

WHAT I INTEND

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us, “the absence of alien intelligence is a great conundrum, and nobody has the data to prove anything except that the aliens are not talking to our conscious selves.

‘What I Intend’ is wrapped around what might be our best data: The WOW signal from back in the seventies. For one brief moment, our sky was filled with a radio song that was both powerful and almost certainly not from around here. And why we don’t talk about the WOW every day of our lives . . . well, that’s another conundrum.”

Rich blonde hair and a serious voice helped the reporter win her job, and while she was certainly smart enough, she was also blessed by an absence of imagination and absolutely no political verve. Like most of CNBC’s staff, she believed that billionaires were royalty. Every day, the young woman happily offered up the expected questions, smiling and nodding with great sobriety while the wealthiest people delivered predictable answers. That morning her honored guest was T.T. Hynes. The two of them had been chatting about Internet commerce. At least that’s what she assumed the topic was. Hynes Networking owned certain indispensable software—robust platforms that shepherded every species of money. This very routine interview had been progressing normally. She asked about trends. That was a standard question. T.T. said that trends were good, which was perfectly normal. She inquired about growth. Growth was inevitable, he said. Then she inquired about the future. Could he share an insight or two? In response, he offered up several cryptic names wrapped in optimistic noise. She nodded, saying she was intrigued. But what did those names mean? Each was a ferocious algorithm, T.T. said. Then she laughed politely, asking, “And what is a ferocious algorithm?”

“Radical manipulations of code,” he said. “Code that accomplishes miracles when it comes to filtering and compressing oceans of data.”

The reporter nodded. Smiled. And she almost dropped a soothing “I see” into what she expected to be a moment of silence.

But T.T. Hynes kept talking. “These miracles are important. Because for me, it isn’t enough anymore, keeping everybody’s wealth happy.”

She nodded while he spoke, uncertain how to reply.

“I want to branch out in new directions,” he insisted. “And being human, I want quite a lot more than what I have already.”

At that mark, he paused.

“And what do you want?” she asked carefully.

This man ruled a multinational empire that helped protect nearly 40 percent of the world’s wealth. The natural assumption was that he would make a bid for another 10 or 20 percent of the pie.

Except that wasn't his intention.

"A lot of possibilities have occurred to me," said T.T. "But what I want, and I mean more than anything, is to decipher extraterrestrial communications. You know. The signals and wild flashes arriving every day, falling from the farthest stars."

Later, studying her performance, the reporter hunted for evidence that her questions were responsible for the event. Because a routine interview had become the most important few minutes of her career. Offhand pronouncements from one famous man, delivered fifteen minutes before the Opening Bell, had triggered news stories and rumor storms. And not only did Hynes's stock suffer a partial collapse, but suddenly there were worldwide fears that a linchpin to everybody's economy was batshit nuts.

And yet.

By nature, reporters are self-absorbed creatures, quick to claim credit even when it wasn't theirs. Yet the credit wasn't hers. This was a routine job, nothing special from her end of the table. Indeed, a waitress or golden retriever could have handled the announcement with at least as much pleasure, charm, and reflexive interest.

Into the abrupt silence, she said, "Excuse me. Communications with what?"

"Extraterrestrials and the farthest stars," T.T. declared again. "And we'll look at the closer stars too. But the odds that the nearest dozen or hundred suns prove worthwhile is very, very slight."

"I see," she began, seeing nothing. Then her mouth hesitated. Her producer was muttering suggestions into her ear. Ignoring that unhelpful voice, she first worked to regain her poise, and once her shoulders were squared asked, "Are we talking about watching the skies? For aliens?"

"Of course other geek billionaires have attempted this work," said T.T. "Percival Lowell and Paul Allen, to name two."

She kept nodding.

"But I'm not going to end up like those failures," he declared.

"Oh," the interviewer said, trying to hide her considerable confusion.

Her guest offered a bland smile. Nothing more.

"Well," she managed. "Can you tell us how?"

"People always assume telescopes," said T.T. "But I don't care anything about telescopes."

Because she couldn't think of anything better, she used that good word once again. "Well," she said firmly.

Sounding proud, the man claimed, "I've never owned a telescope in my life. And I certainly won't pretend to understand the hardware. But I have my own set of tools, and I'm going to use what I know."

The interview was slotted to last for another two minutes, but the next break seemed like a very distant goal.

At a loss for words, the reporter offered a reflexive utterance proven in many complicated situations.

"Go on," she prodded.

"Data filtering," he said.

They were discussing the manipulation of data, back before this peculiar twist of topics.

"But not telescopes," she said.

"Frankly, they sound incredibly boring. Sitting in the dark, watching the dark."

The reporter nodded, throwing more reliable words into the empty audio. "This is rather unexpected."

"Because you're thinking about mirrors and dishes," he said.

"Dishes," she repeated, imagining shelves of stacked china.

"But I don't need hardware. Really, machinery would just be a distraction. We already have huge amounts of raw data. Data from NASA probes and every major observatory. Those sources have generated images beyond count. Petabytes sitting in digital drawers, barely noticed. There's even richer ground inside the defense department, and the intelligence services too. And believe me, I won't exclude any nation's spying apparatus. Anything that offers me a peek, and I'll peek."

A quick breath was necessary.

Then once more, she said, "Go on."

"What I intend," said T.T.

Then he hesitated, showing a sneaky, clever-boy smile.

Sensing the end of this ordeal, the CNBC woman leaned forward. Engaged, hopeful, she asked, "What do you intend?"

T.T. laughed.

"What could be more obvious?" he asked.

"To help mankind," she presumed.

"That too," he said. "But first, I intend to make myself into the wealthiest person in history. That has to be the first priority. Otherwise this whole venture would be just a damned waste of a few hundred million dollars."

Then he broke into a mad little laugh.

Seeing her escape, the reporter said, "Well, Mr. Hynes. Thank you for coming to see us today, and for telling us about these extraordinary matters."

Yet that wasn't the right note to end on. Not in T.T.'s mind. So with a loud, stern voice, this middle-aged prince told the lowly reporter, "You don't understand. I know that. But I'll forgive you, my dear. When the time comes, when I'm holding the world in my great hand, I'll give you a gift. I'll give you something good."

* * *

"My great hand" was an inside joke.

A joke from a person who didn't normally use humor, or for that matter, rarely revealed any playfulness with his tongue.

But T.T. was a talented liar. Among the facts that he neglected to mention: The "Big Hand" was the code name for an existing group of engineers and cryptographers. Also, their funding was nowhere near hundreds of millions of dollars. And most critically, his alien hunt wasn't a new venture ready to launch. Not at all. His people had already spent eleven months and two marriages pursuing the Big Hand mission, already proving that miracles could be achieved with bright minds and a few million out of petty cash. And it didn't hurt that Hynes Networking had oceans of spare intellect ready to be borrowed from the company's AI farms.

The first astonishments had arrived early.

Eight months before the famous interview, the project manager was given half an hour alone with his boss and benefactor, and with that, the opportunity to trumpet about their various successes.

"We have fifteen probable Wows," the manager reported. "And judging by trends, we can possibly have another thousand Wows before the end of our first year."

T.T. absorbed the spectacular news, and then he calmly smiled.

Yes, he was an odd fellow. But frankly, the project manager worked with more peculiar creatures than this.

"Remind me," said the boss. "What is a Wow?"

Regardless of reputation and self-professed genius, T.T. Hynes wasn't especially gifted with technology. What he had was a rare knack for picking the right products and making inspired hires. What he could do better than most was offer the best

words to the cameras, and it didn't hurt that he looked smarter than most geniuses, and, better still, that he carried himself with a winner's jaunty poise. But his hold on mathematics didn't extend into the rarified realm where Big Hand existed.

Yet the subordinate was startled, hearing the man ask about the Wow.

Perhaps that was T.T.'s intention. Maybe this was one of his quirky tests—idiocy worn as a useful disguise.

The moment demanded a patient, professorial voice.

That's what the project manager used.

"In Ohio, in 1977, a strong signal was observed," he explained. "The signal was at 1420 megahertz. Neutral hydrogen radiates at that frequency, and humans don't normally transmit there. Which is why it's always been considered ripe territory for SETI. Astronomers across the galaxy are going to know what the hydrogen line is, and they'll be watching. Except in this case, a primitive radio telescope was the only witness, and later, seeing the peak recorded on the graph paper, the astronomer labeled it the 'Wow.' Hence the name."

T.T. stared at a far wall.

"You let us pick our mission's name," said the manager. "'Big Hand' is a joke. Because the radio telescope that caught the Wow signal was named Big Ear."

"I remember that," the boss insisted.

The manager's enthusiasm was recovered easily enough. "Anyway, as I was telling you, sir: Our busy fingers have pulled out several new signals. Fifteen candidates sitting inside the forgotten data. Just as we guessed, they were unrecognized and unrespected. Because they were too brief. Because they were seen by commercial facilities or serious men doing entirely different work. Or because they were noticed, but the people in charge didn't appreciate what they were seeing."

The boss nodded amiably.

Was he going to make a comment? Apparently not.

"We have three 1420s. They come from different parts of the sky, but they roughly match the original Wow in strength and duration. Which would be amazing in itself. But even better, there's a laser beacon from just last year. So bright that a person could have seen that three-second flash with bare eyes."

"Well," said T.T. "That does sound promising."

The manager sifted that voice for information. Where was the excitement, the sense of promise and discovery?

The manager's passion was genuine. "This is just the beginning, sir. According to our models, we can assume finding a thousand of these events before the first year is finished. Most of the signals will be weak or brief, or both. But they are real. These new Wows have the proper motions, the right positions. They're organized in the sky, exactly where you would expect to find them, coming from the metal-rich regions of the Milky Way."

T.T. looked at his own thumbnail, asking, "And what do the signals tell us?"

"Tell us?"

"Can you see information? Codes, clues. The plans for starships, perhaps."

"So far, nothing. Not yet, sir."

"But there will be messages. Why else would the signals be sent?"

That ground had been covered three months ago, when T.T. first agreed to bankroll this team. "Sir, any signal we find, particularly those from more than a dozen light-years away, is going to be degraded. Space isn't empty. There's interference, dispersal effects. The lady might be fat, and she could even have an opera singer's voice, but we're sitting in the cheap seats, and what we are hearing is a mushy mess of notes."

"So," said the boss. "These Wows aren't valuable."

"Really," the manager thought, "we need to schedule more meetings."

Shaking his head, the project manager said, "No, they're priceless. These events prove that aliens are out there, aliens with superior technology, and they are actively transmitting in our general direction."

"But you told me . . ." T.T. hesitated, suddenly looking off into the distance, playing with a frown.

"I told you what, sir?"

"You and everybody else. Back when I was a boy and every day since. Experts have made the same promise. The universe is full of life. Some of that life has to be smarter than us. And even if it isn't smarter, much of it is going to be older and far more advanced than any of us."

"Yes. Of course."

"I didn't have any doubts about this."

"You shouldn't have doubts, sir."

"Why would I have thrown my money at this scheme, if I didn't believe?"

The project manager found a new tactic.

He shrugged, offering up his own silence.

Then the boss said, "Twelve months. I gave you that goal, and you gave me your assurances. But you have only nine months remaining, and proving what we already know isn't much help."

"Well . . . I'm sorry you feel that way . . ."

"Stop." The boss said it with his voice, and he said it with his hand. Three fingers touched the manager's mouth. Lavatory soap had left its distinctive odor and taste. But it was the simple touch that made the man flinch and back away.

An uncomfortable moment lingered.

Perhaps T.T. Hynes wasn't well regarded among those who understood mathematics. But he said something remarkable just then.

"I wasn't going to help you."

"What's that, sir?"

"I allowed you to build your equipment and your protocols. I was prepared to let you try your skills at this business. This fun. But I can't risk that great things will be discovered by others. We have to be the winners in this race."

"That's what I want too," said the manager.

"So I'm going to tell you something obvious. An insight that just might help you with your very important work."

"I'll listen to any suggestion, sir."

"They want to be understood," said the boss, once again applying the three-finger shut-up touch. "The dumbest shit of alien slime isn't going to spend that much energy and that much capital to make an empty three second flash of light."

* * *

No one knew her husband better. In fact, T.T.'s wife knew him well enough that she long ago gave up any pretense of deep understanding. This was the most opaque creature ever produced by humanity. Every person had schemes and dreams and a few great thoughts, but T.T.'s thoughts were always wrapped around winning. What mattered was every form of success. Money mattered, and so he built his corporation around that magical stuff. She was married to him because she was beautiful and smart. They had houses that the world envied, and they had lovely children because that's what the world expected. And T.T. could be a reasonable father, when necessary. But how much he loved his family was one of the many mysteries, to her, and perhaps to him too.

The CNBC debacle had just happened, and with a quiet, no-nonsense voice, the beautiful woman asked her very odd husband, "Are you screwing her?"

He knew who she was referring to. Guilty men would have feigned confusion and then straightened their backs, preparing to lie. While innocent men would have cultured the outrage in their voices.

T.T. was something else.

“Yes,” he said with flat conviction. “That girl and I are sleeping together.”

“Do you love her?”

“I love her body. And that voice. And her gorgeous blonde hair.”

“Is that why you gave her your big news?”

T.T. hesitated, just for an instant. Then he suddenly laughed at her, shaking his head with what looked like disappointment. “That isn’t true, darling. You know I don’t sleep with anybody but you.”

Years of experience and several private investigators agreed with that assessment: T.T. was profoundly monogamous. Most wives would have considered that quality to be a plus. Except the two of them didn’t have sex often or with much vigor, and his absence of affairs long ago convinced her that this man was peculiarly uninspired by normal masculine feelings.

That didn’t stop his wife from having her little adventures, and a couple of big ones too. In fact, her last child wasn’t even T.T.’s.

If the man knew that or cared were other mysteries not worth investigating.

“So why did you announce your alien hunt now?” she asked.

“This was the smart time.”

Three days after the unexpected announcement, the company stock had bottomed out. Hopefully. But there was still quite a lot of talk about removing T.T. from his CEO duties, and perhaps even loosening his grip on the board.

T.T. shrugged and said, “I have my reasons.”

About that, she had no doubts.

“So when does the hunt begin?” she asked. Then because she was still fond of this man, and because she loved being Mrs. Hynes, she put a hand on her husband’s shoulder and gripped his elbow with her other hand.

He said nothing, except for the half-smile.

And then she had it figured out.

“No, wait,” she said. “You already have your people working on the project. Don’t you?”

“For most of a year, yes.”

“Hundreds of millions invested?”

“Oh, it’s cost a fraction of that.”

“And have you found any aliens?”

“I haven’t found one,” he said.

She grabbed the elbow again.

“Tim,” she said quietly, firmly.

“But my people have. They’ve identified one thousand, one hundred and three probables. Plus ten thousand more flashes and blips that might or might not have been genuine.”

That’s when she saw his logic.

“You’re close,” she guessed.

“I said that we have thousands—”

“Close to getting something more.” She was surprised by the news and surprised by her own delight. “I halfway understand you,” she said.

“More than halfway,” he said.

“This isn’t charitable research. You want to make a profit. And you think what? That deciphering alien transmissions will give you new technologies?”

“Imagine that it does.”

"I am imagining," she said.

"If there are wonders and if I find them, then I will be the most important person on this one world."

The words were calm, but his breathing seemed quick.

"That announcement," she said. "You wanted to sound crazy."

"Why would I want that?"

"Because you realized how easy this is. And you're afraid others are going to try it too. So you throw them off the trail. You pretend you're a madman chasing ETs, and your competitors don't want to be stigmatized in the same way."

"People care too much about public noise," he said.

"What happens next? You call a press conference and make your huge announcement?"

He nodded. "If they can finally tease out the messages, yes."

"They haven't? Why not?"

He shook his head, frowning when he said, "The data are too distorted, too simple. At least that's the way it's been explained to me."

"But what if they can't decipher anything?"

"But they assure me they're close."

"Are they're lying?"

"I would know," he remarked. "Don't I always know when someone is lying?"

T.T. had never asked about his wife's boyfriends. That was another blessing of being married to this rare kind of man.

Unless she was terribly wrong about him.

A sudden thought bubbled out of nowhere. The notion took her by surprise, and her response, instant and unwelcome, was a long rippling dose of laughter.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She didn't want to say it, and she couldn't stop herself.

"I get it. You're an alien, aren't you?" Again, laughter. "Of course you are, Tim. That explains everything, everything."

Very rarely did this man become upset.

And never with her.

But he seemed genuinely enraged, and after a few moments of red-faced silence, he acted shaken.

"I'm not an alien," he said. "Why, darling, would you even think that?"

* * *

The physicist believed in quite a lot.

Belief was a terrible problem.

There were days when she was convinced of her own withering brilliance, and there were other days when she was just as certain that she was a bland, simple-thinking idiot. Confidence was a suit of armor, right up until the armor abandoned her for places unknown. Yes, and she was lovely, lovely, lovely. Unless she was ugly. Grotesque. Monstrous. Of course her mental health was a liability, and maybe she should mention her shifting moods to someone. But she was going to wait until she turned thirty or sixty, or a thousand. She certainly didn't confess to crazy thoughts yesterday. And she had no intention to do it now. Nor tomorrow, most likely. Because what this half-pretty, deeply original woman never doubted, not for an instant, was that her current job would take her to wonderful places.

Oh, yes. And like everybody else in Big Hand, she was certain that the galaxy was filled with beautiful, brilliant life.

Which was another big problem.

The great Mr. Hynes would visit almost every day during these last weeks. Usually his appearances lasted only for a few minutes. Usually he saw no one but the pro-

ject manager and the lead cryptographer. T.T. never acted interested in faces, and he certainly never reacted to her face in any special way. Yet she felt a connection nonetheless. It was as if a radiant thread of potential was pushing its way back through time, from the golden future to the present moment, existing for no reason except to encourage her, telling her that she needed to think a little harder and a lot better than she had already.

Well, that didn't sound crazy, did it?

The CNBC interview: That's why she was dancing with these vivid notions of romance with Timothy T. Hynes had always been Hynes, and even a crazy woman couldn't imagine herself with him. But after the interview, while most of the world was loudly proclaiming that the boss was insane . . . that's when she had the sudden premonition that the two of them were far more alike than she had ever imagined.

That's why she had to speak to him, for the first time.

But of course nobody else wanted that. There were barriers to what seemed so easy in theory. The daily appearance came without warnings. Their manager was their manager because he was exceptionally talented at monopolizing their benefactor's time and gaze. The top cryptographer had his own tricks. Sometimes he brought his people with him, and everybody talked the good talk about deriving meanings from a thousand-plus signals, and everybody talked about progress, even though these Wows had no interest in being deciphered.

In a more confident mood, she would have been decisive.

But this week wasn't that kind of week.

She sat at her desk, watching the sealed doorway. T.T. would arrive for a few minutes or longer than an hour, and from her station, she could see inside the conference room. She carefully studied how the various hands moved, how the faces changed. Not a word was audible behind panes of glass, but these polite events were still rich with knowledge, if you paid close attention to posture and faces and where the eyes pointed when the attached faces were lying.

She wasn't a bold person. Not by nature, no. Yet the stakes were so high that she ignored her own mood—a rarity in itself—and ten days after the disastrous CNBC interview, and three minutes after T.T. had finished the day's visit and walked out into the world . . . that's when the physicist put her many failings aside. Doubts were strangled and legs were forced to move, carrying her into the conference room. The manager was still there. All of the experts about language and alien biology were present. It had been a giant meeting, yet briefer than most, and everyone was shell shocked, looking through her with their first defeated glances.

"Have you told him the truth yet?" she began.

Nobody misinterpreted the question. They knew what she was asking.

But the manager preferred games. He shrugged. He said her name. Then with a tame little voice, he asked, "What are you talking about? What truth?"

"The signals don't hold any information," she said. "Tell him that."

The reaction was immediate. Every participant had reasons to shout at her, and even if they tried to be polite with their rage, it was rage nonetheless.

Yet every reflex comes to an end.

The room grew quiet again.

"We have a thousand strong signals," she continued. "And many more that we can't confirm. Sure. Sure, sure. But they don't offer anything sensible."

Nobody dared argue that point.

"What would make sense would be for two of these signals to emerge from the same point in the sky. Even once. What would make a lot of golden sense is if some portion of the signals or maybe all of the signals were associated with visible stars. Except none of them are. And what would be wonderfully helpful is for just one of

these damned things to last longer than a few minutes, and if the transmission gave us any sign of being aimed at our visible sun."

Nothing she said was wrong.

They knew this.

But these were clever people, and cleverness always finds ways to convince itself that it was never mistaken.

Everybody glanced at the manager.

He felt the eyes, the expectations. Bowing to pressures, he said, "Mr. Hynes knows all about these issues. And he understands the situation, yes. The data don't resemble what we expected, and that's the nature of science. Lack of repetition is an artifact of life's abundance in the Universe. Not being associated with stars and worlds means nothing. It means that life always migrates into deep space. Who knows why? Maybe great minds like the cold. Maybe there's a lot more room and safety, keeping away from wild stars. And, yes these transmissions are brief, but that's because they come from distant places, and why would they aim at us? Even if they notice the Earth, it's an older version of our world, full of wilderness and radio dead."

A good manager nods with authority. That's what this man did. "You don't need to worry, my dear. Mr. Hynes is well briefed. He has no grounds for complaints. Though I'm sure our benefactor grows rather impatient with this business . . . as well he should . . ."

With that, he gave every subordinate an accusing stare.

People moved past her, escaping out the door.

Then it was just the two of them.

Looking at her, the manager sensed some piece of her thoughts. And maybe that's why he asked, "Do you want to meet with Mr. Hynes? I could arrange it."

He was talking about a planned, thoroughly controlled encounter.

"Next week perhaps," he said, remembering to smile.

She didn't like smiles, as a rule. Smiles were teeth and lips. Tigers and salesmen used teeth and lips as weapons.

"No, thank you," she said.

The manager nodded.

"I'm going back to my desk," she promised.

"Very good," he said. "And thank you for bringing your thoughts to me."

The walk back to her station proved long and horrible. Coworkers glanced at her, or they avoided her eyes. She kept thinking that she should have done instead of what she did . . . was what? What?

And that was when the first insight arrived.

That was the moment when she knew what she would do tomorrow. She would wait like a tiger in the shadows, waiting for her future husband to walk down to this watering hole.

And with that strategy set and ready, a second, far larger insight found her in a receptive mood.

She knew everything.

Without question, she suddenly understood the Universe.

Except it was a very difficult piece of knowledge. She had a sharp cold awful epiphany, knowledge acquired with little warning and no preparation, and now the central premise of this project was doomed to be crushed. The aliens would die, and only one goodness remained. These magnificent events, and she was in the midst of history, and in the end, wasn't that really the second best outcome of all?

* * *

As a boy, somewhere in second grade, Timothy Thomas Hynes concluded that he resembled nobody else. Other people were emotional, impulsive animals. Smart and

stupid, it didn't matter which. He could see that at school and across the adult world, and the only difference was that very smart people wasted their gifts convincing themselves that they were right about whatever they cared about most.

Free of illusions, Timmy Hynes didn't have to pretend to himself. He could play the mastermind for others, manipulating opinions and actions. Or he was the idiot and got his way by other means. Adulthood found him secure with those few talents, including a singular capacity to look at the world with dry eyes, deciphering what truly mattered.

Wealth was what mattered.

That's why he joined his small inheritance to a group of imaginative mathematical minds, producing Hynes Networking.

Most of the world believed in imagination, considering it a considerable gift.

Thankfully, T.T. didn't suffer that distraction. Daydreams were minutes lost. Doodles and the great works of art were collections of lines only slightly more interesting than random nonsense. He hired thinkers because thinkers made him money when they weren't wasting time. But he didn't trust their kind. So he also hired people that were more like him, and he listened to their good advice and everything else too. And because there had to be an element of intuition in any decision—that critical spark missing from every machine—T.T. allowed his tiny bit of imagination to whisper only to him, advising him only in the largest decisions.

But living inside this man, bright and urgent, was one belief.

An imaginative flourish as old as any, almost certainly stemming from his first years of life.

The Universe was full of life.

Television told him that, and his parents agreed with those science programs, and the movies too. A well-loved grandfather once put a warm hand on the boy's little shoulder, and that fine deep voice, sounding like words drawn through leather, promised that Mars had microbes and the stars had other Earths, and most of the Universe was older than they were on this little blue world that held no great significance whatsoever.

For a creature without a dreamy nature, that single dream took hold deep and never left him alone. That was the spark for the Big Hand project. But to satisfy the rest of his nature, T.T. insisted on a business goal. His people would identify and translate the alien signals, and then he would carve up whatever he could use, re-making the world with the wonders that rained out of these insights.

One day he had a large Big Hand meeting that accomplished nothing. The next day, T.T. decided to drop by before lunch, catching the head cryptographer when his stomach was empty.

But nothing went as expected.

He passed through the EM baffles and the sealed door. T.T. was alone, which was normal enough. Relaxed and focused, he approached his target, and that's when he heard a low voice asking someone what they were doing, and an instant later, there was a blast that shook glass, and half of the room's inhabitants dropped flat on the floor.

T.T. remained upright, but only because he hadn't seen the woman tossing the firecracker in his direction.

The flash was barely noticed, but the blast's roar seemed to linger. He smelled smoke. The first kick of adrenaline made him stand taller. A smallish woman was approaching him, nearly running. He remembered her. In the Big Hand ranks, she was the hardest to assess. T.T. was notoriously poor with names, but he must have been told her name once at least. What she did . . . her purpose here . . . she was a physicist by training, but with a strong talent for art and programming. Another

scientist had asked for her help with this work, and the manager had offered weak praise, and T.T. didn't fight the hiring but should have. Because she was the one who had exploded the bomb. And she was truly running now, waving at him, shouting, "That's what they are, the Wows. Because that's all they can manage."

T.T. took a useless step backward.

She stopped just short of him, smiling in a wild fashion.

He should have been scared but wasn't. His voice was smooth and almost calm, asking her, "What do you mean? All who can manage?"

"The aliens," she said. "They can't make anything better than an empty flash of light, or radio. Whatever."

He started to ask the same question again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this," she said, and she lifted her left hand, reaching for his chest.

But then the project manager took it upon himself to push the crazy woman to the floor, giving her a vivid rug burn before he was told to let her go.

"She has something to say," T.T. warned. "And I want to hear it."

* * *

The man needed help with the mathematics and everything else.

For three and a half hours, T.T. sat in the conference room with a variety of experts, but the manager did much of the talking. It seemed that this nameless crazy woman was neither nameless nor insane. But she wasn't at her best, not having slept for more than a day, busily taking apart more than a thousand recorded flashes and pops of EM noise, proving how each of them was nothing short of amazing.

"Punching out of wormholes, like they do," she said.

They let her sit at one end of the long table, talking as much as she wanted, right up until either T.T. asked a question or the manager told her to be quiet. Without question, this was the most imaginative creature that T.T. had ever endured. She was a burden and a revelation. He felt sorry for her. Particularly when she said, "I think you're a great man and the others don't realize that and can you imagine what kind of children we would make?"

"Quiet," said T.T.

"Shut up," the manager said.

T.T. turned to the manager. They were sitting close. The monitor in the tabletop was displaying an endless series of equations. The dynamics and density of every Wow was on display, including those few that might have come from nearby space.

"What does she mean?" T.T. asked.

Nobody spoke.

"Not about our children. I mean about the Wows' positions in the sky."

"None are tied to any star," the manager said. "Because they didn't come from any star we can see. I guess. According to her work . . . the aliens don't exist here. They live in alternate universes. In galaxies that might be our Milky Way, but with the suns out of position. Or they belong to entirely different universes, and these transmission points happen to be where they managed to punch through."

"Wormholes," the woman shouted.

A cryptographer took it upon himself to nudge her, hard. As if he might deliver a fierce smack if she spoke again.

T.T. lifted a hand.

Lowered it.

The manager spoke again. "The energy required to make a workable wormhole is enormous. You might doubt her calculations, because they seem awfully optimistic. She claims it requires the total detonation of five large stars, or their equivalent, to pierce the local universe, reaching into one of the trillion other realities inside the multiverse."

T.T. nodded.

He felt ill. Why was that?

“But to spend that much energy, that much money,” T.T. began. Then he had to find a deep breath, just to say the next words. “Why would they go to that trouble, and then not say something we understand? Are they that different than us? Are they so stupid?”

“It’s the wormhole,” she shouted down the table. “It’s too small and temporary, and they won’t bother. Any information would get scrubbed out of the signal anyway.”

The cryptographer reached for her.

She bit his hand.

And then the project manager—a gray cool fellow chosen for a thousand strengths that had nothing to do with abstractions and art—shouted at everyone in the room, and maybe across the entire world.

“This isn’t what anyone goddamn wanted. But please, show some self-control here, people!”

* * *

T.T. found his wife at her boyfriend’s house.

About the younger man’s presence he said nothing. Nor did he explain when or how he knew about the affair, or that her youngest child had a strong resemblance to this fellow who was told to leave, complained briefly, and then was led outside by a couple bodyguards with strict orders not to harm anyone.

T.T. sat at one end of the sofa, shaking.

This man who never surprised his wife and himself was shaking, and he wasn’t certain why.

“I’m not an alien,” he began.

“I know you’re not.”

“I can’t be, because there aren’t any.”

She nodded, waiting.

He explained. In crisp phrases and waves of both hands, T.T. described his afternoon and the lessons learned and how little sense it made to him. This wasn’t what he anticipated, or wanted, and he didn’t even care that he couldn’t make money out of the work. That’s how seriously this event weighed on his mind.

“But why aren’t there aliens?” she asked finally.

“Because we’d see them,” he said, angry that she couldn’t anticipate the obvious. “If it’s possible to blow up stars to punch a hole in space and time, then it’s relatively easy to blow up stars to power transmitters, sending good long dense messages to everybody in your galaxy. Or for that matter, to souls who are a billion light years away from you. And we don’t see that. We never see that. Which means that for whatever reason, intelligence is exceptionally rare. So rare that we might be the only ones.”

The woman stood, took a step and sat again.

They were close now.

She felt pity and was probably going to touch him.

So he stood and said, “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

He shook his head, unexpected words raining out of him.

“You get the children and one house, and if you say one ugly word about me, I swear, I’ll have you strangled in your sleep.”

* * *

There were no commercials.

T.T. demanded those terms.

The blonde woman sat where she had sat before, and T.T. was facing her the same as before. But this time he was flanked by his experts—the young physicist who

spoke with impenetrable numbers; and the project manager who did his best to interpret what the madwoman was saying.

But most of the words came out of T.T.

Nobody knew the reason or reasons. But he repeated the unhappy truth that intelligence was extraordinarily rare in the Universe. That's what the lack of true messages proved. If the galaxy had just two other Earth-like worlds . . . planets with any organized, self-aware civilization . . . well then, the galaxy was beating the odds with that kind of wealth. But the most likely scenario was that nobody shared the Milky Way with humans and this one little world. Nobody now, and maybe nobody else ever. That was where the numbers led, and he had too much respect for numbers and their clarity to deny what the Big Hand had revealed to him.

The blonde nodded, and sighed, and she said, "Please, go on."

"The signals that we see . . . I don't know why they even bother," he admitted. "Blowing up suns to say nothing. How can that make sense?"

Then he was done talking, staring at the floor between him and the reporter.

Nobody else was speaking either.

For fifteen seconds, the network's only product was lost expressions and perfect silence.

Thinking about silence made him even sadder.

With several million people watching, T.T. Hynes began to cry. Not like a man cries at a funeral or a sappy movie, but he wept like a little boy suffering some unfair, unloving horror that he surely didn't deserve.

And that's when the reporter stood.

She said nothing, kneeling beside her guest. Nothing was sexual about her posture or the moment. She simply got down to where she could see his wet eyes. Then she quietly reached out and touched T.T. on the closer arm.

"There's meaning in this gesture," she said. "And if that's all you can do, destroying five suns just to let another person feel your presence . . . well then, I guess that just has to be enough."