

# Mystery Hill

**ALEX IRVINE**



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by Alex Irvine

Mr. Irvine's last *F&SF* story, "Wizard's Six" (May 2007), was a hard-hitting high fantasy story. And now for something completely different, we present a lighthearted science fiction story that starts off in an odd corner of the Wolverine State.

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During the thirty-three years since he'd bought Mystery Hill from Ford Albritton after Ford got tongue cancer and couldn't do the spiel anymore, Ken Kassarian had been debunked more times than he could count. Every year or so, sometimes more when economic times got tough and grad schools at all

the state universities swelled up with people who knew they couldn't get a job, some bespectacled muckraker would pull off the interstate and take all kinds of measurements. Their questions to him varied all the way from aren't you ashamed to be pulling this scam to you do know this water doesn't really run uphill, don't you—and Ken always said the same thing. I believe it, he said. And the people who come here, you better believe more of them believe it when they leave than did when they got here.

He could understand why the university types and crusading journalists needed to debunk him, or at least write tongue-in-cheek features about cranky Kassarian and his tourist

trap. Water wasn't supposed to run uphill. If water could run uphill in one place, it might start doing it somewhere else, and then you'd have cats lying down with dogs and other such apocalyptic scenery. Truth be told, Ken was a great deal more put out by the true believers of every stripe who arrived like caravanning pilgrims during the summer. If he had to hear one more story about lines of power in the earth or aliens who lived under the North Pole or interdimensional vortices, he wasn't going to be responsible for his actions. The worst was the Reptilian crowd, who had managed to mash every self-respecting conspiracy theory since the Pyramids into one Grand Unified Theory

of Gobbledygook. They gave him books, and accused him of being a Reptilian himself, which offended Ken a little because as he'd gotten up in years his face had acquired more than its share of wrinkles, a fact that offended his internal image of himself as a twenty-six-year-old squirt lean and mean from two tours in Vietnam. On these occasions, and these occasions only, Ken Kassarian was apt to growl, "I didn't serve my country to have some moonpie wacko call me a lizard." Invariably his hostility proved to the wacko in question that Ken was indeed a Reptilian; he had evidence of this in the form of a number of articles mentioning both him and Mystery Hill in the more out-there conspiracy

magazines, sent to Mystery Hill as what he assumed must have been a triumphant gesture on the authors' part. He took vindictive pride in the fact that he had spawned a small twig on the conspiracy tree all by himself, involving his Army unit—he'd done nothing but repair trucks, for crying out loud—and some kind of anti-gravity hocus-pocus. Apparently Vietnamese Reptilians could levitate, or maybe it was all of the Communist Reptilians. Ken didn't waste his time reading the articles they sent him.

It was the Wednesday after Memorial Day when the Toyota minivan with the professor in it pulled into the parking lot. Ken had her pegged as a professor

right off the bat. He put down his rake—he'd been leveling the gravel between the fourth and eleventh holes of the minigolf course—and said, "Just tell me up front if I'm a Reptilian, eh?"

She gave him a look. He gave it right back. "Reptilian?" she repeated.

"Lady, you have college professor written all over you," Ken said. "What I want to know is, are you one of the debunkers or one of the wackos? I got to know which jokes to have ready."

"No, I—" She looked over her shoulder, back down US-12 in the direction of Clinton. "It's just odd that you said 'Reptilian' because I ran over something on the way here, and right before I hit it, I thought it was some kind

of huge lizard.” She shook her head and walked over to shake his hand. “Fara Oussemitki.”

“Ken Kassarian. Probably a snapping turtle. It gets a little warm, they like to sun themselves on the road. Truth is, if it was a snapper, you might not even have busted its shell. I’ve seen them walk right off after getting run over. Was this just back about a mile?”

“Could have been,” said Professor Oussemitki, who was a sight easier on the eyes than the run of the academic mill. Early thirties, Ken figured. Probably just got her job. One of these postmodern types who tried to make highbrow hay out of stuff like cereal boxes. What was the word, semiotics or



something like that. She had on little glasses with black wire frames, her hair was cut to look like she hadn't combed it in a month, and she wore a little stud in her lower lip. Not your standard professor look, although some of the cultural-studies types he'd run across made a practice of bringing a little bit of Paris to southern Michigan. Ken liked her. He made it a practice to decide right away whether he liked someone or not, and Fara Oussemitiski went into the plus column. He'd still lied to her about what she'd run over in the road, though.

“Well, Professor,” he said, “I’m about to head out on an errand, but if you want to look around, Jamie up in the ticket booth will get you started. I’ll be back in

a half-hour or so.”

“All right,” she said.

“What kind of professor are you, anyway?” he asked as he wrenched open the door of his crumbling F-150. Her reply was lost in the squeal of the hinges. “Say again?”

“Physics,” she said. He started the truck and drove away.

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He found where she'd had her incident, but Little Boozy Boswell had gotten there first. Crap crapity crap, thought Ken. A physics professor and Little Boozy. If it wasn't after Memorial Day, I'd shut down and go bass fishing.

Little Boozy—so monikered because his father had been nicknamed Boozy

since the Depression—was squatting on his considerable haunches examining the mess in the westbound lanes of US-12, right by the turnoff to the state park. Ken pulled across the road and sat idling on the shoulder, facing the wrong way so he could talk to Little Boozy through the passenger window.

“It’s another one, Ken,” Little Boozy said. He shifted his weight as a car blew by in the opposite lane, the gust of its passage flipping Little Boozy’s hair into his face.

“Another turtle,” Ken said.

“Hell you say.” Little Boozy was prone to theories, one of which held that Wamplers Lake had a colony of aquatic lizard-men living in its depths. Ken had

pointed out that Wamplers was only thirty-nine feet deep, which meant that if the lizard-men had two-story houses, they'd have fish finders bouncing off their roofs all the time. Little Boozy's reaction was to expand his theory to accommodate a subterranean city below the lakebed. Ken, in turn, had expanded his assessment of Little Boozy to accommodate the possibility of fetal alcohol syndrome or plain animal stupidity. Which was not to say that he genuinely thought the scrambled mess of gray, green, and red on the pavement was a turtle—it wasn't—but he did not for a second believe that there were lizard-men in Wamplers Lake. The truth, which Ken had approached in minute

increments over his years at Mystery Hill, was much stranger. And now he had a physics professor to deal with.

He got out of the truck and went over to stand next to Little Boozy, who was displaying an impressive length of plumber's crack to those unfortunates driving west on US-12. Everything about him was big. Big beard, big gut, big mechanic's shirt flapping in the breeze. He looked like a bear hunched over a kill.

She really nailed this one, Ken thought; there's nothing left of it. Might as well be a turtle. "If this is a lizard-man, Boozy, you couldn't prove it by me," he said.

"Don't you think I know what you're

up to?" Little Boozy said.

"Fact is, I don't," Ken said.

"Okay, smart guy," Little Boozy said. He went to his own pickup and got a flat-bladed shovel and a plastic bucket. When he'd scooped the mess into the bucket, he clamped a lid on it and put it in the cab, then locked the doors.

"Boozy," said Ken. "You really think I'm going to steal your turtle?"

Little Boozy walked up close enough that his belly brushed the buttons of Ken's shirt. "Let me tell you something," he said. "You can make fun of dumb old Little Boozy all you want. But you stop by our place sometime, and I'll show you something'll change your mind."

"Thanks," Ken said. "How's tonight?"

He'd meant it sarcastically, but it didn't come out right, and Little Boozy blinked. "Tonight," he repeated.

"Okay, then. Go down the road a piece past the house; there's an old cabin on the north side. I'll be there." He unlocked his truck and got in. "Set you straight," he said through the window, before roaring into a U-turn and away back down US-12.

Now how in the hell did I manage to do that? Ken wondered. Then he remembered the physics professor wandering around his property and he dragged the F-150 through a U-turn in the other direction, hoping that Fara Whatsername hadn't found his collection.

She hadn't, but she had done something far worse. She had unpacked real, actual scientific instruments right smack in the middle of the tour and was for the love of Christ taking measurements while tourists wandered by and took pictures of each other standing at an angle off a brick or pointing down at the part of the creek where the water flowed uphill. Ken rarely lost his temper, but seeing this brought him right up to it. He marched over to where the professor was peering into some kind of monitor, restrained himself from grabbing her arm—only because he figured she'd have him arrested—and said through gritted teeth, "I would hate to kill you in front of those



kids over there. But I would hate it even worse if you kept on with your experiments. Hell of a situation you put me in.”

She held up a hand. “Shh. Almost done.”

That’s a fine-looking hand, Ken thought despite himself. Strong fingers, well shaped. “Goddammit,” he growled. “Done with what?”

“Measuring fluctuations in the local gravity. Now be quiet a minute.”

“Don’t you ... what?” Fluctuations in the local gravity? Ken worked the phrase over in his head. Then worked it over again. If he wasn’t mistaken, Professor Fara Oussemitiski was telling him that Mystery Hill wasn’t a hoax.

This made him suspicious, since if she wasn't a debunker that made her a wacko, and since he'd already decided he liked her, that meant he liked one of the wackos. This contravened one of the cardinal principles of Ken Kassarian's life, which was to disassociate himself from wackos as completely as was possible. Close on the heels of these thoughts came the realization that since he'd agreed to go over to Little Boozy's that night, that principle had been violated not once but twice in the same day, which clearly meant that he should shut down and go bass fishing on the off chance that he'd catch an unwary lizard-man over to Wamplers Lake.

Professor            Oussemitiski            stood.

“There,” she said. A portable printer on the ground, next to whatever apparatus she’d been monitoring, started spitting out graphs and numbers.

“There what?” Ken said.

“Done for right now,” she said. “I’ll have to look these results over and figure out what to do from there. But if things work out like I think they will, I’ll have at least part of the grammar today.”

“Grammar?” Ken said.

She gave him an appraising and faintly bemused look. “You have an office? We should probably discuss this there.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” he said, and went to let Jamie know.

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Ken had owned the same boat since 1964, a fourteen-foot War Eagle with a two-stroke Evinrude outboard that was probably illegal and certainly on its last legs. Every spring he took it apart and rebuilt it, just on general principles, and every spring he got it started after an ordeal of starter-yanking and smoke-farting. He kept it in his garage, down at the end of the dirt road that wound around the perimeter of Mystery Hill. Half an hour after Fara Oussemitiski had packed up her gear, they were cruising slowly along the southern shore of Wamplers Lake. When they got to the edge of a certain cluster of lily pads, at least a couple of hundred yards from the nearest lakeside cottage, Ken cut the

motor and let the boat drift. They were over a dropoff he had been fishing since he was a kid. He dug out a collapsible spinning rig he kept under one of the seats.

“You got a license?” he asked.

She shook her head without looking up from the pages she'd printed.

Ken clipped on a little Mepps spinner and flipped it out along the edge of the lily pads, drawing it slowly back in and waiting for Professor Oussemitiski to enlighten him. “Can take smallmouth out of here all day long,” he said, just to hear himself talk. “If the damn crappie will leave you alone.”

She was still reading. Ken had a momentary sensation of being on a bad

date. “I know this guy named Little Boozy Boswell,” he said. “Little Boozy says there’s lizard-men living on the bottom of this lake.”

This got her to look up. “Little Boozy?” she said. “Is there a Big Boozy?”

“Well, Boozy used to be just Boozy, but then when Little Boozy came along, everybody started calling him Big Boozy. Believe he was a rumrunner during Prohibition. He’s coming up on a hundred years old now, and Little Boozy’s a lot bigger than Big Boozy. But they’re both crazy as bedbugs.”

A little smile was trying not to show itself on Fara Oussemitiski’s face. “What about these lizard-men?”

Ken deliberated. “What about fluctuations in my gravity?”

“Your gravity?”

Annoyed, Ken snapped off a longer cast this time and the Mepps landed eight feet into the lily pads.

“You know goddamn well what I mean,” he said. Certain that if he looked at her she would be smiling, and that if he saw her smiling he would either kiss her or throw her out of the boat, he concentrated on extricating the Mepps from its lily-pad prison. In the back of his mind he was wondering how many lures he’d lost in this spot. At least one a year, was his initial reckoning. After a couple of minutes hauling this way and that, he lost this one, too.

While he was tying a new leader on, Professor Oussemitki said, “Which do you want first, the weird part or the weirder part?”

Ken shrugged. “Professor, there is nothing you can say any weirder than the stuff I hear from the crowd who thinks I’m a Reptilian. You go ahead and tell it the way it makes sense to you.”

She laughed. “Well, it might or might not make sense whichever way I tell it. And it’s Fara.”

Oh, is it, thought Ken. Then he cut himself off at the knees. She isn’t flirting with you, dumbass, he told himself. You’re thirty years older than she is, twenty-five at least, and physics professors don’t flirt with proprietors of



shady roadside attractions.

Only maybe she was about to tell him that his attraction wasn't quite as shady as he'd imagined.

“Ever hear of string theory?” she asked him.

“Matter of fact, I have,” Ken said. “There is a segment of my clientele that believes my little piece of the Irish Hills is some kind of interdimensional vortex. Some of ‘em go into the creek right where it runs uphill, and they do something, some kind of interpretive dance maybe, that’s supposed to get them sucked through into another dimension. I never seen it work.”

Fara was staring at him with her lips slightly pursed. “Not that I believe it,”

Ken added. He found another Mepps, dropped it back in the tackle box, and went for a rubber worm that bore the marks of maybe twenty years' worth of smallmouth bass.

“Well,” Fara said. “That is interesting. So you know about the multiple dimensions?”

“Yup. And the ... what are they called, branes or something? Calabi-Yau spaces?”

She broke into a brilliant smile. “Ken, this is not at all what I expected when I came out here.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment rather than an assumption on your part that anyone who runs a place like Mystery Hill is a conniving

bumpkin.”

“So it was meant,” she said. “Well ... hm. I’ll tell you in a minute, but the fact that you’re not a conniving bumpkin has distracted me. Tell me something: why do you do this?”

“Go fishing with physics professors?”

“Run a tourist trap that everyone thinks is fake.”

Ken cast, landing the worm perfectly along the edge of the lily pads, and reeled it slowly back in, giving it a little flip every so often so the fish wouldn’t get bored as they watched it go by. “You think it’s fake?”

“We’ll get to that. First answer my question.”

“All right,” he said. “I came here in

1973, when I got home from Vietnam. Just driving down the road and saw the place, stopped in to see if I could spot the gag. And what happened was first of all, I liked it, and second of all there was this big vanload of kids from some summer camp. That's what did it. Man, they loved that place. I thought to myself, I wouldn't mind working here if it meant I could be around kids that happy all the time. So I went looking for whoever was running it, and met this old bird named Ford Albritton. I asked him if there was any work, and he said—I'll never forget this—'Hell, son, you got ten thousand dollars you can have the place. I got cancer of the tongue and I don't plan on dying in this ticket booth.'

“Well, I didn’t have ten thousand dollars, but I did have a stepfather who was an exec at GM, and he cosigned a loan for me, and now it’s thirty-three years later and I’m still here.”

“Huh,” Fara said. She was looking out over the lake. Ken was struck by a sudden wish for a lizard-man to appear, just so they’d stop talking about him. “That’s a sweet story.”

Ken shrugged and flipped the worm out toward the lily pads again. “Problem is, all those kids come back, and some of them have turned into Reptilian wackos in the meantime. I still love ‘em, but sometimes I wish I could make a rule that nobody old enough to vote can go past the minigolf course. Although the

kids around here aren't any picnic, either. Teenagers, I mean. The little ones are fine. But I got enough problems with the older ones that I'd just as soon jackhammer up the goddamn minigolf course and plant tomatoes. Damn, where are all the fish today?"

"Maybe we're talking too much. We should be quiet."

"If we're quiet, I'll never find out about fluctuations in my gravity." Plus that comment about grammar, Ken thought.

"Well, do you want information or fish?"

"Don't feel like waiting for the fish." Ken reeled in the worm, picked a stray bit of leafy flotsam from one of its

hooks, and stowed the rod.

Fara waited, sipping from her bottle of water. “Okay. So you know about the eleven-dimension thing, and you know what a brane is.” Ken nodded. “Where gravity comes in is interesting, because it turns out that unlike all of the other strings, which are stuck in their particular brane, the strings that allow gravitons might be shaped in such a way that allows them to move between universes. If there are parallel universes.”

Ken had a lump in his throat that he was sure must look like a goiter. He swallowed and tried to play it cool. “Okay.”

“That’s what would make gravity so

much weaker than the other forces,” Fara went on. “It’s traveled so far that it gets attenuated like sound waves propagating through an atmosphere.”

“Uh huh.”

“So I’ve been ... I should confess something here, Ken. This isn’t the first time I’ve taken measurements at Mystery Hill.”

Now the lump felt like it was climbing up next to Ken’s uvula. “Is that right,” he said.

“I’ve kind of been sneaking in. Didn’t want to bother you until I had a clearer idea of whether anything was really happening.”

She’s young, she’s cute, and she does guerrilla physics at tourist traps, Ken



thought. This is a slobberknocker of a girl.

“I’ll understand if you’re angry,” Fara said, “but I’ve found a couple of interesting things.”

Like the collection in the shed behind the barn? Ken wondered. He didn’t say anything; if she’d seen that, he’d find out about it soon enough. “Are you about to tell me that gravity really isn’t right at my place?”

“Well,” she said with another brilliant smile, “now I don’t have to.”

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After that, he had to get back to relieve Jamie and close the place. Ken never kept it open much after dark because the local teenagers, many

psychologically altered and all bored from the absence of available mischief in the Irish Hills, tended to do this weird collective pogo-jumping dance, complete with incomprehensible singing, on the seventeenth hole. Never any of the others. They'd worn the Astroturf right off number seventeen three times in the last year and a half or so. Like some kind of adolescent cult, Ken thought.

He dropped Fara off next to her van. "Mind if I come back in the morning?" she asked.

Do I mind, Ken thought. "What, now you're asking?"

"Great," she said. "See you bright and early."

He watched her drive off feeling

vaguely as if he was experiencing some kind of disturbance in his personal gravity. Here I've been fending off the bored divorcees for thirty years, he thought, and now comes the payoff. Whoops. Can't let that train of thought get very far. As penance he imagined all of the times he might have succumbed to momentary lust or ongoing loneliness and ended up with an accidental wife in the double-wide out behind the barn. Oddly, knowing that he hadn't exploited the bizarre phenomenon of tourist-trap groupies didn't make him feel any better right then. All it meant was that he was free to let his momentary crush on Fara Oussemitiski go further than it otherwise would, which meant he was dooming

himself to a big letdown when she packed up her instruments and headed back to whatever university town it was she'd come from.

“What are you staring at?” Jamie asked him.

He looked over at her and saw that she had positioned herself so she could follow his gaze eastbound down US-12. “Nothing,” he said. “Thinking. Little Boozy hit something on the road today and swears it's a lizard-man.”

“Little Boozy's been hitting his own stash,” Jamie said with that potent disdain available only to girls in late adolescence.

Ken started to ask her what she meant about his stash—who else's stash would

Little Boozy be hitting?—but he didn't want to know any more about Little Boozy Boswell than he was already going to find out in about an hour. He sent Jamie on her way and went around locking everything up. There were seven of the kids on number seventeen tonight. "Goddammit," Ken said. They were in a rough circle, jumping up and down in some kind of pattern that he couldn't quite suss out, and all the while singing. Well, chanting. Reminded him of the fad for Gregorian chants that had gone around a few years before, only dissonant and kind of nauseating. Had a weird undertone like that Australian tree-branch thing. What was it called ... didgeridoo. Something like that.

He opened the cover of the course's electrical panel and flicked the lights on and off. "Out," he called.

"All of you."

Whatever pattern there was in the pogoing, it fell apart, and the chanting broke up. "Mr. K," one of the kids said, "this is poor."

Poor? Ken thought. First time I've heard that one. He had an attack of curmudgeonliness, inwardly denouncing the kids, their slang, their music, their drugs, and anything else he could think of. Then he remembered what his father had said the first time Ken had put The Doors on the family turntable.

"Whatever," he said. "I'm closed. Come back tomorrow."

The kids shuffled away, but Ken could see that the dance or whatever it was hadn't quite left them. They swayed from side to side as they walked, not in the way that teenagers always do. Something rhythmic and secondhand about it, as if they were hearing and responding to invisible signals. Spooky. When they were gone, Ken went through the nightly ritual of checking all of the attractions for stowaways and/or lost items. He had, over the years, come to look forward to this part of the day, when he had Mystery Hill all to himself, and he could experience it the way he had the first day he'd come, back in 1973. On the path from the minigolf course up toward the barn, the first ripples of

lightheadedness made him smile. The plumb bob hanging from a frame outside the barn was eight degrees from true, about average. The most he'd ever seen it vary was to about fifteen degrees, and when that happened he had to issue an advisory to the pregnant women who showed up. Between ten and fifteen degrees, they all started to puke, which didn't do much for business. In the barn, he stood on the strange part of the floor, looking at himself in the mirror. Eyeballing his reflection, he figured he was about ten degrees off vertical, which was a little more than average, and different from the plumb bob. Hm. Maybe he should check and see if one of the clients had messed with the frame.



There were always smartasses trying to contribute their own little bits of dysfunction. Ken set a golf ball on the plank that angled up from a table to the windowsill, and it rolled up just like it was supposed to. He got a little tremor in his stomach. Fluctuations in gravity, Fara had said. Grammar.

Next on the locking-up itinerary was the shed out behind his double-wide, but something about Fara's visit, and Little Boozy's veiled promises, made Ken reluctant to look at his collection tonight. He wondered if Fara had seen it; if so, she was one cool customer. He hadn't gotten a read on her either way, even though he'd thought her admission of sneaking around after hours had been

leading up to a question about the shed. “Argh,” Ken said to the barn. He went back to the double-wide, put on *Weird Scenes Inside the Gold Mine*, and boiled up some mac and cheese so he’d have something for his beer to wash down.

The last thing in the world I want to do, he thought, is go over to Little Boozy’s house and subject myself to his theories. Then he corrected himself. The truth was, he did want to see what Little Boozy had in his shed; he just didn’t want Little Boozy around while he saw it. This was a dilemma, and sneaking around Boswell outbuildings wasn’t a viable option, since Big Boozy was free with his buckshot and possessed neither

the sensory sharpness nor the patience for Ken to identify himself before Big Boozy started shooting.

“You know what,” Ken said out loud to an imagined group of Reptilian conspiracy types, “it’s Little Boozy you should be talking to. Crazy bastards.”

He finished his beer, rinsed the mac and cheese crud out of the bowl, and fired up the truck. Little Boozy lived down a dirt road that angled off another dirt road somewhere between US-12 and Ohio. Remembering his directions, Ken drove past the turnoff that led directly to the Boswells’ ancestral manse and waited until he caught the outline of a shed in the periphery of the truck’s headlights. He parked on the side

of the road and killed the truck's lights, taking a minute to steel himself for the coming onslaught of lizard-man theories. The light of the waxing moon was enough for him to pick out a path through the brush to the shack, and by the time Ken had gotten to it his eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he could tell that a dim light was on inside.

“Hey,” he said. The back of his neck prickled in anticipation of buckshot. “Little Boozy. You in there?”

“Yeah, man, come on in,” came Little Boozy's voice from inside.

Ken found the door and opened it with a squeal. Immediately upon entering he kicked over a jar of something and heard its contents dripping through gaps in the

floorboards. “Goddamn, man,” Little Boozy said. “Watch your feet. That’s money, there.”

The light in the shed came from a kerosene lantern that Little Boozy had turned down so low that its wick was barely glowing. There was a smell in the air, ghosting around the edges of Little Boozy’s own emissions, that vaguely reminded Ken of chicken broth. He got a little queasy.

“Money?” Ken said. He was thinking of Jamie’s comment about Boozy’s own stash. “Didn’t know your family was still in this business, Little Boozy. Prohibition’s been over a long time.”

“Not for what I got, it hasn’t. Check this out.”

Little Boozy turned up the lantern a touch, and Ken saw that two walls of the shed were entirely taken up with metal shelves lined two and three deep with mason jars. It wasn't bright enough to see what was in the jars, but there was enough light to see that most of them contained solid bits suspended in a clear fluid. Now Ken was thinking of weird specimens in a biology lab and that thought in association with the lingering specter of chicken broth wasn't doing his stomach any good at all.

"Ew," he said.

"Ew?" Little Boozy echoed. "Come on, Ken, you was in Vietnam."

"I fixed trucks," Ken said, with the horrible feeling he got when he knew he

was about to be dragged into the Reptilian conspiracy again.

“Whatever,” Little Boozy said. He picked up a flashlight from the table that took up most of the space not occupied by shelves. “I told you I was going to set you straight. How about this? On the house.”

He took down a jar from the top shelf nearest the table and poured its contents through a strainer into a watering can. Then he blew the dust out of a drinking glass he found somewhere in the tabletop debris and poured about an inch of liquid into it. “Give her a try,” he said, holding the glass out to Ken.

“Right,” Ken said.

“Seriously,” Little Boozy said. “Here,

I'll show you." He tossed the contents of the glass back like a shot of tequila. "Cures what ails you."

"Don't know that anything ails me."

"Trust me, this'll change your mind."

Little Boozy filled the glass and held it out to Ken again. Ken was more disturbed by the idea of drinking after Little Boozy than by whatever was actually in the glass, but to his astonishment he found himself accepting the glass and drinking from it. The liquid was cool, and had a faint burnt taste, along with a slight bitterness and behind that a little sting that got his eyes watering.

"Okay," he said when he'd put the glass down. "Now what?"



“Lizard-man tea,” Little Boozy said. “You’re in for a treat.”

The beam of the flashlight illuminated a row of jars, each of which had a small piece of one of the things that weren’t turtles in it. Ken’s stomach did a slow roll, and not just from nausea; he was thinking of his own shed with his own collection, and it was no easy thing to be forced into a confrontation with the fact that you had common interests with a guy like Little Boozy Boswell.

Tomorrow morning I’m taking my collection out to the dump, Ken thought.

“So,” he forced himself to say. “How is this money?”

“First thing is, I’m saving all of these for when the government finally answers

my letters,” Little Boozy said. “I figure they got some kind of interest in the lizard-men, and I’m like an authority on the topic. Because I observe, you know? I pay attention.” Little Boozy tapped himself on the temple with the flashlight. “Second thing is....”

He broke off and looked at Ken, a knowing grin on his face. What Ken initially thought was a wave of visceral horror washed over him. Then he fell over next to the table and during an indeterminate period of inspecting the debris washed up around the table’s legs he realized that he was wasted. “Boozy, you motherfucker, you poisoned me,” he said, and Little Boozy cracked up.

“Boo-yoom-fuck-poin’ee,” Little

Boozy mimicked. “Ah ha ha ha ha. That’s great. Told you you were in for a treat.”

The initial blast wave of the explosion in Ken’s head passed, and he sat up. Something was moving in the darkness under the table. After intense examination he determined that it was his own shadow cast by the kerosene lantern. Except it wasn’t. “Agh,” Ken said, and scrambled backward away from the table, banging into the shelves opposite it. The jars set up a clanking racket, and he ducked his head waiting for a hail of glass and bits of lizard-man. No, not lizard-man. Ken willed himself not to adopt Little Boozy’s terminology, lest he go from there to believing Little

Boozy's ideas, which event didn't bear contemplation.

Still chuckling, Little Boozy said, "I may have gave you a little too much for your first time."

Ken could feel the jars hitting the back of his head, but worse than that he could feel the fluid flooding down his collar, feel the bits of not-lizard-man stuck in his hair, feel the toxins from the fluid creeping through his pores and into his capillaries and from there to his already reeling brain—which was, or at least part of it was, singing. Okay, he told himself. This isn't the first time you've tripped. Okay, it is the first time you've tripped on some kind of secretion from the mysterious critters that keep showing

up squashed on US-12, but a trip is a trip. “Is a trip,” he said.

“It sure is,” Little Boozy said. “Business keeps up the way it is, I’m going to have to buy a bunker so’s the big dealers from Detroit don’t just take it away from me.”

Ken suffered a vision of Big Boozy blasting away at a band of Detroit gangsters. Out of nowhere he had a nearly irresistible urge to get up and start jumping up and down. Overlapping this compulsion, like a bubble popping in his mind, the thought arose: so that’s what the kids at the minigolf course are up to. He lifted his head, and was vaguely shocked to discover that he was dry and free of biological flotsam.

“They wouldn’t know where to find the...” What was the word, Ken wondered. “Product,” he finished.

“That’s my ace in the hole,” Little Boozy agreed.

Ken struggled to his feet, supporting himself on the shelves. The clanking of jars terrified him, but he held himself together. Little Boozy’s voice had acquired color, mostly red, and Ken thought it smelled funny too, but that might have been just Boozy.

“But how—I mean, who drinks lizard-man roadkill, anyway?” he asked.

Sensing he had the upper hand, Little Boozy got expansive. “There’s a story there,” he said with as much bonhomie as a guy like him could muster. “My old

man, you know, he grew up eating possum, skunk, turtle, whatever he could find, so one time when I had one of the more disfigured specimens in the house—left it on the kitchen table while I was in the can—he went and fried it up and ate the goddamn thing. Now that would have been okay, but then he took the parts he hadn't fried and used 'em for soup stock. We ate that soup, and I'm here to tell you I don't remember a thing else about that day. Was good soup, too.”

This made Ken hungry. He was starting to get on top of the trip, in fact starting to like it. The edges weren't as hard as he remembered acid being, once you got through the first wave. All those

kids pogoing up and down at the minigolf course, he thought. Little Boozy Boswell has ‘em stoked on alien juice.

“I did some experimenting,” Little Boozy went on, “and I found out that you don’t have to cook anything. Fact, it’s better if you don’t. Lizard-man tea.”

“If there’s lizard-men at the bottom of Wamplers Lake,” Ken said, “and they find out you’ve been using their friends and loved ones for tea, you might find some trouble.”

“Let ‘em try,” Little Boozy said.

Infected by Little Boozy’s bravado, Ken thought, Yeah, let ‘em. Then he managed a moment of lucidity and concluded that one of the effects of lizard-man tea was a profound tendency



to be suggestible. Even though he didn't believe in a city of lizard-men, he had a moment of stark terror at the thought of a wave of Reptilian (the part of his brain that had been singing what he now recognized as part of the same screwball ensemble piece favored by the kids at the minigolf course interrupted itself long enough to yowl *aaaaahhhhh!* *Reptilian!*) invaders from the weedy depths of Wamplers Lake. Or from the woods behind Mystery Hill, which was where Ken had found much of his own collection. Whoever the little critters really were, they tended to run afoul of the coyotes roaming around back there.

Any alien monsters who can't stay out of the way of coyotes and tourists on

US-12 won't pose much of a threat, he thought. He was a little disappointed at the evaporation of his alien-invasion fantasy; it was more fun than imagining that they were just a bunch of bumbleres with a certain illicit chemical usefulness.

“What do you charge for this, anyway?” he asked.

“Five dollars a jar,” Little Boozy said. “I could go higher, but I read this book that said you shouldn't price yourself out of the market before you get brand recognition.”

Ken's earlier conversations with Fara Oussemitiski had been slowly steeping in the lizard-man tea, and now an idea occurred to him that was so

preposterous he wrote it off as part of the hallucinogen. After all, when Little Boozy Boswell's voice was red and you almost ran screaming from the room because of a bunch of broken and seeping jars that were neither broken nor seeping, it was prudent to regard your intuition suspiciously. But—if gravity could be used to *talk* between universes, between branes, what if it could be used to *travel*? Yow, Ken thought. That's what the feds would be interested in. If the Pentagon got hold of this....

I have to talk to Fara, he thought.

“Boozy,” he said. “You are a piss-poor human being to be selling this shit to kids.”

Little Boozy shrugged. The action set

off visible convection currents in the air around him, and the convection currents bent the notes in Ken's head, and he could have sworn that he was sliding sideways along the floor.

"I mean it," Ken said. "This is bullshit."

"Whatever," Little Boozy said.

Ken went to the door. Wonder if I can drive, he thought. He entertained the idea of cruising US-12 until he saw Fara's van in a motel parking lot. Then he entertained the idea of being pulled over on US-12 and dealing with an annoyed state trooper who would know Ken was under the influence, but not of what. Recipe for a night in jail, he thought, and reluctantly came to the conclusion that if

he could drive in a straight line, it ought to be back home.

“If you call the cops, I’m gonna burn your place down,” Little Boozy said.

“Okay, Boozy,” Ken said, and let the door bang shut behind him. The moonlight made him itchy, and the stars were moving in funny directions, but he found the truck, got the key in the ignition on the first try, and didn’t even get stuck in the ditch turning around. Not bad, he thought. I can still handle it. Those old Sixties-honed reflexes never quite go away. He got home, found another beer in the fridge, and sipped it while he waited to come all the way down. The lizard-man tea—dammit, he told himself, stop calling it that—was a fast trip.

Already he felt almost normal again, only with some ragged edges at the boundaries of his senses and that damn droning music in the back of his mind. The carbonation in the beer organized itself into a sort of percussion ensemble; Ken tapped his foot in time with it and thought that he wouldn't mind doing this again.

Also he wouldn't mind getting back in the truck and seeing where Fara was staying, partially just so he would know something she didn't know he knew. This was an impulse for payback, he knew, spawned by her sneaking around his place in the middle of the night. Argh, introspection. The camp where that followed the army of intoxication.

Ken chuckled to himself at his ridiculousness, and fell asleep, only to be awakened by a merciless hammering on the double-wide's door. Still on his couch, and still in his clothes, Ken shambled to the door and opened it to find Fara on the front step.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, keenly aware that he looked like eight miles of bad road. She, on the other hand, looked like she was ready for a nightclub instead of a physics experiment. “What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty. I wanted to talk to you before you opened up.”

He left the door open and went into the kitchen in search of coffee. She came in and followed him into the kitchen. There was no coffee, so Ken got a glass

of water instead. “Want one?” he asked her.

Fara shook her head. She was wearing long spangly earrings that drew Ken’s attention uncomfortably to the line of her throat. He drank off the glass of water and said, “Okay. What are we talking about?”

“Grammar,” she said. “What if I told you that there really were alien beings communicating from another brane, and that I was starting to figure out what they were saying?”

Still feeling little aftershocks of the lizard-man tea, Ken had a hard time not telling Fara that Little Boozy Boswell was way ahead of her. He managed, though. She was rummaging through her



bag looking for something, and Ken also had a hard time not saying something along the lines of *How about we have dinner sometime*. But he managed that, too. “Look,” she said, coming up with a much-folded and

-annotated sheet of paper. “These are the times when I’ve detected signals that I can understand. They’re sending on a twenty-four-cycle, do you know what that means? Either they’ve heard something from us—which means someone out there is doing something veeeerrrry secret—or *they’ve been here*

.” Her eyes shone with the excitement of discovery.

I can’t do it, Ken thought. She can’t

know about Little Boozy yet.

He could, however, show her his own collection. “Fara,” he said. “You haven’t, you know, snooped around any of the buildings here, have you?”

“Ken,” she said. “I was here—am here—to do science. You afraid I’m going to steal your extra golf balls?”

“If you knew how much the colored ones cost, you might. Come on,” Ken said. He found his shed key on top of the fridge. “Something you should see.”

\* \* \* \*

He was a little afraid that she would be angry, or disbelieving, or scornful, or something; but Fara took one look at Ken’s collection and said, “Oh. My. God. Fabulous.”

There were nine of them. For most of the seven years since he'd seen the first, Ken had been feeling guilty about stuffing them, but now that he had Little Boozy as an ethical barometer, taxidermy seemed positively beneficent. He'd staged them in a couple of different ways, remembering museum trips as a kid when from one visit to the next, new information about dinosaurs or something would result in completely changed exhibits. So a couple of them were posed as if hunting, a couple standing upright, and in a fit of silliness he'd set two of them up on either side of a chessboard. "That's Boris and Bobby right there," he said as he pointed them out to Fara. She picked up one of the

standing specimens and turned it over in her hands.

“How much did they weigh when you found them?” she asked.

“That one, not too much,” Ken said. “Coyotes got to him. I had to do some reconstruction to make him look normal. Truth is, if that’d been the first one I found, I would have thought it was just pieces of an animal.”

“Well, it was,” Fara said. “Just the animal was from another dimension.” Delighted with this idea, she laughed. Ken grinned with her. “What do you call this one?”

“Mary, because of Frankenstein.”

Fara put Mary back on the shelf. “So what did the intact ones weigh?”

“Thirty, forty pounds. Wouldn’t have figured that was the first question a physicist would ask.”

“I’ve got others, believe me,” Fara said. “But I’m curious about their weight because it helps me to ballpark what kind of energy they need to travel this way.”

“So how much?”

“A lot. Did they have any tools, or machines, anything like that?”

Ken was shaking his head. “No, I always expected to find some, but they all turn up naked and dead. I’ve never seen a living one, and I’ve never seen a dead one with any kind of clothes or anything.”

She picked up Bobby. “Amazing.

Wonder what they're doing here.”

“I don't know,” Ken said. “It started maybe seven years ago, and I've seen a bunch of dead ones. A guy I know, Little Boozy—”

“You mentioned him yesterday.”

Way to go, dope, Ken thought. “That's right, yeah. Well, Little Boozy sees 'em all the time run over on the road. These are the guys he thinks live at the bottom of Wamplers Lake.”

“Actually, that's not any stranger than believing that they travel from other dimensions,” Fara said, and although it pained Ken to admit it, she was right, which meant that except for the fact that he had a professor on his side, he and Little Boozy were in equal measure

proponents of loony theories. Oh no, he thought. This contact with conspiracy nuts has finally done me in. Before you know it, I will not only believe in the Reptilian conspiracy, but at the same time I will start thinking Mystery Hill is a hoax. And then my transformation into a credulous idiot will be complete.

Fara was watching his face. “Something I said?” she asked.

“One of those moments when you realize something about yourself,” Ken said. “In my experience those moments are almost always a mixed bag.”

She put Bobby back on his side of the chessboard. “Yeah,” she said.

“So okay,” Ken said. “You told me about your grammar, I showed you my

aliens from another dimension. What do we do now? Is this when the feds show up and disappear us both, or do we get to talk to them?"

"I'm thinking we should try to talk," Fara said. "I'm not quite sure it's going to work, though. Can you give me a hand with something?"

Usually Ken opened Mystery Hill at nine sharp, but what with the extraterrestrial hallucinogens and the possibility that he might be talking to aliens during the course of the morning, he decided to take the day off. While Fara wrestled with crates in the back of her car, he went down and chained off the driveway, hanging a closed-see you tomorrow! sign in the middle of the chain.



He always spelled *tomorrow* wrong on the theory that if he made the place seem more rustic, tourists would be more likely to stop there. There was no draw quite like the chance to feel superior. Then he called Jamie and told her not to come in, which broke her heart not at all once he told her he'd pay her for the day. "Stay away from that shit Little Boozy is peddling," he told her. "If I ever see you pogoing on my minigolf course, we're going to have a problem."

"You're not my dad," she said, and hung up on him.

Glad that he'd never had kids, Ken walked out of the office to discover Old Vera of the Forked Tongue standing on the other side of the driveway chain. She

appeared indignant.

“What do you mean, closed?” Vera demanded as soon as she saw him.

“You can read, Vera. Come back tomorrow.”

“I most certainly will not.” Vera commenced trying to heave one of her substantial thighs over the chain.

Now what have I done to deserve this? Ken wondered, although he knew perfectly well. Twenty-five years ago, when he'd been more foolish and Vera more attractive, she had been one of his Reptilian-groupie liaisons. Now he was paying for his sins, because Vera of the Forked Tongue not only believed in the Reptilians, she professed to believe she was one. Hence her moniker. She

appeared at Mystery Hill according to some schedule that made sense only to her, and every time she managed to fill Ken up with an emotional stew of regret, annoyance, and pity.

“Vera,” he said. “If you fall down and break your arm, I’m not driving you to the hospital.”

“Today’s the day, Ken,” Vera wheezed. “I finally figured it out.”

Having no choice, Ken took hold of her leg just above the ankle and moved it back to the other side of the chain, careful not to upset her balance. When he let go of her leg, it stayed in the air for a moment before she shifted her weight. Remarkable balance for a woman of her size, Ken thought. He

looked at her and wondered what it was about her life that had brought her to this pass. She was about his age, but since he'd first known her had put on maybe a hundred pounds and taken to dressing like Madame Blavatsky. Necklaces and bracelets rattled and clinked every time she moved or drew breath. Some of her hair was twisted into dreadlocks, some of the rest beaded and braided. Over her shoulder she carried a cloth bag stuffed with books and journals filled with ramblings and calculations about the Reptilians.

“What day?” he asked, because he couldn't help it.

“The day they show themselves,” Vera said.

“Vera, you’ve said that a hundred times in the last twenty years. Literally,” he said.

With great and withering hauteur, she said, “The scientific method demands great dedication, and progress through trial and error. I have had hypotheses, and they were wrong. I admit it. But now I am right, and I am coming over this chain, Ken Kassarian, so you’d better just get used to the idea.”

“No,” he said. “We’re closed today.”

Vera looked as if he’d slapped her. Then her shock mutated into a knowing leer. “So it is today,” she said. “That’s why you’re keeping everyone out. You *know*, don’t you, Ken?”

“Vera,” Ken began, and then was

briefly distracted as the lizard-man tea sparked up for a second and the entire Pink Floyd song “Vera” ran through his head. He looked up. It was in fact a sunny day.

“Yikes,” he muttered to himself.

“Ken, what the hell is wrong with you?”

He snapped himself out of it. “Nothing. Come back tomorrow.”

“Ken, no, it’s today. You owe me this, Ken.”

He started walking away, not wanting to look at Vera because he knew she would get theatrical. “You owe me this, Ken!” she yelled. “If you know something, you owe me!”

“Tomorrow, Vera,” he said without

looking back. Feeling bad about himself, he walked back up the driveway and found Fara out behind the barn setting up a shiny metal contraption unlike the one he'd seen the day before.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“That,” he said, “was Vera of the Forked Tongue. Did you see her?”

“I did. Are there many like her?”

“Too many. But she and I have a history, so she feels entitled.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to kill himself.

“A history,” Fara repeated, with a sidelong look and the faintest hint of a smile.

Ah well, Ken thought. Honesty's the best policy. “I've been around long

enough that I had lots of chances to do dumb things. Couldn't pass all of them up."

"Persuasive," she said, and went back to her machine.

Time to change the subject, Ken thought. "What do you call this thing?"

"This thing is a Lacoste A10. For measuring fluctuations in gravity. I've also," she added with a wink,

"customized it a little."

"Fancy," Ken said. "Lacoste like the shirts?" He was having a hard time imagining Izod gravimeters.

Fara laughed. "No, but one of my colleagues did paint an alligator on the side of his. I've got a bunch of other basic mass-spring doodads in the van,



but I like this one,” Fara said.

“So, customized. As in, talking to them?”

She was fiddling with a display.

“That’s the idea.”

“Huh,” Ken said. “Now when you do this, is it going to come across as fluctuations in the gravity over there?”

“I hope so. But gravity might not do over there what it does here. Physical laws might be different. Although,” Fara said, looking off into the distance for a moment, “if they can exist here, things must not be all that different there. Unless some kind of conservation of, what, form, is operating. Wow.”

“You lost me.”

“Well, what if they occupy a certain

ecological space over there, and they are more or less reconstituted to occupy the analogous space here? What if there's a sort of universal trans-brane grammar of phylogeny, so that if you're...." She caught herself, which was a good thing, because Ken never would have caught her. "Never mind. Probably things are just similar enough over there that they can survive here."

"They don't actually survive too well," Ken pointed out.

"This is maybe not the time to tell you this," Fara said as she sighted down a thin tube pointed in the direction of the barn, "but absence of evidence is not, as they say, evidence of absence. Could be there's a million of them running around

in the woods and you and Boozy have just seen the ones that didn't make it. Could be they wanted you to do everything you've done, et cetera. Or not. I don't know, and you don't either."

"Okay, Professor," Ken said.

She looked up at him. "What?"

He was annoyed but couldn't say exactly why, because she was probably right, or at any rate could be right. Still, there were ways to say something, and he'd been seeing the dead lizard-men for years. Maybe she was just trying to get his goat because of Vera.

"Nothing," he said. "If you talk to them, ask them if they'll tell us how to come over there for a visit. But only if we get some kind of survival course

first. I don't want to visit another universe if I'm just going to get hit by a car full of alien tourists. Also ask them why they don't have any clothes on."

"If the connection works," she said, "you can ask them yourself."

She plugged her laptop into a socket on the side of the Lacoste, turned both machines on, and started running three or four different programs. "Okay, here goes," she said after a minute. It occurred to Ken that he still hadn't had any coffee. There wasn't any place close enough to walk. Maybe Jamie would bring him a cup. He was about to unlock the office and use the phone in there when he remembered that she wasn't coming in. Then he was about to ask

Fara if she wanted a cup, but before he could, she said,

“Hey, it worked.”

“What? What worked?”

“This worked. This talking-to-another-universe thing we’ve been doing.”

Ken experienced that dangerously polyvalent kind of exasperation that you only feel toward someone you either a) love or b) like a lot in a way that in unguarded moments you might admit means you want to love. He was dangerously near to needing saving, and not from a tourist-trap groupie this time. Fara Oussemitiski was a creature of another ... well, phylum, he thought, since the word was in his head.

Phylogeny? Phylum? They were related, right?

“You serious?” he said.

“I sure am.” She was toggling back and forth between a couple of different programs on her laptop.

“Well, holy sheepshit, Doctor Oussemitiski. I guess congratulations are in order.”

“You guess right. Hey, Ken, run into the barn and see how far off your plumb bob hangs.”

He did, a little goofy because she'd called him Ken. Here you are participating in a communication with an alien race, he thought, laughing at himself, and you're all calf-eyed over this girl. The plumb bob was hanging

fourteen degrees off. “Yow,” he said, and went back outside to make his report.

“And the average is what?”

“About eight degrees.”

“Yeah,” she said, eyes still on the monitor of her laptop. “Whole lot of chatter all of a sudden.” Then she sat up straighter and said, “I’m such an idiot.”

Ken did his best to look doubtful.

“Which way is the plumb bob off? I mean, what direction?”

Closing his eyes to envision the inside of the barn, Ken oriented himself and pointed to the south-southwest. “About there,” he said. When he opened his eyes he gave himself a fright because he was pointing right at the shed, and

momentarily he thought that the shed door was going to burst open and disgorge a horde of avenging lizard-men. Hey, fellas, he was already explaining in his mind. I didn't kill 'em (well, there was that one last October, but I thought it was a turkey), and if you want something to get good and worked up about, have I introduced you to my neighbor and distant acquaintance Little Boozy Boswell?

“What's over that way?” Fara asked. “Other than the shed. I'm guessing if they were coming into the shed, you'd have had communication with them already.”

“I was just thinking that,” Ken said. “All's that's out there is woods. A creek or two, couple of ponds. Farther back



there's some houses.”

She looked skeptical. “Let's take a walk,” she said.

“Are you ... wait a sec. You think that when the plumb bob is off more it means some of them are coming over?” It made a certain kind of sense.

Fara was already headed around the shed and into the brushy margin of Ken's property. “That's exactly what I'm saying,” she said over her shoulder. “I think that your baseline disturbance is just noise from the open channel. Small fluctuations probably mean some kind of communication, and big ones signal arrivals or departures. Argh, I wish there was some way to monitor that plumb bob so we could know how long

the big disturbances go on.”

“Get your department to put in a camera,” Ken suggested.

“Sure, but I mean right now. If we see some of them, and we can correlate the last arrival with the end of the big disturbance, then—agh.” Not looking where she was going, she’d walked into a low-hanging branch. She stumbled, and Ken caught her.

“Tenure,” she said. “If I can make that correlation, I get tenure.”

Ken couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing. “Tenure?”

She shook her head and rubbed at the spot on her hairline where she’d hit the branch. “Oh. Did I not say the part about the Nobel Prize and becoming an

international celebrity for discovering sapient life in another universe? Thought I did. Hey, we have to hurry.” She took off through the trees, and Ken followed.

\* \* \* \*

Truth be told, the moment at which Ken Kassarian first observed the presence of a living sapient extraterrestrial organism was a little anticlimactic. He was out of breath, his mind was scattered by his infatuation with Fara Oussemitzki, and he'd just slapped at a mosquito behind his right ear. Then Fara stopped dead in front of him and he almost barreled into her while simultaneously trying to get a look at whatever had caught her attention. Which, as it turned out, was a lizard-

man. Then another. Then two more.

Well, I'll be darned, Ken thought—but he was also thinking that this proximity to Fara was mighty nice, and that the combination of bug dope and whatever she put in her hair smelled better than it had any right to.

“Shit,” Fara said. “I don't have my camera.”

It was all Ken could do not to burst out laughing. Some remnant instinct toward woodland silence, left over from his teenage years when he hunted a lot, kept him quiet, but Fara looked over her shoulder at him, saw the expression on his face, and said, “Shut up.”

The lizard-men heard her and stood looking at the two of them. One of them

said something to the others. Its voice sounded a little like R2D2. Then all four of them were off like they were spring-loaded, scattering into the trees.

“Some alien hunter you are,” Ken said.

“I’m a *physicist*,” she replied with wounded dignity, and stalked off in the general direction of the minigolf course. As Ken turned to follow her, he saw out of the corner of his eye the unmistakable form of Little Boozy Boswell, motionless in the dappled shadow of young pine trees growing up in the clearing made by the fall of their ancestors. All of his exuberance, his flirtatious happiness at being alive this morning, drained right out through his

gut. Keeping a stone face so Boozy wouldn't think he'd been spotted, Ken walked off, but already he was dreading what he knew would come next.

\* \* \* \*

And it didn't take long. The next morning, while Fara was off somewhere compiling the results of the previous day's soon-to-be-immortal endeavors, and Ken was sitting in the office counting up receipts and having a cup of coffee, he heard the signature death rattle of Little Boozy's F-150. "Hey there, Ken," Little Boozy said as he burst through the office door. "I got me an idea."

"Does it involve gangsters?"

"Does it what?" Ken watched the

wheels grinding in Little Boozy's head. "No, I got an idea. What if, and I'm not saying this is true, but what if we could find out where the lizard-men were coming from?"

"And how would we do that?" Ken asked.

Little Boozy glared at him. I know I shouldn't, Ken thought. I'll go to hell for it. But it's just too much fun.

Plus there was way too much at stake. Who knew how the lizard-men would react if Little Boozy wanted to start trapping them, or ranching them or something?

"Well," Little Boozy said irritably. "What's that professor been doing? Ain't she looking for them?"

“Boozy, you know as well as I do that a hundred people a year show up looking for aliens. Old Vera of the Forked Tongue showed up again today. So as far as the professor is concerned, she might be. She hasn’t told me much. Why don’t you go ask her yourself?”

As he heard himself say this, Ken realized it might be a serious tactical error. He hadn’t told Fara about Little Boozy’s surveillance, and he had no idea how she would react to Little Boozy if he approached her in a belligerent mood.

“I just might do that,” Little Boozy said, but Ken could tell he was vamping. Boozy knew Ken was lying, but he didn’t know that Ken knew he knew, and



he didn't know that Ken knew that Little Boozy was trying to sucker him. I'm no genius, Ken thought, but all it takes is the right frame of reference to make me look like one.

“Okay,” he said. “You go right ahead.”

Little Boozy thought of something. “Hey, Ken,” he said, as if he'd just walked in and they were starting a brand-new conversation. “How far back does your property go that way?” He pointed past the shed.

“Couple of miles,” Ken said, lying through his teeth. In fact his land ended less than three hundred yards from Michigan Avenue, and beyond that there was forest owned by some millionaire

somewhere who hadn't gotten around to selling it off for second homes. The lizard-men were appearing on the millionaire's land, but Ken thought it best to keep Little Boozy vague on that fact.

“Huh. Like out past the pond where them beavers used to be?”

“It's not a pond anymore,” Ken said. One of Big Boozy's last excursions beyond his property line had been a mission last fall to dynamite the beaver dam that flooded a part of an old road back in the woods. Since this road was Big Boozy's preferred route to his favorite spot to shine deer, he saw the beavers as mortal enemies. Ken hoped that someday beavers would learn how

to use dynamite and get annoyed at the presence of Big Boozy's shack.

"Well, that's the place I mean," Little Boozy said. "Is that on your land?"

"Boozy, I'm not going to sue your dad for trespassing so he could blow up some beavers," Ken said.

"I ain't worried about that," Little Boozy said.

Suddenly fatigued by the whole conversation, Ken considered whether he could make trouble for either of the Boswells, or with any luck both, by getting the state Department of Natural Resources interested in the Boozy Beaver Massacre. It seemed like too much trouble, plus he could only imagine what would happen if the DNR ran

across the lizard-men.

“Boozy,” he said. “What are we talking about here?”

“We’re talking about your professor,” Boozy said.

“She’s not mine,” Ken said, and he must not have done a good enough job of keeping the wistful tone out of his voice, because Boozy’s jaw dropped open—a sight guaranteed to provoke avarice among dentists and nausea in just about anyone else—and his eyes got squinty with malicious glee.

“You got a thing for the professor,” he said slowly, savoring each word like a kid newly in possession of a devastating secret about his worst playground enemy.

“Screw,” Ken said.

“Ha,” Boozy said. “I knew it. We’ll talk about this later.”

He bulldozed his way out of Ken’s office, leaving Ken to curse his lack of a poker face. If only I hadn’t spent my last twenty-five years at the mercy of the Veras of the world, Ken thought. I’d be stronger. I sure as hell wouldn’t have to suffer the indignity of having Little Boozy Boswell gloat about me having a schoolboy crush on a physics professor.

Who, Ken knew, would take off to Ann Arbor or wherever she came from as soon as she got her readings. He cursed himself for a sentimental fool. Then he cursed himself some more because while he was thinking about

being a sentimental fool, he grew besotted by the specter of her smile at him while they were out on the lake, and whatever resolve he might have been about to muster went poof! Just like that.

“Fara Oussemitki,” he said out loud. He liked the sound of it.

\* \* \* \*

It was a slow day at Mystery Hill. The only paying customer after two o'clock was Vera of the Forked Tongue, who stationed herself next to the barn and started taking some kind of reading with a sextant. After he'd satisfied himself that she wasn't going to cause any trouble, Ken whiled away the afternoon replacing the Astroturf on the seventeenth hole, where the local

teenagers liked to dance out their lizard-man tea affliction. He'd lifted the new patch of Astroturf from the back porch of a cabin just beyond his property line to the south, thinking all the while that he was going to go to hell for the theft but also that life was not going to offer him many chances to perplex absentee millionaires, so what the heck.

He was rolling a wrinkle out of the patch and cursing the teenagers, as well as cursing Little Boozy for addicting them to his interdimensional devil juice, when the possibility presented itself that the teenagers could actually talk to the lizard-men. I mean, his train of thought went, if they're in tune with something while they're on the juice, maybe they're

in tune all the way. The idea made him wish he'd seen a lizard-man while he had been on his own tea-trip. Maybe they could have conversed, and Ken could have warned them to stay away from Little Boozy lest they be turned into ranch animals in a dimension not their own. Wasn't the whole point of Timothy Leary's existence to convince people that hallucinogens would put them in touch with other realities?

Ken willed himself to be rational. Then he reasoned that the only way to find out what went through the teenagers' heads while they were tea-tripping was to ask them, which made him an accessory after the fact in Little Boozy's substantial contribution to the



delinquency of local minors and thereby put his livelihood and freedom to walk the streets in jeopardy.

On the other hand, if there was any kernel of truth in this deranged idea, it might keep Fara around a bit longer. His heart did a little flip at the thought.

It was a desperate time. Ken went looking for Jamie and found her sneaking a cigarette behind the barn.

“Huh. Some things never change, I guess,” he said.

“Shit,” Jamie said. “Don’t tell my parents, Ken.” Her worry, however, did not provoke her to such a drastic action as extinguishing the cigarette.

“Your personal relationship with cancer isn’t my business,” Ken said.

“I’m here to ask you a crazy question.”

“Ken, if you hit on me, my dad is going to kick your ass.”

For just a second, Ken had the feeling that he wasn’t quite free of the lizard-man tea. “What do you take me for?”

“You weren’t going to hit on me? Shit.” Jamie flung her cigarette to the ground and stomped on it.

Teenagers, Ken thought. He was glad he didn’t have kids.

“Jamie,” he said, “you are the loveliest piece of untouchable jailbait in all of the Irish Hills, kiddo. Now tell me something: you ever join in with all of the kids who drink up Boozy’s juice?”

“What if I did?”

“If you did, I have a question.”

“What if I didn’t?”

“Then I still have a question, but I need to ask it to someone else. Either way, I need your help.”

“You can’t make me do anything just because you caught me smoking. I’ll tell my dad you hit on me.”

“Okay, and then he’ll kick my ass. Fine. You don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. Who should I talk to?”

\* \* \* \*

Armed with the name and location of one Travis Ludwig, Ken coaxed the F-150 to life and roared off to a bait shop way the hell off the other side of the lake. He found a kid matching Travis’s description counting leaf worms into plastic containers that had once held

chip dip. It being midafternoon, when all of the fish in the local lakes were hiding out, Ken figured that his conversation with Travis would be uninhibited by the presence of customers.

“You Travis Ludwig?” he asked.

Travis nodded. “Don’t make me lose count.”

Ken waited until Travis had finished the container he was working on. “You know Jamie, who works over at my place?”

“What’s your place?”

“Mystery Hill.”

Travis looked up at him. “That’s your place? Your minigolf course sucks, man. And the whole gravity thing is a total scam. I can’t believe the cops don’t shut

you down.”

For the second time in less than an hour, Ken blessed the good fortune that had made him childless.

“We’re getting off on the wrong foot here, kid. Do you know Jamie?”

Travis sucked on his lip ring. “Yeah.”

“Okay. She asked me to ask you about a little something you might get from Little Boozy Boswell.”

Smelling profit, Travis brightened. “Sure, man. What do you need?”

“I need to know about the juice. You know where it comes from?”

“You just said Boozy. I know all about entrapment, man.” Travis turned away and started counting worms again. Ken waited with superhuman patience

until the magic number of twenty was achieved.

“Okay, Travis. I’ll cut this short. What do you know about the lizard-men?”

With exaggerated care, Travis filled the plastic container with dirt and pressed the lid down, working his thumbs around its circumference as if he’d been specially warned about the perils of escaping leaf worms. When he was done, he put the container on top of its stack in the cooler, next to the Home-Made Ham Salad Sandwiches.

“I know exactly shit about lizard-men,” he said, but he wouldn’t look Ken in the eye.

“Travis,” Ken said. “I am here because of a woman. You understand

that if I can't count on you to help me out a little, the consequences to my emotional well-being might result in you being a little gimpy the next time you want to dance around on my seventeenth green."

"You threatening me?" Before Ken could answer, Travis whipped a butterfly knife out of his pocket and started to do something complicated with it. Ken took a step forward and snapped Travis's head back with a straight right to the nose. The butterfly knife fluttered out of Travis's hand into a box full of cigarette cartons. Travis himself fluttered down to the floor, holding his nose. On the way down he banged into a wire display, bringing

down a rain of bobbers and sinkers on his head.

Ken stood looking down at him. He felt bad. “Kid,” he said, “I shouldn’t have hit you. But don’t ever pull a knife on somebody when you don’t know what you’re doing with it.”

“You broke my nose,” Travis said through his cupped hands.

“Nah,” Ken said. “I didn’t hit you that hard.” He found the knife and put it in his pocket.

“That’s mine,” Travis said.

“You can pick it up at the bottom of the lake. Now tell me about the lizard-men. You see them when you’re on the juice?”

Travis moved his hands far enough



from his face to see that he was only bleeding from one nostril, and not very much. He wiped his fingers on his shirt and said, “Yeah.”

“You talk to them?”

“It’s not really talking.” Travis shrugged. “More like singing.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Ken said, thinking of his seventeenth green. “So what’s it like?”

“I don’t know,” Travis said. “It’s cool.”

Ken was on the verge of socking him in the nose again when the front door banged open and admitted a fat, sunburned fisherman. “You carry chubs?” he wanted to know.

“We’re all out,” Ken said, hauling

Travis to his feet.

“Damn.” The fisherman wandered to the back of the store to consult *Field & Stream*.

“We’re not out of chubs,” Travis said. The rattle of the aerator that kept the chubs and minnows alive in an aluminum tub kept the fisherman from hearing.

“Travis,” Ken said. “Tell me what the lizard-men say.”

Again Travis shrugged. “It’s sort of an invitation, I guess,” Travis said. “But it’s not like they’re real. That’s just the trip.”

Good, Ken thought. Perfect. Exactly what I want you to believe.

“How do you think you might take them up on the invitation?”

“You’re an asshole,” Travis said.

“What I am is a desperate man, Travis,” Ken said. “Do I have to repeat myself?”

The fisherman was meanwhile sticking a package of beef jerky in the pocket of his vest. Travis didn’t notice, but Ken did. “Buddy,” he said, “you need to put that back and get out.”

“I’ll pay for it,” the fisherman said. He looked annoyed, and Ken thought, what is it with people? Catch kids smoking, they want to cry rape. Catch grown men stealing beef jerky, they act like you’re an IRS auditor.

“What would you say if I told you that aliens use gravity to communicate with

our dimension?” he asked the fisherman.

Wordlessly, and with bomb-squad care, the fisherman put the beef jerky on the counter and left, never taking his eyes off Ken.

“Now,” Ken said. “We’re alone again. Do I have to repeat my question?”

Travis thought hard. “Actually, yeah. I kind of forgot what it was. What did you say about gravity?”

“Ask your science teacher,” Ken said. Out of the blue he was riding a wave of crazed elation, the kind of delirious pride that comes from knowing something that nobody else in the world knew—only in this case Fara knew, so it was only the two of them. That made it even better. They shared this knowledge.

Ken imagined sitting on the patio of a Wamplers Lake cabin with Fara, sharing a bottle of wine and reminiscing about the time they'd discovered alien life in other dimensions. Those were the days, huh?

He shook himself out of it. "Do you think you could actually go there?" he asked Travis ... who, predictably, shrugged again.

"That's what they say," he said.

"Anybody you know done it?"

"No." Travis shook his head. "You have to be in a group to ... what, make it work."

"Make what work?"

"The singing."

Ah. That, Ken thought, explained why

he hadn't gotten an invitation the night out at Little Boozy's.

“So when all of you get zonked on lizard-man tea and go dancing around on my seventeenth green, you talk to the lizard-men and they invite you for a visit.”

Travis's face went slack. “Lizard-man tea?”

“Yeah, kid.” Lord save me, Ken thought. I should not be enjoying this nearly so much. “What do you think Boozy makes that stuff from?”

One hand up as if to ward off Ken's words, or Ken himself, Travis went back around behind the counter. “I'm gonna puke,” he said. But he didn't puke. He started counting mealworms again,

slow and steady, one through twenty. Ken stood watching him until he'd finished one little tub. Then he decided that, having taken one fairly drastic action in assaulting a teenager, he might as well take one more.

“Travis,” he said. “You got any?”

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later, he said to Fara, “I think I have something figured out.”

He had taken her to dinner at the Zukey Lake Tavern, which was a long drive from the Irish Hills but worth it both for the company and for the distance it put between them and Little Boozy, of whom Ken was at that moment ready to believe the worst. Also they'd driven past the speedway at Brooklyn,

which was where Ken discovered to his perplexity that Fara was a NASCAR fan. And not just the kind of fan who put a #8 sticker in the rear window of her car, oh no. She talked his ear off, unbidden, about the complexities of a recent race at Pocono during the course of which Mark Martin would have won had he not forgotten that Turn 3 was slippery because of a crash thirty laps previous ... and so on, and so on. Ken lost track. He wasn't into sports. But he was very into Fara, the way she lit up when she talked about something that interested her. He'd never known a woman who could suddenly luminesce when talking about either string theory or stock-car racing.

“Anyway,” she said when she'd run



out of steam on the NASCAR topic, “what did you figure out?”

“I think I figured out how we can get Boozy off our backs and still win you your Nobel Prize,” he said.

“Boozy?” She looked puzzled. “What’s Boozy got to do with anything?”

This was one of those moments when the only way out was straight through. “He saw us back by the pond,” Ken said. “I didn’t want to tell you, but ... well, here’s the thing. He’s been making the lizard-men into a kind of drink.”

“Drink?”

“Yeah, it’s....” Hm, Ken thought. How to do this. Okay. “Little Boozy Boswell comes from a long line of bootleggers. Don’t ask me how this happened, but one

day his old man....”

“Big Boozy,” Fara submitted, just to let him know she was still following.

“Right,” I said. “Big Boozy ran over a lizard-man and thought it was a turtle or something, and he cooked it. He’s kind of crazy. So they ate the soup, and the way Little Boozy tells it, there’s no trip like it. Not

‘shrooms, peyote, nothing.”

Fara cocked her head to the side. “Ken Kassarian,” she said, “just how much do you know about trips?”

“Relaying information, darling,” Ken said. “I am purely a conduit here.”

“Darling,” she commented, and sipped her drink.

It took the very last of Ken’s self-

control to not pursue that comment. “So the kids who have been tearing up my minigolf course say that you can talk to the lizard-men if you’re, you know,” he said, “in tune. But you need more than one person to do it.”

“How do the kids get it?” As she said it, Fara’s entire upper body quaked in a shiver that had to be exaggerated for effect. “I mean, is Boozy—Little Boozy —?”

“Yeah, he is,” I said.

“That son of a bitch,” Fara said.

“Agreed. So tell me again how this gravity thing works.”

Fara pursed her lips. She had one of those perfect Cupid’s-bow mouths, designed to be pursed at the transparent

ruses of inferior beings such as men. “Ken, you are playing dumb. Do you think women go for that?”

“I think I am at the Zukey Lake Tavern with a marvelous girl who is going to make her own decisions,”

Ken said. “And perhaps that is as far as it should go.”

“Mm hm,” Fara said, and absently spun the stud in her lip. Their dinners arrived, and Ken tore into his chicken fried steak while Fara—here, Ken thought, was his riposte to her infuriatingly accurate insights into his own personality—went to great lengths to pretend that she wasn’t picking around her Caesar salad because she didn’t like it.

“Gravity,” Ken said, just to see if it would work.

“You asshole,” she said. “You know the whole thing. I already explained it to you.”

Ken sighed. “I can see I’m going to have to do all the hard work here,” he said. “Okay. Gravity fluctuations are really communications from another brane. Brane?”

“Right.”

“Right. So my place is one of the ones where the communications come through, which is why Little Boozy has all of these roadkill lizard-men, and God knows where else or how else he’s gotten them, to make his tea.”

“Right.”

“And the kids say that the lizard-men are inviting them somewhere.”

“Right. What?”

“Yeah, that’s what this kid says. But it only works in groups.” Ken caught himself waving his fork around with a piece of steak still attached and shedding bits of batter. He set it on his plate. “This is the good part. If they can come through, maybe we can, too. Maybe my place—”

“I cannot believe this,” Fara said. “Here I am trying to do science, and I have to deal with a drug dealer named Little Boozy who is cooking the bodies of aliens to make hallucinogens for the local teenagers. Not to mention Reptilian conspiracy theorists.”

“Steeping, more like. I don’t think he really cooks them, except for that first time.” Ken let pass her remark about Vera. No way was he having that conversation ... although it did occur to him to wonder where Vera had gotten to. She might not be the type to climb over chains, but she also wasn’t the type to go easily when she thought she was on the trail of galactic secrets. Which was all the time.

“Well, he’s innovative, Little Boozy, isn’t he?” Fara forced herself to take a bite of the salad. “Listen, if we can really communicate with them, I mean directly, without using the gravimeter, how are we supposed to explain what he’s doing?”

“I wondered about that myself,” Ken said. “Maybe when we take them up on their invitation, we can ask.”

\* \* \* \*

At slightly after two o'clock in the morning, butterflies in his stomach, Ken was watching Fara tinker with her Izod gravity gizmo out in the woods where they'd seen the lizard-men. So, he was thinking. Guess we're going to do it. “You never did tell me what you said to them,” he said.

She wasn't listening. “Hmm?”

“When you were trying to talk to them,” Ken prompted. “What did you say?”

“Oh, yeah. I just sent a test message. Quick brown fox type of thing.”



“Okay, but was it actual words, or are you saying it that way because you don’t think I’ll understand what you really did?”

Fara stood and turned to him. “Ken. I’m really not always trying to be patronizing. Okay?”

“Fine,” he said. “So was it actual words?”

She sighed. “Yes. Kind of. I made a guess at how their messages might be structured, and sent something back with a similar structure. For all I know, it came across as a haiku.”

“That’s all you needed to say, Professor.”

“You are an exasperating man,” Fara said, and went back to her tinkering. Ken

stood feeling awkward until she was done. Then it was Go Time. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle he'd bought from Travis.

“Are just the two of us going to be enough?” he asked her.

“How should I know?”

Ken opened the bottle, which had once held maple syrup and now held about two inches of lizard-man tea. “Here’s mud in your eye,” he said, and drank. He held it out to Fara, and she killed off what was left.

“Do we dance now?” she asked.

“How should I know?”

Fara gave him a look and tapped something into the keyboard attached to the gravimeter. “Okay,” she said. “Take

us to your leaders.”

A tremor crept up Ken's left leg. He looked down at it and watched as his foot started to tap. “Hoo boy,” he said. “Stuff works fast.” An old *Saturday Night Live* sketch with Steve Martin ran through his head. The lizard-man tea scoured its way through his brain, and he started to hear chirps and whistles, like whalesong or R2D2. He caught Fara's eye, and then caught her hand, and just like that they were pogoing. Her eyes shone in the dark, and Ken wanted to sing but didn't know the words. His mouth came open anyway, and sound came out, and for a second the sound blinded him and he felt like he was sensing something, physically sensing

something, that wasn't coming via taste/touch/smell/sound/sight. Someone took his other hand, and Ken tried to look at who it was, but he couldn't make his eyes work—a lizard-man? Would they dance together? The hand felt bigger than that, but there was no trusting sensation at this point. A third voice joined in, and deep inside the hallucinatory fog shrouding Ken's brain, realization sparked: Vera of the Forked Tongue. Oh shit, he thought. She found us. Still he couldn't make his eyes work, and then he figured out the trick. They were closed, that was it, and all he had to do was open them, and that's when he saw not just Vera of the Forked Tongue but Little Boozy Boswell, the four of

them pogoing in a ring, like they were dancing around an interdimensional maypole. The music filled him with longing, and Ken understood that as they sang, he and Fara and Little Boozy and Vera were all saying yes.

I've been had, Ken thought. Vera and Little Boozy had it all figured out, and now that I've got my eyes open I'm stuck watching the two of them jump up and down. He tried to look at Fara instead, but found that he could no longer control his head. The world swirled, and Ken felt his body start to come apart. He looked around, but it took him a long time to turn his head as time started to elongate; then in a rush the bark fell off all of the trees and their leaves turned

into embers flitting up away from the fire burning in the center of the circle made by their four bodies. The music was too loud to hear, and they were still saying yes.

There was a crackling sound inside Ken's head, akin to what he'd heard the last time he'd yawned while he had a sinus infection. The four of them, hand in hand in hand in hand, jumped up and came down, jumped up and came down. Jumped up.

\* \* \* \*

The first thing that happened in the lizard-men's dimension, or universe or whatever it was, was that Ken's ears popped. Then he looked around, and what he saw convinced him that God, if

there was such a being, was more of a prankster than anyone had guessed.

He dropped Vera's hand but held onto Fara's, and she let him. "Unbelievable," she said.

It was hot and sunny, the sun brighter and whiter than back home. There was something like grass under Ken's feet, and things like trees growing around them, and water in a pond off to their left. It must have been autumn, because most of the leaves had fallen off the trees, and through their naked branches Ken could see the outlines of structures. He knew what they were for because he'd spent the last thirty-three years in one.

"A tourist trap," he said.

On the side of one of the buildings was a colorful banner, and a lizard-man sat on a stool taking tickets from a lizard-man family. A little farther away was some kind of gaming area; maybe lizard-men hadn't discovered minigolf yet, but they had something like it. Ken wondered what it was, and had the thought that he might just make his fortune if he could figure it out and bring it back to Earth. play the game the aliens play!!! What a banner that would make out on US-12.

Everything was at lizard-man scale, and Ken felt unwieldy, as if he might break something the minute he moved. A tiny silver airplane flew overhead. As he worked through the logic of what he



was seeing, Ken got a sudden chill. Leaning his head close to Fara's, he said, "You think they have a shed like mine?"

She looked at him. "I don't know," she said. "Has anyone ever come through before?"

"Maybe it's been just the one way," he said. "Hell, maybe it's like extreme tourism. Experience the dangers of another dimension, as soon as you sign this liability waiver."

Fara laughed. "Litigious aliens," she said.

Her equanimity amazed him, and he was about to tell her so, but just then a shriek of exaltation escaped Vera of the Forked Tongue. "Glory be!" she

screamed, and fell to her knees. What a time this must be for her, Ken thought. Turns out that after all this time of everyone telling her she was nuts, me included, she was onto something. Little Boozy's reaction was a bit different. He took one look around, turned to Ken, and said, "We need to get the hell out of here."

When Ken saw what Boozy had seen, he thought that Boozy was exactly right. A group of lizard-men, carrying what appeared to be weapons, came trooping out of the woods in their direction.

"You and your conservation of form," Ken said to Fara. "Your grammar of phylogeny."

"I didn't invent it," she said.

“Wonder if they’re going to steep us,” Ken said. Little Boozy took off running, and one of the lizard-men raised its weapon and shot him. He sprawled on the grass, rolled over onto his back, and started foaming at the mouth. A small black dart stuck out of the side of his neck.

“Uh oh,” Ken said. He was sweating, and could already feel the beginnings of a sunburn on the back of his neck. Vera was still on her knees, and had begun to babble in some language Ken didn’t recognize. Maybe it came from one of her books on how to talk to Reptilians. The group of lizard-men stopped about ten feet from the three humans and fanned out into a semicircle.

“So, listen,” Ken said to Fara, keeping his voice low. “You think we’re here because of your gravity doodad or because of the tea?”

She shrugged. “I’m not going to speculate on metaphysics. My guess is the Lacoste did it.”

“So we can go back?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “We haven’t tried.”

Vera of the Forked Tongue switched to English. “I am one of you,” she said to the lizard-men, adding an elaborate pantomime that looked to Ken like some kind of interpretive dance. “One of you, don’t you understand? I just can’t change back.”

One of the lizard-men came up to Ken.

It stood about waist-high to him, but nothing about its posture indicated a trace of wariness. Looking back and forth between him and Fara, it made some kind of decision. It coughed and said, “Took you long enough.”

I’ll be damned, Ken thought. He kept his mouth shut, though, because the lizard-man was talking to Fara.

“It’s not every day you invent a way to manipulate gravity to travel to another brane,” Fara said, a trifle defensively. Ken at first heard her last word as *brain*, and spent some time wondering if she was saying they were just hallucinating the whole thing before he got himself back on track. “Have you been watching me?” she asked.

The lizard-man nodded. Then it looked at Ken and said, “The chessboard—is that what you call it, chessboard?”

Ken’s throat was too dry for him to speak, so he nodded.

“Funny,” the lizard-man said. Its inflection was so flat that he couldn’t tell if it was joking.

“How did you learn English?” Fara asked it.

“Observation.”

Ken swallowed three or four times, trying to find his voice. “Do you ... what is this?” he asked. “Do you run tours or something?”

The lizard-man ignored him. It was looking over at Little Boozy, who was

starting to shake off the effects of whatever they'd darted him with. "His jars are not funny," it said.

Boozy, Ken thought, you're a walking dead man.

"I never did that," he said.

Again the lizard-man ignored what he'd said. It was looking at Vera, who, still on her knees, had approached it. "I am one of you," she said. The lizard-man looked up at Fara.

"Can you explain this?" it asked.

Fara inclined her head toward Ken. "He can."

The lizard-man looked at Ken, and he said, "Um. Well, she ... there's people who believe that people like you have been coming to Earth for a long time.

And you can change shapes and look like our people, humans. She believes that, and she thinks she's one of you who can't change her shape back.”

The lizard-man kept its gaze on Ken. It didn't say anything.

“I know,” he said. “It sounds crazy to me, too.”

Some kind of cheer, a storm of whistles and chirps, rose up from the gaming area. “What is that game, anyway?” Ken asked.

The lizard-man walked away. Vera shuffled after it on her knees, still professing her true Reptilian form.

“Now might be a good time to see if we can get back,” Ken said to Fara.

“Yeah,” she said. “I have data to get



back to.”

Data, Ken thought.

The lizard-man returned. “There is some difficulty,” it said, and pointed at Little Boozy. “That one has committed crimes.”

“That’s what I always told him,” Ken said.

“He will stay here,” the lizard-man said.

There was a silence. Ken imagined Little Boozy trussed up on a lizard-man table with an apple in his mouth. Man, he thought. I should do something. Boozy’s a bastard, but he doesn’t deserve to be eaten.

“Business has been slow,” the lizard-man said.

Ken opened his mouth, shut it again, opened it again. “You’re going to exhibit him?”

“And this one,” the lizard-man said, pointing at Vera, who had gone back to speaking in tongues. “You will exchange the two of them for going home.”

“Well, listen,” Ken said. “You get two of us, man, you’re going to triple your receipts in no time. How about some kind of exchange, you know? I can build something on the side of the barn, you can show us humans what that game is. How about it?” What he really wanted was the game. Real live lizard-men would be way too much trouble; Ken had briefly tried adding a petting zoo to Mystery Hill, but it had ended

badly.

“You will exchange the two of them for going home,” the lizard-man repeated.

“Come on, at least tell me about the game,” Ken said.

Fara, who had been staring at him in disbelief during his previous sales pitch, now hauled off and slapped him on the back of the head. “Ken,” she said in a heated whisper, “Vera wants to stay and Boozy’s a murderer. Do not negotiate.”

“Okay, fine,” he said, spreading his hands. “Fine.”

Whereupon Fara turned on her biggest movie-star smile and said, “Do you mind if I ask you a question or two about how you travel? I’m still getting some of

the bugs worked out.”

The lizard-man just looked at her. So did Ken. Little Boozy had gotten to his feet. He swayed and said,

“Man, if I could bottle that, I’d be rich.”

To Ken and Fara, the lizard-man said, “It is time for you to go.”

“Not even a hint about the game?” Ken said.

The lizard-man unhooked two small steel boxes from its bandolier. It handed one to Ken and one to Fara. “Do not come back again,” it said.

These folks drive a tough bargain, Ken thought. “You really liked the chessboard?” he asked.

“Go,” said the lizard-man. It made a

signal to one of its fellows, and just like that, Ken and Fara were standing in the woods behind Mystery Hill. Predawn mist wafted along the surface of the pond, and both of them shivered in the sudden chill. Ken's ears popped again.

The disappearance of Little Boozy Boswell did not go unremarked. Nor did the fact that a 1982 Nissan B10 hatchback belonging to Vera of the Forked Tongue was found parked by Little Boozy's tea shack. Big Boozy was heard to say that his boy had run off with a crazy woman, which was all right with him since that's how he had come to be the father of Little Boozy in the first place. It was damn good, opined Big Boozy, that some families observed their

traditions. He was looking forward to his first grandchild. The tea shack mysteriously burned to the ground about two weeks after Little Boozy and Vera vanished. Big Boozy blamed the local kids, and when he couldn't pin the crime on any of them and the insurance company refused to pay up, Ken figured this new grievance would keep the old man alive for another ten years.

Fara spent about six months trying to reverse-engineer the little steel boxes that had made the trip back with them, but it never worked. She stopped by every so often to take measurements and fiddle with the Lacoste, but as time went by, it became clear that the lizard-men had done something to interfere with her

progress. She could still read the disturbances in the local gravity, but she couldn't send messages.

“Those little bastards,” she fumed.

“Well,” Ken said, “they don't come here anymore.” Which was true; he hadn't seen one since the night he'd gone to another universe. “And they didn't want us to come back anyway. What were you going to do, write a paper about them?”

On her last visit, Ken showed her the display area he'd built on the side of the barn to house his taxidermied lizard-men, with Boris and Bobby right up front. Hell with it, he figured; he had it right from the lizard-man's mouth that they liked the chessboard, and man, did

the tourists eat the whole thing up. He sold postcards, T-shirts with lizard-men on them, the works. He'd even gritted his teeth and let Jamie put up a MySpace profile. Plus his minigolf course was in much better shape now that area teenagers were no longer communing with the lizard-men on the seventeenth green.

He told Fara all this while she was sitting in her car, about to leave, and she laughed at him. "Ken," she said, "you're the only sentimental tourist-trap shyster I know. The only one who loves the debunkers and the true believers equally. You were born to this."

Then she drove off, headed for a conference where she was going to



present some results on her research into local fluctuations in gravity and their possible implications for the theory of strings, and he figured he'd never hear from her again. A slobberknocker of a girl, Ken thought. She gave him hope.

He turned back to regard his domain. Little kids were running around waving toy lizard-men that he'd just unboxed that morning. Their parents followed waving cameras and brochures. Older kids moved in herds across the minigolf course, taking pictures of each other and shrieking at the results. A recently arrived wacko was conducting some kind of occult experiment on the wavelength of sunlight near the plumb bob. Jamie looked harried at the ticket

window; could be he was going to have to hire another sullen adolescent to deal with the swelling number of customers. Pretty good, Ken thought. On the other side, the lizard-men might be making a pile of money off Little Boozy and Vera, but right there and then, he was doing fine off them, too. He considered it a fair deal for everyone.