

REAL MEN DON'T BARK AT FIRE HYDRANTS

Tom Easton
Box 2724, RFD 2
Belfast, ME 04915
(207) 338-1074

1. UFO Slime Devours Israel!

Mickey Gorgonzola sighed into the phone. "It's just a bit of fungus, Larry. That's all it is."

While the man on the other end of the line insisted he was wrong, Mickey rocked his head in his hand and thought, If only I were! He had wished that UFOs were real ever since he first heard the term at the age of eight.

"What does Israel have to do with it, Larry?" Mickey asked emphatically even though he knew better. "It's the Holy Land? Someone faxes Tits'n'Tats to say he saw a UFO land, and he went out in the desert and found a dent in the sand and a clot of mud with bits of twiggy stuff, and you believe him?" Mickey wished he could believe.

Now it was Larry's turn to shout. When he obliged, Mickey winced and held the phone away from his ear.

"What do you mean, I don't have to be insulting? So he sent that photo." And Larry had faxed it to Mickey. "Have you forgotten what a scale bar means? Right. That twiggy bit is a tenth of a millimeter long, it can't be anything except a piece of soil fungus, and they used a scanning electron microscope to take that photo."

He didn't have to wince this time, but it was still very clear that he wasn't getting through. "Yeah, it's first cousin to a toadstool." The closest he could hope Tittles and Tattles would come to the truth would be a headline screaming: "THE TOADSTOOL FROM BEYOND THE SKY!!!"

He used a pencil to draw a Kilroy on the edge of the photo while Larry confirmed his cynicism. When the other paused for breath, he said as gently as he could, "It isn't real, Larry. If it was... Remember when NASA was getting ready to put landers on the Moon? The Vikings on Mars? ... So I'll fill you in. They put a lot of effort into sterilizing everything. They didn't want to take a chance that something from Earth would get loose and multiply and become the slime that ate a world. So maybe..."

And there was another headline: "UFO SLIME DEVOURS ISRAEL!!"

Larry would love that, wouldn't he?

"Yeah," he said. "Glad I could help. I'll bill you."

He hung up. He sighed again, more deeply and more loudly now that he needn't worry about offending... No. He shook his head. Larry Castle was a tabloid reporter. The only time he ever took offense was when a source clammed up on him. His calloused hide made a rhino's butt look like a maiden's cheek.

Sometimes Mickey wished he could penetrate that hide a little more deeply.

Sometimes he wished he had never heard of UFOs.

2. Real Men Don't Bark at Fire Hydrants

Mickey leaned over his laser printer to crank the filthy casement window open. The September air was all he needed to clear the mustiness from both the office and his head. Traffic noise engulfed him. Twenty feet below was the steady flow of the city's populace on foot and bicycle, in cars and trucks and city buses.

He was turning back toward the desk when something caught his eye.

A businessman, an executive by the look of his silvery sideburns, his unwrinkled suit, and his glossy attache case, was striding purposefully toward the fire hydrant across the street. He was wearing a ferocious scowl.

The executive stopped before the hydrant, opened his attache case on the sidewalk, took off his suitcoat, and laid it in the case. Then he laid a yellow legal pad on the sidewalk, knelt on it, leaned forward, and caught his weight on his hands. He extended his neck toward the hydrant. Mickey thought he could hear...

The phone rang. He swore, but he managed to pick it up before it could ring a second time.

"Angela!" Angela Colby was his agent. He sat down once more. "Do you mind if I call you back later? There's a man on the street outside, growling at a fire hydrant... No, not a bum. Quite well dressed. Might even be one of your colleagues..." His chuckle lasted only long enough for him to realize he was the only one laughing.

While she talked, he tipped his chair and leaned toward the window. The executive was still on his knees, but now he was jerking back and forth, his mouth was abruptly opening and closing. The sound... "My God," he said. "He's barking! What? At the fire hydrant. That man on the sidewalk. He's..."

He sighed much as he had for Larry Castle. "Yes, Angela... It's coming," he said as soon as his agent paused for breath. "I know it's just a proposal. I know I've been working on it for two weeks already."

He winced and tilted the phone away from his ear. "I want the advance as much as you do. But you know you can't rush these things, Angela... No, that barking idiot showed up for the first time just before your call."

The shirt-sleeved executive was still on his knees, still barking at the fire hydrant. What was wrong with him? He couldn't possibly be normal, could he? Normal people didn't do such things.

Although they did sometimes act quite strange.

He glanced at his computer. What he had accomplished in two weeks didn't quite fill the screen. "You'll have it by next week. Cross my heart. That's a promise."

As soon as he hung up the phone, he put his head in both hands. Next week, he thought. He had less than a page. He needed at least ten.

Once that had been a day's work. But then he had realized that what he was writing were nothing more than travel books for armchair explorers who preferred a vicarious quest for bug-eyed aliens to one for the last of the Tasaday.

This one would be just like all the rest, and the very thought of writing

it bored him to madness.

Though the quest itself had been as fascinating as ever.

It had begun last spring, when Larry Castle called to tell him that a Russian stringer had reported that a hunter had shot down a 50-pound butter~fly with a six-foot wingspread. Mickey had been skeptical--Mother Nature had laws against bugs that big, after all. But when Larry asked him to investigate the story for Tits'n'Tats, he had accepted the assignment. He had then spent the month of July in the Komi Republic northeast of Moscow. Unfortunately, there had been no sign of the stringer, the hunter, or trophy-sized butterflies, dead or alive.

What he had found instead was the museum in Syktyvkar, the Komi capital, and its permanent exhibit of paintings by UFO contactees. Several of the paintings supposedly showed the giant butterflies, though they looked more like a three-year-old's fingerpaint renditions of flowers without stems.

And two weeks before, when he had told Angela Colby the story and shown her his photos, she had decided it would be his next book.

He stood up and leaned over his laser printer once more. The executive was still there, still on his knees, still barking at the fire hydrant.

Mickey shook his head. How much longer could he keep it up?

As Mickey watched, someone finally slowed as if to join the few spectators. He was a tall man, straight-backed and dignified despite the ragged overcoat hanging from his shoulders and the battered top hat squashing his hair into a fringe of gray curls. His wide mouth was stretched into a grin that struck Mickey as just as goofy as the executive's barks.

When he reached the executive, the newcomer stopped, reached into a pocket of his overcoat, and began to withdraw a rope hand over hand.

The rope coiled on the pavement between the newcomer and the still-barking executive. It seemed endless, and within moments several more passersby stopped to watch, their mouths half open like those of children watching a stage magician.

When twenty feet of rope were on the ground, the newcomer fashioned a loop, stood, and dropped the noose over the barking executive's head as if he were leashing a dog.

Two of the onlookers laughed out loud.

The executive immediately leaped to his feet. He barked once more, a shrill yip, threw off the noose, and glared at the other man. Then he put on his suitcoat, tossed his legal pad into his attache case, picked up the case, and stalked off.

The ragged newcomer shrugged elaborately, yapped once at the executive's back, and winked at the onlookers. Then he undid the noose, returned the rope to his pocket, and followed the executive down the street and around the corner.

"You wouldn't believe it, Kilroy!" The shepherd-beagle mix gaped his jaws and rolled over on the rug so Mickey could scratch his belly.

"What wouldn't he believe?" The blonde in the kitchen doorway held a glass of amber liquid in each hand.

"Rocky!" Mickey jumped to his feet, grinning. He hadn't expected to see

Rochelle Forte for another hour. In a moment, his hands were on her sides and their lips were meeting.

"Careful!"

"What do you mean, 'Careful!'?"

"Take your damned drink so I can beat you off!" But she was smiling as she swore at him.

"I've got to take this guy outside," said Mickey.

"I already did."

"You got home real early then."

"I had a couple of cancellations for a change." Rocky was a clinical psychologist with a private practice on the city's North Side. "So I've still got some listening left. Tell Momma."

Mickey finally accepted the drink she was holding toward him. He took a hefty swallow. Then he told her about the business executive who barked at fire hydrants. He didn't say a word about the slow progress he was making on the proposal.

Rocky sipped at her own drink. "Hmm."

"What do you think? In your considered, professional opinion, that is."

She laughed. "The guy's a nut."

"Is that all you can say? I could tell that much myself."

"Well, he doesn't sound depressed."

"But what is he? Schizophrenic?" Rocky didn't talk a lot about her work, but she had told him a little. He knew schizophrenics were most likely to act bizarre in public. He looked at his glass. It was already empty.

"I've never heard of anyone barking at fire hydrants." She stepped to one side of the doorway and gestured toward the kitchen with her own glass. "The bottle's on the counter."

"Mind-reader." He patted her hip as he passed. Kilroy followed him.

"Not quite. You're just predictable. And I'd have to talk with him for a while before I could come up with a decent diagnosis. You know that."

He grunted in reply. "What're we doing for supper?"

Kilroy lifted his head and looked expectant. "Supper" was a word he knew.

The glowing red display of the clock on the table beside the bed said 2:43. Only an occasional car interrupted the quiet of the street outside the building. Further off, trucks rumbled and sirens whined.

Normal.

Nothing alarming. Nothing even strange or bizarre.

Then why had he awakened?

A cold nose touched his ear as Kilroy, alerted by the change in his breathing, silently asked, "What's up, boss?"

He wished he knew.

He moved a hand, patting, stroking. Rocky's bare hip and thigh and back were where they always were, where they belonged, beside him, warm beneath the covers. Her breath fluttered. There was no hint that she knew he was awake.

Kilroy chuffed, meaning, "Getting up, boss? Going out?"

"Shhh, boy," he whispered. "It's too early to water any..."

And then he had it. Hydrants. Barking.

He had never seen or heard of such a thing before in his life.

Neither had Rocky.

So people didn't do such things.

Did they?

People didn't.

Not even when they were insane.

As Sherlock Holmes once said, when you've eliminated the possible, whatever remains, no matter how impossible it seems, must be the truth.

So if people didn't bark at fire hydrants.

Which they didn't.

And if that polished-looking business executive had indeed been barking at a fire hydrant.

Which he had.

Then that polished-looking business executive could not be people.

Not human.

He had to be an alien.

A space alien.

A real one! At last!

Mickey Gorgonzola conscientiously reminded himself that a very large "MAYBE" really did have to be attached to his conclusion.

But then he lay back on his pillow with a beatific smile on his face.

3. Sdrawkcab Gnis Ro

"What else could he be?" He lay in bed, arms crossed behind his head. Kilroy stood beside the bed, his chin resting on the mattress, his tail wagging like a demented metronome.

"A nut." Rocky grimaced as she yanked the brush through a tangle. She was wearing nothing but panty-hose. "I told you that yesterday."

"People don't go nuts that way."

"They go nuts in every way that you could possibly think of. And they keep thinking up new ones."

He shook his head vigorously. "Come on. You didn't see the guy. He looked utterly rational."

"He did?"

"You know what I mean. He wasn't drooling. His eyes weren't rolling." He showed her what he meant and was rewarded by a flickering smile. "Of course, he wasn't looking at..."

She threw the hairbrush at him.

He threw it back, rolled out of the bed, thumped Kilroy on the shoulders, and pushed the dog out of the way. "Pretty soon, boy. Give me a minute. Maybe I'll even take you with me today."

"There's scarcely enough room in that office for you."

He was rummaging in a drawer for socks and underwear. "We'll manage."

"And what're you going to do about this space alien of yours?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. Keep my eyes open, I suppose."

"And if you see him?"

"Ask, maybe?"

She snorted and pulled a blouse over her head.

When they reached the office, Kilroy flopped on the throw rug with a heavy sigh. Mickey hung up his jacket, turned on his computer, called up the proposal he was supposed to be working on, and stared at the screen. He typed a few lines. Then he sighed as gustily as his dog.

"It's shit," he said. "All shit. Isn't it, Kilroy?"

The dog's tail thumped the floor.

"I'm glad you agree." He got out of his chair and leaned over the laser printer. The window was as dirty as ever, the street as crowded.

Could there possibly be real, genuine space aliens at large among Earth's natives? He had wished there could for as long as he had known anyone had ever thought of the possibility. He had searched for them all his working life. He had never found them. Not even one.

Neither had anyone else.

And as for space aliens out there in space... He thought they had to be there, somewhere. But all the astronomers with their SETI radio antennae and cartoony space probe messages had found no sign of them either.

Could the barking man really be what he yearned for? If so, where did he come from? Why was he here? Were there more like him in the city or on Earth?

He ached to know the truth.

But there was no barking executive today. No double-parked flying saucers.

Just a squad car by the hydrant across the street. Two cops getting out.

Two minutes later, Mickey opened his office door to find two dark blue uniforms blocking the opening. Large "I {Heart} My Job" buttons covered all but the edges of the name tags above their left breast pockets.

"Michael Gorgonzola?" asked the fat one. He stepped forward just enough to force Mickey a step backwards, and the tiny office felt jammed as full of flesh as a knackwurst. "The writer?" He sounded skeptical.

"Mickey."

Kilroy growled.

Mickey said, "Down, Kilroy," and the dog retreated to hide under the desk. He did not stop growling.

The thin cop stepped up beside his partner, showed his teeth, and touched the brim of his cap. "I read wanna yer books once."

"Shut up, Custer," said the other cop.

"Right, Abe." Custer's lips compressed into a thin line so wide his cheeks bulged.

After a portentous pause, the fat cop extended a finger, studied it, and finally pointed it at Mickey. "You're not in trouble."

"Yet," said Custer.

"Shaddap," said Abe.

"Right, Abe."

Kilroy growled louder.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Mickey.

"You're not in trouble yet," said Abe once more. "But you're getting close. We're here to tell you to lay off."

"Off what?" Mickey gestured toward the computer screen. The book proposal he had promised Angela was the only thing he was involved in at the moment. There was nothing else to lay off. "That? It's a friggin' travel book! And I've already done most of the research!"

Abe shook his head. "Just lay off."

"Is it the Komi region? The museum?" He stopped. Was something special going on there? "Just who are you guys anyway?"

"Just lay off," said the fat cop.

"Or what?"

Custer giggled. "You won't like it."

"Shaddap."

"Right, Abe."

"But...!"

"You've been warned." The fat cop tapped his partner's shoulder with one large hand and said, "Let's go." Simultaneously, the two men turned around and stepped toward the narrow office doorway.

Custer was trying to give the other room when Kilroy barked.

The thin cop leaped forward, and for a moment the two men were jammed together in the doorway, unable to go either forward or back.

Someone in the hallway laughed.

"Idiot!" cried the fat cop as he slapped the top of Custer's head.

"Right, Abe." The thin cop retreated a step, shrugged apologetically, and let his partner precede him through the door.

Mickey Gorgonzola was shaking his head and scratching Kilroy's muzzle when someone said, "Oughta shut your door. Keep the riffraff out."

He grinned up at the newcomer standing in the doorway. "Hi, Bert. That was you laughing?"

"They looked like something out of an old movie." Bert Camen was a head taller than Mickey, though that head was nearly hairless except for a thick mustache. He was also thinner, and a rolled beret jutted from one pocket of his tweedy sportscoat.

"You should know." Bert was a film and stage critic for the city's largest paper. They had known each other since college.

"So what's going on?"

Mickey shrugged. "I wish I knew."

"Didn't look like they had their hands out." Bert closed the office door, stooped to pat Kilroy's shoulder, and squeezed past Mickey to sit on the edge of the desk.

"It wasn't that," he said. "They were warning me off something."

"What?"

"They wouldn't say." Mickey pointed at the computer screen and explained the proposal. "That's all I'm working on these days."

"How many days?" Bert sounded concerned; it was obvious from the screen that Mickey had not been making rapid progress.

"I've been watching the street too."

A single bark sounded from somewhere beyond the window.

His friend leaned in that direction. "See anything interesting?"

"Some idiot was barking at the fire hydrant yesterday."

"Nobody there now."

"Rocky thought he was a nut."

"You didn't?"

"Ahh." Mickey waved a hand. "He sure wasn't normal. Normal people don't do things like that."

Bert laughed and pointed at the computer screen. "Oh, I don't know."

"You know me. I'm wondering if he's a space alien."

"And the cops know? You're tiptoeing into classified territory. They don't want amateurs muddying the waters or getting into the line of fire. So they warn you off."

Now it was Mickey's turn to laugh. "So how'd they find out? I've only told Rocky and Kilroy what I was guessing. And now you."

"The walls have ears."

"They're space aliens too?"

"Who?"

"The walls. In disguise."

"Maybe," said Bert. "Anything can happen when you're dealing with space aliens. Ask the tabloids. But what about Rocky? Walls don't talk."

"Then she's wearing a damned good disguise. And aliens disguised as walls could too talk."

"Kilroy?"

"Ditto."

"Then it must be your modem. They've bugged your computer."

Mickey opened the middle left drawer of his desk and pointed. "There's the modem. It isn't even plugged in."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm supposed to be working on that proposal. But..." Abruptly, Mickey turned around and opened the office's small closet. He pushed a sweater aside. Then he removed a tangle of leather straps from a hook.

"What is that?"

He ignored his friend. "Here, Kilroy."

The dog stood up eagerly, tongue lolling and tail oscillating. He stretched, uttered a creaky groan, and stepped forward. Mickey shook out the tangle, and it became a harness attached to a boxy-looking handle.

When he had buckled the harness onto his dog, he said, "In the center drawer. Pass me the glasses."

Bert Camen obediently opened the drawer and held up a pair of dark sunglasses. "But you're not blind."

"You're the one who mentioned disguises," said Mickey.

"That was you. I just said 'walls.' But what on Earth do you want a disguise for?"

"Research. You'd be surprised what you can get away with when no one believes you could possibly be watching. Ready, Kilroy?"

The dog faced the door eagerly.

"He does not look like a guide dog," said Bert.

"He'll do." Mickey reached across his old friend to turn off the computer. "He always has."

Bert followed him into the hallway before asking, "What are you researching?"

"God knows. Answers, I guess. Why those cops came around to lean on me. What that hydrant-woofer thought he was up to. Whatever. Or maybe I'm just not working on that proposal."

Eyes hidden by dark glasses, back straight, one hand on the harness handle, Mickey Gorgonzola was every inch a blind man. Yet he saw it all, and a sense that somehow the rules that had always governed his world had changed told him that if he did not run across another hydrant-woofer, he would surely find something just as strange.

For the moment, he saw nothing unusual, though there were certainly plenty of fire hydrants. He had never realized how many of them adorned the city's streets, as if they grew like mushrooms after rain.

Near the corner, facing each other across a wire-mesh litter receptacle, two hard-hatted construction workers screamed insults at each other. Ten feet beyond them a hydrant leaked a shallow puddle from one of its firehose connectors. A young woman in a tight sweater, a short skirt, and rose-patterned panty hose rolled a newspaper into a tight cylinder, leaned over the hydrant, lifted the rolled paper, and belted it across the leaky connector. "Bad!" she cried. "Bad dog!" She hit it again.

When her paper was a soggy ruin, she straightened up, crossed the few feet that separated her from the city's wastebasket, and chucked it in. Then she grinned at the gaping construction workers, dusted one hand against the other, and stepped into the crosswalk.

Did that strolling executive look familiar? He had the silvery sideburns, the attache case, the freshly pressed suit. But there was another, and another, as alike as the proverbial peas. Mickey could not possibly be sure unless one of the dozens and hundreds and thousands of corporate look-alikes went down on his knees and began to howl at a hydrant.

Not one of them obliged, even though there were plenty of hydrants available. Space aliens welcome. Instant service. No waiting.

On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any lack of strange people on the loose today. He had never before seen anyone scold a fire hydrant for leaking, just as he had never seen anyone bark at one. Now he had seen both in two days.

He was near the city's park when he saw a thirtyish man clad in a brown sweater over gray slacks walking backwards and singing an unrecognizable tune. The words--"N-aye-sh-nus eim raa oo-ie..."--seemed nonsense until Mickey played them backwards in his mind.

The singer did not seem to notice when Mickey began to follow. He kept singing as he threaded his way among the other pedestrians, and when he reached the corner he stopped just as if he could see where he was going.

That was when a business executive, carrying a gleaming attache case, flagged a passing cab and, as the cab's door swung open, faced the singer, bowed low, and barked once.

Before Mickey could react, the executive was in the cab and disappearing into the city's depths.

4. Bullwinkle Lives!

Mickey Gorgonzola was the only person on that street who seemed startled by what had just happened. Everyone else ignored both the singer and the barking executive.

Was this business executive the very one that had barked at the hydrant outside his office? He had the same silvery sideburns and a very similar suit and attache case. Yet Mickey could not be sure. Executives were like bureaucrats and airline ticket clerks and customs agents. He couldn't tell them apart unless they were wearing nametags.

And if they were the same? What connection could there possibly be between a backwards singer and a business executive who barked at fire hydrants?

He swore that he would not stay ignorant if he could help it. Something strange was going on, and after all, he had long since made the pursuit of the strange his business.

He had never caught it, but maybe this time...

When the backwards singer turned toward the city's business district, Mickey and Kilroy were not far behind. In the next several blocks, Mickey saw nothing strange except a department store mannequin with its thumb to its nose and, on the wall of a small art gallery, a picture of a bakery box with its lid open to display a dozen shapely buttocks.

When he looked ahead once more, the backwards singer was not in sight. Mickey swore out loud as he told himself that it didn't matter how the artist had produced "Sarah Lee's Best Buns." Painting or photo or computer graphic, he shouldn't have let himself be distracted.

Had the singer simply turned the corner just ahead? When he reached it, Mickey took off his dark sunglasses and peered down the side streets.

"You're not blind at all!" gasped an elderly woman with a half-full canvas shopping bag hanging from the crook of one elbow. "The nerve of some people!"

"Shh!" he said. "Undercover work, you know."

"Oh!" She nodded and stepped back against a storefront to watch him scan the flow of pedestrians to the left. "Are you shadowing someone?"

"I can't say," he said. "It's secret. But watch the papers." Then he turned to scan the street to the right.

"Oh, I will!" she said. "Are you from the FBI? I used to watch Eliot Ness, oh, a long time ago."

"Shh," said Mickey.

She whispered huskily: "Your dog doesn't really look much like a seeing-eye dog, you know."

Mickey shrugged at her.

"Or are you a reporter? I read Tits'n'Tats every week!"

There was no sign of his quarry in either direction.

"Kilroy? Can you smell him?"

The dog tugged at his harness. Mickey put his glasses back on his face.

"Good luck!" cried the woman as they turned right, leaving her behind to marvel at how close she had come to secret police work and to continue thinking that he was an agent of the FBI or CIA. Or that he was one of Larry Castle's colleagues.

Two blocks later, he and Kilroy turned a corner and found the singer just ahead. A boxy speaker slung above the door to a pet shop emitted birdsong and animal noises. The shop's window held a large cage crowded with parakeets.

As the singer passed the window, the parakeets flapped their wings in unison, flew against the wires of their cage, and erupted in a cacophony of avian curses, even though the singer was not at the moment performing his schtick.

They repeated their eruption when Mickey and Kilroy passed the shop.

A few minutes later, the singer ducked into a real estate agency. Before Mickey reached the building and had to decide whether to follow the other inside, he was out again and leading the way once more across a street and around a corner to a music shop. Mickey had just time enough to wonder whether it were possible to buy backwards lyrics, and then the singer was on the street once more. His hands were empty.

The marquee of the local Marriott was in sight in the next block when the singer stopped to lean against a lamppost and stare intently toward the hotel's entrance.

Mickey crossed the street to parallel the other's path. Three chartered buses pulled into the horseshoe drive beneath the marquee. From them emerged a small horde of overweight men in tight, spangled jumpsuits. About half of the new arrivals carried gleaming electric guitars and wore slicked-back hair whose colors varied from brown and black and blond through all the shades of gray. The rest wore yellow hardhats from which jutted bright red plastic moose antlers.

Cabs and airport limos disgorged more spangled musicians and mooses in twos and threes. They joined the crowd from the buses in a confusion of greetings, handshakes, and backslaps while the limo drivers produced a few suitcases for the hotel's bellman to pile on a polished brass cart.

Mickey had an excellent view when the buses pulled away from the hotel and four of the new arrivals spotted the fire hydrant by the curb. They broke away from the pack and trotted across the drive, where three of them circled the hydrant three times counterclockwise, waving their instruments above their heads and yelling, "Hound dog! Hound dog!" The fourth, a moose, seemed to be keeping watch, rather like a dog that knew it would be scolded if its master showed up.

There was another hydrant precisely across the street from the one in front of the hotel. A Ford Tempo with a ticket under its windshield wiper was parked beside it. Mickey Gorgonzola stopped and let Kilroy sniff around its base while he stared.

"Widdershins," he said. "The way witches are supposed to dance around their cauldrons and altars. Did you know that, Kilroy?"

They were just as nuts as hydrant-woofers.

Mickey looked back the way he had come. The backwards singer had now abandoned his lamppost. Back straight and head up, he was almost marching toward the crowd in front of the Marriott. When he was about a car-length from them, he waved, raised both hands, put his thumbs to his temples, wiggled his fingers,

and cried out quite loudly enough for Mickey to hear above the sounds of the city's traffic: "Svil luk-niw-lub!"

Several of the crowd's members punched the shoulders of neighbors who had not yet spotted the newcomer. Soon the whole group was waving back and shouting with a single voice: "Oot siv-le!"

The hotel's doorman held the door for the bellman and his cart. A moose gestured him aside and took his post. The singer bowed to the crowd, spun on his heels, and stepped into the hotel. The rest followed.

Kilroy eyed the hydrant he had been investigating skeptically, barked once, and lifted a leg.

Mickey Gorgonzola said, "Looks like a washout from here. Just a convention." He sounded and felt disappointed. Conventions and conventioners were routinely strange. Every year the city endured migrations of Lions and Elks, office supplies salesmen and feminists, Odd Fellows and Redmen. Suddenly a horde of spangled guitarists and mooses did not seem strange at all. Nor did barking executives, nonsense talkers, and backwards singers.

"Let's go home," he added. But when he tugged on Kilroy's harness, the dog refused to budge.

"Really," said Mickey. "Well what the hell, why not." He let his dog lead him around the bow of the Ford Tempo and across the street, apparently quite oblivious to the squealing of brakes and the bark from somewhere behind him.

The first thing he saw inside the Marriott was a sign mounted on a silvery pedestal. It said:

THE BULLWINKLE-ELVIS
BROTHERHOOD
11-2
SPRINGFIELD HALL
ROOM 318

Lunch, he thought, and his stomach growled. A luncheon meeting. He wondered if the backwards singer was their luncheon speaker.

The second thing he saw was the dim-lit bar to one side of the lobby. The bar was not crowded. Kilroy led him to a booth with a view of the lobby. "Ah," he said. He scratched the dog's ears. "So we won't quit." The backwards singer might very well stay with the Bullvis Brotherhood until 2. Or he might not. If he didn't, Kilroy was saying as clearly as any dog could ever say anything at all, Mickey should be in a position to see him leave. If he came through the lobby.

"May I help you?"

The waitress leaning over his table had a British accent and wore a nametag that said "C. Stilton." She was also high-busted and short-skirted, and he had to struggle to maintain his pretense that he could see nothing.

"Just coffee, please."

"Nothing for the dog?"

He dug into the pocket of his windbreaker and found a dog biscuit. "This should do him. Unless you could bring a bowl of water?"

"Of course, sir!"

The way she bounced when she straightened up reminded him of the way Rocky had looked that morning. He smiled, glanced toward the empty lobby, and studied the bar across the room. Behind it was a traditional mirror and a tier of shelves loaded with bottles. One of the shelves held an antique mantle clock that said the time was 11:05.

The waitress returned with his order just as Rocky and Bert appeared together in the entrance to the bar.

"There you are!" Rocky cried.

"Are you drunk yet?" asked Bert Camen.

"What are you talking about?"

"I had to cancel a client," said Rocky Forte. "A man called and said you were sticking your nose where you really shouldn't. Then he said you were here at the Marriott, in the bar, and I should come get you."

"And you believed him?"

"He sounded very official." She sounded apologetic. "And I know you can..." She shrugged at him. "So I called Bert. And..."

Suddenly Mickey held up a hand. "Wait a minute," he said. "You were in your office?"

She nodded.

"That's over a mile from here."

She nodded again.

"And this guy called you. Then you called Bert?"

She and Bert both nodded this time.

"When was this?"

"About half an hour ago," said Rocky. "We walked."

"I've only been here five minutes."

Bert chuckled. "You said they were space aliens. You shouldn't be surprised if they can see the future."

Rocky seemed to take the discrepancy more seriously. "I don't see how that could be."

"We wouldn't, would we?"

"There has to be a simpler explanation."

Mickey sighed. "I was following him," he said. "The backwards singer."

"Huh?"

He explained what he meant. Then he said, "I didn't think he spotted me. But if he did..."

"And he knew where he was going," said Bert.

"So if he figured you were going to keep on following him," said Rocky.

"And if he didn't want to bother shaking you off his tail..."

"Then he knew where I was going to be. All he needed was a chance to make a call." And he had ducked into that real estate office and the music store. Perhaps the first hadn't let him use its phone.

5. What Do You Do with the Leftovers?

"I'm hungry," said Bert Camen.

"There's a place I like just up the street," said Rocky Forte.

"I'm staying here."

"Mickey!" Her tone was both fond and exasperated. "The guy's just another flake!"

"I've got to be sure." He peered toward the hotel lobby. There was no sign of a Bullwinkle or an Elvis, much less the backwards singer who had led him here. "When he comes out..."

"You'll follow him," said Bert. "But he won't be out of there till two. You've got time."

Mickey Gorgonzola let himself be persuaded. Ten minutes later, they were entering the Willow Wallow a block away. Its chairs and the backs of its booths were wicker. One wall bore a mural that depicted a broad river, drooping willows, a rowing shell, and a hippopotamus.

"I wish I could see the hotel," said Mickey.

"It's just around the corner," said Rocky. "And he'll still be there when you get back."

A waitress approached them with a fistful of menus, glanced at Kilroy, and said, "You'll want a booth."

"By the window," said Mickey.

She looked at him skeptically. Why would a blind man want a window seat? But she obliged, and it wasn't long before she had their orders.

"You should be back in your office," said Bert. "That proposal..."

Rocky sighed. "I know he's been working on it for awhile, but I haven't seen it. How far along is he?"

Bert snorted, but before he could speak, Mickey pointed at the window. "You both think I'm off my rocker. But look at that hydrant."

The hydrant was perhaps fifty feet away from them.

"So?" asked Bert. "It's a hydrant."

"Watch."

An executive had just stopped facing the hydrant. He had no silver in his hair, and he wore a thin mustache, but otherwise he looked much like the one that had caught Mickey's attention the day before. He was even doing the same things, laying his attache case flat, opening it to hold his suitcoat, arranging a legal pad for his knees, and kneeling.

"Jesus," said Bert when he began to bark. "I can hear him from here."

"Who gets the hash? The bangers and mash?"

The plates the waitress set before them were heaped higher than Mickey had ever seen. "My god," he said.

"They don't believe in starving people," said Rocky.

Despite the hunger he had claimed earlier, Bert barely touched his food. Instead he kept watching the scene outside the restaurant.

"Would you look at that?" he said.

"That" was a bum wrapped in a ragged overcoat, his hair bulging from beneath a derby with a fist-sized hole in its greasy crown. He was marching across the street toward the hydrant-woofer and waving a cane over his head. When he reached his goal, he smacked the man across the buttocks with the cane.

"He used a rope yesterday," said Mickey.

The executive did not look at his attacker. But he did stand up, put his suitcoat on, and restore his legal pad to his attache case. Then he walked off with as much dignity as if nothing at all had happened.

"Who? The bum?" asked Rocky.

"Didn't I tell you that?" While they ate he made up for his deficiency.

"That's a little much for coincidence," said Bert when he was done.

"Then I'm getting to you? You agree something strange is going on?"

Rocky set down her fork and waved a hand at her plate. It still held more food than most restaurants delivered to the table. "But no space aliens," she said. "Nuts."

Mickey fished a piece of meat from the remains of her lunch and dropped it under the table. It never touched the floor. "You're jumping to that conclusion."

"And you're jumping to the opposite one."

"At least I'm trying to find out if I'm right."

"Everything okay?" The waitress was back. "You want dessert?"

Rocky and Mickey were both shaking their heads. Bert said, "That was an awful lot of food. What do you do with the leftovers?"

The waitress shrugged, picked up their plates, and walked toward the mural wall, where she set them down on a low table. Then she picked up a large spatula, scooped the food from one plate, and slung it at the wall. Mashed potatoes, chunks of sausage, and green beans covered the hippopotamus's head. The contents of the second plate obscured the rower in the shell. The third covered a boulder near the river bank.

Not one of the restaurant's other customers seemed to notice.

"That's new," said Rocky. "The last time I was in here they didn't do that."

The waitress returned with the bill and accepted Bert's credit card. As she

was crossing the room toward the cash register, a small man emerged from the kitchen. He was bald and paunchy, and he bent forward as he walked. For a moment, Mickey thought he was severely hunchbacked, but then he recognized what the man wore strapped to his shoulders. It was a backpack sprayer of the sort used by firefighters.

He pointed. The little man was standing precisely where the waitress had stood to sling their leftovers against the mural. The sprayer's nozzle was in his hand, and a stream of greenish, sudsy fluid was washing the food into a gutter at the base of the wall.

"I don't get it," said Bert.

"I bet you should," said Rocky. "After all, you're a theater critic. And if this isn't dinner theater..."

The last of the hash slid down the wall. The little man aimed a last squirt into the gutter, barked once, and returned to the kitchen.

Before Bert could answer Rocky, the waitress returned. As he signed the credit card slip, Mickey shrugged. "Let's get out of here. I don't want to lose that guy."

6. Fast as Fast Can Be

The Marriott lobby was empty except for a bored-looking desk clerk, a young man with a broom, and a couple emerging hand in hand from the bar. A wall clock said the time was half past twelve. There was no sign of Bullwinkles or Elvises.

All the bar's booths were now occupied. They found a table with a view of the lobby and ordered coffee.

"We have food too, you know," said the waitress.

"What does the C stand for?" Bert was staring at her nametag.

"Chessie." The waitress wrinkled her nose. "The kids used to call me Cheesie. Stilton Cheesie. You want any lunch?"

"We went to the Wallow," said Rocky.

She wrinkled her nose again. "They're strange."

"What about your Bullwinkles?" asked Mickey.

"They're just flakes. Little kids playing dress-up. Nothing else?"

They shook their heads, and she left. But before she could return, Mickey stiffened like a dog on point.

The backwards singer was standing in the lobby, neatly framed by the bar's doorway. He seemed to be speaking to someone just out of sight. He was wearing a hard hat that sported a set of realistic deer antlers.

Rocky turned to look. "I thought you said they were mooses."

Mickey shook his head. "That's him."

"Maybe he's the chief," said Bert. "And chiefs have to be different. Or he's only an honorary Bullwinkle."

The singer was moving now, walking rapidly toward the hotel entrance.

"I've gotta go," said Mickey. He fished a handful of coins from his pocket and spread them on the table. "Enjoy the coffee."

Where had he gone?

Mickey and Kilroy had not been far behind the backwards singer when they emerged from the hotel. They had had no trouble keeping him in sight for block after block, even though their quarry set a fast pace.

When they had reached the city's Roswell Park, the singer had turned through the gate and immediately begun to run along a curving path. Mickey had begun to run as well, but then he had thought of how it must look: A blind man and a guide dog pursuing an antlered jogger through what passed in the city for forest. The image might carry a freight of mythic symbolism, but most urbanites would surely see something far more alarming. He doubted he would get very far before a bicycle cop pulled up beside him.

So he walked.

So he watched the singer draw further and further ahead and finally disappear around a clump of evergreens.

The path cut across a corner of the park. When he reached its end and peered down the street to right and left, there were only normal pedestrians in view. No antlers jutted above the crowd. There was no sign of the singer.

But there was a fire hydrant. An elderly woman, dirt deeply engrained in the creases of her face, her hair in tangled strings, leaned against it, wrapped in a filthy blanket. One hand clutched a brown paper bag.

He sighed. He might as well join her.

Would she know the difference if he bought a pint of decent booze and offered to share?

She might, he thought. After all, the papers insisted that the homeless were fallen. They had once been higher. They had had homes and families and perhaps even enough money for Medoc instead of Thunderbird.

Kilroy was sniffing the blanket.

She opened bloodshot eyes and muttered, "Nice doggy." Then she looked at Mickey. "Hey, bubby. Dja know wha' I shaw las' nigh'?" Her open mouth showed filthy, eroded teeth, and her breath was noticeable even at Mickey's distance. "A fahr hydran'! Walkin' dow' a shtree'!"

He couldn't help the noise he made: "Huh?"

But her eyes closed and she said nothing more.

"Lost him?"

The voice startled Mickey into looking up. He was once again at the corner of the hotel's block, and Bert and Rocky were facing him. "Yeah," he said. "We got to Roswell and--" He gestured. "He just ran away from me."

Rocky took his arm and turned him in the direction she and Bert were going. "It's probably just as well."

"Back to the office, eh? Back to work?" When she nodded, he added, "I'd

rather get to the bottom of this. It's as strange as anything I've ever investigated. And it seems a lot more real."

"So it's strange," said Bert. "There's a lot of strange things in this world. You've got to lighten up a bit. Stop taking it all so seriously."

"You don't understand." Mickey described once more the weirdness of the barking executive, the backwards singer and his encounter with another--or perhaps the same--barker, the Bullvis Brotherhood. "I've never seen such things before in my life, and I've been looking for a long time. I'm beginning to think I've found my space aliens at last, right in my own backyard!"

"Oh, no!" said Rocky. "Not that again! They're just flakes, normal weird humans. The city is full of them and always has been."

"There's more of them lately, and they're weirder," insisted Mickey. They hadn't been far from his office. The building was already in sight two blocks ahead. "And I've never, ever heard of walking fire hydrants."

"Huh?" Bert's voice was only mildly puzzled, but Mickey described the woman he had found leaning against a hydrant and repeated her words anyway.

If he had hoped to convince his friends that he was chasing more than will-o-the-wisps, he was disappointed.

Bert's only response was a "What do you expect?" gesture of the hands. Rocky just rolled her eyes.

7. Just Another Cloud of Swamp Gas

Mickey heard the phone ringing as he approached his office door. It quit when his key touched the lock, and he swore.

"Dammit." A glance at the equipment on his desk was enough to tell him he had neither turned on the answering machine nor turned off his computer. "You know who that was, Kilroy?" For some reason, he had not stripped off the guide-dog harness and stowed it in the closet with his jacket. "That's what I think too. Just a minute..."

The dog flopped on the rug. The dark glasses went back in the desk. A finger touched the button that would call his agent.

"Was that you, Angela?... I was in the hall, just missed... Yeah, I'm making progress." He stared at the text that still failed to fill his computer's screen. He winced. "Yeah, you'll have it soon, real soon."

He hung up. He sighed. He had never before in his life had so much trouble with a simple proposal, never been so easily distracted, never felt so close to genuine aliens, even if they hardly acted as he had always supposed aliens would act. He wished he did not have to lie to his agent.

He sighed again. He managed to type a few lines. A paragraph. Two. He filled the screen and began another. Progress, though not on the thing he cared most about at the moment. Why would anyone, executive or no executive, bark at fire hydrants? Why waitresses at slopped-up walls and backwards singers at fake mooses? Why...?

He stood up to peer out the window. Nothing. Had he imagined it all? He shook his head and sat down again. No. He hadn't. But for now, at least, he had no hope of answers.

Mickey had just closed the apartment door behind him when a full-throated scream erupted from the kitchen.

Something crashed.

Kilroy's fur instantly bristled, and he growled.

Mickey wasted less than a second on the thought of masked invaders burst~ing through the back door that flashed through his mind. He ran toward Rocky's terror-stricken voice, plunged into the kitchen, and stopped.

A pot lid rocked and sang upon the floor. Rocky's back was against the refrigerator door. Her hands were raised as if to ward off some awful horror. Her face was white and her mouth was open wide in shock. Her eyes were fixed upon the stove.

The only thing upon the stove was a large, lidless pot.

"What...?"

She did not answer. He crossed the room, looked into the pot, and nearly screamed himself.

In it, a human hand lay on its back in a pool of blood. The thumb and forefinger gripped a business card on which the words "Aliens Anonymous" were plainly visible.

"You bastard!"

"What do you mean?"

"Where did you get it?" Her skin was no longer white but red and blotchy. Tears were filling her eyes. Her voice was desperate.

So was his as he cried, "I didn't!"

"How else could it get here! And I loved you!"

"I love you too, but..." He reached for her shoulder, but she twisted away, her face saying clearly that she was terrified--of him.

"Who did you kill? Why?"

"I didn't!"

"No! Don't touch me! I'm calling the cops!"

She sidled past him. A moment later, the slam of the apartment door said she was gone, perhaps forever.

The sound of an engine behind the building drew him to the window. Rocky was taking his car, an ancient Chevette.

He took a deep, bewildered breath and turned once more toward the stove.

A hand. Severed from some unlucky wrist.

It looked so real that it looked unreal. A toy. Plastic and rubber and ketchup.

But he did not touch it. He did not believe it was not real.

No clue to why. No clue to who had done it. Except that he knew he had not.

He couldn't blame Rocky for running.

What would the cops say?

He had heard so many stories.

They would take him in, wouldn't they? He was there, right on hand. It was his apartment. No one else could possibly have done it.

He squinted and shuddered at the thought of bright lights and endless questions.

But that wouldn't be the point, would it? They had already warned him, when all he had done was look out his office window. He hadn't paid enough attention. He had followed the backwards singer.

Now they would throw him in jail and toss away the key. And the aliens would be safe from discovery.

It was a plot then, wasn't it? That was why they were doing it.

And it would work if he was here when they arrived.

On his bedroom dresser there was a royalty check he had not yet deposited. Taped to the underside of a dresser drawer there was an envelope full of what he called his getaway money. Just in case. For emergencies. Between check and cash he had about \$1500, though the check was worthless unless he could get to the bank in the morning, before they put someone there to watch for him.

He dared not waste a moment. He threw a few clothes into an overnight bag and left. An hour later, he was locking the door of a small hotel room, undoing the guide-dog harness at last, and saying to Kilroy, "Under the name of Sanders. Kodiak Sanders. I wonder how long they'll take to find us?"

The dog, of course, did not answer. On the other hand, he did manage to look quite sympathetic, almost as if he understood his master's plight.

The news channel had no mention of body parts in pots. He wondered if they could so soon, or would. The police might want to find more than just a hand before they made the crime public. Maybe they would want to find him. Or perhaps they already knew where he was. Every footstep in the hall made him look up, and when the steps stopped, as if some burly cop were about to knock, he cringed.

Someone barked. He jumped, and then he realized that the sound had come from the TV set still on before his eyes. A businessman was kneeling before a hydrant, and someone was saying, "...Cleveland." A moment later he was staring at a stage adorned with the "Strange America" logo and watching the host make antlers with his hands and say, "We'll be right back," in a passable imitation of Bullwinkle's voice.

The screen winked out. He stared at Kilroy where he lay curled upon the room's thin rug. "They're everywhere, aren't they? Space aliens. Or flakes."

The dog cocked his head, rose, and trotted to the window. He put his forepaws on the sill and whined.

"Do you need to go for a walk?"

He reached for the harness that was the only reason the hotel had permitted Kilroy on the premises, but the dog only pressed his nose against the glass. Mickey looked, and in the distance he saw a glowing ball fall out of the sky, hover over Roswell Park, and settle out of sight.

"Is that it?" On any other day, he would have screamed with joy. For all his searching, for all the investigations he had pursued for his books and Tits'n'Tats, he himself had never seen a flying saucer. Not one.

The dog returned to his position, turned around three times, and lay down once more.

"It's probably just another cloud of swamp gas."

But he stayed at the window, staring into the empty sky.

8. Banana Splits and Lemon Drops

"I'm sorry," said the teller. She looked barely old enough to have anything to be sorry for. "A check this size will have to clear before you can have the money. Come back in three days."

Mickey sighed. "I should have expected this, right?"

The smile she gave him was far too tired for nine in the morning.

"Just take it out of my savings," he said. "Then, when the check clears, deposit it."

"Your passbook, please."

He stopped his hand halfway to his shirt pocket. "I didn't bring it with me. But you've got me in your computer." He pointed at the screen be~~side her. "Just..."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gorgonzola. You must have your passbook to make a withdrawal."

"I need that money!"

She shrugged and glanced toward the line growing behind him. A ripping sound drew her gaze and his toward the bank's entrance, where a middle-aged man had apparently just bent over to retrieve a parcel. The seat of his charcoal-gray pants was split by a white crescent the shape of a banana.

The man froze in his position for just a second. Then he straightened, made an exasperated face at the hard-faced blonde who was the bank's security guard, and marched toward the loan department.

"Is there a difficulty here?" The bank's manager was leaning over the teller's shoulder.

"I just wanted to cash that check, but..."

"Of course." The manager peered at the check and patted the teller's back. "Go ahead, dear." Then he gave Mickey a wink and an abrupt, conspiratorial nod. "I enjoyed your last book."

Mickey was tucking the bills into his wallet and walking toward the bank's revolving doors when a police officer entered, scanned the room, and marched toward the manager's office in the rear.

Mickey had left Kilroy in the hotel room because he had feared just such a moment. If anyone was looking for him, they would also be looking for a dog. Without the dog, he would have that much more chance of escaping notice and

staying free.

Unfortunately, he was in the wrong place. Before he could reach the door, the manager's voice cried, "Stop him!"

He was only a yard from the security guard. But instead of grabbing for him, she reached for the automatic in the holster on her belt. Her skirt fell, revealing frilly lemon-yellow panties and a curve of haunch far more feminine than her face.

Not surprisingly, she grabbed for her skirt. Mickey, forgotten for the moment, charged into the revolving door. As it swung him to the street outside, he thought he heard someone bark.

He did not remember seeing the hydrant at the curb the last time he had visited the bank. But he had no time to dwell on that thought, for a squad car was coming toward him down the street.

The tinted windshield let him see only that there were two cops in the car. As it drew abreast, he recognized the cops who had visited his office. Custer, the thin one, was behind the wheel. Abe, his fat buddy, held the mike to the car's radio in one hand.

Custer held up one hand and wagged the fingers.

Abe smacked him on the shoulder and gestured furiously.

The car stopped with a lurch. Its siren growled. Its lightbar began to strobe blue and blue and blue.

Mickey was already running. His goal was a narrow passageway down which he was sure the police car could not possibly follow him. He glanced behind. The car was crosswise in the road, kept from completing its turn by a bakery van.

The high backsides of apartment buildings, all red brick and tiny windows, blocked his view as he dove into the passageway. A moment later it dumped him into an alley flanked by closed metal doors and open loading bays full of garbage cans.

No one was in sight when he seized a shadowed corner in one of those bays to catch his breath. It could be only moments before the squad car reached one end of the alley, which was quite wide enough to let it through. Abe would use his radio to call other cars, and the passage he had used would be blocked. He felt trapped already.

Unless... He tried the door that led into the depths of the building. It opened, and he was in a hallway adorned by the pipes that festooned the walls and ceilings. The only other person present was a single janitor bent over some unidentifiable bit of pipe. The seat of his pants gaped as widely as had that of the parcel-dropper in the bank.

"You ripped your pants," he said as he passed.

The other man gave him an unshaven glare that said he knew.

It didn't take Mickey long to find the building's lobby and recognize the street he had fled. A squad car, its lightbar strobing, was passing by.

He turned the other way, back the way he had come, back toward the bank. He hoped there would be no one to recognize him. The manager would be back at his desk, or explaining to his employees and customers that there had been no robbery, or... The cops would be elsewhere, hunting, lying in wait.

The hydrant in front of the bank was no longer alone. An elegantly dressed blonde was kneeling beside it and yapping enthusiastically. Beside her stood a top-hatted bum with a loop of rope in his hand.

As Mickey passed, the bum winked at him. Then he went back to eying the blonde's legs.

No one shouted. Nor did anyone seem to notice when Mickey crossed at the corner and glanced toward the alley's mouth. No police car was in sight, but still he did not breathe easily until he had turned two corners and could see an entrance to Roswell Park ahead.

A squad car drove slowly through the intersection just ahead. Its lightbar was not flashing. His throat tightened, and he tasted acid. A woman left the park leading a small dog on a leash. As she reached the curb, something frilly and yellow fell from beneath her skirt. With barely a glance at what she was leaving behind, she freed her ankles and moved on. The dog ignored the puddle of cloth.

He surrendered to the first park bench he saw. Since it was half surrounded by shrubbery, it felt protective, a shield against discovery if the cops turned their attention in this direction. He knew the feeling was an illusion, but he embraced it anyway. He needed a respite, a moment to think about what was going, to try to make sense of it all.

People didn't split pants that often. He had seen it twice in one morning.

People didn't drop skirts and panties or slips either. And he had seen that twice too.

Were the aliens trying to keep him from being arrested? Distracting people? "But I can't even say they're real yet," he muttered to himself. "On the other hand, someone certainly seems to be trying to stop my investigation."

Two groups of aliens?

Not just barking dog-mimics, but cats as well.

"I'll know if anyone ever meows at me. Or at a hydrant."

He choked off a hysterical giggle before it got out of control.

Or was it just that the aliens didn't fit human clothes properly, so that they kept falling off?

He snorted. "Then there must be a lot of 'em out there."

9. Clem Padiddlepopper Rides Again

"What are you talking to yourself about?"

"Rocky!" He jerked and looked for cops converging on him.

The bench lurched as she sat down. "You're off the hook," she said. "You bastard. That was a nasty trick."

"What do you mean?" If he was off the hook, why did she sound so mad?

She punched his knee. "I should have had more faith in you, I suppose. But I really didn't think you could be that mean." She punched him again.

"What...?"

"They finally took a close look at that hand. It was candy! Marzipan!"

"You mean it wasn't real?"

"Don't sound so goddam surprised!" This time she punched his biceps. "You put it there."

"I did not!"

"Then who did?"

His bewildered gesture was quite enough to say he hadn't the foggiest.

"Aliens, huh?" She made a face as if the words tasted bad, but she said nothing more. Instead, she slumped against his side. "You want to go home now?"

He leaned back against the bench and put an arm around her shoulders. "How'd you find me?"

"A man in a business suit. He even had an attache case."

"Just like the one I saw."

She nodded against his side. "Yeah. I was at the office. Running out for some tissues. Soggy client, you know? He stopped me outside the drugstore and told me."

"Did he bark? Or keep looking at fire hydrants?"

"Not that I noticed," she said. Then she sat up straight and touched her hair. "Actually, he kept looking at me."

Rocky had left his car just outside Roswell Park. When they reached it, she gestured him toward the driver's side. "Sorry I took it," she said. "I guess I was in a rush."

"The hotel's not far away. I'll get my stuff. And Kilroy. And then...? Home?"

She shook her head. "Back to work. I've missed one appointment already."

He stepped on the brakes as the light ahead turned red.

Something banged against the left front fender.

Rocky yelped.

A jaunty wave drew Mickey's eye to a battered top hat and a ragged overcoat, a tall figure with a goofy grin, and a hand raised to throw...

He rolled down his window. "What the hell did you do that for?"

The bum grinned still more widely, bounced his rock in his palm, and crossed the street to look down at Mickey. "It's how I get a bed at night," he said. "When the shelters are full, thank you."

Before Mickey could wonder out loud why this man looked so familiar, Rocky was leaning across his chest. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I was aiming for the headlight, you know. Once I hit a couple, someone always calls the cops."

"You must have a name," said Rocky.

He dropped his rock, lifted his hat enough to let gray curls escape, and looked thoughtful. "The cops just call me Clem. Clem Padiddlepopper."

The car behind them honked. Mickey looked up. The light was green. "Hop in," he said. "We'll take you to the station." When they were moving once more, he asked, "Why Padiddlepopper?"

"It isn't right, you know. I don't throw rocks at padiddles. I just make them."

Clem was leaning over the back of the seat. Oddly, he did not smell nearly as unwashed as he looked.

"What is a padiddle?"

"A car with one headlight out," said Rocky. "When you see one, you're supposed to kiss the driver. At least, that's what my father used to say."

Mickey shook his head. "And which one of you starts barking now?"

"Oh, no," said Clem. "I'm dead serious. Take the next right. Halfway down the block."

Mickey was holding the door for Clem when a police officer appeared in the entrance to the precinct station. Her expression was one of exasperated patience. "Not again," she said with a sigh. "You want to press charges?"

Rocky touched the dent in the fender and shook her head. The car was not new, and it wore worse mementos of parking lots and traffic.

"Just as well," said the cop. "It wouldn't make much difference." Then she looked at the bum. "You're in luck, Clem. We've got an empty cell."

He crooked his arm and offered her his elbow as if he were a gentleman escorting his lady to a ball. She sighed again and looked at Mickey. "Thanks for saving us the pick-up trip."

10. I Love Lucy and Ronnie and Bonzo and Quayle

Something slammed against the apartment door three times in quick succession.

Mickey set down the slice of toast he was buttering and stood up.

The sound repeated--Wham! Wham! Wham!--louder than before.

Kilroy barked.

"Someone's knocking, dear," said Rocky. She was at the kitchen sink, washing her plate. A mug of coffee sat within reach on the counter.

"I had that impression." As his shadow fell across the spyhole in the door, a rough voice said, "Open up. Police."

That didn't sound right. He unfastened only the deadbolt, but as soon as the door began to gape, a boltcutter lunged through the crack and severed the chain. He tried to push the door shut, but the effort was futile.

"Back up." The speaker was a burly cop whose arms reached to his knees.

Mickey obeyed, retracing his path to the kitchen.

"Who's the ape?" asked Rocky, her back to the sink. "Bonzo?"

"Shaddap," said the ape.

Kilroy wagged his tail.

"Siddown," said a woman cop with curly red hair and too much makeup.

"Is that coffee?" asked a slender man with a long, wrinkled face and wavy hair. He pushed Rocky toward the table and appropriated her mug.

The fourth cop was the youngest. He had sandy hair and a square face with an innocuous expression. "I know them," said Rocky. "But who the hell are you? Quayleedum? And what the hell are you doing in here? Do you have a warrant?"

"Siddown," said the redhead, and she put a hand on Rocky's shoulder. "Where's that rope, Ronnie?"

"You too," said Bonzo as he pressed Mickey into his seat.

Ronnie put down Rocky's coffee mug and produced a hank of clothesline. Together he and Quayleedum tied Mickey and Rocky to their seats, their hands behind the chair backs.

When they were done, Ronnie opened cupboards until he found the dog biscuits and gave Kilroy two. "Good dog."

The redhead made a fresh pot of coffee and found mugs for everyone except her hosts.

Quayleedum asked, "Why?"

"Why what?" asked Mickey.

"Don't get cute. You know what we want to know."

Mickey was afraid he did. Why was he so interested in barking businessmen and backwards singers? Why didn't he ignore them the way everyone else did? Why did he have to go looking for business to stick his nose into? And how much had that nose sniffed out already?

He tried to explain: He was a writer. He wrote about UFOs and aliens and other strange things, and the barking man had made him wonder where he was from and why he was here, and then things had rapidly gotten weirder.

"You thought he was a space alien," said Rocky.

He still did, but he thought--he hoped--that if he kept his mouth shut, their interrogators would go away.

When the cops had stopped laughing, the redhead said, "You were warned once already. Stay out of it."

"Yeah," said the ape. "Or..." He set down his coffee mug and made a twisting motion with both hands.

"I still..."

"Shut up," said Rocky. "Please!"

Quayleedum grinned. "You're ruining her peace of mind."

"I still want to know what's going on."

"Forget it," said the redhead. "They're not space aliens."

"Just flakes," said Ronnie. "The city's full of flakes."

"So cool it, guys." Quayleedum tipped up his mug and then stared into its bottom as if surprised it should already be empty. "And don't rush off anywhere."

The other three followed him to the door.

Mickey jerked against his bonds and swore.

Rocky tipped her seat back and worked the loops of rope that held her ankles over the ends of the chair legs. She stood up as best she could with her torso still tied to the chair. She stumbled to the kitchen counter, where she turned around and managed to open a drawer. In a second she held a carving knife.

Mickey glared at the dog. "Man's best friend," he said. "Hah!"

"Women have always known better," said Rocky.

11. Making Faces

"I'm late," Rocky grunted as she leaned into her stride.

"You could have called." Mickey kept up with her easily, but Kilroy had to trot.

"I hate to cancel. My clients need me. And everyone else in the clinic is booked solid too." She glared at a hydrant as she passed, sidestepped a slower pedestrian, and plunged into an intersection just as the light changed. Cars honked.

Mickey stayed with her until a rack of clothing rolled from a delivery van toward the door of a boutique. She made it through. He and Kilroy had to wait.

When he caught up once more, she sounded thoughtful: "I'm not sure that was really Quayleedum. Might have been Quayleedee."

"At least they're gone." The relief Mickey had felt when the door had closed behind the cops was still strong. So was his bewilderment. He wished he knew what was really going on.

"And I believe you. God help me, now I believe you. Space aliens!"

"Huh! What do you mean?"

"They didn't have a warrant," she said. "They didn't take us to the station. And then they just walked off, leaving us tied up."

"So you think they must be up to something funny."

"Funny business." She nodded emphatically and stopped walking. This intersection was already full of moving vehicles. "Maybe even something to do with barking executives, backwards singers, and Bullwinkle and Elvis impersonators."

The light changed, they started across the street, and Mickey added, "And God alone knows what else."

"So you're probably right. Space aliens."

"That doesn't necessarily follow." He told himself he was happy that she had come around, but he did have to be honest. Then he snorted in surprise as doubts suddenly flooded in upon him, and again at his own lack of faith in his guesses.

"Real people aren't that weird," she said. "Just like you said. And if they're all space aliens, that would explain a lot."

He wondered if it could possibly explain the woman across the street, bending to retrieve the panties that had slid down her legs, or the man holding his briefcase carefully over his crotch with one hand, while the other hand half covered a split seam in back.

At last he said, "We need to kidnap one or two of them and ask a few questions ourselves."

"What if they don't have any answers?" asked Rocky. "Or what if they don't want to give us any?"

"Then we'll have to..."

A city bus rolled past them, trailing stink. A siren sounded in the distance. The next corner gave them a glimpse of the city's center. Mickey's own office was two blocks away.

"This is where I turn," said Rocky. "You walking with me?"

He spoke, but not in answer: "Look at that!"

He was pointing at the department store they were passing.

"That" was a display window full of children dressed in well worn and often patched, but clean, jeans and shirts. Some had their faces pressed against the glass. Some were stretching their mouths and eyelids with their fingers, or contorting their lips, or twisting their tongues into unlikely shapes.

Rocky shook her head. "What are they advertising?"

Suddenly every face relaxed. The children pointed. They screamed and cheered and barked so loudly that Mickey heard them easily through the glass.

When he turned to see what they were pointing at, he saw Clem Padiddlepopper dodging cars and trucks and cabs, jaywalking in their direction. He was carrying a slender stick in one hand and his overcoat was swirling around his ankles.

"Would you look at that?" he cried as he reached the curb. He swung his switch at the hydrant and used it to point at a parked car with a shattered headlight. "Some of my handiwork!" he said.

Then he tossed his switch toward the gutter, slipped his arms through theirs, and spun them around.

"But..." cried Rocky.

"Your clients will be fine," he said in a reasonable tone. "We need your car."

"What for?" asked Mickey. He tried to resist the bum's insistent tug back

the way they had come, but the effort was futile. Clem Padiddlepopper was much stronger than he looked.

"You are getting annoying, Mr. Michael Gorgonzola," said the bum. "So it's time to let you in on something. Maybe then you won't want to kidnap and torture us. Let's go for a drive."

When Mickey asked, "How did you know what I was thinking of doing? You weren't anywhere near!" Clem gave no answer. His grip on their arms simply became more irresistible, and their movement toward the parking lot where Mickey had parked his Chevette more inevitable.

12. Even the Birds Can Tell

"You said 'us,'" said Rocky Forte.

"So you're one of 'em," said Mickey. Even though the car was his, he and Rocky were in the back seat. Clem Padiddlepopper had insisted, and Kilroy had demanded the front seat to himself. "What do you do? Bark at lamp posts? Dress up as Maid Marian after a hard night and call yourself Thor?"

"I throw rocks at headlights," said Clem.

"And where the hell are we going? Back to your flying saucer?" Presumably, he thought, the very one he had seen from his hotel room's window. "Where is it? In the park?"

"Nope," said Clem as he steered the car around one more corner.

Kilroy barked. Mickey recognized the block ahead of them. There was the pet shop he had passed when he was following the backwards singer. Its window was still full of parakeets. The boxy speaker was still over its door, and the street was still full of birdsong and puppy yelps.

Since one police car looked much like every other, he did not recognize the one that plunged from the alley and slammed into the left rear quarter of his Chevette.

The car lurched and spun and threw Mickey against Rocky. Her arms quite automatically rose as if to defend him.

The curb exploded against the tires, and the car stopped abruptly amid the sounds of crumpling metal and breaking glass.

The windshield crazed and fell in pieces from its frame into Clem Padiddlepopper's lap.

Kilroy whined from the floor where the crash had flung him, but when he climbed back onto the seat and shook the glass from his fur, he seemed none the worse. Clem seemed dazed. Rocky was already reaching for the door handle.

Mickey was swearing. If the car--his car--hadn't been kidnapped by goddam space aliens... It was obviously totaled.

By the time he stepped onto the sidewalk, two cops, one fat, one thin, were emerging from the battered squadcar. Across the street, a crowd of gawking pedestrians was growing. A siren growled in the distance. Two Bullwinkles and an Elvis were pushing through the crowd to gain a better view.

Ten feet away, a kid was making faces at them from the back seat of a

parked VW Bug wearing Georgia license plates and a university decal. Its sides were turned to lace by rust.

The parakeets were streaming through the shattered shop window, squawking and screeching and oblivious to the chill in the autumn air.

A cloud of pigeons descended from cornices and ledges above the street, mingled with the parakeets, and then, as if some one among the mobbing flock had cried, "Attack!" flew at cops, Bullwinkles, and Elvis.

When Kilroy jumped through the opening where the Chevette's windshield had been, two parakeets and a pigeon attacked him, pecking at his ears and tail.

When Clem Padiddlepopper shook his head and crawled from the wreckage, one pigeon snatched his hat and a parakeet landed on his head, pecked his ear, and flew away with his hair in its claws.

For some reason, the birds ignored Mickey and Rocky and most of the onlookers.

The cops waved their arms, turned, and ran. So did the Bullwinkles and Elvis.

Clem and Kilroy stood their ground.

In the VW Bug, the kid's mouth was wide with wonder.

"Your birds don't like us," said Clem. He waved one arm and knocked a parakeet to the ground. It gave him a baleful look and limped under the Chevette's broken front end.

For just a moment, Mickey wondered why he had never noticed birds attacking anyone. Certainly the city's pigeons hadn't seemed to pay particular attention to hydrant-woofers, backwards singers, Bullwinkles, Elvises, or Clem Padiddlepopper before this moment.

But then the now-baldheaded Clem said, "Let's get out of here." A few steps put him beside the VW, and a yank opened its door. "Out, kid."

A treble voice refused.

Clem Padiddlepopper wasted no time in negotiation. He reached into the back seat, laid his hands on the kid's shoulders, and dragged him from his seat.

"I'll tell my mother!"

"This should take care of it." He produced a business-sized envelope from somewhere beneath his overcoat and handed it to the boy. "Give that to her."

The kid began to scream.

The cops, Bullwinkles, and Elvis were nowhere in sight.

Peremptory gestures ushered Mickey and Rocky into the Bug's cramped back seat. Kilroy once more took the shotgun position. Clem slid behind the wheel.

"You don't have the key," said Rocky.

"No problem." One hand reached under the dashboard and bent upward. A second later, the Bug belched smoke and began to vibrate.

As soon as they were on the road once more, Mickey asked, "What was in that envelope?"

"A gift certificate," said Clem Padiddlepopper. "At Jolly Roger's Used Cars."

"You'd better have one for me, too."

At the first light, Mickey spotted a pair of teenagers sitting tailor-fashion beside a hydrant. The boy wore no shirt. The girl positioned a soda can between his shoulder blades. He arched his back and crushed the can into a hockey puck. Two passersby tossed coins into the gimme cap that rested, open side up, on the sidewalk in front of him.

As the girl held another can against his back, a pigeon dive-bombed them, beating their heads with its wings.

Half a block later, a parakeet swooped down upon an executive kneeling before a hydrant and attacked his right buttock. He leaped to his feet, obviously swearing.

As Clem slowed for the turn into Roswell Park, they passed a Bullwinkle rubbing something white off his bright red horns.

Just inside the park, they saw the backwards singer. He looked quite normal except for the crow sitting on his shoulder and pecking at his ear.

"They're everywhere," said Mickey.

"Quite so," said Clem Padiddlepopper.

"Where are we going?" asked Rocky.

"The flying saucer?" asked Mickey, and when Clem replied neither yea nor nay he nodded as if he now knew more than he had.

The Bug's rear-mounted engine whined in his ear. The floor vibrated against his feet. Corners made Rocky lean against him and he against her, though Kilroy kept his seat as firmly as a tongue-lolling statue.

A squad car, strobing blue and blue and blue, blocked the exit from the park. The Bug's brakes squealed, even Kilroy tipped forward, and Clem twisted the wheel frantically. As they accelerated back the way they had come, a siren began to sound.

There was no roadblock on the other side of the park. They whined around the corner, through a red light, and into an alley. When Clem said, "Shit!" Mickey looked out the tiny rear window and saw the police car practically on their bumper. The cops behind the windshield looked like Ronnie and Bonzo.

At the end of the block, Clem swung hard right out of the alley, barely missing a Federal Express van. He cut in front of a cab, jinked to miss a jaywalker, and made the next light just before a bus blocked the road behind.

Rocky pointed, and Mickey saw two teenaged boys squirting what looked like whipped cream down each other's shorts. Two belly dancers gyrated in the back of a pick-up truck, while a staring man walked into a lamppost. Oriental music blared from a boom box fastened to the top of the truck's cab with bungee cords.

"Weird," said Mickey. "Not normal."

"The city's full of flakes," said Rocky.

Clem Padiddlepopper said nothing at all.

An executive turned away from the fire hydrant she was eying speculatively

and saluted the Bug as it passed.

Above it all, pigeons perched on cornices and held their heads at malicious angles.

Nowhere did Mickey see any sign of a flying saucer.

Clem dove the Bug into another alley, back into traffic, and finally into the park once more. "Lost him," he said.

There was no sign of a police car behind them. No flashing blue lights. No siren, except for a plaintive growling in the distance.

And no roadblock at the exit.

"It is time," said Clem Padiddlepopper, "to get out of this burg." As he spoke, he spun the Bug on two wheels onto a major boulevard and headed for the nearest freeway ramp.

13. Encounters of the Strangest Kinds

Like many urban freeways, this one walked on elevated stilts over and past the decaying factories and warehouses and tenements that fringed its city. From this new vantage Mickey Gorgonzola once more glimpsed flashing blue lights, but only in the distance. The cops seemed to have no idea of where they were now. Certainly no squad cars roared into view behind them.

The roadway descended. Open space appeared. Individual houses with yards and tiny swimming pools, already covered against the coming winter. Community tennis courts and bouncing grandparents.

There was no sign of weirdness. No Bullwinkles and Elvises. No hydrant-woofers. No can-crushers or belly dancers. No backwards singers or padiddlepoppers. No flakes. No flakes at all.

"Where are we going?" asked Rocky.

The Bug whined on. The yards gave way to trees. Bicycle paths appeared. A barn. A field. A small herd of half a dozen cows. And in the air above that herd, descending in a fluttering stoop...

Suddenly Mickey was screaming, "They were real!"

"What is it?"

Mickey could not answer her. It was not a butterfly. It was much too large, and it did indeed look more like a fingerpainted flower that flew by flapping its petals. But there really wasn't anything one could call it except a butterfly.

"Of course they were," said Clem. "You don't think the tabloids make their stories up, do you?"

"I've checked them out a thousand times," said Mickey. "And not one of them was true. Though that at least had a few crude paintings to back it up." He said where he had found the paintings. "And my agent wants me to do my next book on the trip."

Rocky had turned around to kneel on the Bug's back seat and keep watching the strange creature. Now she shook Mickey's shoulder. "What is it doing?"

"Jesus." The cows were running, circling the perimeter of their pasture, bellowing in panic, while the "butterfly" followed above. "If only I had a camera..."

Clem Padiddlepopper pulled the car to the edge of the road and stopped. Then he too turned in his seat to watch.

He was just in time to see the "butterfly" orient on one of the cows, swoop down, lift it into the air, and...

"How can it do that?" cried Rocky. She was holding one hand over her mouth.

"At least he isn't killing and mutilating her," said Clem.

Then he started the Bug rolling once more. "We're almost there."

They rounded a curve on the country road the highway's next off-ramp had led them to. Ahead of them stretched an arc of impressively decrepit shacks on either side of a ramshackle house and a "Vacancy" sign. Just past this ancient "motel" was a sign that said "Targay Shores." An arrow pointed down a dirt road that pierced a wall of trees. Some of the trees were evergreens. Many still clung to autumn leaves.

"Ugh," said Rocky Forte. "I wouldn't want to stay here."

Clem laughed as he turned the Bug into the dirt road and woods engulfed them. "It just looks bad. We don't want local tourists."

"Local?" The "butterfly" had convinced him, even though Clem never had said what it was. He had been right all along, and at the moment his only question was whether "local tourists" meant people from the city or people from the planet Earth.

The answer was not long delayed. The dirt road debouched into a broad clearing almost entirely filled by a tent of mottled green and brown camouflage cloth. There was no sign of a lake.

Beneath the tent was...

Kilroy barked.

Rocky gasped.

Mickey said nothing at all.

The thing beneath the tent blurred its outlines as the light shifted under the breeze-rippled cloth. Still, it did not take Mickey long to see that it was dome-topped, dish-bottomed, and round. Its rim was marked by a hundred oblong windows, much like those on an airliner. It stood on a dozen legs that looked just the way they would look if a human engineer had built them to be hydraulically extended on landing.

A broad, rectangular portal faced them. From it stretched a ramp a little too steep for wheelchairs. At the head of the ramp, on the lip of the entrance, stood several ordinary looking humans dressed in skin-tight blue coveralls.

"That's not a hoax," said Mickey Gorgonzola. It was far too elaborate a structure.

"Oh, no," said Clem Padiddlepopper.

It was just what Mickey had craved for most of his life.

It had to be, it was, a genuine flying saucer. All it lacked was little green men.

On the other hand, the people standing by the entrance were accompanied by several quadrupedal creatures that looked more than anything else like...

Mickey turned to stare at Kilroy, who was lolling his tongue in a very canine grin. "Oh, no," he said.

"Amazing what you can do with a little make-up, eh?" said the dog.

"So that's how he knew as soon as I said we should kidnap someone. You must have some sort of transmitter under your hide."

"In my left collar bone, to be precise."

14. Make Jokes, Not War

At the top of the saucer's entrance ramp there appeared two short, squat aliens. The others backed away perceptibly. Kilroy growled and said, "No one likes the Hydrans very much."

"Why not?" asked Rocky.

"Snotty bastards," said the dog.

As if they knew what others thought of them, the Hydrans were remaining by the ship while the human-like and dog-like aliens approached the car.

"They can't help it," said Clem Padiddlepopper. As he spoke, he opened the Bug's doors and gestured them out of the vehicle. "It's their voices."

One of the approaching aliens, a man whose scalp bore only a thin white fuzz of hair, said, "They always sound so horribly offended when they have to speak with non-Hydrans."

"No sense of humor," said Clem.

"We can hear you, you know," said one of the stubby aliens. Then it said something to the Hydran beside it. When its voice and words sounded like a barking dog, Mickey immediately realized that some of the barks he had heard over the last few days had been Hydrans talking, or other aliens speaking to Hydrans, or humans imitating what they saw as funny antics. "And you wouldn't laugh either if you had to just stand there and take it every time a dog..."

"Only when the Earthlings are looking," said Kilroy, laughing doggishly. "Have to maintain the cover, you know."

"If you ever try that when we're not in disguise..."

"They have an electric organ," said Clem. "Like an electric eel, though not as powerful."

Kilroy shuddered. "Thanks for reminding me."

"If they're Hydrans..." said Rocky.

"That's close enough," said Clem.

"Then what are we?" asked Kilroy. He shrugged, looked at Clem, and said,

"You couldn't pronounce it. So call us doggies."

"And we're just folks," said Clem. "Tourists, you know?"

"Come to gawk at the quaint natives, eh?" asked Mickey.

"You're not as quaint as you used to be," said Kilroy.

"And just how long have you been taking your vacations here?" asked Rocky.

By now the humanoid aliens from the flying saucer were close enough to shake Clem's hand. One did. "Haven't seen you out here for a while."

"Busy, busy. Some of our customers don't get along. You know."

"Hey!" barked a Hydran from the saucer's entrance. "It's not our fault!"

"I didn't say it was."

"Wait a minute," said Rocky. "Is that what you were doing with the rope? And the switch? Breaking up arguments?"

"Not always. Sometimes a customer samples the wrong food or beverage, and then he starts cussing out a real fire hydrant."

"How long...?" Rocky's voice was now tinged with impatience.

"About five hundred years," said the one with the fuzz.

"Earth didn't get real popular until just the last few years." Clem sounded faintly apologetic.

"You finally have amenities a little more like what the customers are used to," said another humanoid alien. "They still have to rough it, but..."

He shrugged, and Kilroy said, "Not too many Earthlings go in for wilderness camping, you know?"

"There have been a few, though," said Clem.

"Ah, well. Chaucer couldn't make it back home, right?"

"What about Jackie Gleason, Abbott and Costello, Phil Silvers, Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges, Red Skelton?"

"They got bigger laughs here in the bumwads, didn't they?"

"We call it the sticks," said Mickey.

Several of the aliens laughed. One said, "You sound like you think your species has produced any comedians at all!"

"You mean we haven't?" asked Rocky.

"Precious few! You have enough sense of humor to laugh at our jokes, but you couldn't even invent vaudeville on your own. Your idea of a joke runs to things like whoopee cushions and bibles, and the next thing you know you're shooting at each other."

"Come on, now," cried Mickey in protest. "What about TV sitcoms?"

A doggy pointed at Clem Padiddlepopper with his nose. "His predecessor. Had to be replaced. He invented the 'Strange America' show."

"You're trying to tell me that that nonsense can prevent war?"

Both the humanoids and the doggies laughed at him. "Look at your history!" said a doggy who would have needed very little help to pass as a collie. "When you were primitive and had no civilized amenities, and when there weren't very many of us around to keep you laughing, you had your worst wars."

"Now you're not so primitive," said a near greyhound. "You have more amenities, more of us are visiting, and that global conflagration you've all been dreading for the last half century or so seems less likely than ever."

"But...", said Mickey.

The humanoid with the fuzz nodded. "Right. You still have plenty of local wars, but they tend to be where there aren't many amenities, which just proves the point."

"You can't laugh and shoot at the same time," said the near-collie.

"At least, you can't," said a humanoid.

15. Cheesit! The Kops!

A quiet buzzer sounded within the saucer.

"Perimeter alert," barked one of the Hydrans as the other abruptly dove for the spaceship's interior.

"She's the gunner," said Clem Padiddlepopper.

They could now hear the sound of tires on the dirt road that linked the camo tent and what it concealed with the outer world.

The "butterfly" flapped over the trees, under the tent, and into the saucer's entrance.

The distinctive shape of a police car emerged from the woods. Its lights were not flashing, and its siren was silent.

Behind it was another, and behind that a cab.

When it was clear that nothing else was coming, the gunner Hydran rejoined her companion in the saucer's entrance. At the same time a third Hydran appeared from behind the spaceship, looked around, and began walking toward the crowd.

The three cars drew up abreast not far from the Bug. From one squad car emerged the fat and thin cops who had first told Mickey to lay off. What were their names? he asked himself. Abe and Custer?

The second squad car proved to hold three of the cops who had invaded Mickey's apartment and tied him and Rocky to chairs. Ronnie and the redhead and the ape.

"Where's Quayleedum?" asked Rocky.

He was in the back seat of the cab, sandwiched between two Bullwinkles. The backwards singer rode shotgun. The cabby was an Elvis.

The cops were not wearing their guns. Indeed, their manner now seemed far more patient and long-suffering than aggressive.

As soon as the backwards singer was out of the cab, he pointed a rigid

finger at Mickey. "You, sir," he said, "are a nayp ni eth tub. If Clem hadn't fetched you out here, I'd have had to cancel this group's tour."

Mickey looked at the Bullwinkles and the Elvis. "So they're aliens too."

"What did you think they were?"

"But why the..."

"Real horns," said Clem. "But the Elvises..." He shrugged.

"They're not all real," said the backwards singer. "A few are fake, and when they take theirs off, everybody believes they're all fake. Neat, huh?" Then he glared at Mickey. "As long as no one spills the garbanzos."

"He won't," said the ape cop Rocky had dubbed Bonzo on their first meeting. "He knows what we'll do to him if he does."

"No, you won't," said Clem. "Your job is our folks, and you haven't been doing it. Or I wouldn't have to keep breaking up arguments with the Hydrans. You're letting our customers get too conspicuous."

Kilroy snorted. "So who notices? One bag lady and a writer no one could possibly believe."

"They might notice," said Clem. "Or believe. We can't afford even a bag lady and a UFO nut."

Kilroy snorted again. The Hydran who had joined them away from the saucer barked.

"Right," said Clem. He withdrew a bit from the squat alien, as if he had just noticed its presence. So did several others.

"Don't act so high and mighty, assholes," said the Hydran. He turned toward Rocky. "They think they're funny. Call me Stover."

Clem looked at Mickey as if he wished he could ignore Stover. "The only ones we can be sure no one will notice are the Rigellians," he said. "They're gourmets who look like giant slugs."

"How could anybody not notice?" Rocky was making a disgusted face.

"They're behind that restaurant, the Willow Wallow."

"The one where they throw the leftovers against the wall?"

He nodded. "Or under it, rather. In the basement, in tanks. The staff uses a liquid containing digestive enzymes to wash the food down to them, and they absorb it through their skins."

The thin cop, Custer, was scratching Kilroy behind the ears. The doggy, even though he was an intelligent alien, seemed to be enjoying the attention. "Want to thank you for your help," Custer said.

"He tipped you guys too, did he?" said Mickey.

"Of course," said fat Abe. "He's no tourist. He's one of us. Secret Agent Ought Ought Seven and a Arf."

"I still don't think you needed to bother," said Kilroy. "Earthlings are too good at missing things that don't fit their preconceptions. They just call it weird and pretend it doesn't exist. Or they think someone's making a movie, which means it isn't real."

"However," said the redheaded cop. "Some Earthlings are more perceptive. You tour people have got to keep your clients less conspicuous, or we'll be forced to declare Earth off limits no matter how popular a holiday spot it is becoming."

The humanoids and doggies from the saucer seemed about to erupt in protest, but Mickey butted in. "No," he said. "Kilroy's right. People just don't pay attention, or they don't believe what doesn't fit, or they reinterpret it until it does fit."

When the humanoids looked skeptical, he added, "Clem had the right idea when he set up 'Strange America.' If you make the prizes bigger and spin off an imitation or two, everyone will be out on the streets with camcorders, looking for weird behavior, and no one will even think of aliens. Not even the tabloids."

"Why not?" someone growled. "They love..."

The redhead interrupted. "Okay," she said. "Give it a try. Six months. But no more Hydrans. And you..." She was indicating Mickey. "No book. Not about the alien paintings in Syktyvkar, and not about us."

Mickey felt like he was about to explode, but before he could make any noise other than a startled hiss, Stover barked, "No." The other Hydrans were still keeping their distance. "We just sit there on the edge of the road, watching the world go by. We don't do anything wrong."

"But people bark at you," said Clem.

"And you've been lucky," said Ronnie. "Just think how fast the beans will spill if there's a fire and someone tries to hook a hose to you. The least you have to do is find a different disguise."

"The Alpha Pictans are the only ones skinny enough to be parking meters. And we're not fat enough for mailboxes."

"Dress up like hobbits or dwarves," said Rocky. "And wear name tags. People will think you're attending a science fiction convention."

Mickey finally managed to squeeze a word in. "But what about me?" he cried. "You're shutting me up. And that's hardly fair. All I did was keep my eyes open."

Of all the faces that surrounded him, only Rocky's seemed the least bit sympathetic. He grunted sourly. "Not that I could write the same old stuff anyway. Too much of it is true for me to say it's not, and my editors would think I'd gone round the bend if I told the truth. God help me if I wrote up the last few days!"

"Hmm." Clem's expression was softening just a little. "Do you think you could write a guidebook?"

"For you guys, you mean?" When Clem nodded, and then so did the cops and several of the other aliens, he fell silent. A guidebook. For space aliens.

He could mention the Syktyvkar museum. He could warn against near-sighted duck-hunters. He could offer etiquette tips, such as a warning that "butterflies" should not make passes at domestic animals. He could...

If he did it right, it might even sell to Earthlings too. Though they would surely call it sci-fi or satire.

Finally he said, "Uh, what sort of figures are we talking about?"

"We bring over a million tourists in here every year."

"And every one of them would need a copy?" When Clem nodded, he said, "I think you'd better talk to my agent. While I start revising my proposal."

THE END