

What can you say about chocolate covered manhole covers



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It was the last party. Otherwise it was only one of many, so many that they merged in the memory. We all knew each other. George had invited around thirty of us, a heterogeneous group, aged from teen to retirement, in dress that varied from hippie to mod to jeans and sneakers to dark suits, and hair that varied from crew cut to shoulder-length.

It was a divorce party.

Granted that it's been done before, still it was done well. George and Dina had

planned it a year earlier, to celebrate the night their Decree became Final. The cake was frosted in black, and was surmounted by the usual wax figures, but facing outward from opposite edges of the cake. Jack Keenan donned a minister's reversed collar to officiate. His makeshift sacrament included part of the funniest prayer in literature: the agnostic's prayer from Zelazny's *Creatures of Light and Darkness*. George and Dina kissed with obvious sincerity, for the last time, and everybody clapped like mad.

Afterward I got coffee and a piece of divorce cake and found a flat place to set them. Without a third hand to handle

the plastic fork, I was as good as trapped there; and there it was that Tom Findlay found me.

Tom Findlay was all red hair and beard. The beard was full and thick, the hair long enough to tie in back with a rubber band. Once he had gone to a costume party with his hair combed forward over his eyes and the bridge of his nose, and a placard around his neck that read NOT A SHEEP DOG. He generally wore knee-length socks and leather shorts. His legs too were thickly covered with red hair. He spoke in a slow midwestern drawl, and grinned constantly, as if he were watching very funny pictures inside his head.

He was always part of these groups. Once a month he held a BYOB party of his own. He had a tendency to monopolize a conversation; but even those who avoided him on that account had to admit that he gave fair warning. He would walk up to any friend or stranger he found standing alone and open conversation with, "Hey. Would a Muslim vampire be terrified of a copy of the Koran?" Or, "It seems to me that anarchy would be a very unstable form of government, don't you think?" Or, "What about chocolate covered manhole covers?"

That one fell pretty flat, I remember. What can anyone say about chocolate

covered manhole covers? Most of Findlay's ideas were at least worth discussing. Vampires, for instance. What significance has the vampire's religion? Or the victim's blood type? Could you hold off a vampire with a sunlamp, or kill him with a stake of grained plastic wood? If a bullet won't kill a vampire, what about a revolver loaded with a blank cartridge and a wooden pencil?

And one night someone had come running in to interrupt the poker game in the other room. "What do you think Findlay just came up with?" And it was a new form of ice skating. You strap blocks of ice to your feet, see, and you skate over a field of razor blades set on

edge.

Wild? Consider the ramifications! Straps will be cut, unless you embed them in the ice itself. God help you if you take a spill, or let the ice melt too far. And the blades have to be lined up. So how can you change directions? The only answer to that one is to lay the blades in a loop, like a skating rink.

That night, the night of the divorce party, Findlay perched on the edge of the table I was using for my cup and plate, and said, "Hey. Suppose all the Adam and Eve legends were true?"

I could have gotten away, but it would have meant finding another flat spot. I

said, "That story's been done to death. A rocket ship crashes on Earth, see, with two people aboard-"

"No, no, you don't take my meaning. Every big and little group in the world, past and present, has a creation myth." Findlay's Midwest accent did odd things to the two-dollar words he was fond of using. "They all involve one man and one woman. In every case all of humanity sprang from that one couple. Suppose they were all true?"

My wife moved up from behind me and slid one arm around my waist. "You mean five hundred different Edens? That wouldn't make sense." She nestled against me, unobtrusively, feeling warm

and silky in a loose, flowing pant dress.

Findlay turned to her eagerly. "Carol, do you know anything about breeding horses? Or cattle?"

I said, "Dogs. My mother raises keeshonden."

We didn't see where he was going, but Findlay seemed to sense we were hooked. He settled himself more comfortably on the table. "There's a stock method of improving a breed. It always works, but it takes a long time. How long depends on what you're trying to improve, of course.

"Suppose you're working with horses,

just for argument. You've got a hundred horses for base stock. What you do is, you fence them off into say twenty-five corrals of four horses each. A large number of small groups. You make them breed within the group.

"Pretty quick you get severe inbreeding. All the little deadly recessive traits start to come out, and combine. You lose a lot of each generation. You help it along by weeding out the traits you don't like, like blindness or early senility.

"You keep it up for as many generations as you've got time for. Then you run them all together. You know how hybrid vigor works?"

"It's a mathematical thing, really," someone muttered deprecatingly. I realized that we'd acquired an audience. Four or five male teens were standing around listening, attracted either by Findlay's carrying voice or by my wife, who is uncommonly pretty. They were looking puzzled but interested, except for the one who had spoken.

Hal Grant was a small, dark fifteen-year-old with an astonishing vocabulary. With his full black beard and collar-length hair he looked like a young baron out of the Middle Ages; but he talked like a college professor. People tended to see him as an adult, and to react with astonishment on the rare occasions when

he acted like a fifteen-year-old.

When nobody tried to stop him, he went on. "Say you've got a strain of horses that has a dominant for weak eyes, and another that has weak hindquarters. You breed a stallion from one strain to a mare from the other strain until you get four colts. In general one colt won't have either of the bad traits, one will have the weak eyes, one will have weak hindquarters, and one will have both. That's straight Mendelian genetics. Where the hybrid vigor comes in is, the one with both of the bad traits can't compete. He dies. That leaves three colts, and one is an improvement over both his parents. The average quality

goes up."

Findlay was nodding his approval. "Right. That's how it works. So you run all the horses together. A lot of the weak traits that didn't get killed off in the interbreeding phase, combine and kill their owners. You wind up with a superior strain of horses."

"It wouldn't work with dogs," said Carol. "Mongrels don't win dog shows."

"But in a fair fight they tend to kill the winners," Hal pointed out.

"The technique works on just about anything," said Findlay. "Horses, dogs, cattle, chinchillas. Split the base stock

into small groups, make them interbreed for several generations, then run them all together. Now keep it in mind, and we'll make some assumptions.

"We assume an alien race, and we assume they've got a pet that's almost bright enough to make a good servant. Its hands can hold a serving tray. They could almost repair machinery-"

"Homo habilis," said somebody.

"Right. You have to assume the overlord race had a lot of time, and endless patience-"

"And cheap space travel."

"Wouldn't have to be faster than light, though. Not if they had all that endless patience." We could see where Findlay was going now, and everyone wanted to get there first. Hence the interruptions.

Findlay said, "So they pick out about a thousand of the brightest of their animals, and they split them up into pairs, male and female. They find an Earthlike world and set down five hundred couples in five hundred locations."

"Then the Noah legend-"

"Came first," I said. "And you get five hundred Edens. Beautiful."

"Right. Now look at how it works. Each of the little groups undergoes severe inbreeding. They're all cut off from each other by fences of one kind or another, mountains, rivers, deserts. The recessive traits come out, and some of the groups die off completely. Others spread out.

"Remember, it's the most successful ones that are spreading. They infringe on other groups. The genes start to mix. The quality of the mix goes up, partly because of hybrid vigor. If they're going to develop intelligence, this is where it starts."

"Hah! They'd start inventing ways around the fences," said an older kid. Short blond hair, pale fringe of

mustache, knitted sailing cap surgically attached to his head; I forget his name. "Bridges across the rivers, canteens for the deserts-"

"And camels."

"Passes across the mountains. Ways to tell each other how to find them."

"Ships!"

"Right," said Findlay, his blue eyes glowing with pleasure. "Now notice that the most intelligent groups are the ones that spread their genes around the most, because they're the ones that do all the traveling. Also, the more inventions you get, the easier it is to mix; the more

mixing you get, the higher the intelligence goes; and that makes for more inventions, like paved roads and better rigging for the ships and better breeds of horses. Eventually you get airplanes, buses, guided tours and printed language guides and international credit organizations."

"And tourist traps."

"And multilingual whores."

"Not to put a damper on any of this fun stuff," said Hal Grant, the dark youth with the very adult vocabulary, "but eventually they'll be coming back to see how we're doing."

"How would they know when we're ready?" Someone wondered.

"Just stop by for a look every thousand years?"

Hal said, "Not good enough. Look how far we've come in the last five hundred years. Give us another five hundred and we'll be competitors, not slaves."

"Or dead of pollution."

"But they wouldn't have to check. They just wait until-"

"Project Ozma!"

"But how could they be sure we'd signal

them?"

"They must be in one of the nearby stellar systems. Alpha Centauri, Tau Ceti-"

"Or they left signal devices in all the likely systems-"

"Wouldn't it depend on how intelligent they want us? Maybe we're supposed to be repairmen for a starship motor. Then they-"

"They'd damn well wait for us to come to them, wouldn't they? To prove we can build a starship!"

Jack Keenan tapped me on the shoulder.

He was still wearing his clerical collar. He spoke low, near my ear. "There's a place at the poker table. They sent me to tell you."

My cake was gone, and the conversation here was turning chaotic. I got up. Behind me Tom Findlay was saying, "But they'd have to find our starships some way. Maybe a large metallic mass moving faster than light would put out heavy Cherenkov radiation..."

I played for an hour and lost a dollar twenty. Presently Carol put her head around the corner, caught my eye, showed her teeth and snapped them at me several times in rapid succession. I nodded and cashed in.

It means, "I'm starving. Let's collect some people and go eat." There was still a group around Tom Findlay. I caught bits and pieces of sentences. They were talking about the things you could do with neutronium, if you could get it in four-foot globs and had the technology to move it around. I broke in to ask if anyone was hungry, and got Hal Grant that way.

We looked up our host (our hostess had gone home with her date), thanked him for a great party, told him we might be back in an hour or so, and asked if he'd like to come along. The guests could take care of themselves, and he knew it,

but he declined anyway.

Joy Benjamin was outside sitting on the wall, breathing. There was precious little oxygen left inside. She joined us too. We drove off to find a place we knew of, an all-night pizza place.

Sometimes they get forgotten instantly. Sometimes they go on and on. This latest of Findlay's brainstorm was one of Those. I came back from the counter carrying a tremendous deluxe pizza, and Hal Grant was saying, "See, that way you wouldn't need a Project Ozma, or an FTL spacecraft detector either." And both women were nodding, rapt.

Joy Benjamin was young and pretty and

a bit pudgy, and her front teeth showed when she smiled. It all gave her a cuddly, innocent look that I had never found occasion to mention to my wife; but if she had been in the group around Findlay I would have noticed her. She must have gotten her details at second hand. She looked up as I set the pizza down, and said, "He's got a point. You know about Tom Findlay's Multiple Eden Hypothesis?"

"Yes."

"This planet puts out as much radio flux as a small star," she said seriously. "The overlords could put a detector on the Moon and then just wait for us to invent radios."

"That means they must be on their way here now," my wife put in.

Hal smiled sardonically, an effect he couldn't have managed without the beard. "Maybe they're already here. There were flying saucers all over the place when radio was really popular, before everybody had two television sets."

"It's been done, that bit about a detector on the Moon. In 2001. Put it on Mars."

"Okay, it's on Mars. The point is, with the radio detector they can get here after we develop as much intelligence as we're going to, but before we can pollute

ourselves to death or bomb ourselves to death. After all, they probably weren't trying to develop anything supremely intelligent. Just bright enough to take orders."

"How young you are, to be so cynical."

It took him a moment to decide I was kidding. He said, "Someday, Howards," and shook his head sorrowfully, contemplating awful carnage. He went to work on the pizza.

It was delicious. I wish I'd paid more attention, because it was the last time I ever tasted pizza. We ate on a wooden bench, and used up an inch-high stack of paper napkins. Off in one corner, a man

with garters on his sleeves played a player piano.

"So we can expect them any minute." Joy made whirring noises and moved her hands expressively. "Big ships in the sky, coming down to ssscoop us up."

"Or little ships to take samples."

"If they were the flying saucers, they must have rejected us already," Hal put in. "They've been here too long. They'd have started major scooping operations long ago."

And if we'd dropped it there, we'd be home now.

There are tunes that go round and round in your head, driving you nuts, driving others nuts because you're humming under your breath. There are ideas you can't leave alone. You toy with them, or they toy with you...I got my fair share of the pizza and a bit more. While we were waiting for Carol to finish, I said, "Suppose they did reject us. Suppose we didn't meet their presumably exacting standards. What then?"

"They'd destroy the Earth," Joy said instantly.

"Typical bloodthirsty female."

Hal said, "Maybe they'd start us over. Give us IQ tests. Pick a thousand off the

top. Settle us on a new planet."

"Then destroy the Earth."

"Maybe. Maybe even settle us back on Earth, after clearing it for us." Grant's "us" had not escaped me. He would be one of the thousand, and so would his friends. I let it pass. Truth to tell, I was flattered.

The pizza was gone, and much of the cardboard disc beneath it. We piled in the car and started back to George's place.

Carol ended a reflective silence. "Does it seem to anyone that there are more written tests around than there used to

be? Army IQ tests, motivational research, testing for jobs, even the forms for computer dating. Now-

We started laughing. Hal said, "Are you still on that?"

"Well, they have to test us some way."

"It's a lovely idea, but I can't bring myself to trust those IQ tests. I know too much psychology. There's not a printed test that's good for anything, especially at the top of the scale."

"What, then?"

"There Are Aliens Among Us," Hal Grant intoned. "Or their agents. And they

choose by intuition and superior judgment. You, and you-"

"Hey," I said, hit by a lovely idea. "Hey. You know who would make a great intelligence tester?"

"Who?"

"Tom Findlay! He's a walking, talking intelligence test. Remember what he was talking about just before we left? Blobs of neutron star matter-"

"That's lovely stuff, neutronium. It's unreasonably heavy. If you just let it sit, it's got to be a shiny sphere. The surface gravity would flatten any surface roughness, see? If you toss a glob of the

stuff at an enemy spaceship, it'll just drift through the hull and leave a gaping hole and come out a fraction of an inch thicker. Spin it and you don't get an ellipsoid, you get like a flying saucer, a ball with a rim around it. It's all theoretical, of course."

"See what I mean?"

Behind me in the darkened car, Hal Grant said, "I guess so. Findlay makes you think. If you can't think, you go away. After awhile there's nobody left talking to Findlay except people who like playing with ideas. He's a filter. Then I suppose he tags the best of us and off we go, right?"

"Right. Well, nobody's disappeared yet."

"Nobody that was noticed. How many of us do you know, away from these parties? Sometimes I run across Jack Keenan in the supermarket, but that's it. All we know for sure is, we haven't been picked yet." Grant laughed uneasily. "Maybe we'd better not go back to George's."

The feel of the car changed drastically. I hit the brake fast, but it was hardly necessary; we were only starting to move from a dead stop. A moment ago we'd been doing seventy.

I heard the sea before I saw it: breakers crunching ahead of us, flashing white in

the headlights. If I'd kept the throttle down we'd have driven right into them. The freeway lighting had become a pale pink glow far across the sea; dawn or dusk, I couldn't tell. We were in soft dry sand. It might have been a California beach, and our car sitting mired in sand might have been a television commercial or a practical joke, except that it wasn't.

"S-s-sonofabitch took me at my word," said Hal Grant. Then, "This can't be real. Can it?"

Joy was furious. "He was listening to us! That-eavesdropper!"

I got out.

It felt like sand. It crunched beneath my feet, like sand. How could it be part of another world? But the sinking feeling in my belly felt like an elevator starting down. Terror? Or low gravity?

I threw back my head and screamed, "Findlay!"

And he was there, grinning out of a metal cagework affair. "Figured it out, did you?"

"Christ no, Findlay! What's going on here? We're terribly confused! One minute we were driving along the freeway, and the next we're here at Hermosa Beach!"

First he was flabbergasted. Then he burst out laughing. Well, it had been worth a try.

So was my next move. His head was thrown back and his beard was raised, and I stepped forward fast and hit him in the throat, putting all my weight behind it.

Not murder. Justice. And we needed that cage affair to get home.

It was like hitting a padded pillar. My head snapped forward, my teeth came together with a sharp click, and something gave agonizingly in my shoulder. Tom Findlay must have weighed over a ton.

He stopped laughing, gradually. "Very good. Nobody's ever adjusted quite that fast. Let's say you pass with honors," he said. "And here's your diploma."

It appeared beside him in the cage: a black disc on edge, two feet high. He caught it before it could topple, and he sent it rolling out. I let it go past me.

Grant had come up behind me. In resignation he said, "Where are we?"

"A lot of use you'll get out of that! I'll tell you anyway. It's the second planet out from Alpha Centauri A. If you were hoping for double suns and wild new constellations, you can forget it. We used the closest available water world."

"Gonna be dull," said Hal. He'd given up.

So had I. I inhaled; the air smelled incredibly clean. A door slammed behind me. The women. God, don't let them beg. I said, "So they came and sampled us and found us wanting. So they're doing it over with another five hundred Edens. So where do you come in, Findlay? They aren't human, are they?"

"Not by a long way," said Findlay, with reverence. "Neither am I. I'm a robot. I'm also the ideal they're aiming for, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't."

"Now, now."

"If you're just what they want, why do they need us?"

"I'm expensive. Robots don't breed. You can forget about genetic engineering, too. It's immoral. I don't know why. It's enough that they think so. Anything else?"

"We were doing seventy on the freeway," said Hal. "What happened to the momentum?"

"You were also doing about twenty miles per second with respect to this beach. We just took it all in one vector sum. What else? Oh, you won't be

separated. This Eden will hold all four of you. We did it that way last time, too. The Eden story is only a myth."

"Are there any others?" Carol cried. "What direction are they."

But he was gone, and the metal frame around him. We were alone on a beach, four of us and a car, in the growing light of dawn.

"This thing is sticky," Hal said suddenly. He was holding the black disc that Findlay had rolled past me. He looked at his hand, then licked a finger. "Right. It's a memento, his signature, as it were. What can you say about chocolate covered manhole covers?"

"Don't get it sandy," my wife said briskly. "We can eat the chocolate. It's the only thing on this world that we know we can eat."