

# Channel Surfing

By E.S. Strout MD

“Our isotope has some unique properties, Professor Archer.”

“Yes, Nari,” the physicist replied. He caressed the tiny ceramic cylinder with a fingertip. “The anomaly releases a previously unknown, highly reactive subatomic particle when exposed to a minimal electrical charge. A couple of small alkaline batteries will suffice.”

“And our purpose, Professor?”

“This discovery offers a unique solution to the global escalation of terrorist activity and unabated warfare, Dr. Singh.”

“A peaceful solution, Dr. Archer?” his associate asked.

The professor smiled. “The device will be installed in an ordinary household appliance. Come to my home sometime around eight-thirty this evening for the trial.”

“Will the test be dangerous?”

“Unknown. The results will be confined to a small area and produce some pyrotechnic effects. The long range outcome will be unpredictable.”

“We will prevail, Professor.”

## 1.

“It was a self-contained incident,” the arson investigator said as he brushed greasy soot from his coveralls. “TV cabinet’s charred. Cable leads and picture tube melted, cable box vaporized. And look at this.” He plucked an intact Zenith remote from the singed carpet. “It’s still warm.”

“I talked to the cops,” his partner said. “Their HAZMAT team found no explosive residue or unusual radiation, but they still suspect foul play. Two missing. Archer and Dr. Narindar Singh.”

“Professor Merlin Archer was a highly regarded nuclear physicist. His work with subatomic particles has earned worldwide acclaim. Why would anyone . . .?”

“There are those who regarded him as a wacko,” the investigator told him. “More than a few, according to his department head at the university.”

“A peacenik from the ‘60’s, I’ve heard. Did some time for trying to blow up the campus ROTC office.”

“There’s no evidence of bomb-making paraphernalia here.”

“So how do we report this one?”

“I think a missing persons report would suffice for now.”

## 2.

“Beat it, twerp. The game’s on.” Sixteen year-old Alex Martindale thumbed channel nine on the remote. Nothing. “Damn. Where’s the Lakers?”

His younger sister gasped. “Dad!”

“Go play in the street, Jennie.” She gave Alex a superior smirk, tossed blond curls and bounced from the room. Alex unfolded from the sofa and tuned the cable box by hand. “Shaquille O’Neal. My man.”

Instants later he hugged the carpet, clutching a battered earlobe. His stepfather towered over him, rubbing his hand. “Jennie said you swore.”

“Come on, Dad. It’s the playoffs . . .”

The man curled a fist. “Don’t you have homework?”

“The Lakers. My team,” Alex pleaded, “Please?”

The fist caught him on the lip.

“Some day soon, guys. I can wait,” Alex muttered as he held the ice bag to his swollen mouth. He flipped the remote’s battery compartment catch with a thumbnail and popped in two 1.5 volt Duracell AA replacements. Punched nine. No Lakers. “Aw, screw Zenith.”

Jennifer stuck out her tongue. “I’m gonna tell.”

Alex’s glare could have cut glass. “You’ll be the first, Jen.”

She pointed her nose in the air. “Dad says you’re adopted, Alex.”

## 3.

The Time-Warner lady aimed the remote at the cable box crouching atop the TV set behind her, punched in a channel. Nothing. “Did you change the batteries?”

“First thing.”

“We’re out of replacements. Should have ‘em in by Monday.”

“But the weekend. The playoffs . . .”

She rolled her eyes. “Look behind you, son.” Four customers fidgeted. “Monday.”

“What’s the prob?”

“Won’t change channels.”

The TV repair technician viewed the remote’s guts with a critical eye. He cleaned the battery contacts, checked for loose connections. Ran a test unit check. “Your integrated circuits are fine,” he said. “Transistors are okay too, but your infra-red LED is shot.”

“Can you replace it?”

“Not till this weekend.”

Alex groaned. “The playoffs . . .”

“Tell you what.” The man rummaged in a drawer and produced an identical Zenith remote. “It’s part of an estate sale. Owners were never located. Fire. Possible arson.”

The boy stifled a yawn. “Whatever.”

“A loaner. Okay?”

“I owe you, man.”

#### 4.

Alex punched up channel nine. There was a sudden sharp aroma of melting connector cable insulation. But picture and sound popped up with DVD clarity on the ancient set. 2000 NBA Championship finals, Lakers and Pacers. Chick Hearn calling the action. “Eat it, Pacers!” Alex howled.

“Dad said I could watch cartoons,” Jennifer announced with a self-righteous smirk.

“Bug off, freak.”

“You’ll be sorry when I tell Dad . . .”

It was a whim born of long-standing frustration. Alex aimed the device, punched MUTE. “Shut up, Jennie.”

Silence. Jennifer’s lips flapped. Alex’s sinuses and eardrums throbbed in the vacuum. He could feel his eyeballs bulge. Panicked, he hit MUTE again. Sound returned as the negative pressure dissipated.

His sister’s voice rose a shrill octave. “What did you do, Alex?”

He touched the MUTE stud. There was the same sensation of displacement, vacuum. Jennifer’s lips moved as before, but without sound.

“Un-be-freaking-lievable . . .” Alex grinned at the black box. He pressed POWER.

The TV picture vanished in a white blink.

So did his sister.

“Unreal.” He hit the power stud again.

“Shaq Attack!” Chick Hearn screamed as O’Neal crammed home a two-pointer. The Lakers were back.

So was Jennifer.

“Where’d you go, Jennie?” Alex asked, intrigued. His nose wrinkled at the odor of frying plastic.

Her eyelids blinked in tremulous staccato. “Dad!”

“See you around, Jen.” Alex pressed POWER, ignoring the warm vibration to his fingertip.

“Where’s Jennie?”

Alex tried to conceal a grin. “Look in the X-Files under ‘J’, Dad.”

“Smartass. I’ll . . .”

POWER.

Alex gave the remote a conspiratorial smile. “Owners never located? You sent ‘em to the Twilight Zone, right?” A gray haze drifted from the Time-Warner box.

“Alex, where’s your father?”

POWER.

“Bye, Mom.”

5.

Alex propped his feet on the sofa, popped open one of his former stepfather’s Budweisers, chugged a swallow, punched up channel nine. But instead of the Lakers he got a muffled explosion, billow of smoke, spray of sparks. A sensation of dizziness, falling. The TV set was gone. So was the furniture. And the living room. Star-studded night sky overhead and bare cement slab where he sat. Smoldering lath and plaster where the wallpaper had been.

His thumb twitched, touched the power stud . . .

Firemen milled around in frustration, unable to pin down a flashpoint. Bomb Squad people were at a loss as well. “Must have been a couple kilos of something like C-4,” their leader opined.

Six year-old Paul Shaffer peered into the smoking, twenty foot deep scorched craterlike defect in the ground. “What happened, Mom?”

“Nobody knows, Paul.”

The boy held up a soot-coated object he’d found at the edge of the depression. “What’s this?”

“It’s a remote, Paul. You know, to change TV channels.”

“Like this . . .?”

6.

“The aggregate of molten debris and ash in the third orbital confirms a planet once existed here,” the alien navigator told his C.O. “I don’t have an explanation. But I’ve picked up a discrete anomaly on short-range scanning. Bringing it aboard now.”

The carbon-encrusted artifact had raised studs marked with odd hieroglyphics. Curious, the Commander pressed POWER . . .

The End