

Cold Light

By E.S. Strout MD

You are the one, Neo.

The Matrix

1.

Friday 11 July 1947. Army Air Corps Research Facility, Groom Lake, Nevada. 1126 hours PDT:

“Infirmary for you, sir,” the C.O.’s aide said.

Lieutenant Colonel Evan Rogers crushed out his half-smoked Lucky Strike in the overflowing ashtray on his desk, grabbed the phone. “Give me some good news, Doc.” He listened for several seconds. “Oh hell.”

He dialed the base operator, requested a long distance line. The connection to the Pentagon’s Army Special Projects Office took five minutes. “Groom Lake Special Ops, General. Professor Schumacher is dead. Heart attack. COLD LIGHT is missing.”

Tuesday 10 May, 2011. U.S. Air Force Monitoring Station, Groom Lake, Nevada. 1823 hours PDT:

A sudden high-pitched beep reverberated in the small electronic surveillance space. Twenty year-old black Sergeant Raymond Falconer took a swallow of coffee, dogeared his page in ESPN Magazine and turned to the array of tracking monitors. He stared at one of the screens, did a double take then punched in a phone extension. “Major Burke, something you need to see, sir.”

“Did you run diagnostics, Sergeant Falconer?” Stealth Project Officer Major Ellis Burke asked as he gaped at the star-punctuated screen.

“Yes, sir. All in the green. Key West Naval Air Station confirms COLD LIGHT is missing. All radar sweeps and satellite visuals negative.”

Ellis paced, scratched his dark crew cut. “Impossible. It’s been in a stable geosynchronous orbit for almost sixty-five years.”

“What is it, sir?”

“A bogey, Sergeant. Red phone, please.”

“COLD LIGHT you say, Major?” the Pentagon Chief of Air Force Operations asked, his voice brimming with amazement. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir. N.A.S. Key West verifies.”

A soft audible gasp. “Oh, holy crap. Confirm its prior location, please.”

“Yes, General.” Major Burke rattled off longitudes, latitudes and altitude. He listened for a few seconds. “Acknowledged, sir. Security code X-ray Bravo Quebec is in effect.”

2.

Tuesday 10 May, 2011. Gravity Laboratory, Space Corps/NASA Complex, Cape Canaveral, Florida. 2123 hours EDT:

Five foot four-inch ash blond Sara J. Iverson tapped a computer key with a silver-ringed index finger. Rotation of the alternating metallic and ceramic discs in the concrete encased gravity cold chamber accelerated in a high-pitched crescendo. “Antigraviton level stabilized, Professor Lynch,” she announced. “Insertion complete.”

A computer beep signaled execution of the command. Then a sudden blinding flash of light produced a momentary white-out. Dr. Iverson scrubbed her eyes with both fists, blinked away the afterimages, then stared. “What the heck is that?”

Thirty-three year-old Professor Paula Jane Lynch eyed the disturbance lurking over the cold chamber with a speculative eye. She gave a nervous tug at the lace collar of her blouse, gnawed a thumbnail. “Hmm. It wasn’t there before.”

“You noticed.”

“Sort of jumps out at you.”

“How did it get in?”

“Skylight was open.”

A sparrow flew in through the skylight, circled the lab deciding on a landing place. It took one glance at the visitor and flapped its way out at twice its entry speed.

“Did you feel something, bird?” Paula asked. “I did.”

3.

“Another fine mess I’ve gotten us into,” Sara grumbled. A cube of swirling gray vapor hovered over the cold chamber emitting a soft sinister luminous pulsation which glinted off the tile walls and shelves of glassware in the windowless laboratory. She reached a hand toward the anomaly.

“Oh no,” Dr. Lynch breathed. “Sara, I wouldn’t . . .”

“Ow! Damn.”

“. . . touch it.”

Sara stared at her frostbitten fingers. “Get some ice, Paula.”

Circulation returned after an ice bath and brisk massage. “You won’t be minus any digits,” Dr. Lynch assured her.

“Brr! What can be that cold?”

“Let’s find out.” Paula entered her ‘Q’ password and accessed the NASA mainframe. She typed IDENTIFY GRAVITY LAB ANOMALY. INSUFFICIENT DATA flashed in stark white print to the dark screen.

“Figures. I’ll try D.O.D.”

A sharp warning tone berated her. USER NOT AUTHORIZED. U.S. AIR FORCE FILE R-GL 1041. WARNING. SEVERE FINES AND POSSIBLE ARREST. She punched SHUT DOWN.

Iverson raised a dubious eyebrow. “The military. That figures.”

“The Air Force, Dr. Iverson, will be actively seeking an unauthorized user. Us.”

“You think?”

“I’d bet my next paycheck on it.”

“So we’re just gonna sit here?”

“Not a chance. What do we know so far?”

“Besides that it’s cold?” Sara asked, rubbing her still tingling fingers. A defensive shrug. “The test went off without a hitch.”

“We could look at video surveillance playback,” Paula suggested.

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You’re not a Ph.D with a Nobel Prize.”

Sara pushed up the sleeves of her oversized black NASA sweatshirt, placed hands on hips. “I’m twenty-seven, Paula. I’ll get my Ph.D a year earlier than you did.”

4.

“Hmm,” Paula mused as she paused the playback. “Not there, then there. Finite limits. Dimensions about a cubic meter.” She tore a sheet of graph paper from a pad, folded it into a crude paper airplane, launched it toward the anomaly. It passed through, landed on the concrete deck in a puff of frosty vapor and disintegrated into fragments. Paula plucked one with latex glove protected fingers and placed it in a specimen envelope. “Microanalyzer, Sara.”

The result swished into the printer tray. “Paper and printed grid are preserved,” Sara noted. “Ideas, boss?”

“I’m thinking,” Paula said as she tapped a clear polished fingernail on the printout. She gazed at the anomaly, entranced. “Fascinating. Those pulsations. Need some time . . .”

“I’ll go get us some doughnuts,” Sara said.

5.

May 10. 2230 hours:

Paula blinked gray-green irises, brushed shoulder length curly auburn tresses from her face. She lay semi-reclined in an office chair, Reebok-shod bare feet propped on a Formica lab bench top

next to the cold chamber. She patted both cheeks to restore circulation, stared through half-lidded eyes at the uninvited visitor. “Must have dozed off.”

“Naughty girl. You snuck in a nap,” Sara said. “Our new friend tell you anything?”

“Had a dream. Can’t remember . . .”

“Here’s coffee.”

“You made fresh?”

“Yesterday’s. I got fresh doughnuts, though.”

A tired smile as Paula slurped the rancid brew and made a gagging sound. “Better than no coffee, I guess.” She snagged a strawberry glazed Krispy Kreme, took a bite.

“Any brainstorm, boss?”

“I’m in cortical synapse gridlock, Sara. Nothing yet.”

Sara chose a chocolate glazed pastry with green sprinkles. “You could be hypoglycemic. Try another of these.”

She did.

“I took a sample with a glass pipet. Take a look,” Sara said.

Dr. Lynch viewed the gas chromatograph printout, brows wrinkled in concentration. “Not room air. No oxygen or nitrogen. Those little spikes are rare gases. Xenon, radon. Helium and hydrogen nuclei. Particulate matter. And temp approaching absolute zero. Explains your frostbite, Sara.”

An involuntary shiver. “Don’t remind me.”

“I’ve seen this before.” Paula gulped more coffee, brought up an image on the computer screen. “Take a look.”

“My God,” Sara whispered. “Where’d you get that?”

“JPL website. Outside sample from the Apollo Twelve mission, 17 November, 1969. On their way to the Moon.”

“It’s identical to our friend here.”

“It’s a piece of interplanetary space, or a perfect replica,” Paula said as she stood transfixed, eyes shut tight. “Why me?”

“You okay, boss?”

“Huh? What, Sara?”

“You were away somewhere. I’ll make more coffee.”

6.

Wednesday, May 11. 0400 Hours:

The aberration hovered three feet over the cold chamber with an insolent gray pulsation. Paula’s sigh of frustration was palpable. “Talk to me. I’m listening.”

“How about we zap it with a dose of antigravitons,” Sara said as she poured fresh coffee. “Send it back to wherever it came from.”

“I don’t think it’ll work.”

“Okay if I try?”

No response.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Sara pressed RUN PROGRAM. A blink of soft light encompassed the stranger, then faded. The entity flickered, unmoved.

“I’m not surprised,” Paula muttered. “It’s waiting.”

“Say what?”

“Thinking out loud, Sara. Damn computer’s frozen up now.”

“I pound a fist on my TV set sometimes.”

“You’re suggesting I punch out a piece of highly sensitive and expensive piece of NASA equipment?”

Sara stirred CoffeeMate in her coffee. “Try it.”

“Can’t,” Paula said with a sigh of frustration. “Budget constraints.” She swore for a full ten seconds without a repeat.

Sara winced. “I’m impressed, boss.”

An apologetic flush. “Sorry, Sara. My Dad’s influence. He was . . . When I was twelve I was a regular visitor to the Principal’s office. Lasted fifteen minutes at cheerleader tryouts in . . .”

A startled blink. He was? You mean . . .?”

“Navy SEAL. He was killed in action in Afghanistan. 2002. Raid on a Taliban and Al Qaeda encampment . I was still in graduate school.”

“Geez, Paula. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

Paula blotted away a tear, squeezed her eyelids tight. “Ancient history, Sara. But I still miss him.”

Dr. Iverson’s coffee cup shattered on the deck as she stared. “Paula?”

“Sara?”

“It’s moved.”

The visitor hovered over a lab bench next to the cold chamber.

”Yell at it again.”

Dr. Lynch dumped tepid coffee down the sink, poured hot, blew to cool it, glared. “You are beginning to piss me off. Big time.” she snarled in an ice-crusting mutter.

The curiosity made a slow descent to the bench top and was enveloped in a frosty cloud of vapor.

7.

Sara yelled, "Whatever you just did, Paula, take it back."

A sudden eye blink. "I didn't do anything."

The entity retracted to its original position, leaving a through and through frost-rimmed defect.

"You scared it, boss," Sara said, eyes wide with wonder.

"Ridiculous."

"I'm serious. It reacted when you yelled at it."

A dismissive head shake. "Get more samples, please."

Sara inserted a glass probe tip and withdrew a cubic millimeter sample. The microanalyzer spewed out results seconds later.

Paula stared in dismay. "You sure you got everything?"

"A nanomicon couldn't have escaped."

A repeat sample was identical. "Ionized metal and Formica hydrocarbons," Sara said. "Impossible. Matter was disrupted."

"It didn't disassemble your hand," Paula said.

An involuntary shiver. "Just froze it."

Paula twisted a stray curl around an index finger. "It's selective. Didn't affect glass or my paper airplane. It's something more . . ."

8.

Wednesday, May 11, 0723 hours:

Beep of Paula's cell phone. "Sergeant Williamson, Dr. Lynch. Base Security. I have U.S. Air Force Major David P. Snyder here. Top D.O.D. clearance. Fingerprint and DNA scan confirm."

“Show him in, Sergeant.”

Paula’s office held a desk, two chairs, a bookcase filled with textbooks and tech manuals, G-6 PowerMac, coffee maker and a framed classic Blade Runner movie poster on one wall. A framed photo of her father in his Lieutenant’s uniform rested one corner of the desk, a Navy SEAL trident emblem adorning his chest. She pushed a stack of paperwork to one of the chairs and stood. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“David Snyder,” the tall, angular Air Force officer introduced himself.

Paula offered a tentative handshake. “Pentagon Security, I assume.”

“Correct, Professor. Some questions regarding your recent unauthorized internet inquiries, Dr Lynch” he said.

He gave Sara a calculating glance. “And you are, Miss?”

“Sara Joanne Iverson. I’m the Prof’s associate. Ph.D candidate. Subatomic physics.” She stood close, touched his collar insignia. “Gold oak leaf. Nice uniform, Major. You’re kinda cute. Getcha some coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

“You married?”

A blush. Mop of his sandy crewcut with a regulation blue handkerchief. “Where is it, ladies?”

Paula led the way to the gravity laboratory. “Yours, I assume.”

The problem hovered over the perforated laboratory bench with a taunting gray flicker. Major Snyder approached warily, gave his chin a speculative rub. “Never saw it up close before. Only as a blip on a radar screen,” he admitted.

Major Snyder handed Dr. Lynch a single-spaced Xerox copy. “This is our problem.”

Sara bounced on tiptoes to peer over the six-foot two-inch Major’s shoulders. “Why is most of it blacked out?”

“Security.”

A skeptical single eyelid squint. “You’re really a CIA spook, right?”

Paula donned rimless reading glasses and read. “Groom Lake? That’s Area 51. Ultra classified research facility. My clearance doesn’t go this high, Major. Sara’s either.”

9.

A sarcastic giggle from Sara. “Area 51? You guys made Roswell a major tourist attraction. Get your photo with a real space alien. Five bucks. What kind of kickbacks do you get?”

Major Snyder ignored her. He unzipped his attache case, opened a manila folder. “These photos are authentic. Alien craft and its pilot. Sorry about resolution. Best they had in 1947.”

“They’re fake.” Sara whispered.

“Hush,” Paula admonished. “Go on, Major?”

“They recovered its weapons system. You have it now.”

“So how come your alien pals took off without it?” Sara asked with a derisive snicker.

He gave a nervous tug at his uniform collar. “Nobody knows. The military stayed on alert for a year after July 1947. Speculation was the pilot must have been lost, light-years off course.”

“So why did it come here?” Sara asked.

“Wish I knew. It’s been parked in a geosynchronous orbit one hundred fifty thousand miles over the Florida Keys since 1947.”

“It dropped in on us at about 2100 hours EDT.” Paula said.

“The time zones match close enough,” Major Snyder confirmed. “At 1823 hours PDT the Groom Lake tracking center reported it missing. First time it’s moved in almost sixty-five years.”

“Our test affected its gravitational field,” Paula said. “And something else. Attraction . . .”.

“This is where it gets weird,” the Major said.

“Not as weird as you and your CIA buddies” Sara accused.

“My office,” Paula said with an anxious glance at their odd visitor.

10.

“Explain, please?” Paula said.

“Please bear with me,” Major Snyder pleaded. “Does the name Alfred Schumacher ring any bells?”

“Came to the U.S. after Germany’s surrender in 1945,” Paula said. “An expert in rocket technology, colleague of Werner Von Braun.”

Sara gaped. “How can you know that?”

“WWII history course my freshman year at Stanford.”

“He was assigned to the Groom Lake research center in June 1947,” the Major said.

A nod from Paula. “In time for Roswell.”

“Professor Schumacher had a unique gift. He could communicate with the alien device, move it within and over the Area 51 complex.”

“Thought control weapon,” Paula said with an intuitive nod.

“Thought control my ass,” Sara snorted. “You Pentagon guys watch too much SciFi Channel.”

“Really? What would you call it?” Major Snyder prompted.

“Oh my God,” she gasped, eyes wide, her mouth a startled O. “Paula made it move.”

11.

“I just yelled at it,” Dr. Lynch claimed.

“She scared it,” Sara insisted.

“I got its attention,” Paula said.

Sara reached around, snagged the Xerox page. “We saw these numbers when your computer threatened us. What do they mean?”

The Major grabbed the page back. “R-GL 1041. Project COLD LIGHT. It’s a classified Air Force investigative report. I only read it on my way from Washington.”

“It reacted when I was upset.”

“Three times,” Sara affirmed. “Froze my fingers, then chewed that hole in the lab bench.”

The Pentagon Security man consulted several pages of hardcopy. “Professor Schumacher could make it ionize metal with cold.”

“Oh wow,” Sara gasped. “It could zap other UFOs.”

A bemused breath from Paula. “Professor Schumacher was in tune with it.”

Sudden dimming of the office lights and the anomaly hovered expectantly over her desk.

“Yikes! She did it again.” Sara yelled.

“It’s on my frequency now,” Paula said.

A whistle of awe from Major Snyder. He held up a page. “Here it is. ‘It’s attuned to me.’ Quote Alfred Schumacher, 8 July 1947.”

“Wow,” Sara breathed, eyes wide with wonder. “And nobody else could . . .?”

Another page flipped. “Thirty others besides Schumacher tried. Scientists with I.Q.’s of one hundred eighty plus. One could change its degree of brightness. Bunch of frostbite cases. And now you . . .”

A puzzled grin from Paula. “So you’re saying I’m Mozart to their Salieri?”

She blinked. The aberration disappeared in a frosty cloud of vapor, leaving a roughly cubic defect in the office ceiling. “Better move away from the desk, Sara, Major.”

An instant later an identical defect appeared next to the first. The alien weapon took its position over Paula's desk, emitting its frigid vapor.

"Holy moley," Sara howled. "Major?"

"You told it to . . .?"

"I visualized it orbiting the planet and returning."

"Schumacher never moved it that far," Major Snyder whispered as he scrawled longhand notes in the margins of the Xerox page.

"His dying effort put it in orbit," Paula said. "It had no homing capability, so it was stranded. It just parked itself and waited."

"For you? So you say. I can't believe . . ."

"It has faster than light capability," Paula revealed.

Sara tugged at a loose strand of ash blond bangs. "How . . .?"

"It told me. A mental heads-up display."

"Is it alive?" the Major asked.

"No. It's just a tool. It cannot initiate action on its own. It reacts to my cognitive input."

"How does it function?" the Major asked. "What fuel?"

"Self-sustaining reaction. Hydrogen ions, neutrinos, gamma rays. The science is eons ahead of us."

Major Snyder pocketed his pen, folded the Xerox sheet and stuffed it in a breast pocket. "The Pentagon will need you at Groom Lake. I'll arrange for a flight . . ."

There was a blink of light. The alien weapon hovered a foot from Snyder's face. "I don't think so," Paula said.

The Major shielded his eyes from the brilliance with a hand. “This is obstruction of a military investigation, Professor Lynch.”

“It’s very protective,” Paula warned. “ Any threat against me . . .”

“Yeah,” Sara agreed. “You wouldn’t want your spook bosses to find you turned into a Popsicle.”

“No I wouldn’t,” Major Snyder agreed with an involuntary shiver. He unfolded the Xerox sheet and placed it in the COLD LIGHT folder. “The Pentagon will want an answer.”

“You drew a blank, Major,” Paula told him. “Your computer hit was a random event. Ask for funding for a continued search.”

“I understand.” The door eased shut behind him.

“Well that was exciting,” Sara declared. “Want some more coffee?”

A vigorous headshake. “Please no, Sara. My kidneys are floating.”

Sara slurped from a fresh cup. “So what else do we know about your new accomplice?”

“It showed me precise details of its orbit around our planet. Better resolution than our most sophisticated satellites can attain.”

“What will you do?” Sara asked.

“I’ll think of something.”

“Can I help?”

12.

Saturday, May 21. 0230 hours. Fox Eleven Breaking news:

The Pakistani government reports the total destruction of an Al Qaeda training camp in the Kashmir region. Sixty terrorists were found frozen to death. A freak Arctic storm is suspected to be the cause. Updates to follow . . .

The End