

HOW I FOUND HARRY'S ALL-NIGHT HAMBURGERS

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Lawrence Watt-Evans has been a full-time writer since 1979, with about fifty novels and a hundred and fifty short stories to his credit, but it wasn't until 1987, when Gardner Dozois bought "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers," that he got a story into an actual science fiction magazine. It was revised to Gardner's specifications and went on to win the short story Hugo and other awards; without those revisions, who knows how it would have done? In the interests of keeping his Hugo acceptance speech brief, Lawrence failed to thank Gardner, and he's regretted that omission ever since. This new story about Harry's place was started almost immediately after the first was published, but took thirty years to finish. He's sorry it waited so long.

I was in my office, digging receipts out of drawers and trying to decide if I'd have to do my own taxes this year or if I could afford H & R Block, when this little guy knocked on the door and walked in.

"Be with you in a minute," I said, and I dumped the whole stack on top of the file cabinet, to be dealt with later. Then I motioned him to a chair, and while he pulled it over I sat down behind the desk and asked, "What can I do for you?"

He was a little nervous, which is normal enough for someone making his first visit to a private detective. He cleared his throat a couple of times, then told me, "My name's Bergin, Paul Bergin, and I want to hire you to find something out for me."

"That's what I do," I said, leaning back in my chair. "I find things out. You've come to the right place. What is it you want to know?"

He cleared his throat again and reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out something about the size and shape of an egg.

"I want to know where this came from," he said, setting it on my desk.

I looked at it, and it didn't look like anything very special. It was a soft brown

color, patterned, something like tortoiseshell, and shaped in a flattened ovoid, an inch or two thick, one side convex and the other concave. It looked a little like a bar of fancy soap.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "That's why I want to know where it's from, so I can find out."

"Where'd you get it, then?"

"There's this guy," he said. "He comes into my shop sometimes with stuff to sell."

"Your shop?"

"I run a pawn shop."

I nodded. "Okay. Go on."

"Right, so this guy comes in sometimes—maybe once every couple of months—and he's always got weird stuff to sell. Almost never any ordinary stuff like rings or laptops or musical instruments; instead he'll have coins from places that don't exist, and strange little gadgets—"

"Wait a minute," I said, holding up a hand. "What do you mean, coins from places that don't exist?"

"I mean he'll have coins that say they're from countries that aren't real, or that don't exist anymore, or that never had their own coins. Places like, say, the Republic of Texas, but dated from the last few years, not the 1840s. Or the Dominion of Darien, or New Sweden, or Deseret, or whatever."

"Like—play money? Or movie props?"

"Maybe. That's what I thought at first. But they look real, except for being from impossible places, and when I've had them assayed most of them are real gold or silver. I take those to a smelter, since they aren't worth anything as currency. The ones that turn out to not be real precious metals I give away as curiosities."

I sat up and cocked my head. "This guy has a *lot* of these coins?"

Bergin nodded. "He must have brought me a couple of hundred over the years."

"He won't say where he got them?"

"Customers, he says."

"Customers where?"

"He says he runs a business in West Virginia. He won't say what kind. I figure it's probably a second-hand shop or an antique store, from the kind of thing he brings in, and he's bringing me the stuff he can't sell back home."

"All right. Go on."

Bergin adjusted himself in the seat. "He brings other stuff, not just coins—jewelry sometimes, but not like any other jewelry I've seen, and gadgets like hand warmers and shavers and pocket flashlights, but they're almost always a little off, somehow, and they aren't any brand I recognize."

"So it's *all* weird?"

"Pretty much. I'm guessing that he takes the more ordinary stuff somewhere else, and only brings me the oddball items."

"Why? Why you?"

"Because I'll take it. I have a reputation for handling unusual goods—not just from this guy, but from other people, too. It's my niche, you know? I don't pay top dollar, to be honest I mostly pay pennies on the dollar, but I'll take almost anything that looks interesting. My customers know that, so if they want a conversation piece, or a unique gift for someone, they come to me. Which is why I took this." He pointed at the egg-shaped thing. "I thought it was just a paperweight, and I could get a buck or two from someone looking for a gift for a boss or a teacher, but then I handled it. He'd had it in a baggie, and I took it out."

"Oh?" I looked at the thing. "What does it do?"

He licked his lips and glanced to the side, let his gaze wander around my office, but I didn't rush him. I wasn't in any particular hurry.

"It feels good," he said at last.

I looked blank. I'm good at that; it's a useful skill in my line of work.

He sighed, reached out, and pushed the thing across the desk at me. "Try it," he said.

I picked it up.

It felt softer than I'd expected; it looked like hard plastic, but it was silky to the touch, and just a little cooler than I had thought it would be. I ran my thumb over it, and it felt *nice*. I don't know how to describe it any better than that. It reminded me of the back of an ex-girlfriend's neck, where there were very fine hairs, too pale and thin to see if you weren't looking for them, that made her skin feel impossibly soft and smooth and delicate.

It fit perfectly in my hand, resting on my palm where I could wrap my fingers around it and slide my thumb along the top curve. I found myself staring at it, drawing circles on it with my thumb, thinking about *nothing whatsoever*. Not about doing my taxes or what I would have for supper or Bergin sitting there watching me or how the afternoon sunlight was shining on the polished hardwood floor or *anything*. Not even about the object itself.

It's hard to describe just how wonderful that was, to think about nothing. No worries, no concerns, just calm.

And then Bergin reached out and took it out of my hand and dropped it back in his pocket.

"You don't want to do that for very long," he said. "It's kind of addictive."

"I'll bet," I said, staring at that jacket pocket. I suddenly wondered how long I had actually held the thing; the shadows on my office floor looked longer than they had when Bergin came in.

"I want to know what it is," the little pawnbroker said. "And where it came from, and whether I can get more."

"I see," I said. I tapped a key to wake up my computer. "The guy who sold it to you—you know his name? Pawn shops usually require ID."

He reached into a different pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "Here," he said, handing it to me. "I did some searching myself, but I couldn't find out anything. No police record here in Pittsburgh—I have contacts on the force, in case someone tries to use me as a fence, so yes, I checked."

I opened the paper and saw a scan of a West Virginia driver's license in the name of John H. Praszky, Jr., with a rural-route address in Sutton, West Virginia. The photo showed a middle-aged man who didn't look as if he'd ever been in good shape, and who certainly wasn't now, though I'd seen worse. Overweight, thinning hair, sagging clean-shaven jaw, tired eyes.

"John Praszky," I said, wondering whether I had the pronunciation right.

Bergin didn't correct me. "He never said his name, but he matches the picture on the license," he said.

"All right," I said. "I have somewhere to start, anyway. I'll need a retainer, and if I'm going to be traveling out of state I'll need to have a thousand up front. Are you sure it's worth that much to you?"

"You held it for almost fifteen minutes; what do *you* think?"

I nodded. I understood. And now I knew how long it had been, and it was longer than I'd thought, but not as long as I'd feared. I was surprised Bergin had let me hang onto it that long, but that brought me to another point.

"Can I take that thing with me, in case I need to show it around?"

Bergin bit his lip, staring at me, then shook his head. "I can't," he said. "But here."

He reached into a pocket again and handed me a sheaf of photographs, showing the thing from a dozen different angles, several of them including a ruler—it was four inches long, a little over two across, an inch and a half thick.

"These should do," I admitted, but honestly, I wanted to hold the thing again. I wanted to take it with me. Hell, I wanted to *keep* it. "You wouldn't want to sell it, would you?" I asked.

He shook his head immediately, and not just a gentle back and forth. "I'll sell more if I get them, but I'm keeping this one," he said.

"I understand," I said, and that was absolutely true. I had a momentary thought of grabbing him and simply *taking* it from him, but I dismissed it quickly; not only do I try to be honest and do my business cleanly, and not only would he probably call the cops and I'd likely lose my P.I. license even if I stayed out of jail, but . . . okay, this is the weird part. I didn't think the gadget would like it. I didn't think it would feel as good if I took it without permission. I didn't want to upset it. Why I thought I *could* upset something that looked like a lump of plastic I don't know, but I did.

After that it was just details—exchanging contact information, getting his check and a cash deposit for expense money, and so on.

I didn't have anything else going except follow-up on a divorce case, so I finished out the afternoon with tax prep and paperwork, did some research, and the next morning I headed out.

I had an old Toyota—in my line of work it's a good idea to drive something that isn't distinctive, that will just blend in, and I had decided that it was about time to swap it for something newer because it was getting old enough to be noticed and wasn't as reliable as I would have liked, but I hadn't done it yet. It was still good enough to get me to Sutton—I-376 west to I-79, then a hundred miles south on the interstate.

The drive should have been pleasant—a sunny spring day, light traffic, a good road, and the Toyota behaved itself—but I found myself not enjoying it. I felt nervous. I am not a nervous guy, or I wouldn't survive as a detective, but that whole way I was uncomfortable, thinking about that thing I had held the day before. I hated the idea that I was driving away from it, and at the same time I was anticipating maybe finding one of my own, if I could find this John Praszky and learn where he'd gotten it.

I knew I was being irrational, that it was just a gadget, not anything important, but I couldn't help it. I was more focused on trying to remember how it had felt to hold it than I was on my driving, and I almost missed my exit. At the last instant I realized where I was and cut over, down the ramp onto the two-lane blacktop and into town—what there was of it.

Sutton's the Braxton County seat, but it's still not much of anything. Main Street runs along the Elk River, and there are a few blocks on either side, and that's about it. I had considered going to the county clerk's office and asking after John Praszky, but I thought it might be better to try an informal approach first, not put anything on the official record, since after all, I wasn't chasing a criminal, just trying to locate a shopkeeper.

I drove the length of Main Street and didn't see any secondhand shops, or anything with "Praszky" on the sign, so after I'd cruised all the way through town from west to east and then retraced most of it I stopped in at the Rite-Aid for a candy bar. The cashier rang me up, and while I was pretending to dig for change in my pocket I said, "Hey, do you know a guy named John Praszky?" Ordinarily asking a random minimum-wage employee would be a long shot, but in a town this size I thought it was worth a try, especially if he owned a business. "I heard he lived in Sutton."

"Nope," she said.

"*Anyone* named Praszky?" I asked, as I counted out coins.

She hesitated, then called to the guy stocking the beer cooler, “Hey, isn’t Harry’s last name Praszky?” Her pronunciation was pretty close to my own, basically assuming the Z was silent.

“I dunno,” he answered.

She swept up the coins and counted them into the cash drawer. “Who’s Harry?” I asked.

“He owns Harry’s Hamburgers, west of town,” she said, as she closed the drawer.

Well, this Harry was a shopkeeper, anyway, and if he was John *H. Praszky, Junior*, maybe he went by his middle name so as to be distinct from his old man, or maybe John Praszky was a brother or a cousin. It seemed worth checking out, especially since it was getting on toward lunchtime. She handed me my receipt, and I asked for directions, which were pretty simple, Sutton being what it is. Finding a *home* might be a challenge, if it was somewhere back in the woods on an old logging road, but there were only so many places a business could reasonably be.

So back to the Toyota and west I went, and sure enough, there was this tacky little joint with a neon sign reading HARRY’S ALL-NIGHT HAMBURGERS and a parking lot big enough to hold a couple of semis but currently occupied only by two pick-ups and a rusty sedan.

Except for a little cabin out back, practically in the woods, it was all by itself, with nothing but trees around it. Seemed to me this Harry would do better in town, or down by the exit off I-79, but no one asked me. I pulled into the lot and parked between the pick-ups, looking around.

I didn’t see anywhere that mysterious whatsit could have come from; there was no souvenir shop or secondhand store, just the restaurant and the cabin and a lot of trees. I collected myself, unbuckled the seatbelt, and got out.

It was quiet out there, the sort of quiet I didn’t get much of back in Pittsburgh. I could hear the wind in the pines, a sound I hadn’t heard in ages. When I walked across the asphalt I could hear grit scraping under my shoes.

Then I opened the door and stepped into Harry’s burger joint, and the quiet was gone—the grill was sizzling, machinery humming, music playing over speakers in the ceiling, and someone I didn’t see was laughing. It smelled pretty good. There was an old guy at the counter with a cup of coffee and a newspaper, but the half-dozen booths were empty. It was cleaner than I’d expected.

It didn’t look like a place where you could find anything like that gadget. It looked like an old-fashioned diner where you wouldn’t find anything more exotic than key lime pie. My fingers twitched at the thought of the gadget.

Someone must have heard me come in, because a young man appeared behind the counter and waited while I crossed the floor and took a seat three stools down from the guy with the newspaper.

“What can I get you?” he said.

“A burger,” I said, my finger tracing a circle on the laminate counter. Burgers were their specialty, after all. “Cheese and lettuce, no ketchup.”

“Onions? And are chips okay? If you want fries you’ll have to wait.”

“Sure, onions, and chips are fine.” I glanced down the counter, forced my finger to stop moving, and added, “And a coffee. Black.”

The guy headed back toward the kitchen, and I looked around, hoping to see a picture of the proprietor somewhere. I didn’t find one. There was a pecan pie under a glass dome that looked pretty good, and I realized I was genuinely hungry.

A moment later the guy who had taken my order reappeared, and I beckoned him over.

“This Harry who runs the place, is he around?”

“No, he mostly works the night shift. We’re open twenty-four hours, he’s not

kidding about the 'All Night' in the name, and Harry usually does the graveyard shift himself. He's probably asleep right now."

"Does he live nearby?"

"That cabin out back."

"So you could go wake him up if you had to?"

"If I wanted to look for another job, sure."

"So is his last name Praszky?"

The guy looked startled. "How should I know?"

"He's your boss, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but he's just Harry. I don't know his last name."

I fished that scan of the driver's license out of my pocket and folded it so that only the photo showed. "Is this him?" I asked, holding it up.

He squinted at it. "Yeah, that looks like Harry. What's this about? Is he in trouble?"

"No, no. But there's someone in Pittsburgh who's looking for him, and hired me to find him."

"Why?" He looked worried.

"Harry did him a favor once, and he wants to see about maybe . . . well, I don't know exactly. Returning the favor, I guess. He doesn't mean Harry any harm, I can promise you. There might even be some money in it for him."

"Okay. He'll probably be in for the dinner rush."

"You get a dinner rush here?" I looked around. "I sure don't see a *lunchtime* rush."

"It's still early," the counterman said defensively. "It's not a *big* rush."

"Burger's up!" a female voice called from the back.

My guy turned and stepped back from the counter, and a moment later he set a plate in front of me.

It was a pretty good burger, I've got to admit. Nothing fancy, but fresh beef cooked just right, and the cheese was good sharp cheddar, which is my favorite. Somewhere around my third bite I paused and said, "My compliments to the chef."

He smiled. "I'll tell Ashley."

"Is it okay if I hang around? I want to talk to Harry."

He shrugged. "I don't care. It'll be a while, though, and I'm off at four, so the evening guys may have something to say."

I nodded.

I took my time, but I wasn't going to let the food get cold. I got a refill on the coffee when the counterman cleared my plate away, and I took my cup over to a booth in the corner.

They did get some more customers eventually, and the old guy with the newspaper packed up and left. The young guy was prompt with the customers, but spent as much time as he could in the back, flirting with someone I assume was Ashley. Going by her laughter, she didn't mind a bit.

I tried people-watching—I do that a lot, in my line of work, and usually it keeps me entertained, but this time it wasn't really working. I kept finding myself curling my fingers around something that wasn't there, and sliding my thumb in little circles on my palm. I wanted that gadget in my hand, and not having it there began to *hurt*.

Besides, there weren't always people to watch; sometimes there weren't any customers and the counterman was in the back. I tried meditating, or thinking over old cases, or estimating figures for my taxes, but those weren't any better. The remembered feel of that gadget kept intruding. Its absence was the exact opposite of the calm, happy oblivion I had felt when I held it.

Around quarter to four, when I was the only customer in the place and had been rubbing my thumb across my hand so long that the joints in my thumb were aching

and my palm was red and sore, a middle-aged guy came in and headed straight behind the counter. I looked up, but this wasn't the man in the license photo.

"Hey, Bill," the counterman said. Then he leaned forward and whispered something, and I saw Bill throw a quick glance in my direction.

Then a woman about my age or a little older came in, a thoroughly unnatural redhead wearing an apron; she settled at the counter and began chatting with Bill and Ashley's beau—I never had gotten his name, and Harry evidently didn't believe in name-tags.

A few minutes later Bill vanished into the back, and the redhead took over behind the counter. Ashley appeared—she was a cute brunette, well worth flirting with, but from the way the counterman put his arm around her waist and she leaned into him, there was obviously more there than a little workplace flirting. They left together.

"Need another coffee?" the redhead called, and I said I did. She brought the pot over and we talked a little, confirming that I wanted to talk to Harry as soon as possible.

"He'll probably be in for his breakfast soon," she said. "I'll let him know you're here."

I thanked her, she left, and I found my thumb making circles again. I forced myself to stop.

For a moment I wondered what I was really doing, spending the entire afternoon sitting in a greasy little diner in West Virginia, but then I remembered the feel of the gadget. I wanted one of those for *myself*, damn it, and this was where I needed to be to find one.

It was about five, and a couple of truckers were at the counter bantering with the redhead, when I heard a door slam somewhere in the back. I sat up.

And there he was, pushing past the redhead to get himself coffee and danish—Harry Praszky. He looked better than the picture on his license, but who doesn't? It was definitely him. He was maybe sixty, at a guess.

He brought his breakfast to the counter, then came around the end and settled on the last stool. I got up and carried my own coffee cup over, then sat down beside him.

"Hi," I said.

He didn't look at me or say anything, just sipped coffee.

"You're Harry, right? You own the place?"

"It's not for sale, and my bills are all paid, so don't try to tell me I owe someone money," he said.

"I wasn't asking that," I said.

He didn't reply, just took a bite of danish, so after a moment I went on. "You sold a friend of mine something, and he was hoping you might have more of them."

He stopped chewing and stared at the countertop for a moment. Then he finally turned to look at me. "Yeah?"

"We'd pay good money," I said, reaching into my pocket for the photos.

"I like money," he acknowledged, "but I probably can't help you."

I spread the pictures on the counter. He glanced at them. He frowned.

"That thing? He wants more?"

I nodded.

"Is this the guy from Specialty Pawn, in Pittsburgh?"

I nodded again. "His name's Bergin."

"I don't care what his name is," Harry said, in a tone of disgust. "I don't have any more. I don't even know what that thing is. I thought it was a paperweight, but I can't believe you'd come all this way for a paperweight."

"It's not a paperweight," I said. "It's . . . it's like a meditation stone. It feels good. And Mr. Bergin thinks he could get a good price for these."

"Well, good for him. I don't have any."

"You sold him this one."

"I sold him a lot of stuff."

"Well, where'd you get it?"

He sighed. "From a customer," he said.

"Could you be more specific? Mr. Praszky, I'm not trying to give you a hard time. We just *really* want more of these, and you're the only one we can ask. Even if you don't have any more, if you can put us in touch with this customer of yours, we can pay you a finder's fee."

Bergin had not actually authorized that, but *I* was willing to pay whatever it took to get myself one.

"I don't know her name," Harry said. "She was in here late one night, and tried to pay for her meal with a counterfeit bill, and when I spotted it she said she didn't have any other money, so we worked out a trade. She put a bunch of stuff in a plastic bag and gave it to me—some of it was jewelry, so I thought it would cover the costs. I drove it up to Pittsburgh and sold everything in the bag to Specialty Pawn." He pointed at the photos. "That was in the bag with the jewelry."

Bergin had told me he'd bought jewelry from Harry. He hadn't mentioned it was in the same plastic bag, or I'd have wanted a look at it.

"Is she a regular?"

He looked at me like I was wearing pink eyeshadow. "She tried to pass a counterfeit bill; what do you *think*? I never saw her before or since that one time."

"And you didn't get her name?"

"Nope."

I pulled out my pocket notebook. "What did she look like?"

For just an instant I thought I saw a sort of trapped, deer-in-the-headlights expression flicker across his face, but then he shrugged. "I don't remember the details; I mean, it's been at least a month. Kind of short, I guess. Hair a funny color, probably a bad dye job. Or maybe a wig. Beyond that I couldn't tell you."

"Fat? Thin? White, black, Asian?"

"She wasn't real fat or real dark. Seriously, I didn't notice."

"So she didn't make much of an impression, even with this whole mess with the bad bill and trading you a bunch of knickknacks?"

"I get a lot of weirdos at night, after anyone with a brain is home in bed, and I've taken barter before when customers didn't have money, so no, she didn't make a big impression. Sorry I can't help you, buddy; I'd have liked that finder's fee." He took another bite of danish.

I needed a moment to process that. He'd taken barter before? Often enough that it wasn't a big deal? And I remembered that he had brought Bergin all those fake coins and other odd stuff. I'd assumed he was running a secondhand shop, not a burger joint, until I got here, but once I'd gotten inside I hadn't seen a sign of anything but a diner. I had been too obsessed with the gadget to give that the attention it deserved; clearly, he accepted a *lot* of bartered items. What kind of a place was he running out here in the middle of nowhere?

I decided to try another angle. "So you thought it was a paperweight, and you never saw her again. Did you ever see another paperweight like that one?"

"Nope. People come here to eat, not to show off their stuff."

I looked down at the pictures and felt my hand trembling, desperate to hold the thing again. For the first time a thought struck me, one I should have come up with much sooner.

"Why'd you take that stuff to Pittsburgh, anyway? Isn't Charleston a lot closer?"

"I like Pittsburgh. I get better prices there."

"So you sell stuff there a lot?"

He shrugged and sipped coffee.

“Is it *all* weird stuff you got in payment for meals? How often does that *happen*?”

He sighed. “Look, you got what I can tell you. How I run *my* business isn’t any of *your* business.” He turned away and finished his danish in another oversized bite.

I didn’t know what to say. He didn’t owe me anything, and he probably really didn’t know anything more about the customer that gave him the gadget, and if I hassled him too much he would have every right to throw me out, but I needed to know more. I *needed* to know how I could get one of those things for myself.

I could head back to Pittsburgh and tell Bergin it was a dead end, and go on with my life, but I wanted one of those gadgets. My fingers itched for one—they were twitching at the very thought, trying to close around a nonexistent one, as I sat there next to Harry.

I tried to think of what my next step should be, and Harry drank his coffee, and I beckoned the redhead over for a refill.

This whole business of Harry getting weird stuff in trade for his food—that didn’t make any sense. I remembered what Bergin had said about coins from places that didn’t exist; was Harry’s joint somehow getting customers from those imaginary places?

That sounded ridiculous, but that gadget—something like that didn’t exist anywhere in the world *I* knew. What was going on out here in the West Virginia hills? I had been there all afternoon, but I didn’t want to leave yet. I was sure there was more to learn. I stayed where I was.

Harry finished his coffee, then went back behind the counter, around the corner where I couldn’t see him.

The lunchtime counterman had been right; there really was a dinnertime rush. Oh, it wasn’t huge, but it was enough to fill most of the booths and all the other stools at the counter at the peak, from maybe 6:30 to 7:00. But then it began to thin out again.

I got myself fried chicken and a piece of the pecan pie for my supper, and kept drinking coffee. The chicken was a bit greasy, but it tasted okay, and the pie was good.

Most of the post-dinner clientele seemed to be guys in hunting jackets.

Around 11:00 P.M. the truckers started to predominate, and the redhead, who I’d heard other people call Sherry, told me that was because the fast-food places out by the interstate had mostly closed for the night, so the more knowledgeable truckers pulled off the highway and came to Harry’s.

Harry started working the counter alongside Sherry around 11:30, and not long after that she and Bill left, leaving Harry to manage by himself.

And business slowed down after midnight. Even most of the long-haul truckers were off the road by then, or at least weren’t stopping at Harry’s.

Around 12:30 Harry came over to me and asked, “You sure you don’t want to head home, buddy?”

“I’m good,” I said.

“Look, you’ve been here a long time; how long are you planning to stay?”

“Until I get another lead on where I can find more of those things.”

“Buddy, give it up. I got *one* of them, *once*. It could be years before another one turns up, if it *ever* does.”

“I’m staying a little longer, just in case.”

Harry frowned. “Seriously, do you have anywhere else to go?”

“Sure. I have a nice apartment back in Pittsburgh.”

“That’s a three-hour drive. Shouldn’t you get moving?”

I shook my head. “I’ll head back tomorrow. Or Friday.”

Harry sighed. “I don’t want to give you a hard time, buddy—for one thing, you

seem to be doing that to yourself, so I won't pile on." He handed me a napkin from the dispenser; I looked at it, puzzled, then up at Harry, who pointed at the smear of blood on the counter. My hand was bleeding where I'd been rubbing it; I hadn't noticed. While I scrubbed at the blood Harry continued, "But I'll tell you right now, if you bother any of my customers, I'm throwing you out, and if you give me any argument I'm calling the sheriff, and I guarantee Sheriff Williams would not appreciate being woken up at this hour."

"I won't bother anyone."

Harry did not look as if he believed me, but he left me alone.

Half an hour after that I was beginning to fade. I'd had a long day, even if I'd spent most of it sitting at the counter drinking coffee. I didn't want to bother getting a room, but settling into the back seat of my Toyota for a couple of hours was definitely starting to appeal to me.

But then *she* came in.

I hadn't heard a car or motorcycle, but I assumed I'd just missed it, as groggy as I was. She was tall, probably six feet, with a shiny black helmet tucked under her arm, and dark blue hair halfway to her waist, wearing a black leather cat-suit, with a bright red logo I'd never seen before on the back. There were three red lines on one cheek, but I couldn't tell if they were make-up or scars or tattoos or war paint. She looked around warily.

I was the only customer in the place, so I tried to look harmless. I had no idea who she was, but it was pretty obvious to me that she didn't belong in a place like Sutton.

She marched up to the counter. Harry had emerged from the kitchen at the sound of the little bell on the door, and was waiting for her.

"You speak Angle?" she said.

"I speak English," Harry replied.

She nodded. "I have no local currency," she said. She held out a hand and dropped a few coins on the counter; they made an odd sound, not quite the normal jingle. "Will you credit these?"

Harry swept them up and studied them. "Gold?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"Yeah, I'll take these." He handed two of them back. "This should cover pretty much anything we have here. And if you think you're going to *want* some local currency, I could give you a good deal on the others."

"I will think toward it," she said, as she took a seat. "What food do you offer?"

He handed her a menu.

This was apparently where some of those strange coins Bergin had talked about came from. I started to get up, but Harry saw it and hurried over. "Don't bother her," he whispered.

"I wasn't—"

"Seriously, buddy. Leave her alone."

"I was just—"

He put a finger to his lips, then turned back to her to await her order.

She pointed to something on the menu. Harry looked at it and nodded. "Club sandwich," he said. "Coming up. Want something to drink with that?"

She looked confused.

"I'll bring coffee," Harry said. He fetched her a cup and poured, then put the carafe back and headed for the kitchen.

When he was out of sight I moved to the stool beside her, the photos in my hand. I noticed a strange smell, a bit like licorice, but I ignored it.

"Excuse me," I said, "have you ever seen anything like this?" I spread the pictures on the counter.

She glanced at the pictures. “No,” she said. Then she looked at my face. “You are a worldjumper?”

“I’m a detective,” I said. “I’m trying to find more of these.”

“I know them not.” She sipped her coffee and grimaced.

It wasn’t bad coffee; I can only assume she wasn’t a coffee drinker.

Disappointed, I gathered up the photos and returned to my own seat.

Unless she was a superb actor, she was not the source of Mr. Bergin’s gadget. Harry had said the woman who traded it to him was short, which this blue-haired goddess definitely wasn’t, but neither of them was exactly a normal diner’s typical customer, and there were those gold coins . . .

Apparently Harry did get weirdos, plural, as late-night customers—but who were they? Where did they come from? Where did those coins come from, and the gadget?

Harry brought her sandwich, and she ate, and I beckoned Harry over.

“Could I see that coin she paid with?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Just curious.”

He had it in the pocket of his apron; he fished it out and laid it on the counter. I leaned down for a good look.

It had a stylized picture of an owl, and letters around the edge that seemed normal enough but didn’t say anything intelligible—it was all abbreviations, something like IMP AQ NOV ORD I SOL.

“Why’d you take it?” I asked.

“Because it’s gold,” he said. “I’m guessing it’s at least twelve karat, and I estimate that melted down it’ll be worth about sixty, seventy bucks. That’ll cover her sandwich, and a decent share of the drive to Charleston or Pittsburgh.”

I looked up at him. “You do this a lot?”

He put the coin back in his pocket. “Enough to know,” he said.

I was going to say something else when the bell jingled again. I turned.

The three things that came in then *shimmered*. They were more or less human in size and shape, but I couldn’t see their features, and they didn’t really look solid. One wore blue, one solid green, and the third maroon, but I couldn’t tell through the distortion whether those were jumpsuits or something else. I stared.

Harry didn’t. He just held out a menu.

These three didn’t seem to speak any English. They looked at the menu, conferred among themselves, and then the one in maroon tapped a picture on the menu three times.

Harry nodded, but then held out his hand and tapped his palm.

I couldn’t see what they offered at first, but Harry waved it away. On the second try they apparently came up with something more to his liking, and he nodded and headed for the grill.

I stared for a moment, and realized my mouth was hanging open, but then I closed it and turned away; looking at them made my head hurt.

What was going *on* here? Who were these people, and where did they come from? What had Harry just agreed to accept in payment, and how did he know what it was?

I didn’t know. I began to wonder whether I might be hallucinating.

I did know I wasn’t going to sleep any time soon. I sat at the counter, watching and waiting.

The blue-haired woman did not speak to the ghostly trio; she ate her sandwich, drank her coffee, then left. Harry brought the threesome three cheeseburgers and three Cokes and accepted something I couldn’t make out from them in exchange. They, too, ate and drank and left. They spoke among themselves in a variety of hooting sounds. I did not approach them; my tolerance for weirdness was not *that* high.

For a few minutes after they left the place was empty except for me and Harry, but then the bell rang again. . . .

I never heard car engines, or trucks, or motorbikes. Sometimes there was a whine, or a thump, or a whoosh, but nothing that sounded like an ordinary vehicle. There were lights, but not like ordinary headlights. Some of the late-night people looked pretty normal; some did not.

Harry remained utterly unfazed by them all. He accepted normal currency when they had it, coins of gold or silver or platinum if they were offered, and assorted jewelry and other trinkets. A few times a sale took extended dickering, and Harry might wind up with a gadget, or a tool, or an article of clothing.

And sometimes they couldn't reach a deal. When that happened Harry would give the would-be customer a glass of water and a stale hamburger bun and maybe some onions and lettuce, out of pity.

I didn't see all that the first night, of course. I stayed. The weird ones stopped coming an hour or so before dawn. Once the sun came up and Harry went to bed, I went and slept in my car.

And whenever I could, whenever Harry wasn't looking and the customer spoke English, I would pull out my photos and ask about the device.

I was getting desperate, I admit it. My palm was raw from rubbing; I went down to the Rite-Aid and got myself some bandages, and I would wear through about two layers of gauze every night. Whenever I wasn't actually talking to anyone, I would sit and remember how beautiful it had felt to hold that thing. Sometimes when I was talking, I would find myself staring wistfully at the pictures and rubbing at my bandage.

The sheriff came by a couple of times; he rousted me out of my car once, but I showed him my P.I. license and explained I was on a stake-out and he let me go. He had a long conversation with Harry that night, though, and afterward Harry told me that if I made any trouble at all, or bothered any customers, I'd have to go, and the sheriff had been warned.

I tried to be meek and say, "Yes, sir," at every opportunity.

Most of the customers I spoke to had no more idea what the thing in the photos was than I did, but on the third night a woman with a shaven head and a sort of holographic badge on her chest took one look and said, "Oh, that's a neural resonator!"

Relief flooded through me, like nothing I had ever felt before. I had a name for it. I hadn't hallucinated its entire existence. "It is?" I said.

"Sure!"

"What's a neural resonator?"

"That is! It's a mood enhancer. It uses touch and microstimulants to make you feel better when you hold it."

"Do you know where I can get one?"

She snorted. "Not around *here*, certainly."

"Where, then? How do I get there?"

"No, I mean not in this timeline."

I wasn't clear on what she meant by "timeline," but I ignored that. "How does it work? Could you help me make one?"

"Me? Not an inkling. That's not my lawn. I'm a test pilot, not a biotech."

That should have been interesting, that test pilot business, but I was focused on my target. "What do I need to do to get one?"

She sighed. "You're bottled, aren't you? Someone let you hold one unsupervised? One that had already formed for someone else?"

I had thought she spoke the same English I did, but I was beginning to wonder. "What do you mean?"

“I mean you held one that had already patterned itself for someone else, and now you’re addicted.”

“Patterned?”

“Sure. Everyone’s chemobiology is different, so a new resonator attunes itself to the first person to handle it. After that, it can be dangerous for anyone else to hold it—or it might not work at all. It all trails.”

That explained a lot, even if I wasn’t completely certain what she meant by “trails.” “Is there a treatment for this addiction?”

“Oh, sure! You just need your own fresh resonator. That’ll repaint your neurons and put you on top of the branch—if it isn’t too late.”

“So I *really* need to find one.”

She glanced at the bloody, torn bandage wrapped around my hand. “I don’t know, playmate, you may be past the fence.”

“But I have to *try*. Where can I go? What can I do?”

She looked me in the eye, and for the first time in three days I realized I probably looked like hell. I hadn’t bathed or changed my clothes since I’d left Pittsburgh, or even combed my hair. I’d bought a toothbrush at the Rite-Aid, so my hygiene wasn’t a *complete* disaster, but it was pretty bad. I’d eaten nothing but Harry’s greasy cooking for three days, which probably hadn’t done my health, or my breath, any favors—Harry was generous with the onions.

“Do you have any idea where I came from?” she asked. “Or any of the other people who come in here late at night?”

“No.” I had noticed they were extremely strange and varied, but I had been too focused on finding the gadget, the neural resonator, to really give it much thought. It finally began to register that I *should* have thought about it. I would have, if I hadn’t been rubbing my hand and dreaming about how it had felt to hold that thing.

“I’m from another universe,” she said. “So are neural resonators. *Your* world doesn’t have anything like that—not yet, anyway.”

“What?” I must have looked like a complete imbecile. My mouth hung open, and I stared at her.

Just then Harry delivered her burger and fries. He glared at me. “Is this guy both-ering you?”

“No, it’s smooth,” she said. She nibbled one of the fries, took a swig of her soda, and waited until Harry left before she starting talking to me again. But when Harry was out of sight, she gave me a crash course in parallel world theory.

I’d heard some of it before, of course. I wasn’t a big sci-fi fan, but some ideas drift out into the mainstream. This was the first time, though, that I’d heard it discussed as a real thing, not just a fictional device, and she went into a lot more detail than I’d ever heard before, talking about the practical difficulties of navigating among infinite universes, and how the shape of what she called polyspace complicated it.

One of those complications was that there were just twelve spots on Earth where travel between worlds was easy—at least, by the method her vehicle used, though apparently other methods were possible. Most of the twelve were in the middle of one ocean or another. One was in Antarctica. One was in the Gobi Desert. One was in central Africa.

And one was just outside Harry’s All-Night Hamburgers, or its otherworldly equivalent.

I had occasional problems with the way she used English. It was basically the same language, but some words and phrases had shifted meaning. Still, I could follow it well enough.

By the time she finished explaining her burger was gone, her soda was on its second refill, and her last few fries were cold. Four short guys in black robes had come

in and taken a booth in the corner, where they were arguing intensely about whether their faith permitted them to eat fried chicken. A sort of flying drone thing had come in the front door at one point, but Harry had chased it back out with a broom.

"So," she concluded, "you can see why I can't bring you a neural resonator."

"No, I don't!" I exclaimed, loudly enough that one of the four in the corner looked up at me, startled, and I could hear Harry moving around in the kitchen.

"Because we *can't steer*," she said. "We've unraveled a few things about polyspace, but not enough to find any specific universe. I told you that. None of us can ever go home, except maybe by fluke—we can't find that one particular timeline. If I went traveling and found a bag of neural resonators and tried to bring it back for you, I wouldn't be able to find you. At the extreme best I might find someone *like* you, who's bottled the way you are, but the odds are a myriad to a minimum it won't be *you*."

"But what if I came *with* you?" I said. "Then when you found those resonators, I could use one."

She frowned. "There are at least three preventions," she said. "On top, it would be immoral to remove you from your own world without a possibility of restoring you. I wouldn't be able to find your world any more than I can find my own; I'd have to strand you in some other timeline. Next down the stack, my orders forbid it—my callers worried about spies or wreckers or disease vectors, and stuck it to my nose that I was *not* to fetch anyone along. That one isn't so significant anymore, since I'll probably never see any of them again, but then we get to the bottom, the one that really bakes the clay: I operate a one-person vehicle. There's no *room* for a companion."

I couldn't argue with that.

We talked a little more, but not about anything that mattered; then she settled up with Harry, using little strips of something silvery that Harry apparently recognized, and left. I went to the front window and pulled aside the curtain, and I couldn't see how *she* fit in that thing—it looked like a half-melted coffin. There certainly wasn't room for a passenger. It made a sound like a shotgun when it vanished.

I hadn't gotten the gadget I came for, but I knew a lot more about it now. I started approaching Harry's customers a little more boldly after that.

A couple of others recognized the neural resonator from the pictures, but nobody had one with him; most had no idea what it was.

It took five more days to convince someone to give me a lift. I think my appearance, particularly the damaged hand, frightened a lot of people off. Finally, though, I got a ride. He was an ordinary guy, and his vehicle looked like a boxy little van with black paint and golden tires; he said his name was DeVane. I was trembling with excitement when I climbed into his machine, and he cranked up the engine; it whined like nothing I had ever heard before I found Harry's.

We didn't seem to go anywhere except across the parking lot on that first little hop, but in this version of Sutton my Toyota was gone and Harry didn't recognize me. "I thought I'd start small," my driver said.

I asked half a dozen people. No resonators.

The next jump was longer, and we came out atop a glacier, with nothing anywhere in sight but ice and intensely blue sky. We obviously weren't going to find any resonators here, so I waited impatiently in the van while DeVane took pictures and made measurements.

After that came an ocean, where I discovered that the van was amphibious. The next stop was empty forest. Then we saw a radioactive wasteland, a sweltering jungle, another glacier, and then a diner, but the sign wasn't in any alphabet I had ever seen before and the woman running it had scars on her cheeks and spoke something that sounded Slavic.

At each stop DeVane read the instruments in his vehicle and took careful notes,

and where it looked safe he got out and took photos and readings. I helped where I could. We talked a lot, but I don't think I was very good company—I was obsessed with neural resonators.

We managed to stay in human civilizations for a while after that. DeVane had done some calibrating on his vehicle. He still couldn't really aim, but he could largely control the probabilistic distance we traveled.

I was with him for maybe a month, subjective time, and by then we were fed up with each other and I hitched a ride with a woman whose name kept changing according to a pattern I never really understood. She tried to treat my hand, but couldn't really do much. The closest to a resonator we found was a tracking device used in a fascist state—it injected some sort of opiate into the user's wrist.

Except it didn't work on me. I was too far gone in my addiction.

After her came Jottie and Kor, who wanted to adopt me, and then Big Stan, and by then my hand was gone, leaving just a stump, but that wasn't enough to stop me.

It's been about three years now, I think. For most of the last six months I've been back in universes where Harry's exists, even if the United States doesn't. One of them had the technology to make me this robot hand—you'd hardly know it's not real, would you? And it doesn't itch, and I can't rub it hard enough to damage it. The fact that I can rub it at all means I still have my *other* hand.

So I'm back, I've found Harry's All-Night Hamburgers again, and someone here told me that *you* may have licked the navigation problem. Is it true?

You think you have? Oh, thank God! Oh, lady, you have no idea what this means to me. I'll do anything I can if you'll give me a lift.

What? No, I don't want to go home! Not yet, anyway.

But please, help me find a resonator.