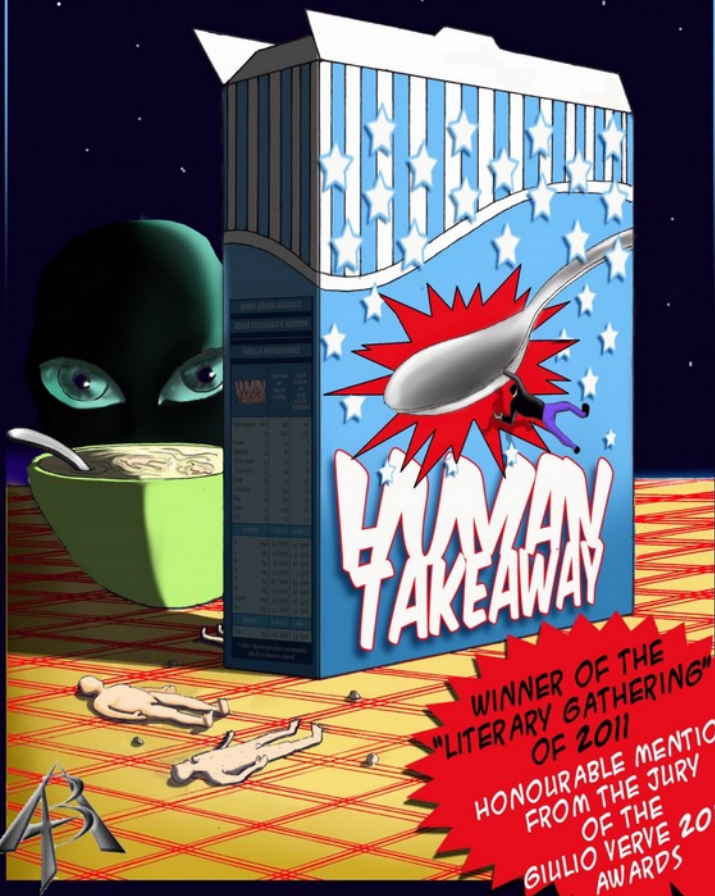


HUMAN TAKE AWAY

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Human Take Away

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Foreword

"Human Take Away" is a choral narration in which the authors *Alessandro Napolitano* and *Massimo Baglione* have imagined an unusual perspective for an alien contact. This text did not conceive some kind of literary novelty, nor the authors took inspiration in a particular movie, book or videogame already seen or read. Theirs is a story they enjoyed writing together, to have fun and, above all, to win the "Literary Gathering" of 2011, organized by BraviAutori.it. "If in the story they inadvertently got too close to already famous stories," they say, "it was not intentional." They only want you to enjoy the adventure without pondering too much on how it came to their minds.

In the story, the protagonist succeeds where the established power fails. He takes on his shoulders the fate of the Earth and, through his ability to react and suffer, he puts himself on par with a superior intelligence. Often there is strength in numbers, not always there is the collective good as well.

Human Take Away won the *Gathering 2011* contest, in which seven literary web sites battled with pen and keyboard. The purpose of the Gathering, in addition to electing the best story of the competition, is to foster friendship and exchange of ideas between the writing web sites on the web. Winning the competition assumes a significant importance, because the success of the story is established by the votes of all participating authors. For more details on the "Gathering", check: www.braviautori.com/adunanza. In 2012, besides, HTA received a Honourable Mention from the Jury of the *Giulio Verne* Award, at LevanteCon in Bari, with the following motivation: "The story is witty and depicts a fun side of science fiction that, in most cases, is always gloomy."

This book also contains two short sci-fi stories, in which the extraterrestrial component is represented with different shades; "The last flash" by Alessandro and "The opponent" written by Massimo.

The authors thank *Roberta Guardascione*, author of the magnificent cover, *Daniela Piccoli* for her help in the editing stage, *Claudio Baglione* for having invented the title, *Diego Capani*

for his trailers and *Carmelo Massimo Tidona* for the translation from Italian into English.

Happy reading!

*Solar system, planet Earth, Italy,
between Rome and Belluno AD 2012.*

Human takeaway

Alien lesson (Part One)

On a certain planet, a teacher is teaching to his class of young schoolchildren, "Humans. Yeah, that's them.

What a strange breed. Would you ever imagine that they appeared in the universe thanks to us?

I suppose that your generatives have told you a lot about them, haven't they? Yes, of course, but I think a review of history can not hurt us. Come on, don't make those faces, you will see that there will be a delicious surprise afterward.

A long time ago (million years ago), we succeeded for the first time to travel in space. That's right, I'm talking about the "Star day," but now shut your beaks and let me continue. It took hundreds of years to seize that new technology, we revolutionized the concept of physics, we made mistakes, but in the end we succeeded. At first we conquered our solar system, then the nearest

stars and gradually farther and farther, far and away, to the limits of imagination.

At the same time, however, other sciences progressed too. So it happened that a brilliant team of scholars tried the Sowing for the first time. Come on, please, don't make noise, listen to me carefully. They understood, in essence, that space exploration and the colonization of habitable planets would dilute over millennia, without haste but in a systematic and unrelenting way.

Obviously not all planets turned out fitting to our life, but many of them were suitable to produce food, especially those with too much water, too little oxygen and little ammonia. And you know how hard it is for us to produce liquid organic nutrients! So the idea of the Sowing came. Why abandon those worlds, when in the long run they could be useful? That's right. Scientists synthesized a cocktail of generating cells that, sown in those inhospitable environments, according to the simulations, would have good chances to create Life, even in peaceful interaction with the native one. A swarm of cells which, in part, would develop in a pre-selected way, and in part would subject itself to the exist-

ing climate and environmental factors. It's all clear, right?

Why did those scholars go so far?

After thousands of years (sometimes much more), this choice proved definitely apt. In many cases, indeed, new colonized planets were able to draw on these Larders to deal with terrible famine. I could also mention thousands of cases in which new colonies on their way, finding themselves in need of repair for breakdowns or accidental collisions with celestial bodies, have managed not to starve thanks to these Larders scattered everywhere in the universe.

That's right, they have always been all mapped in the main computers of our ships. When planning a long trip or a new colonization, navigators try to always chose routes that are not too far away from the food.

Obviously it wasn't, and still isn't possible to check on regular basis each of these Larders to ensure that Life was progressing optimally. It was taken for granted, especially after realizing that on the vast majority of them, food evolved more or less as in the original plans. Yes, without any doubt each Larder, by virtue of its autonomous evolution, produced a kind of food of its own, but it was not so difficult to treat it to

make it edible. Almost all life forms can be harvested and pressed to extract the organic fluids we eat. And after all, when you're hungry, you're hungry, aren't you? I see that you grasped the concept.

Yes, on rare occasions, Life had not developed at all, because of tremendous cataclysms occurred after the Sowing, or it was so removed from the original plans as to become indigestible, like cobaltoids, but we'll talk about this unusual race in another lesson. And so, in this case, Life was left to its fate, free to grow undisturbed.

But no! This is not how Humans were born. Will you please listen to me without chattering? Here, good guys. I was saying... humans developed following perfectly the original intent of the Sowing, even too much! In the end, the food evolved and started to gain self-awareness, and to think."

Plan

John Star was a chosen. Graduated with honours in economics, six feet tall, broad football-player shoulders and a tenor voice. The perfect

identikit of the President of the United States of America. And the day he was elected, he conquered the entire population with a sentence, "I will protect you all."

Today, that boy grown in New York City would curse the moment in which politics had come into his life. If it were possible, he would have erased each and all memory of himself, and bartered the decisions that were waiting for him with the miserable existence of a bum.

John Star was sitting behind the desk in the oval room, when the head of T. Smith, once his childhood friend and now his personal counselor, peeked in from the door.

– We're ready, the connection is ready, waiting for you.

– All right, – the President said – give me a minute, wait out here.

He took in his hands the frame with the photo of his daughter. He looked at that girl with short black hair, red cheeks and a smiling face, so alike that of her mother. He kissed her on her forehead. "Forgive me," he thought, "somehow forgive me."

Two minutes later, Smith was leading the way through the basement of the White House, past an imposing security, and bringing the Pres-

ident into the secret room. Here, John Star, the President of all Americans, sat down on the only available chair, positioned in front of four monitors. He put a headset with microphone on his head and pushed a red button located on the right earphone. The four screens lit up and the fate of humanity swerved towards a direction undreamed-of until a few years earlier.

Tsarevich, President of Russia, was standing and wiping his forehead with a linen handkerchief. Lovebe, British Prime Minister, wetted his lips with a sip of water. Li-Wang, Chinese head of state, merely nodded a greeting, as did in the fourth screen Watanabe, the Japanese Prime Minister. The five men were the GCE, Great Council of Earth, the only political body recognized by the aliens, and only spokespersons of the human race.

The first to talk, while not hiding a growing embarrassment, was Lovebe, – We believe it is necessary to implement the "Future" plan. We strongly believe that the survival of the human race must be protected at any cost and sacrifice.

The Russian President slammed his fist against a table, so hard that the image of his face trembled. – This is not tolerable, we refuse to be

accomplices of this massacre. And Wang-Li too shares our opinion. We do not accept the plan.

Smith, the counsellor, standing motionless behind the back of John Star, frowned. "Russia and China scandalized?" he thought. Immediately he put a hand on the nape of his friend the President, who slightly nodded, as if he had read his mind.

The Chinese head of state adjusted his glasses on his nose. His gaze went beyond the camera filming him, and this, in Star's mind, was a sign of weakness. All doubts were swept away when, in a trembling voice, Wang-Li said, – China rejects the resolution.

Watanabe, the eldest of the five board members, hastened to utter just four words, – Japan votes in favour.

The "Future" plan had been developed in a few days, immediately after the first contact with the aliens. Before creating unnecessary and counterproductive havoc across Earth, they had informed the GCE about their intentions. First communications hadn't been easy, but the aliens had explained the matter with pictures, and humans had had no chance to equivocate. In essence, for them, it had become important to take food from their Larder; Earth. They must ensure

plenty of food for their mega-president, his entire court and his powerful military escort, passing just a few light years from the Solar System on a long leisure journey.

Their ultimatum, since they did not expect that an intelligent and independent life form had developed on their Larder Earth, was pretty much summed up in these words, "We will let you live in peace, but you will allow us to reap the fruit of the Sowing which, as you certainly understand, we are entitled to. If you do not agree, we will be forced to exterminate you, use you immediately as food and, therefore, enjoy our Larder in full".

To the legitimate question of the humans, "How long will you be taking food from Earth?", the aliens had laconically answered, "As long as we need it, and as long as there is any."

Humans, for some reason, were not willing to act as a convenient refrigerator, at the reach of the first alien who happened to be passing close to Earth, so the President of the USA thought about this and pulled out of his hat a brilliant idea; we are a lot on Earth, too many! Why not take advantage of this food obligation from the aliens to trim to the most vulnerable individuals,

strengthen the entire human race and greatly lighten the expenses of the health service and social security? Since they had to lose something, they might as well make a profit of it.

It had certainly not been easy for President Star to make the GCE digest this madness, but it was the only possible move. Planet Earth was in danger, mankind and its knowledge were in danger of disappearing forever if the aliens had wiped it out. They had to fight them with weapons other than those of destruction, where the comparison with the superior technology of the aliens was not feasible. They had to be clever, perhaps bluff, surely sacrifice something in order to take time. And the "Future" plan aimed to that.

When he spoke, John Star knew well what was the only chance to save Earth. At least for a few months to come. – The United States of America vote in favour of the "Future" plan. With three votes in favour and two against, the Great Council of Earth approves the plan. May God forgive us.

The meeting

Not even a workaholic like John Star could have imagined he would live such a complex night. And if having earned the approval of the GCE for the "Future" plan had been crucial in those hours of full moon, being able to reach an agreement with the aliens seemed like mere imagination. He knew well that a far longer step had to be taken, and that the path towards a new dawn for Earth would prove at least impervious.

The door of the oval room opened and the President entered the study, accompanied by T. Smith.

– Do you feel ready? – the counsellor asked.

– No, not at all, but the clock is ticking and we cannot put it off.

– As you wish.

Smith punched in an hexadecimal sequence on the touch screen of the safe, while John Star sat in the chair next to the portrait of George Washington. Not by chance he had chosen that place. He thought that sharing that moment with the father of the United States would ease his re-

sponsibilities and made less difficult the decisions to take.

Smith picked up a box the size of a packet of tissues from the bottom of the safe. He weighed it, as he did every time he handled it, and handed it to the man he had always considered a brother.

– You’ll stay here with me, won’t you?

– Of course, even if last time you weren’t such a pretty sight.

The two exchanged a smile and a hug full of affection. Then, John Star opened the box, pulled out a golden ring and slipped it on the index finger of his left hand. Instantly, the colour of his skin became emerald green, his head snapped back and so did his eyes, showing only the white. His entire body was shaken by a tremor and his mouth dropped open. His mind and thoughts expanded, until they passed the threshold of what he imagined to be the fourth dimension. It was there that a metallic and asexual voice greeted him in current English, – Welcome back, earthman. A few more of your hours and the fate of Earth would have fallen.

– Instead, here I am. I hope you don’t mind – using an ironic tone with those beings made him feel stronger.

– Have you thought about our offer?

– Of course, and we expect to reach an agreement with you.

– Miserable! We do not make agreements, let alone with inferior races. If you fail to comply with our terms, we will raid you humans, how and where we want, and as long as we want. Or we will burn you to ashes, so we will have one thought less to deal with. Mind you, we are not insensitive toward other forms of intelligent life, and we realize that it is not your fault if you exist, but our needs are a priority, especially toward our mega-president. Your problems, your complaints and your ridiculous agreements are all moved to the background.

– That's the point. We won't wait for you to destroy us. We will do it ourselves, and I assure you that, as inferior as we might seem, we possess weapons capable of destroying the planet before the morning comes. We will poison your delicious Larder. And nothing will remain for you, and your mega-president will feel the pangs of hunger. On the contrary, if you accept our plan, you can withdraw an agreed number of humans, in areas indicated by us. This will ensure a sufficient supply.

– What about the animals?

– You will not touch them, otherwise you might risk unbalancing traumatically our already fragile food chain. No, animals will stay where they are.

The alien seemed to reflect on Star's words. Finally he asked, – How many humans?

– Millions, – the President said, effectively masking the taste of victory.

– We have to take them alive, it is your blood that interests us. And the first must be your own countrymen, let us call it a pledge of trust.

– Okay, as you prefer. They will be Americans. And alive.

– You have three days to hand over the first load. If you miss the appointment you will not have to use your weapons. We will destroy the whole human race and use the lower animals, even at the cost of losing the whole fruit of the Sowing.

The metallic voice stopped speaking, and the fourth dimension collapsed on itself. Star's skin returned to its pink colour, his body ceased to tremble and his mouth shut in a gnashing of teeth.

– Did you make it? – Tobias Smith asked with wide eyes.

– So it seems. Now there is no turning back, we have to dance the waltz of deportation.

The first million

– This way we reach seven hundred thousand. Lower the maximum age limit, – the President suggested to his friend Smith, while in the Oval Office, on a protected terminal directly connected with the database of the Ministry of Health.

– John, for God's sake, if we select more, too many people will make questions, don't you think?

– Damn it, I know. But the terms are clear, a million or nothing. Come on, lower the obesity level too, let's see what happens.

– One million and sixteen thousand.

– Well, that's fine. Press "submit". Taxpayers will be thankful.

– You're cynical, John. Don't you have pity at all?

– Of course, darn. Who do you think I am? – the President said while looking lovingly at his family photo – But why not use to our advantage a situation which has no alternatives anyway?

Would you rather sacrifice young cheerleaders and strong quarterbacks maybe?

– Of course not, but...

– What?

– I don't know. Convicts, terrorists, communists and neo-Nazis?

– Yes, but how would you convince them? It is far better to make a million of stoned people believe they have won a trip, and remove them from our health expenses. At the very least we are offering a service to the nation.

Not without trembling, Smith nodded in front of that iron logic and obeyed his President. He clicked "submit". With that action, over a million fatties, sick and elderly people would win a ticket for a trip. Some for a cruise, others for an air trip, others for places carefully chosen along with the aliens. Many of them would suffer disastrous accidents, which would be disguised as synchronized terrorist attacks. Those damned Taliban! Osama the murderer! Saddam the destroyer. That's who would be blamed. And then Katrina, the Big One, a tsunami... anything goes for the aliens. They claimed they were able to cause environmental catastrophes, so it would be enough to concentrate enough people in the right

places at the right times. From there, the ball would be to the invaders.

They preferred to capture their food alive, to keep it fresh, so to speak, on their ships, but they didn't wrinkle their nose in front of just-dead humans. They made them disappear, squeezed them and retained the blood and the slurry liquid obtained. Then they froze it and stored it in the holds of their carriers. They would certainly reserve to their mega-president a live, beautifully plump human, who would become a real delicacy once squeezed.

Abduction

Martin's house was a colonial mansion built near Route 35, just outside the town of Copeville, and about a hundred meters away from the beach. That morning in May, from its terrace, you could glimpse the first rays of the sun hitting the waves of the ocean, and the reflections of light wrap the water in a silver film.

Rudolf Martin got out of bed and pulled on a pair of slippers. The villa had been his father's and, before that, his grandfather's. The idea of

moving a few steps from the Pacific immediately turned out to be a wonderful insight.

He was a fifty-year-old architect, who after reaching a not-so-positive budget of his professional life, had decided to use the money inherited from his father to live an easy life with George, his partner.

George Fortuna was a doctor, but he introduced himself to the world as a gay man. He certainly did not put on a show of his feelings, but the tortuous childhood he had lived, and the effort spent to see his right to love recognized, forced him to reveal what he called his marital status. Along with Rudolf Martin he formed a close couple, culturally distanced from the stereotypes of the gay culture, all neuroses and cheating. They used to face life with the irony of two comedians, able to share the same stage.

– Wake up, it's time, we're gonna skip workout again, – Rudolf said in a peremptory tone.

George rolled over in bed, tried to open his eyes and plunged his head under the sheets.

– Come on! The weather's magnificent! – he screamed again, as he put on shorts and a cotton tank top. – Come on, after running I want to find a few sea urchins for lunch.

He opened the trunk below the large window that looked out on the bay, dodged a basketball and buckled to his ankle the strap of a diving knife. In that moment, he saw from the corner of his eye a strange light flying over the sea. – What the hell is that? George? Are you coming or not?

The second passage was even faster. It looked like a billiard ball, albeit a bright yellow one. Rudolf heard a hissing sound coming from the ball, put on a Los Angeles Lakers cap and went out on the terrace.

The air was too hot for this early in the morning, he thought. An unnatural heat.

– There it is again, George! Shit, get up from that damn bed and come look.

The light stood a hundred meters from the shore and reared on its vertical axis. Then it turned on itself and started to expand.

– I can't believe this, – Rudolf whispered, barely moving his lips – What the fuck is going on here?!

The ball opened like a flower, showing seven petals shining against the sky. A moment later, a deafening roar swept the whole area and the man was caught by a transparent ray. He stood mo-

tionless, suspended in mid-air, between the house and the light.

The same fate befell the inhabitants of Copeville. About fifty thousand people, mostly elderly and retired citizens, floated a hundred meters from the ground, their legs struggling to find a surface that was far away by now. One of the last to be captured by the magnetic force was George.

A second roar shook the bay and the bodies began to vibrate, and then were sucked one after the other inside the ball of light.

When George came back to his senses, he found himself lying and flooded by dozens of men and women. He freed his head from the clutches of someone's legs and realized that he was in an enclosed place. He heard some of those people moan. They were massed like animals. Then their voices faded, until silence came. The sour smell of that place made the air unbreathable. As soon as his thought focused on Rudolf, he felt a thrill shake him, and he jerked to his knees. Before his eyes there were dead people everywhere. Among them was his partner. He stood up and walked towards him, trampling on a woman's head and a child's

chest. When he reached him, he hugged him close and started to cry, then took him in his lap and rocked him for a moment.

Then the walls of that dark place began to swing and take on a gelatinous consistency. George stroke once again that greying hair he had loved so much, imprinted in his mind the boyish expression of which Rudolf had been so proud, touched the still toned muscles of that chest, and his eyes slid to the diving knife tied to the ankle of his man.

Press Conference

– I warned you, John; one million people cannot disappear without at least arise suspicion. Not even a hundred thousand could. Maybe neither a tenth of that, – Smith told the President. – And now what would you want to appease the press with?

– You're right, Tobias, but there was no choice. The commitment was clear. Or better, we had a choice. Even two. Either we revealed the alien invasion to the public, in which case I don't think I need to tell you what would have

happened, or we let the aliens free to "gather" what they wanted, and even so I'm afraid...

– All right, I understand. But Christ! One million, like this! We sure couldn't hope that their relatives would look the other way and be content with the government bullshit!

– Tob, Tob... they would take that first million anyway. They were clear! Their mega-president's stomach cannot stay empty. Would you let me die of starvation in some country where food is scarce?

– No, of course not – Smith said, puffing his chest.

– See, they have no choice too, but the very remote one to acknowledge our occupation rights and try to convince their fucking president to spend his holidays elsewhere. And if they had wanted animals, it would have been even worse. However, there would have been no way to find a plausible explanation, and on top of that nothing would have come into our pockets. We could as well gamble.

– Yes, yes, I understand, heck of a President. But the question remains: how do we placate those frenzied journalists now?

– Counsellor Smith, this is your job! – Star insisted, smiling to his long-time friend.

– Go fuck yourself, Mr. President... with all due respect.

T. Smith summoned the journalists of the most important papers in a newsroom.

– You all have your number. Number one can talk – an assistant announced.

– Jane Butrow, NYT. Can you tell us, Counsellor, what the hell happened along the whole Pacific coast?

– Currently the situation is constantly monitored by the army, which... ... besides the meteorological satellites indicate that anyway it could... ... and that's all we know.

– Number two.

– Rocco Marion, Herald. How does the government interpret the dozens sightings of strange flying objects moving about on the water, along the coast, just before and just after these mysterious subsequent catastrophes?

– At the moment the government can only assume that the panic, the adrenaline and the excitement that sprang from these dramatic events affected the perceptions of the witnesses who, in spite of themselves, believed to see objects that... ... will certainly be examined individually. If you were in possession, dear journalist, of pic-

tures that could help us, we will gladly analyze them together with you all.

– Number three.

– Ju Jan, Orient Press. Is it really over? Do you expect more disasters like these?

– Hello Ju, you could not be missing – Smith hinted at a smile, but it looked bitter. – Your studies on extraterrestrials and the interesting articles stemming from them always enchanted me, I take this opportunity to compliment with you, I am a big fan of yours. I bet your question was aimed to obtain some statement about alien invasions or something from me. Well, believe me, for how things are going today, some intervention from them would be desirable. However, and I regret that very much, what I said is confined in science fiction.

The questions followed one another repeatedly, and for each of them counsellor Smith was able to fight back in an impeccable manner. Then, as expected, after the opponent had been exhausted, the President entered the ring.

– Mr. President! Mr. President! – Dozens of journalists tried to make themselves noticed by fanning notepads and screaming as if they were at Wall Street, but Star just smiled. He raised a hand and waited. Everybody got silent. The as-

sistant pretended to suggest him something in his ear, and finally, Star announced, – Friends, American people, I am told that Counsellor Smith provided you with all the answers he could give, so I can add only one thing, and I would like you to listen to me carefully.

For a moment, the flashes stopped and dozens of eyes stuck to those of the President.

– It might not be over. Merely for the sake of it, all world governments have been alerted. No similar event ever occurred, and statistical analysis do not rule out some sort of chain reaction, or related reactions.

The journalists went mad. If they could, they would have climbed on Star's body just to ask him a question or tear from him some further information.

– Gentlemen, please! – the President shouted, supported by Smith and his assistant. Finally, when he could make himself heard again, he concluded, – Now, go back to your offices and inform the people without scaring them. The U.S. government, and certainly all of the world governments, will do its best to try and provide a logical explanation. I promise. And you know why? Because I have a family too! I want ex-

planations too. And especially because, thanks God, I am American too!

It worked.

The contact

George, frightened by the mysterious gelatinous walls, found the clarity of mind to disarm his dead partner and tie to his arm the knife that Rudolf had been wearing at his ankle.

There seemed to be no way out from that strange place. Studying it better, since he was a doctor, he recalled all notions of human biology; he, the dead body of his partner and the other dead and dying people totally looked like food about to be digested. He tried to prick one of the closest walls with the knife, imagining some form of pain perception by a hypothetical hungry monster. It didn't work.

– Hey, you sons of a bitch! Let me out! What the fuck is this, huh? Show yourself, cowards, I'll stick this in your throat! – he yelled, by now prey to the bleakest despair.

Something happened. The stomach lurched. One of the walls became solid again and a mechanical arm came out of it, grabbing George

without much finesse, claspng him like one of those amusement park claws, where you insert a coin and have to grab a prize in one try.

With a few movements, the mechanical arm brought George out of the stomach and placed him before some really unusual beings, – Who the fuck...?

He did not have time to ask the question, as one of them approached him, took his hand and put a weird ring on his finger.

For a few moments George tried both to free himself and to prevent that forced marriage, but then his mind calmed down and relaxed. A force unknown to him was whispering in his head to be calm and patient. He guessed that the ring was the source of that weirdness. Finally, the voice became stronger, – Earthman, you're determined. Maybe you deserve a chance to live, or for a more honourable death.

The voice he was hearing in his head had also informed him about the nature of his interlocutors. George was now fully conscious of being in the presence of extraterrestrials. He sensed that the lightness he was feeling was the artificial gravity of a spaceship in space, lower than Earth's one. – What the fuck do you want from me?!

– Food, but if we can have the opportunity to study you better, we will take advantage of it.

– What the...?

– Rarely our tractor beam keeps the Harvest alive, and you are a fortunate exception. What is your role on Earth?

George's eyes widened. – What is my role? You want to know what my role is? That's my fucking role! – he jumped with all of his might against one of the aliens, trying to stick the dagger in what looked like a belly. From the ring, however, came a strong surrender signal that was able to stop the blade just an inch inside the soft tissues of the victim. The latter uttered an absurd scream, like that of a pig being slaughtered.

George fell paralyzed, and one of the other beings disarmed him.

– Earthman, your reaction is excessive.

Now the human could speak, – The fuck it's excessive! What should I do? Smile happily and thank you for the fraternal and hospitable treatment you are using with me and the others there? By the way, stop, what the hell are you doing to them?

– By now they were treated. Here is the result
– an alien said, pointing to some tanks full of a coffee-coloured, ruby-veined slop.

George watched them. When he realized what that substance was, he vomited on the feet of the alien he had hurt, who was closing his wound with some metal staples.

The interrogation

George had been tied on a cot, which was rather uncomfortable for him but should be fairly comfortable for the physique of the aliens. He had been stripped naked; the only item he had been allowed to wear was the mysterious ring he had now understood to be the means of connection between the two intelligences.

– Are you comfortable, human?

"Fuck you!" George thought, but he preferred to say only, – Enough, yes.

– Well. If you do not struggle we will be done soon. We would like to better understand your nature. Our Naval Council feels that your race could be considered smart enough to deserve a position of equality and independence. If our assessments are positive, we will communicate the

discovery to the Main Council, which will start the necessary procedures.

– What procedures?

– If a new breed is intelligent enough for self-sustenance and self-government, and does not cause damage to the others, then it certainly deserves to exist beyond our rights of exploitation which, however, remain valid if such requirements are not met. In spite of your skills for communication, for the construction of a primitive social and political model, it seemed to us that your intelligence was limited, but the key might be your determination and, if this were a prerogative of the whole human race, then we might start thinking otherwise.

– I see. Potatoes and rabbits are owned by whoever raises them until they rebel.

– If the entities you mentioned, earthman, represent your food, then yes, we can crudely summarize this way the whole matter.

A red circle created by a laser was moving on George's body. Each time it stopped, clicking sounds came from behind a wall.

– Are you analyzing me?

– Yes, we need to study you in detail.

– Well, if you want I'll explain everything myself, since I'm a physician, but please... move that fucking laser away from my dick.

The aliens stood silent for a few moments. George thought that, perhaps, the ring had difficulty translating in an understandable way both the meaning of his words and the emotions that went with them. Most likely the ring could only process the innate part of the language, or the basic one, and not the fancy parts. Words like mother, house, water, and so on are actually stored in the brain in a differently way than profanities and nicknames. Calling an alien a "shit-bag", for instance, would not keep its true meaning in a literal translation, it must be interpreted. If the alien ate shit, that offense could even turn into a nice compliment if it were translated literally rather than in its true meaning on Earth. And vice versa with so many other words.

Finally they resumed, – Many times you used the word "fuck", which we understood to be a form of saying, but we do not understand the words "physician" and "dick". Could you explain?

George smiled. – That's right, dickheads, that word is a way of saying, we use it to complete the musicality of our sentences. Maybe your ear

does not perceive the cacophony of our spoken language, in fact you are "big" dickheads, but it is important for us. "Physician," instead, is someone who knows the biology of the human beings in full detail. That's why I could help you fill your gaps, as long as you stop probing my "dick", which is the male genital organ of the human race.

– Ah! You have different genders? And how many?

– Two, and fuck, they are even too many!

– And what does the other earth gender look like?

– Aesthetically it's like me, who stand for males. The others are females; one head, two legs, two arms. Females differs from males because they have two boobs on their chest and a hole instead of the dick, right between the legs. Generally a man and a woman come together through their sexual organs and, after insemination, the woman gives birth to a new earthman, who might be male or female at random. Sometimes it happens that finest minds prefer to deviate from this standard monotonous sex, preferring different pairings, but I'll explain it when you are more educated on the subject.

– Very interesting.

– And you? Don't you have different genders?

– No, we are of a single gender. If you are attracted, we assume, to the physical or hormonal chemistry, we are drawn to the degree of intelligence and the squisometupolatus.

– Squisowhat?

– If the translator has not been able to transfer you an understandable synonymous, it is very likely that we could not explain it, so you have to be patient until your mind is ready to accept these concepts.

– I understand, fucking space bullshit, that is.

– Maybe, yes – one of the aliens answered, ignoring the saying and accepting the incomplete observation. Then he concluded, – Okay. Our preliminary analysis are complete, we will rely on your knowledge as "physician," that will be transferred to us entirely thanks to the ring, but we will think about this later.

The laser died and George was released. – So kind of you.

– If nudity embarrasses you, now you can cover your body.

Realizing that the aliens, despite their ugliness, were also naked, George replied, – No, it's

nice to share nudism with people who can appreciate it by their nature.

– Whatever you like, human. Now follow us, we want to put you at ease to facilitate the exchange of our knowledge.

George just nodded and followed them.

The second million

The Great Council of Earth was about to meet. The USA President, John Star, was sitting in his armchair, in the secret room of the White House.

His counsellor, T. Smith, looked at him, puzzled. He could not read the expression embellishing the face of his old friend.

– Are you sad or happy? – he asked, in a confidential tone.

Star looked away from the monitors, still off, and slightly smiled to the other man. – A mess happened on the west coast, a really big mess.

– Yeah. – the counsellor said.

– But... my goodness, Tobias! A million social pensions less gave us a great breath of fresh air! So I don't know, frankly, whether to be sad or happy. Let's say I'm satisfied, so far.

– So you can kick off the "Star finder" project, huh?

– Also, yes, why not? Now we have the funds. For that and for many other little things too. I think I'll pass through the mid-term elections unscathed, and that I will certainly be re-elected for a new term.

– I'm sure.

The logo containing the sea eagle, announcing the imminent connection with the GCE, popped on the monitors.

– Here we go, Mr. President – Smith announced, back to his official demeanour.

– Good.

In each of the monitors, the face of another head of state appeared.

– Welcome back – Star welcomed them coldly.

The members of the GCE exchanged a few ceremonial greetings, then began to argue.

– The first million was "harvested", as they say. Everything went as planned – the USA President explained.

– Were the samples chosen according to our agreements? –China asked.

– That's right, honourable Wang-Li, ninety percent of them were elderly and sick without hope.

– And they all went to the West Coast? – Russia intervened.

– Yes, president Tsarevich, all went there after winning sweepstakes, free journeys and holidays.

– But how did you manage to keep their families calm? Someone must have been suspicious, weren't they? – the United Kingdom objected.

– It's obvious, Prime Minister Lovebe, but see... when the administration promptly compensates the affective loss with substantial checks, the faded and forgotten affections fade away very quickly. It's just a small expense when compared to the derived savings.

They all nodded, perhaps not really convinced, but yielding to the evidence.

– Now who's next? – Japan asked.

– Honourable Watanabe, – President Star said – America "volunteered" to be first as a pledge of solidarity and trust. I'm afraid you will have to draw lots, or vote. If I can express my personal and unofficial vote, I'd say it should be the turn of China.

Wang-Li was obviously radiant (which confirmed to the President the anxiety that Wang-Li had shown during the previous meeting), but the other three had their reservations. Japan argued that, to China, a million people would not have changed much in the financial structure, while to the Japanese it would, and how! Russia and Great Britain supported Japan, but the English opposed Russians being next, for the very same reasons as the Japanese. Wang-Li, just to win it, even went so far as to suggest that the aliens, if so they wanted, could take from China also the shares of the other countries, if this was going to create them unmanageable embarrassments. But now the eyes of the rulers were full of symbols of their national currencies, deriving from the endless savings on pensions and healthcare, and his kindness was politely rejected. Wang Li slammed his fist on his desk.

– Gentlemen, please... – Star reproached them
– You look like the Italian Parliament! Show some dignity, what the heck!

The others nodded and fell silent.

– So let's draw lots, okay? – Star proposed.

They all agreed.

At a sign from the USA President, Counsellor Smith pushed a button on a computer. Sliding

numbers, like the wheels of a slot machine, appeared on the screens of the members of the GCE. Russia won.

Tsarevich gloated, satisfied, while China and Japan snorted, but eventually nodded.

– Well, just in time, the aliens will contact us in a few moments.

Mnemonic exchange

Squiso (so George had decided to call the alien with whom he talked) was standing in front of him, while he was sitting in a comfortable and cosy pillow-chair. He almost seemed to him to be sinking his buttocks in a huge marshmallow. Once comfortable and ready, the two put on their respective rings.

– Human, to facilitate the cerebral interconnection, total relaxation and a fluid mutual trust are required.

"Fluid mutual trust?" George thought. "Bah!" he continued, then he said, – Of course, Squiso... I can call you that, right?

– If you like, sure. Why that name?

– Because. It reminds me of something you said to me before, and I like it. Anyway, what would be your real name?

– Minziopolietruipola.

– Um... sure it's difficult to choose between Squiso and Minzio...

– You can use any name you like, the ring will convert the right meaning.

– All right, Squiso. – George chose not to push his luck too much, the ring might misunderstand.

– And how do you call yourself human?

– My name is George.

– Does it have a meaning?

– None in particular. Why, does Minziow-hateverthefuckitis have a meaning?

– Of course! Each of us is identified, by his name, with his function in society, or for a recognition earned in life, things like that.

– I understand. And you, how did you earn your name?

The alien summed up in a few minutes the origin of his name, and George could not help but being somehow fascinated. Finally Squiso said, – Well, George, we proceed now.

– All right.

Suddenly, the "fluid mutual trust" made sense. The two consciences, through the ethereal interconnections of the rings, straightened, lied next to each other to form a two-way channel and began to flow. A steady stream of notions propagated freely without filters or constraints. A flood of new names, places and concepts took shape and meaning in their heads. Squiso, for example, became himself a human physician, while George, if he had wanted to, could have safely piloted the ship and headed to Strupolmaria to bring those fucking aliens home.

The mnemonic connection stopped ahead of schedule, that is when one of the rings detected excessive tiredness in the brain of the alien, that did not seem to be as flexible as the human one.

Squiso stood several minutes in silence, as if he had fallen asleep. George got up from the marshmallows, stretched his legs and walked over to the alien. His other companions were at his side and prevented the man to touch him, but the concepts learned from the mnemonic flow let George know that everything was in order. Squiso was just tired, he would regain consciousness in a few minutes.

One of the other aliens accompanied George in an accommodation, basic but comfortable

enough, and told him to wait there and rest. They explained this to him in their own language, which now George understood well enough, although his vocal structure would never be able to replicate its sounds. He would have liked for the connection not to have been interrupted, because not everything was clear yet. It was like living a beautiful dream, of which however only fragments can be remembered after waking up, although we are aware of its overall beauty. He imagined that also to Squiso it was a regret to be fixed as soon as possible.

After refreshing himself in a shower similar to Earth ones, George quickly fell asleep on the cot. He dreamed Squiso's thoughts. He understood their point of view about the Sowing. He processed the concept, analyzed its key points. He carefully considered the immensity of the alien population and their psychology. He was able to feel the same respect and urgency that those aliens felt for their mega-president, now passing through the Solar System. He felt part of a farm, where the Earth or any other planet they cultivated was regarded as a chicken coop, or a small orchard. They were the farmers who cyclically went and reap its fruits. There was a

certain logic in this. It was a fascinating project. And it worked.

When he woke up, he still wanted to give them a few punches in the face, yet he could not help but understand and, if possible, justify their behaviour. In the end, they did not hurt anyone. Certainly not more than Earth people did with their animals. The difference was in the scale, proportions. In a few thousand years, perhaps even humans would independently develop the same concept, if they succeeded in travelling among the stars. The whole thought was somehow natural and, ultimately, obvious.

But George was on the side of the chicken coop, and although from the alien point of view everything looked fully justifiable and logical, as a human he wouldn't allow them to steal his eggs without rebelling. He had already lost Rudolf, who had become some kind of takeaway smoothie along with the other thousands of people.

"Go, pick, squeeze, take away and enjoy at your ease."

Oh no, that was too much!

Final Decision

Squiso reached the polyartic room rolling through the narrow corridors of the ship. He wet his beak with the brew, rich of human plasma, and dropped his three tons of flabby flesh in the big pool in the centre of the room. What could be imagined as an energy wave covered him, and all the cationic tissues of his body twitched, giving the alien a feeling also known by the inhabitants of the Earth as "pleasure". The soggy mass relaxed and Squiso turned his thoughts to the human race, guilty of having drained his psychophysical energies.

"Their story is quite different from what we are used to study among the stars of the "known". They are different not only for the evolutionary capability they have shown, but also for their attitude toward life and their progress, as well as the determination with which they reject the concept of death. Probably, if they only imagined what awaits them after this first cognitive step, they would leave more willingly their imperfect bodies to reach the next dimension. For the moment, though, given their

low degree of intelligence, it is a limit they can afford to have.

We must point out how their primitive arguments prove to be sufficiently logical to address the isonic evolution, and the persistence with which they assert their rights makes us aware that the human species deserves a chance of survival."

After a few qd, a timespan roughly between thirty and fifty Earth minutes, Squiso and George were again one in front of the other.

– Your brain cells proved to be resilient and were not affected by the flow of telepathy they have been submitted to. – The alien moved his "hands" and looked at them, pleased to note the absence of the ring. – We decoded much of your language and we can understand it, thus, without using the adapter. Our, let us call it brain, is more rigid compared to that of humans, and this forces us to regenerate frequently. Certainly it can be much more functional – he went on in his language.

Squiso's beak moved sideways, and George guessed a smile in that alien face.

– You progress quickly, my compliments – the earthman said ironically.

– The race to which you belong is young and nothing you have can be compared to the knowledge that we possess. Still, you are unique in your kind and we decided to allow you to continue your evolutionary ascent.

– Do you mean that you are suspending the blood juices?

– For the moment, yes. We are communicating our decision to the earthman with whom we negotiate, whom you know as the President of the United States of America. He will be informed that the analysis we made on you, both biological, chemical and intellectual, have been determinant for our choice. In a sense, if life on your planet will continue, it is also thanks to our meeting. And to what you would call "luck."

– Are you saying you'll let me go home?

– Yes, in two of your minutes you will be where you were collected.

George felt tears run down his cheeks. His mouth started to tremble and he could not hold back a sob of pain. He raised his hands to his eyes and strongly shook his head.

– Does this reaction of yours mean that you want to stay with us?

– No, you shitbag with an atrophied brain! It means you killed my Rudolf, and bereaved me

of the one thing in the world that made me happy. It means that somehow you will pay for this, now or in another life.

The alien did not flinch. He tweaked his beak and concluded, – "Shitbag" is not a well decoded concept yet. In case it may comfort you, and I know that it will not, I can tell you that Rudolf, and all the people you believe to have ended their lives because of us, elevated to a new cognitive dimension and certainly do not suffer from your absence, because they know they will meet you again. And as for the making us pay... go fuck yourself! – Squiso concluded, fishing the last expression among the incomplete notions learned through the mnemonic exchange.

The alien rolled half a turn on itself and his beak, now resting on the ground, flattened and shaped itself almost like a foot. Squiso hopped a few feet, then disappeared.

A purple light hit George, who instinctively closed his eyes, not realizing what was happening. When he opened them again, he saw before him the path that lead from the ocean beach to the house in which he lived. The windows were open and the terrace desperately empty. Behind

the villa, four military jeeps with high beams on were waiting for him.

Hero

In the last seventy-two hours, the life of George Fortuna had been turned upside-down. First he had witnessed the death of Rudolf, then his experience as human had been enriched by what should happen to no earthman, a close encounter of the fourth kind. Finally, after having spent three days into a military hospital against his own will, he had been summoned to the White House.

The Oval Office appeared to him as he had always imagined it. A small room, some paintings with the faces of the Founding Fathers of the United States, the great circular meander drawing the floor and the presidential desk that certainly, if it could talk, would tell all sorts of secrets, agreements or scandals.

The President was standing with his back turned, facing the big window. He seemed lost among the spring colours of the garden below, intent to warm himself under the rays of the sun that hit his face. When he turned around and

went to meet George, he opened his arms, hugging him like an old fishing buddy.

– Mr. President!

– Dear friend, it is an honour for me to meet you. We owe all to your courage. Please, sit down.

John Star pointed to the couch so dear to him, the one under the portrait of Washington, and there they sat.

– We did not think anyone could survive the alien experience. When we were notified of your release, it was a great joy for us, and we immediately came to look for you where we had been told.

– Actually, I was hoping to be able to share this experience with some other survivor. I would gladly have done without this sad record. But...

– The sacrifice of all those men was not in vain. We knew that the only strategy to follow was to take time, to prevent the invasion at any cost. It would have been the end for everyone.

– Sacrificing a few to save many, – the tone of George's voice became harsh. – It's the old rule. But do you know what happens to those who are "harvested"? – now George was screaming and pointing a finger at Star's nose. –

You know they – now the finger was pointing at the sky – have no mercy, and that our bodies are squeezed like oranges by large industrial machines? And the "sacrificed" people don't even have the right to scream their horror. You have sold...

– No, – the President interrupted him, pushing down the finger that was brushing him – stop it! "Sell" is not the right verb. We were forced by a power, infinitely more advanced than ours, to bow our heads, to let them plunder our people. And, with infinite pain, we had to hide to the world what was happening. A military counteroffensive was inconceivable, it would have been like fighting against an atomic bomb armed with a toothpick. And then there's you, our excellence, the answer to the question whether the sacrifice of millions of men was repaid or not.

– And you, Mr. President, you think you can afford a "yes"?

In pronouncing that question, the man's face twitched and his chin started to tremble. He felt that soon anger would take over, the loss of Rudolf and that of many Americans would claim revenge.

John Star took a deep breath, but before he could answer, T. Smith knocked on the door and peeked in. – Mr. President, – he said in a formal tone – it's all ready. They are waiting for us downstairs.

– We're coming.

– You did not answer my question, Mr. President, – George went on.

– I will, it's a promise.

The three men went down to the basement of the White House and entered the videoconference room. George had had the opportunity to hyperventilate, he no longer felt his heart beating in his temples, and certainly he would have watched with curiosity what was about to happen.

– We called you – T. Smith said while setting headphones and microphones – at the behest of the aliens. The Great Council of Earth meets in this room, that is, the heads of state of USA, China, Japan, England and Russia.

George was carefully following every move of his interlocutor, and showed no particular surprise for the words that were being spoken.

– They are the only men – the counsellor went on – who are aware of the extraterrestrial

presence and of their ominous intentions. And there are news too.

– No less! – was all the guest said.

– Yes, for the first time, through this – Smith pointed at what looked like a mirror – an alien representative will speak, in particular the one who analyzed you.

– And what do I have to do with this?

– Those were their provisions. And we have obliged.

The monitors sparked up and the GCE representatives appeared. John Star and George Fortuna took their places, and the mirror started glowing with a golden light.

A hiss preceded the image of the alien. All of the humans in connection could see his shape, on the verge of being jelly, his flabby flesh overflowing from a skeleton with only two prehensile limbs. The only shape that could be traced back to something known was an ivory-coloured beak, on the top of that revolting being. Everybody stood motionless on their chairs, incapable of any movement or word. Except George, – How are things going up there?

– You mean how I drag something on the ship? – The beak cracked into a grimace.

– You still have to progress and swallow a lot of slang before you understand well what I say.

– The most has been done, human. You are in that room because of me. I wanted to prove to your rulers how your race can learn so much faster than you think. This is demonstrated by our conversation, that we are carrying on each in his own language, but that we both understand thanks to the mnemonic exchange that happened on the spaceship.

– True, it seems our brains are capable of encoding the two languages.

The five heads of state, who could only understand what George was saying, beheld that conversation in a state of near ecstasy. Wang-Li kept passing a handkerchief on his forehead; Tsarevich stared at the scene, the muscles of his face tense; Lovebe moved his lips like a dying old man does while reciting the rosary for the last time, and Watanabe, squinting, stammered, – Bastards! You preach us, when in fact you have treated us like a takeaway! A self-service human takeaway!

The joke did not go unnoticed to George, who turned to the Japanese a glare heavy with irony.

– Earthman, you will translate my words. It is vital that these individuals, masters of your

world, appreciate what has been granted them. Treasure this experience, search for progress and look at the stars with more conviction. The road to isonic knowledge is still long, but you have the genetic credentials to follow it. We spared you. Earth might have ended in the short span of a shat! – his beak reared upward.

– I can't believe you said that! – George burst into laughter.

– You thought I could not? You will see what I do when I will be at these astral coordinates next time.

– What do you want to do? – the man's face was relaxed as it hadn't been in days – at best you can stick to this! – and he pointed down below.

– To the genital organ?

– No! To the happy meal, asshole!

The beak of the alien broke away from the body, did a pirouette in the air and thrust itself in the middle of the mass of flesh. With a pleased voice, it exclaimed, – Like this?

The handkerchief of the Chinese representative fell to the ground. John Star swallowed so loudly that he was heard by Smith, leaning against the door. The British Prime Minister, used to a totally different sense of humour,

raised his hands to cover his eyes. Only Watanabe, the Japanese, smiled.

– You know what? – the human said in a serious tone – The most important thing we have to learn is not “ionic” knowledge, or whatever the fuck it's called, but the ability to stay in the world and find our place in this universe. Then we should stop boasting, this would be crucial. Even on this occasion we have proven to be perfectly able to hurt ourselves. – His eyes met those of the President of the United States.

Two minutes went by without anyone speaking. The heads of state bowed their heads and reflected on what had happened, on how the strength of a single man had been stronger than all of the strategies of the GCE, and reflected on the need to prepare a future that until a few days ago tasted like utopia and science fiction.

– Farewell, earthmen, you are infinitely small compared to the cosmos, but you have sufficient resources to move forward.

– Farewell, Squiso.

Ten minutes later, John Star was again leaning from the big window of the Oval Office. Beside him, his lifetime friend, his lifetime advisor.

Down in the garden, George Fortuna was leaving through the gate of the White House.

– That's the only human, outside of the GCE, who has known the truth. "All" of the truths. – T. Smith started to say, watching the man walk.

– Yeah. – Star sighed. – "All of them".

– And what will you do?

– What you're thinking.

Alien lesson (part two)

In the alien classroom, the teacher was going on with the lesson, "Will you please stop rolling around back there? Should I light a disciplinary note to your generatives? Right. I was thinking the same thing, so lend me a little attention. Remember the promise I made you? You'll see that soon you'll like this lesson more.

What was I saying? Ah yes, humans.

We met them a few qz ago, just on one of those planets that are our larders, Earth. We came to know that race better when one of them, Grogretio – I pronounce it in our language, but if you want to try in theirs you can say "George" – miraculously survived the first Harvest.

Originally it seemed to us that that race, although it had shown unmistakable signs of intelligence, did not have high hopes of evolving. I refer you to the Cilopretuie and Salate race, which indeed self-destructed.

Grogretio... no, sorry, I want to try to use the correct pronunciation, out of respect for that great character... George convinced us to the contrary. The mnemonic merge between him and... who knows who? Come on, raise a limb. That's right, you've been paying attention. Squiso, so renamed by George for ease of conversation. It was decisive for the positive evaluation by the Main Council, which agreed to grant the terrestrials all rights of existence and of exploiting their planet.

As you know, puppies, many of them were Harvested prior to that decision. The Council therefore determined that that harvest would never be used as food, but only and solely as a teaching tool. Who or what, better than our taste, can test the goodness of a living being with absolute certainty? That's right, almost nothing.

See that little cart that is coming? On it there is a small barrel, which contains an extract derived right from that only and, alas, painful Harvest. You will all taste it, evaluate it, and store in

your memories the finest delight of its ferrous aftertaste, the velvety bitter nitrogenous hint and, for those who can feel it, also the parallel duality between the sweetness of carbohydrates and the saltiness of minerals.

For sure you will never taste again the educational delicacy you are about to swallow before your afternoon nap, so open your minds wide during the educational tasting.

In honour of the peace treaty between us and the Earthmen, we called it "Happy meal", because, like George himself taught us, on their planet this definition indicates something very important that has to do with their own existence... but this is too complex, we will talk about that another time.

From the Earthmen we learned many things, and we granted them as many. But it's getting late, puppies, and it is time for your beddy-bye. So get a move sucking that fucking "happy meat", otherwise you will not sleep anymore."

Final act

Martin's house was always there, perched on a small dune, just a few steps from the ocean

waves. Immovable in its gentle shapes, proudly challenging the north wind, but infinitely sad. This George thought the first night when he went back to the villa. Waiting for him, he found only the basketball in the middle of the bedroom, the rumpled sheets and the glasses full of water on the nightstands.

The man opened his closet and hugged all of Rudolf's clothes. He breathed deeply and wept. It would be impossible for him to find again the happiness of the years spent with him, but he knew that living in the past, precluding himself the ability to smile again, would have been mistakes that Rudolf would not have forgiven him. Time is a medicine, no matter how long it takes to take effect, what matters is that it does.

He made himself an herbal tea and went to bed.

The dreams of that spring night were manifold; John Star had the beak of the alien and ordered to Nazi soldiers to shoot against the crowd in Times Square. People fell to the ground one after the other and they all had the face of Counsellor Smith. He dreamed Watanabe reduced to a pulp and packed in cardboard boxes with the Happy Meal brand. Then it was the turn of Rudolf. He stroked his head and

whispered something in his ear. He climbed onto the bed and kissed him. He felt a desperate need to talk to him, to tell him how big was his love for him, and that nothing, not even death, would split them apart.

Half asleep, he heard a noise in the room, some footsteps made the floor creak. It was not a dream, it was reality. He prayed to God, in whom he had never believed, begging that anyone who was in the room, was there to take him to Rudolf. He opened his eyes.

A man dressed in black, wearing a helmet equipped with night-vision lenses, was staring at him from the foot of his bed.

– The President of the United States says that yes, the sacrifice of one million citizens was well worth it and, if needed, another million was ready. And you, about this whole story, know definitely too much.

Without another word, the man raised his left hand, pointed an automatic pistol to George's forehead and fired.

(The End)

The Opponent

by Massimo Baglione

Today is the day of my first encounter.

I'm excited and anxious, but the Master says that I have a good chance of winning. According to him, in fact, I will be on the podium. I don't know. I am not so sure. I don't feel ready and I would like to go home and slip into my bed. I don't even know who I will fight, how can I be calm? The computer reveals the matches only at the last moment, so I might even be assigned the current galactic champion, or a beginner like me. That's what I'm afraid of. I don't want to be defeated in the early rounds and make a fool of myself, no, I wouldn't stand it, I know. And there's my girlfriend there looking at me, in the audience, I want her to be proud of me. I have to show her that I can protect her for the whole life that we'll spend together.

Ever since I was little I prepared physically and mentally for this event. "The Races Trophy," as it is called. Many times I raised

doubts, to my Master, about the real usefulness of this competition, but he believes that it makes sense. He says that all of the races of the known universe will never find a political agreement on the choice of the Galactic President, so this is only possible by drawing on what they all have in common, fighting.

So here I am, on a neutral planet, fighting for the galactic presidency. It is an honour to be able to aspire to it, especially after passing hundreds of psychophysical tests and outclassing all of the people from my planet. I, a humble representative of my world, will fight with proud determination to contribute to the peace and stability of the universe, exactly like my predecessors from other galaxies did.

The Master is massaging me. He encourages me and gives me his final recommendations, as if they were the last and essential secrets for winning, those that are revealed only at the end; the ultimate, decisive weapon. I reassure him, confirm to him that I am in good shape, and all this is turning my initial anxiety in a wild joy. Maybe he was right, the primal instinct is emerging. I can even sense in the air the smell of the ancestral violence that every people lived and

shared in its evolution. It is a kind of mental smell, divine.

I'm getting angrier, I'm focused and motivated. The whole world I belong to will follow me live, supporting and urging me. The rest of the universe, on the other hand, will oppose me, curse me, wish me the most painful trauma. It will want to see me succumb under the clutches of their fighters. Well, no matter, it means I will become even angrier.

Come on! When will you make up your mind and let me fight? I'm ready, come on!

The Master invites me not to show my excitement too much, because it might be read and interpreted by my opponent, and it is wiser to show tranquillity and coolness. He's right, as always. I would like to point out that among different races it is almost impossible to read facial expressions, but I keep it for myself, because we both know all this very well. It's just the peculiar situation that makes us forget it.

Here, the first two pairs of contenders of the Races Trophy have been called and are now facing one another on two rings side by side. All around whirl hundreds of cameras from the news agencies of every place, following the frenzied actions of the fight to rebroadcast them

on every inhabited planet, moon and satellite. They film, greedy, almost as if they could feed on the sweat and the energy put into play. Sometimes they can taste some splash of blood that smears them, and they seem to enjoy it. Indeed, their viewers enjoy it for sure.

In one of the two ring the match is finished; the winner, a strange scaled being full of claws, bit off a few pieces of flesh from his hairy and stocky opponent. The latter is lying on the ground, unconscious, and the cameras dance around the two of them, first on one, then the other, hungry for pictures.

Some armoured guards wrap the winner in a gilded cloth and escort him to his Master. The loser, no matter if alive or dead, is left for some more time at the disposal of the cameras, while his assistant struggle to pull him to them, to heal him or at least move him away from there.

I know how these matches go, I prepared, but it is one thing to see it on television and another to be here in person, knowing that soon you'll be next. This chips my determination a bit, but my Master understood it and he slap my face hard to awaken me. It works; I am again in control of the nastiness that had faltered, and I go on with my warm-up.

On the other ring, the match is going differently. The two fighters, very similar to each other, fought almost on equal terms, for a long time, without coming to an overwhelming victory. The judges will decide who wins, with a system that frankly I haven't understood well yet, but that seems to work.

The computer is about to reveal the next two contenders who will go on the first ring. Here we go; "Retup Nkiolgy, for the moon Isira, against Alex O 'Maximus, for planet Earth."

My heart skips a beat. It's my turn.

My Master takes the healing robe off me, stares at me and tells me, – Come on, you were lucky; that pale terrestrial biped you could eat for breakfast!

(The End)

The last flash

by Alessandro Napolitano

The fact

The darkness swept the country in the early hours of a summer afternoon. It all started with a light breeze. It ruffled the hair of a passerby and made the hat of a child fly. When the wind increased its strength, plants were ripped from the ground and birds thrown to the ground. The trunks of the trees bent, some of them were uprooted and dragged in the air for miles. A cloud appeared suddenly, darkening the sky, and it was night.

The ground shook under a rain of electric shocks, and when the land was on the verge of collapse, swallowed by the darkness, an ochre light lit up the town.

A blinding flash, a burst of energy that struck everything, immobilizing it like in a photograph. The time of a flash and the darkness faded, people started walking the streets again, as if an invisible hand had first retained them, then set

them free. The sun again occupied the highest point in the sky and no one had any perception of what had happened.

Ten hours later

Confusion. This was what Mark felt when he woke up.

He opened his eyes a bit at a time, convinced that the sunlight could blind them. Instead a round moon was there to deny him; it was night.

He realized he was lying on the ground, and sniffed the moisture of the grass that welcomed his body. Every time he breathed in, a blade of grass was sucked into his nostril and there it seemed to dig, like a worm in search of its lair.

His left arm, pinned under his ribs, tingled annoying. It took him a good deal of willpower to shake away the numbness and stimulate the blood circulation. Only then Marco had the comfort of the first memories.

He recognized the city park, but could not find an explanation on how he had reached it. He went back with his thought to that afternoon and to his car parked in the drive below the office. He heard the click of the remote, as if the scene was happening in front of him right then.

He even saw the ochre flash of the directional lights showing that the alarm had been switched off. "How long has it been?", he wondered. "Not more than fifteen minutes" should have been the obvious answer, if not for the presence of the moon that denied this.

Marco was surprised, by the unique situation he was living as well as by the ease with which he was facing that moment of confusion.

He decided to get up. He calibrated every movement and, when he was standing, he realized that surprises were not over. He was naked. He slipped into the park, hugging to the perimeter wall. He climbed over a hedge, than a low wall, and dropped down a meter. He was in the street, crouched in the shadows. He knew he had to walk a few hundred meters to get home. No one noticed him along the way. He walked up the steps three at a time, knocked on the door and stood there waiting with his hands covering his groin.

"The problem is that now she will see me like this", he thought. And he was right. As soon as she was in front of him, Anna was shocked. Her face flushed with anger, and her voice was changed, – What the hell have you done? Look

at yourself – she said, raising her hands to her mouth and running off to the bedroom.

– Anna, I know it's difficult, but you can't understand...

– You're right, asshole. I don't want to understand. Tell me the truth, you got caught this time? Uh, you bastard? Did some husband find you as you were fucking his wife? And you must have had no time to put your underwear back on. He should have killed you, like a worm. You make me sick! – Anna was screaming and crying. She pulled down a suitcase from the closet, threw it on the bed and opened it.

Marco had followed her to the bedroom, stopping in the doorway, – What are you doing? You're not even listening, don't you realize what happened to me?

– I warned you, you used up your bonus, you're done with me. I'm tired of being the laughingstock of the town. I'll leave you the house empty, so you can bring your sluts here.

– Now stop, you're making a huge mistake. – Marco's voice surpassed the woman's in intensity. – I lost my memory and the last thing I remember is more than ten hours ago. I was getting into my car to go to the gym, and a minute

later I found myself lying in the park, with the moon high in the sky.

– You are a constant humiliation for me, and this one is your last clowning.

Marco turned to the wall and struck it with a fist. The pain reverberated throughout his whole arm, but it raised no compassion from Anna. He went to the bathroom, wrapped a towel around his waist and turned the faucet of the sink.

– Do something good, look in the mirror, – Anna's voice was becoming hoarse from the effort – see if you can be honest with yourself. Look at what a shit of a man you are!

The bathroom light was dim; he raised his head and met his eyes reflected in the mirror. An ochre light blinded him. It was a brief flash, yet of blinding violence. Marco blinked, rubbed his eyes, but the glow became more intense.

– Well? Don't you talk anymore? – Her words were broken by deep sobs – Do you make yourself sick or not?

Silence.

– Do you make yourself sick or not? – Anna tucked her last skirt into the suitcase. She was determined to leave the house and never come back but, surprised by what was facing her, she did not make a single step.

Standing near the door of the room, Marco was staring at her with silver eyes. Two streams of blood came from his nostrils, smearing his lips and chin.

– What? – she said, widening her mouth in a surprised grimace. The suitcase fell to the floor, spilling her skirt, while the man's eyes became more and more dazzling.

– I was there, with the car remote in hand, and the blinkers twinkling – the man's voice was flat, with no emphasis or emotion. – I found myself in a strange place, it seemed to me like I was driving a motorcycle and a contrary wind prevented me from maintaining balance. The asphalt slid fast under the wheels, and although I was focused on the road, I knew that there was nothing around me.

Anna flopped down on the bed, hugged her chest with her arms.

– I heard a bang and I looked up. I saw the streetlights emit light intermittently, columns of smoke reaching the sky, and I smelled the wind carrying the smell of burnt rubber. The buildings along the road were skyscrapers, and they were swaying wildly. From the windows hung black drapes, stiff like the bodies of hanged men. – The man paused, then continued, – A second ex-

plosion changed the scenery. I saw a rust-eaten carnival, now the wind was no longer blowing, and on the background dozens of cars were burning in the flames. A rain of black powder enveloped everything, and when it touched the ground, a hospital stretcher appeared before me. On the ground there were white plastic bags, some stained with blood. Strips of torn flesh were scattered everywhere. The air smelled of gangrene.

Anna was stunned. She stared at the silver light shining from Marco's eyes. She stammered a few unintelligible words, then he started talking again, – I moved a few steps and the ground changed colour, I saw it fade in all of the shades of purple. I stopped and, from the ground, five pools emerged, each as long as a man. Four of them were full of a transparent energy, crossed by electrical charges that speckled it blue. The fifth was empty, but it was the one that attracted me, and I laid inside it.

Even though the tone of his voice did not betray any emotion, the words seemed to be answers to the questions of a mysterious force, of which the man was prisoner, and from which he seemed unable to escape.

– Then, they appeared. Half a meter tall beings, made of light, with no legs or arms. They dumped upon me a flow of energy, it looked like a tube, very thin. They stuck a splinter in my nose, I felt a needle slip into my brain but felt no pain from this. When I opened my eyes it was night, I had my face buried in the park lawn and I didn't remember anything.

Anna jumped out of the bed and hugged Marco, holding him tight. She stroked his hair, kissed his temples and down to the mouth stained with blood. She steadied him when she felt him falter, and she helped him sit on the bed.

– What the hell is this all about? – she whispered.

– I feel sick, I feel like I'm dying. Help me.

Anna arranged a pillow behind his back, trying to make him lay down. He resisted and did not move.

The silver light that had been shining in his eyes faded. The blood under his nostrils had coagulated, and his facial expression was relaxing. Just when Anna let out a sigh of relief, Marco's arms started to be tinged with a blue fluorescence.

Suddenly a hissing sound filled the room, forcing the two to cover their ears with their hands.

In front of them, suspended in mid-air, a gelatinous circle appeared, and a blinding ochre light in the middle of it. What seemed to be a source of energy reached out and tapered to a meter of length, bringing the light to the top of the geometric figure.

Marco and Anna tried in vain to leave the bed; all their muscles were paralyzed. And when she tried to scream, her mouth remained locked in a grimace of horror.

The ochre light flashed intermittently. Inside it, a black, small triangle appeared. From it spurted a gelatinous tube, not wider than a finger, which rested on Marco's body. It probed the man's arms, absorbing a blue film from his skin. It slipped into the man's nostrils and, forking itself, pulled two metal splinters out of them. The tube liberated into the air what it had extracted from the man's body, and the black triangle seemed to stare at that slow fluctuation. Then the film and the splinters dissolved like dust in the wind.

It was Anna's turn. The tube aimed at her stomach and pierced into it at the height of the uterus. There was no injury or loss of blood. After a few seconds, the inspection being over, the woman was dragged by an invisible force

that pushed her toward the energy source. When she was in contact with it, a beam of light burst through the window and hit her, dragging her outside. A vibration shook the apartment from the ground up. The ochre light and its black triangle disappeared. At that precise moment, after having being incapable of any reaction, Marco collapsed, unconscious.

Seven hours later

The alarm rang its first beep, while the digital display showed 08:00.

Marco stretched in the bed, first his arms, then his legs. He reached out for Anna's body before opening his eyes. The woman had already gotten up.

– Where are you?

In response, he only heard the water flowing.

– Honey, I made a wild dream. Are you in the shower? Are you naked? Now I'm gonna pick you up and kidnap you.

He ran down the corridor. The bathroom door was slightly ajar. He pushed it forward. The sink faucet was open and the water jet was strong.

– Honey, you left the tap running. Where are you? In the kitchen?

Mark turned and retraced his steps. A detail seen from the corner of an eye paralyzed him. He whirled. In the bedroom, scattered on the ground, there were a suitcase and a crumpled skirt.

Anna was nowhere to be seen.

(The End)

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Human Take Away

The End

a project

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