CIA chief who had died during one of those White House scandals way back when, the Bill Casey Society had become the cause of choice for disenfranchised Communist-haters of every stripe, from conspiracy mavens to shell-shocked vets of Gulf War II to survivalists disappointed that a global thermonuclear war had not occurred. Fueled by a distrust of the new cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union—particularly in space, as typified by the joint exploration of Mars—and led by a minor presidential candidate named George White, the Caseyites compensated for a lack of political clout with fervor, paranoia, and a few well-placed connections.

Space industrialization had become a favorite target of the Bill Casey Society...in particular, Skycorp's powersat project. It was George White's contention that the building of SPS-1 was the first stage in a Communist-backed secret operation to control the world. Skycorp was being backed by the Soviet Union, White claimed, and the SPS network was being established not for use as orbital power stations but as microwave beam weapons. Once three powersats were established over the United States and two were built in geostationary orbit above Great Britain and Japan, Soviet moles in Skycorp and NASA would take control of the SPS system, turn the microwave transmitters against American, British, and Japanese armed forces—namely hypersonic bombers and submarines—and fry them, thus paving the way for Soviet global conquest.

Never mind that SPS microwave beams, designed to relay energy from space to ground-based rectennas with as little environmental damage as possible, barely had the power to blister the paint job on a bomber or a sub. Never mind that the Soviets were building their own SPS system in orbit above the U.S.S.R., or that the Kremlin had better fish to fry—so to speak—than whacky schemes of global domination. But this kind of paralogia always finds an audience, and it keeps the tax-free contributions rolling in.

The Caseyites, to their credit, realized that the SPS construction crews on Olympus station—the latest generation of high-risk blue-collar all-American hardhats—were unlikely to be Communist sympathizers, but were only guilty of ignorance. This was obviously the soft belly of the commie plot. So the Caseyites went so far as to plant its own agent on Skycan, picking a member from its ranks to go to work on Olympus Station in an effort to convince the beamjacks that there was a plot afoot and to convert them to the Caseyite cause.

That person was Leonard Gibson, a thin and somewhat wild-eyed former arc welder for Martin Marietta, who managed to get a job as a beamjack on Skycan.

“We already had Lenny’s number by this time, of course,” Bob said, “and we tended to leave him alone.”

“What do you mean, you had his number?”

Bob sipped his beer. “He came aboard Skycan, from day one, passing out Caseyite leaflets, trying to make converts out of his bunkmates, claiming that certain members of the command crew were Russian sleepers. Lenny used to get into these brain-damaged rants in the rec room about how we were all commie dupes, that sort of thing. He even insisted on changing his bunk assignment regularly, saying that he was being bugged or something.”

I shrugged. “There were a lot of weird cases on Skycan. He should have fit right in.”

Bob shook his head. “Yeah, but not hostile weird like that. Even Virgin Bruce wasn’t that twisted. Even the religious fanatics got the hint when to shut up. Lenny the Red thought he was on a vital mission to save the world.” He grinned. “We used to have some fun with him, like the time Suffering Fred casually pulled out a copy of Das Kapital in the rec room and started reading it aloud. Blew Lenny’s mind. That’s one thing about fanatics, Al. No sense of humor whatsoever.”

So Lenny the Red found himself ostracized. That made the situation even worse. Now Lenny Gibson began to suspect that the situation was even worse than George White had predicted; somehow, most of the Skycan beamjacks had been brainwashed, had become willing commie dupes. How else could he explain this complete rejection of his claims?

So Lenny the Red changed tactics. Instead of seeking converts, he

began to carefully observe the behavior of his fellow beamjacks, watchful for indications that a conspiracy was afoot. Lenny the preacher became Lenny the spy, the guy who sat quietly in the corner, listening, watching, waiting.

“And sending coded messages,” Bob added. “The communications officers who worked in command, y’know, handled the phone calls which crewmembers made to the folks back home. They sometimes listened in for kicks, and they used to tell us about these bizarre calls Lenny would make to some number in Baltimore. ‘Tell Aunt Jane to water the begonias. Repeat, tell Aunt Jane to water the begonias. The Moon is red. How is Uncle George?’” Cowboy Bob chuckled. “God knows what that shit meant, but it was obviously reports to the Casey Society.”

“You didn’t get bothered by this?”

“Naw. He was basically harmless.” Bob paused and sighed, his eyes rolling up toward the ceiling. “Until he caught the rumors about the Free Beer Conspiracy, though.”

“Let me guess...”

“Right. Commie plot.”

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There was little which could be kept secret for long aboard Olympus Station. The space station was enormous, but it was only so large; rumors and hearsay tended to spread quickly among the hundred-plus men and women living in the big wheel, sometimes but not always missing the attention of the security team or the station supervisor. In this instance, word seeped out that something special was being sent up to celebrate the completion of SPS-1. Yet only a small handful of people knew the details. If Phil Bigthorn, the U.S. Federal Marshall who headed station security, or Hank Luton, the station supervisor, had known what was going on, the jig would have been up; but apparently they didn’t, so the conspiracy continued to build itself.

Eddie the Gentle Goon managed to make covert contact with one of the usual sources for goodies at the Cape, a cargo loader who for years had fattened his bank account by smuggling personal-request items into the OTVs bound for Skycan. (Cowboy Bob wouldn’t tell me his name, saying that the same person was still working for Skycan at KSC.) The cargo loader was willing to take the risk, which was considerable, but he

also put a large fee on the job—fifty grand up front, overhead costs included. Eddie dickered with him and managed to get the price down to \$30,000 through a combination of sweet talk and menace for which the Goon was renowned, and authorized a transfer of thirty grand from Eddie's bank account to the loader's. The price was still steep, but the co-conspirators grudgingly agreed to reimburse the Goon for the expense.

The date for delivery of 444 cases of beer was to be on or before April 15, the day that final work on SPS-1 was scheduled to be completed. Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, who had both worked previously as ground crew at the Cape, worked out the rough framework of the plan. They figured that, once the beer was packed into an OTV and the transfer vehicle was loaded into a shuttle's cargo bay in the KSC Shuttle Processing Center, it would be smooth sailing. Under standard procedures, the OTV would not be reopened for inspection once the shuttle was mated with its flyback booster and moved to the launch pad. Once the shuttle reached orbit, the flight crew would routinely deploy the OTV from the cargo bay and fire its engine, sending it towards Olympus Station as if it were any other resupply mission.

So the hard part was to get all that beer into an OTV, a difficulty compounded by NASA regulations forbidding all alcoholic beverages at Kennedy Space Center. There was no way a beer truck could simply drive past the checkpoints and off-load over four hundred cases of beer at the SPC. Not without attracting the wrath of KSC's security cops, infamous for their lack of humor.

Eddie relayed these concerns to the bribed cargo loader at the Cape. The cargo loader's reply, in effect, was: don't sweat the details, we've got it covered. Eddie was also asked if he and his buddies wanted a hundred pounds of beer nuts, cheap.

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The cargo loader did his job well. First, he purchased 444 cases from a liquor wholesaler in Titusville, apparently explaining that he was planning a little get-together for a few friends. The wholesaler, not asking too many difficult questions, delivered the beer to the loader's house in Cocoa Beach, where the cases were stacked in his garage.

Then the cargo loader approached a few touchable cronies who also worked at KSC and, bribing them for \$500 each, managed to enlist their help. He was careful to select Skycorp employees who worked at the SPC, were less than completely honest, and who owned pickup trucks. He found four guys who met that description.

“The big hang-up,” Bob continued, “was getting an OTV. The cargo manifests for the weekly shuttle flights were scheduled well in advance and were pretty tight at that point. With SPS-1 soon going on-line, the low-orbit factory stations wanted to stock up their supplies. This guy wouldn’t and couldn’t bump any life-critical cargo, and he couldn’t slide any military or scientific pallets off the board without attracting a lot of attention. So for a while there we were stuck. We had the beer, we had the plan, and we had the people, but we didn’t have the OTV.”

The Mark III shuttle was in operation then,” I pointed out. “It could have gone direct to Skycan, and you wouldn’t need to use OTVs at all.”

Bob shook his head. “The Columbia II and the Shepard were big-ticket birds then. Too high-profile for smuggling stuff, and their cargo bays could be opened anytime, even if you could get something bumped from their cargo manifests. We had to use a Mark II like the Ley or the Sally Ride, which were doing milk runs with no big fanfare. But, y’know, they had LEO ceilings, which meant we had to find an OTV.

“Anyway, Dog-boy came up with the solution, but Fred and I did the actual engineering. Three OTVs were permanently docked at Skycan, mainly used to ferry stuff over to the construction shack. Fred and I, when nobody was looking, climbed into one of the things, accessed the guidance computer, and plugged in some new coordinates that Dog-Boy figured out. Next time the OTV was sent out to the shack, the engine misfired.” Grinning, Cowboy Bob sipped his beer. “It ended up in an elliptic polar orbit over the Moon. It was a real bitch to retrieve the thing.”

“Oh, ho. Convenient little accident...”

“Exactly. Hank Luton had to request a new OTV for Skycan, since we were running three shifts to get SPS-1 finished on schedule and we needed three OTVs to get the job done. Skycorp was pissed, but they managed to get NASA to bump a science pay load back a couple of weeks so we could be sent a new OTV. We got lucky. It was manifested for the Willy Ley, with launch scheduled for April 12, right on the money.”

“Hmmm. But Skycorp doesn’t send up empty OTVs, so something must have been bumped from the manifest anyway.”

“Toilet paper, logbooks, frozen food, screwdriver heads, shit like that. Funny how easy it is to misplace that stuff in the warehouse, y’know?”

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While the Free Beer conspirators were taking care of the OTV problem, though, another annoying hassle came to their attention, one much closer at hand: Lenny the Red, who had taken to spying on them.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out that Lenny was keeping tabs on us,” Bob said. “I guess he thought he was James Bond, but he was about as subtle as an elephant fart. Fred and the Goon and I would be in the rec room, right? Maybe not even talking about this thing. And here he’d come down the ladder, kinda sauntering across the compartment to sit down real close to us, but being careful not to look our way so he wouldn’t notice us. Whistling, for Christ’s sake...”

“Inconspicuous behavior.”

Cowboy Bob sneered. “Nothing about Lenny was inconspicuous. It didn’t take a genius to see that he knew something was going on. At first we thought it was funny, ‘cause if the Bill Casey Society thought smuggling beer into space was subversive...”

He shook his head in disgust and polished off his latest beer. “Anyway, they were definitely dumb to rely on a flathead like Lenny for intelligence, and that was the scary part.”

As it turned out, the Caseyites did not know that beer was being smuggled into space. Instead, the Society was once again gnawing on a favorite old bone of the right-wing fringe which had been lying around since the Soviets had launched Sputnik in 1957: that the U.S.S.R. was preparing to place nuclear warheads in orbit in preparation for a sneak attack on the U.S. from space. Apparently the group had discarded one commie plot for another. In any case, the Society had informed Lenny to be alert for such a scheme, if there was indeed an active Communist element infiltrating Olympus Station.

So naturally Lenny Gibson, America’s vigilante in space, had discovered just such a plot. There were signs that a nuke would be ferried into orbit aboard an OTV, to be launched by the shuttle Willy Ley on April 12.

“Whoa, wait a minute,” I said. “How did you know what he was thinking?”

“Remember those coded messages he was sending to Baltimore?”

Lenny would write them down first in plain English, then rewrite them into code on the same page. Once he memorized the coded message, he would tear up the page and dump the scraps into the toilet in his bunkhouse. But the moron forgot to flush the pot one day

“So you found the scraps and put the uncoded message together.”

Cowboy Bob nodded, grinning. “Plus he talked in his sleep sometimes. Some secret agent, right?”

“Right.” I decided to take Bob’s story with a few more grains of salt. The yarn was getting a little implausible. But I wasn’t ready to call it total bullshit yet. “So now you knew that Lenny thought you guys were smuggling a bomb up there.”

“Yeah. Even though it was funny as hell, it did present another problem. If the Caseyites took Lenny’s reports seriously, they might decide to tip off somebody, like at the FBI or NASA. Of course the feds might not take ‘em seriously, but on the other hand NASA might not take any chances, make sure that security at the Shuttle Processing Center was tighter that week. So Lenny was becoming a pain in the ass and we had to take care of him.”

Pitching Lenny out the nearest airlock was briefly considered, but dismissed because nobody wanted to take a murder rap, although the idea was tempting. They also discussed tying him up and sniffing him into a suit locker for a few days, but the drawback was that he might be missed from his workshift. The conspirators thought about simply letting Gibson know what was going on, letting him in on the plan so he would be aware that beer, not bombs, was the contraband inside the OTV scheduled to arrive on the 12th; yet a paranoid like Lenny would probably not believe the truth. Even if he did, it was always possible that he would twist it around so that the beer was being laced with mind-altering drugs by those evil Russians.

“Dog-Girl, bless her, came up with the answer,” Bob continued. “Pretty simple, actually. Lenny had to maintain contact with his pals in Baltimore to do any real harm, right? This meant he had to use the phone. Orbit-to-Earth phone calls were rationed items, and you were only allowed to use up so many minutes a month. So we managed to get the communications officers to adjust the phone logs in the computer just a weensy bit so that, suddenly, Lenny was overdrawn on his phone ration for April. No more phone calls, no more messages to Aunt Jane and Uncle George. No secret messages, no word of a commie plot.”

“Nice going,” I said. “But that just took care of the Caseyites leaking word to NASA. What about Lenny himself?”

“You’re getting ahead of me, Al. I’ll get to that. Hey, Jack! Another round here?”

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Around this time a few more of the regulars were wandering into Diamondback Jack’s; some were loitering around the bar watching a baseball game on TV, and a pool game was getting started at the table on the other side of the room. Bob was getting blitzed on the beers I was buying him and I was catching up, so I barely noticed the guy who had elbowed up to the bar a few feet behind Bob. He didn’t look familiar, but that was the only impression I had of him. He seemed not to be paying attention to us and Bob didn’t notice him; the next time I happened to look his way, he was gone. I didn’t think about him again until later.

Two days before the Willy Ley made its April 12 mile run, the cargo loader whom Eddie the Goon had bribed, with the help of the four other loaders he had paid off, quickly placed 444 cases of beer into OTV OL-3643. the load-in took place during the first shift at the SPC, in the wee hours of the morning of April 10.

For the past week the cargo loaders had been smuggling the beer, a few cases at a time, through the KSC security gates, hidden under camper caps in the backs of their trucks. The graveyard shift at the Cape was more easy-going than other shifts at the launch center; the shift supervisors tended to huddle over coffee in the cafeteria, so the loaders apparently had no trouble stashing the beer into the OTV. By the time the SPC’s shift supervisor finished his early-morning coffee break, the OTV was sealed and was being trucked out to Pad 40 to be loaded into the Ley’s cargo bay. The shift supervisor routinely checked off OL-3643 was ready to fly, not bothering to check inside.

Eddie the Goon received a telegram from his enterprising friend later that day, innocuously informing him that the party supplies were on the way. Goony grin plastered across his face, Eddie told Bob and the other principle people involved in the scam, and they put the next phase into motion by spreading word along the station grapevine: something wonderful was arriving by OTV at the docking module on April 12, at the beginning of the second shift, and a few volunteers were needed at the Docks to get it hauled from the station’s hub down to the rim modules.

“You didn’t tell them what was coming?” I asked.

Bob belched and shook his head. “Naw. We wanted it to be a surprise. We also didn’t want Hank to find out. But we got enough guys to say they’d be there. Everybody knew it was something good.”

As anticipated, Lenny the Red got the word through the grapevine. He had realized by now that his messages weren’t getting through to paranoid Central—all part of the commie plot, of course—so he interpreted the subterfuge as the hatching of the conspiracy. Right idea, wrong conspiracy. To the quiet satisfaction of Cowboy Bob and company, Lenny began to get jumpy. He even switched his bunk assignment again.

“We knew that Dick Tracy would be at the Docks when our OTV arrived, of course,” Bob said. “He was planning on something, though we didn’t know what. There weren’t any guns on Skykan that we knew of, but maybe he had managed to sneak one up in case he had to assassinate some commies. Maybe he was planning to defuse the nuke all by himself, I dunno. But we just made sure that he was covered when he got there.”

He reached for a cigarette and almost knocked over his beer without noticing. Jack threw us a look of warning which Bob didn’t catch either. He was ripped. “So when the day came, at 1100 hours about, there were ten, fifteen guys crowded into the Docks when the OTV hard-docked with Skykan. Eddie and Fred and me and couple of the other ‘jacks were kinda casually floating around Lenny while Chang pressurized the airlock and undogged the hatch, so I got to see Lenny’s face when the thing was opened up.”

Cowboy Bob coughed loudly, then began to laugh. “Jesus! Was he pissed! He was staring with this look on his face when Dog-Boy got the covers and the ropes off and started pushing one case after another out into the docks.”

Bob drunkenly hobbled off his bar stool. “Man! One case after another! Fred screaming, ‘Free beer! Free beer!’ And all the guys howling, cracking up, grabbing the cases. Someone opened a can—and you can imagine how shook up that stuff was, after sitting through a rocket launch—and beer started spewing all over the place, making these big yellow bubbles that flew all around, splattering everywhere, and more guys started appearing, hauling the cases out of the Docks, down the ladders through the spokes to the rim. A fucking riot, AL...and in the middle of all this, Lenny, mouth working like a fish, can’t believe what’s going on, shouts...”

Bob shot his arms out wide and yelled, getting the attention of everyone in the bar; "This is un-American! Where's the god damn bomb?"

"Hey, Cowboy!" Jack snarled from the other end of the bar. "Cool it or I'll cut you off!"

Bob was doubled over the bar, cracking up and breathless with the memory of the scene. He got some control of himself after a few moments. Clambering back on his stool and reaching for his beer, he said, "And that's when we dropped the blanket over him."

* * * *

Jack Baker gave us one last round of beers and then shut us both off, after first making me walk a straight line to see if I was halfway capable of driving both Bob and myself home. While Cowboy Bob sucked down his last beer he finished his story.

Once Bob, Eddie, and Fred had grabbed Lenny in the blanket and trussed him with nylon cords, they shoved him into an empty suit locker in the Docks and locked it shut. By then the party was beginning to roll down in the rim modules; most of the second-shift beamjacks were logging in sick, and the third shift was looking for excuses. Once it became obvious that a surprise party was in progress and that trying to shut it down would only incite general mutiny, Hank Luton grudgingly called the day off, halting construction work for the next twenty-four hours before heading down to the rim himself. He later told the honchos at Skycorp and NASA that a spread of stomach virus had caused the stop-work. No big deal, in the long run; the party only delayed the low-power tests by a day.

Sometime during the celebration, Bob and Eddie and Dog-Girl slipped back to the Docks, hauling behind them two garbage bags filled with empty beer cans. Dog-Girl had already sneaked into the vacant medical bay and swiped one of Doc Felapolous' sedative guns. The three of them opened the suit locker and Dog-Girl tranqed Lenny with a shot to the neck, and once Lenny was in a stupor they untied him and stuffed him into a hardsuit, making certain that he had two full airtanks in his life-support pack.

"Then we threw him in the OTV, emptied the bags in there so that there were dozens of empty cans floating around with him, and closed the hatch," Bob said. "Dog-Girl and the Goon reset the nav computer so it would rendezvous with Columbus station in LEO, and then we fired the

sunnuvabitch back to Earth. Never saw him again.”

“That was all?” I asked.

Bob, smiling and slumped over the bar, looked at me and shook his head slowly. “Well...not quite. See, I taped a note on the back of Lenny’s suit, where he couldn’t see it or take it off. It said, ‘To the Bill Casey Society...take your drunk stool pigeon and shove him!’ I didn’t sign it, but I think Lenny let ‘em know who the author was, and I don’t think they appreciated my sense of humor.”

Neither did Skycorp, which was how Cowboy Bob lost his contract bonus and got nailed with a couple of fines which depleted his payroll. He ended up on the “unhirable” list with the major space companies as a result of the Free Beer Conspiracy. When the hammer inevitably came down, he alone took the pounding.

“But y’know what, Al?” he said as I half-carried him towards the door. “I don’t give a shit. Y’gotta have a sense of humor, god damn fanatics. Following me, telling me I gotta keep my mouth shut. I pissed on ‘em from a considerable height, and I’d do it again if I could...”

Bob threw up in the bushes behind the bar, then passed out in the shotgun seat of my car after mumbling directions to his house. I concentrated on keeping my vision straight as I carefully drove down Route 3 towards Cocoa Beach. It was a quarter past midnight when I drove over the Banana River causeway onto Route A1A, cruising through the beachfront commercial strip of Cocoa Beach. The night was black as space, wet and humid like the inside of a dog’s mouth, neon-glittering like the old visions of the high frontier.

A couple of units, a pump and a ladder, from the Cocoa Beach Fire department screamed past us in the left lane as I passed the old Satellite Motel. Bob, snoring in the depths of his drunken sleep, paid no attention, nor did I until we passed the commercial zone and headed into the residential part of town. Then the stranger, the guy who had lingered in Jack’s near Bob and I while he was telling me the story, oddly came to mind, for no particular reason. Remembering him, I also recalled something Bob had told me about Lenny Gibson, how he used to hang around in the Skycan rec room, attempting to eavesdrop on conversations. I began to feel uneasy. For no particular reason.

As I turned the corner onto the residential street where Bob told me he lived, I spotted the fire trucks again, parked in the street in front of a

small white Florida-style stucco house, practically identical to all the other white stucco houses lining the road. The house was ablaze with fire shooting through a collapsing roof and the firemen directing streams of water through the broken front windows, while people stood around beyond the piles of hoses, watching the blaze. I slowed to a stop behind the trucks and shook Bob awake.

“Hey, Bob,” I said. “One of your neighbors has his house on fire.”

Bob’s eyes cracked open, and he stared through the windshield at the burning house. He didn’t say anything for a few moments, just stared.

“It *is* one of your neighbor’s, isn’t it?” I asked, feeling an unseasonal chill.

Cowboy Bob didn’t look at me, nor did he laugh, but his mouth twisted into a sad, angry sort of smile. “What did I tell you?” he whispered at last. “Fanatics. No god damn sense of humor.”

True story.