

Is Anybody Out There?

by James Lynn Smith

The loneliness ached. But he would not stop searching. He tweaked the transmission frequency to another setting and said, “Hello. Is anybody out there?” After waiting a few seconds, he repeated his question and changed the frequency a notch. Again, he uttered his appeal, noting it was almost plaintive. “If anybody can hear me, please respond. I’m scanning all frequency bands.”

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Dreams about the psi-q blast still invaded his sleep. When it first happened bodies lay everywhere, but no inanimate objects were harmed. Engines continued to purr in snarled traffic until they exhausted their fuel. Bodies slumped in seats where live drivers and passengers had been planning their day. *Why was I spared?* Robert recalled passing through a deep tunnel under the river in the subway car. It would have lessened the psi-q penetration, but it was more than that. Passengers around him fell to the floor. He didn’t notice immediately, his view obstructed by the large package he carried front of him. That package contained a panel made from a unique, proprietary alloy. *It must have acted as a deflector.* He remembered his shock after hearing the impact on the floor and peeking around his package. Eleven people lay on the floor, legs and arms awry, with no evidence of what happened. He had been travelling to the Federal Agency for Secure Processing Activity, FASPA, to install voice recognition equipment. Instructions required that he bring the package from the Central Meta-Dimensions Laboratory to FASPA to make his installation. He’d shipped his other materials, tools, and equipment there

already. The special panel he carried would enclose the front part of his installation.

When the subway automatically stopped at the next above-ground exit, he bolted out. Stepping over the once-living obstructions on the walkways, profound alarm blanked his mind of any goal other than getting to the FASPA. Finally arriving, it was still early morning. The front door was open, the automatic admittance process still pending due to an employee having fallen short of complete entry. Slipping past the hapless worker and the collapsed guard inside he stood in the lobby, confused about his next move. Confusion turned to dismay when he saw that his entrance cued the front doors to close. Running back toward them too late, he heard sliding and clanking sounds like doors of a prison shutting behind a felon.

It was weeks later when, searching through the FASPA complex, he discovered the communications console. It appeared to be a vastly improved, commercial, duplex version of the old ham radio his grandfather used.

The receiver also had a series of tuners that could simultaneously scan different parts of the frequency spectrum. The FASPA complex was huge so he felt the broadcast range for communications must be significant.

Robert hoped that someone else may have survived and found a similar console so he could contact them. He also feared that his first contact might be that of an occupational force. But the passage of time with no contact meant there had either been a complete war of annihilation or a tragic accident of unprecedented scale. Any contact would be positive.

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“Is anyone out there? Please answer on any frequency.” The plea was broadcast day after day. He tried to remember how long he had been in the FASPA complex *Months, seems longer*. The fraying cuffs of his shirt attested to time

passage. He had only two shirts on hand, and both were a vibrant but well-worn blue.

He rolled his sleeves to reduce cuff wear and idly flipped through the operator's manual past the section on automatic send and receive. Feeling that his personal presence increased the odds of contact, he never used automatic features. Pushing the manual away, he pulled the mike near again and repeated his appeal.

After several more minutes of searching for contact, Robert sighed and swiveled around in his console chair, looking at his cluttered "apartment." After finding the console and removing bodies from the area, he'd decided to make it his center of operations and residence. The area had been a sizeable vestibule just outside a large top-secret conference room. He had already found food pantries for the cafeteria downstairs. In a break room, he had found a couch and pulled it nearby for a bed.

Robert could only sit for so long before getting depressed. He pushed back from the console and prepared to stand when he heard it.

A faint signal. It sounded like voice. He plopped back and scooted his chair forward, grabbing for the tuner control.

The signal was broken by static and discontinuity but it was definitely a voice. "Can you...me...Can anyone...this call."

Robert tweaked the reception band to fine tuning and pulled the mike to him. "Your signal is received, caller. Stay on your current frequency."

"Oh my God, you hear this? Finally, someone is alive out there." It was a female voice. "I was beyond desperate. Who is talking? Is this the military?"

His voice quavered and he laughed as tears wet his eyes. "No this is Robert Norson. I can't tell you how glad I am to hear a live voice. I'm transmitting from a government complex, FASPA for short." Who are you? What is your situation?"

"This is Linda Mayfield. I'm a research technologist at Howard Health

Institute. I'm locked in a secure facility. I came in from the stockroom and saw my fellow researchers dead on the floor. The doors emergency-locked. From video monitors in here I saw other bodies outside. No damage to equipment or structure. At first I wondered if it was a pathogen we unleashed accidentally. But I'm still here."

Robert wondered briefly how much to say. *Is she really who and what she seems?* But feeling the impetus for deception and spies unlikely, he said, "No, Linda. It's worse than pathogens. I'm not a government official or agent, but I've kept up with events and have an idea."

"So what do you think?"

"Ever since scientists verified existence of the psi-dimension and psi mental waves, political despots have been trying to create a people-killing weapon that would preserve cities and technology."

"So our country responded in kind as a deterrent in this dangerous game."

"Most likely. Being in the psi-dimension, this weapon would wipe out the mind and the life force it governs. That's what I figure has happened. Our country and our enemy have destroyed each other. Psi-q blasts may have wiped out 99 percent of humanity."

"God, that's awful." She sobbed and paused to gain control. "I was afraid it was something like that, but being isolated, I didn't know for sure."

"Linda, do you have what you need there?"

"This is a large complex and fortunately I can access a break room where Autodine equipment still serves meals. Apparently all facilities still operate."

"Someday, they will require human intervention to continue. You say you are locked in?"

"Yes, security isolates us from the outside, but I need both my ID verification and that of a live guard on the other side to get out. Do you have any

ideas of how I can get out of here?”

“Unfortunately, I’m in the same situation. I was a contract visitor to FASPA, and now I am also trapped.”

“You say you are not in government. Is it safe to ask what do you do, Robert? Your contract work.”

“I’m called a voc-aural recognition engineer. That deals with speech recognition, cognition and programmable neural networks.”

“That sounds deep.”

“Sometimes it is. I was here to install a panel with speech control for some prototype equipment. I don’t know what it was for. I didn’t program it beyond basic functions. They were to do that. Top secret stuff.”

“This may sound abrupt, but did you ever do any work on robots?”

“Oh yes. But just for speech and aural cognition.” He almost felt apologetic, sensing where she might be headed. “Limbs and movement, that’s someone else’s bailiwick. Robots have been around a long time. Started with programmed manufacturing and voice operated order systems for telephones.”

“So you never built an automaton that cleans the house and has conversations with you?”

He laughed, appreciative of her sensing discomfort and injecting humor. “Still a bit ahead of us. That pursuit was stymied by funds being channeled to psi-dimension research.”

“Speech cognition systems on computers are amazing. In my bio research, it’s almost like talking to your favorite nerd. Just a lot faster.”

Robert noticed her manner was now light-hearted, despite concern about their predicament. “I may have installed the same equipment your computers have,” he said.

“It’s too bad you don’t make the mobile power trains. Otherwise you might

build a super automaton that would tear doors down and get us out.”

He realized she had skillfully broached the thorny issue. “I wish I could, but such creations take dozens of teams and the resources of huge installations.”

For a moment she was quiet, but graciously switched gears. “I’m still doing some bio research here. I have to do something to keep from going bonkers. If I ever get out and other people are found alive, it may be helpful. We still haven’t conquered all autoimmune diseases, thanks to funding crunches.”

“The psi-q funding drain probably.”

“A timer is going off on one of my experiments. I’ve got to attend to it and finally get something to eat from the Autodine. Please don’t disappear.”

“Don’t worry. Keep your settings where they are. We’ll do more of this soon. I’ll send a call signal later.”

He placed the com-status to standby, pushed his chair back and stretched. It felt marvelous to have made contact with a flesh and blood human being. Though vague, he felt the beginnings of a goal. Linda’s notion of building an automaton to crash the doors was impractical. That occurred to him before and he discarded it, but still the idea resonated with him. *No way can I do that in here, but*—The flash of another idea almost formed, but then it vanished. He glanced about and decided to organize his computer work station for pursuits ahead.

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Shortly after having found the communications console, Robert had brought a computer terminal to his area from one of the work stations in a FARPA office. He finally hacked into the central mainframe and servers. Some folders were protected from access, but he created his own folders for storing pertinent data. Access to the outside world information network soon failed. Then he discovered a link to the on-site digital library. It was extremely encyclopedic about external and internal matters. If ever he found a way to get out, some information would likely

come from the library. Also he and Linda could put their heads together. Memory of her voice inspired speculation on her appearance. Graceful, strong, feminine, and interesting. He imagined her as a brunette, then a blond, between five-five and five-eight in height.

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Robert went to the cafeteria pantry, withdrew a preserved meal, and took it to the break room near his console area. As he opened and heated the contents, he remembered the idea that had escaped him. *There's voice activated, heavy machinery in the city.* If he could get copies of the operational syntax and find a way to send signals, he might gain control of some equipment. This machinery took voice commands both directly and through remote control connections. In theory, he could get it to rupture one of the entrances.

To understand his resources, he needed knowledge about his environment. The first questions were what is the Federal Agency for Secure Processing Activity? And exactly what did the FASPA do?

He used both vocal and keyboard queries in his research. Little by little he came to understand. The FASPA was a top secret facility in psi-dimension research and implementation. It was also a plant for prototype manufacturing of military weaponry. He now felt wary of exploration. *How do I know that psi-dimension stuff is contained? What might I unleash?*

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Placing the call signal to Linda, Robert was prepared to wait with his cup of hot brew within reach. Sooner than expected he heard the response.

“That you, Robert? Be right with you, I’m closing some files now...So how is your day?”

“Monitor shows it’s sunny out. We’ll have to use our imagination inside.”

“I’m in a sunny mood anyway talking to you. It’s so good to visit even if our

bodies are in different places. It makes it all bearable.

“I’ve begun to think about some things. It’s a long shot, but better than being clueless why I get up in the morning.”

“What about?”

“The automaton to break us out. I can’t make one, but maybe I can at learn how to remotely activate one on the outside.”

“Well, that’s better than buttons on a zipper.”

That sounded familiar to Robert. “Interesting expression for ‘better than useless.’ Where’d that come from?”

“I guess it’s my upbringing. It’s been hiding in memory since I was a kid. And here in 2067 I talk with you and it simply pops out. Amazing how stuff hangs on like that.”

“Wait. You say 2067? That’s what my computer clock says and that’s seven years later than the time it should be. The psi-q blast day was November 2059 and I’ve been locked up in here for months, not years. I figured the blast somehow affected clocks in here since this facility is connected with psi-dimension work. But you have the same time too?”

“I didn’t hear...last part Rob...Can you...” The connection was breaking up.

He recalled the weather sensors indicated significant solar flare activity. They would have to connect again later.

*

Robert moved to his computer workstation. He opened non-classified directories related to the physical layout of the complex, especially his area. Exploring the folders one-by-one, he scanned contents to determine what may be important for further probing. Nothing appeared to be blocked except one folder that required a password. It was entitled “Operation Surrogate - location 112.” Opening a layout map on his screen to view what location the folder contents

referred to, he found that it was in a hallway nearby. Robert pushed back from his workstation and went to that hallway. After walking about 30 steps he stopped at a metal panel in the wall with an entry latch. Letters on the panel read “Location 112.” Noting a keypad, he tried the latch anyway to confirm it was locked, and returned to his computer terminal.

Now his questions were more specific. *Does “surrogate” refer to a military human substitute? Did they actually make prototypes of androids here? What’s behind that locked panel?* He needed a program to try random passwords and open that folder which likely contained the combination for the keypad. The rest of the day he searched the library until he found what he wanted. Downloading the password program to his local terminal disk, he activated it and left it running while he went for a meal.

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After eating, Robert decided to contact Linda again. Sensors indicated less solar flare activity. He sent his call signal and received an immediate response.

“This is Bio-lab Bistro. What’s your pleasure? Delicious agar *avec* cellular pathogens or toxic *hors d’oeuvres au* petri dish?”

“Just had a meal,” Robert said. “But if you included a gallon of chardonnay with that, I think I would go for it.”

“That’s a thought. Why waste time on autoimmune research when I could simply get wasted? That might be the best way to survive isolation.”

“Good luck. This place has no spirits at all. Strictly a workplace for the somber and sober.

“How’s your remote control project going? Figured out yet how to talk outside machines into battering our doors in?”

“I wish it were that easy.” Robert told her about needing to discover more about his environment and its resources. He had to research syntax for machines

and get programs to search for activation passwords. “Then I need to devise some sort of feedback response so I know what machines are doing and where they are. All this takes time.”

“Whoa, I’m not pressuring you. I just feel so grateful that we can talk. It makes a world of difference. I’ve been thinking up some what-ifs of my own to pass the time.”

“Like?”

What if a lone female pilot had all the necessities for making a super robot and was sent into space on a long trip? If she built a robot for company, how could she make it be like another person?”

“That would be an android,” He said. “You’re concerned about lack of originality because the pilot could only program her own knowledge and behaviors?”

“Yeah, like being with a copy of yourself. Is that twice as lonely?”

“Maybe. You’d have to take on different assignments. Read different books so you could converse.”

“The game here is that you don’t have other things to learn from.” She laughed. “You only have each other.”

“Wow, that cuts to the chase. I guess you’d have to program the android early, put her to sleep, wait for years until you had forgotten most everything, and then wake her for informative chats.”

“What makes you think it’s a *her*? Just kidding. But I would not like waiting so long. That’s not a good solution either is it?”

The patter continued until they were talked out. It had been fun, but Robert knew he had a lot of research to do. He checked his workstation. No password yet. The program continued to churn away, so he turned in and slept better than he had in many nights.

*

He went to his workstation the next morning. As his hands approached the keyboard, a blinking widow popped onto the screen announcing “Operation Surrogate Password: Godthink1.”

Robert looked for his blue and gold pen, but couldn’t find it. Finding a less desirable substitute, he wrote the password down and activated the voice receiver. “Godthink-one,” he said. Instantly the folder opened to yield a complex subdirectory structure. He tested several sub-folders. Most were dummies or contained redundant data. *Probably makes access slower for the unauthorized.*

One folder entitled “Apex Data” opened with a warning. “Continue only if prepared to accept that what appears real may not be.”

So what is not real? I’m not really locked in? Psi waves are a hoax? ... Well, no. The psi-q blast answers that one. One subfolder was entitled “Background” and another “Location 112” Opening the one for background, his eyes devoured the contents.

He learned that FASPA did not develop psi-q blast technology, but used psi-dimension knowledge to insure secrecy by creating human memory record, erase, and download technology. Daily, the psi system would selectively tag and collect memory and any discoveries in an employee’s work. Small chips embedded near the hairline just behind the ear transmitted mental data to the central psi receiver in the plant. Before leaving, the psi system would erase this collected knowledge from their minds so they could not reveal secrets to an enemy, even if captured and tortured. The erasure did not affect memory of events outside the complex or what they knew before joining FASPA. When they came back the next day, the psi system would implant the last stored information back into each employee for another day’s work. One picture showed the center for memory erasure and download. A series of padded recliners had wrist contacts on the arm rests and gear

resembling a helmet with wires which was lowered over the employees head.

Robert winced and stopped reading. Mind invasion could go way beyond security. Yet curious about where the psi system center was located, he read more and discovered it was not far from the lobby he entered earlier. He would walk there later and see for himself.

Opening the subfolder "Location 112" he found several files of interest. The one entitled "Passphrase" stood out and he opened it. It simply read "Keypad entry to Location 112 is 112059." He made a note of this and put it in his pocket to pursue later. For now he merely wanted an overview before doing research on voice-operated heavy equipment.

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Day after day, Robert talked with Linda and worked hard. He took the slow progress in stride, but not Linda. She was not the one with a liberation plan. Health research for people who may not even be alive began to appear futile, and he sensed that she became despondent, perhaps suicidal.

"Most every challenge takes longer than you think, Linda," He said. "You may not see real daylight yet, but we have reason to hope."

"I know you want to inspire me, but I can't help this mood. And I feel guilty about not being able to give you a boost."

"Listen carefully. You are part of the reason I continue to exist. You are doing your part by being alive. I expect you to honor that life. Understand?"

"I appreciate what you are trying to do."

"We can get caught in drudgery and lose sight of possibilities. Let's lighten up a bit and think about something else. Where were you born?"

"Burgast, Ohio. A neo-exurb of Cincinnati."

"And your mother's name?"

"It was Laura."

Thinking about mothers brought an image of his own to mind. She was saying “better than buttons on a zipper.” *That’s exactly the expression Linda used when I was just getting to know her.* But it was not a common saying. He then remembered this was a term his mother had made up at the moment. *How could Linda have uttered the same thing?* “Linda, the expression you used some time back ‘better than buttons on a zipper.’ Where did you hear that?”

“I guess it’s my upbringing.”

That response also sounded familiar to him. “Think, Linda. Where?”

Her voice quavered. “I don’t...Creator design.”

It didn’t make sense to him. *What does “creator design” mean?*

Before he could pursue it further, she began sobbing. “I’ve got to go. I can’t take it anymore. I’m so sorry Robert.”

“Linda, don’t do anything drastic. I’m depending on you.”

The signal broke off and Robert shuttered. *People commit suicide under distress.* Somehow he needed to accelerate his plan. Maybe Location 112 had something that would help. He imagined a powerful, benevolent being behind the panel that would help him break out and get to Linda. No matter how absurd, he had to do something.

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Robert ran down the hallway to Location 112. He punched in the numbers 112059 and turned the latch. The panel door opened to a maze of dials, wires, displays, and control buttons. It was some sort of prototype, computer-driven system. He studied the labels on displays and controls. Curiously, objects resembling a miniature mike and a tiny speaker cone were visible. Two buttons, one labeled “Autonomous Response Test” and the other “Response Repeat” caught his attention. He pushed “Response Repeat” and nothing happened. “Hello,” he said. Still nothing. “Is anybody out there?” he added.

Sound came from the tiny speaker cone. “Oh my God, you hear this? Finally, someone is alive out there.” It sounded like Linda’s voice.

He felt sure these were her first words to him. *Why has this been recorded?* He surmised this was a recording system that plays back a response to a previously spoken query. Apparently an advanced communications monitor. “All our conversations recorded,” he muttered. Still feeling emotional pressure to act, Robert remembered he had not investigated the psi system center where employees had their memories downloaded and erased. Without any idea of how this could help, he paced briskly toward the center.

Letters on the door read PSDE. He guessed that might be for “Psi System Download and Erasure.” Inside, it looked very much the same as the pictures he had seen on-line. The recliners with high narrow tables attached to one side resembled dental chairs. Robert moved to the closest one and saw something familiar. The blue and gold pen he had been missing was on a table. *But this is my first visit, so how did that get there?* The notion of someone else snooping around was almost a relief until another thought crossed his mind. Robert felt this throat constricting.

Turning away from the center he raced back toward Location 112. He arrived winded and jerked the unclosed door open wider, found the second button “Autonomous Response Test” and punched it. He took a deep breath. “Who are you and why are you here?”

“My name is Linda Mayfield, and—I am not there. I am locked in a secure facility in Howard Health Institute.

Part of that answer was not a recording. It was an original response. His face paled as racing thoughts battered his psyche: Linda knew his mother’s expression, the seven year lapse was real and his pen was in the psi system center. The only common denominator was...him.

He had created Linda.

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In the seven years he thought was a computer clock error, he had utilized resources of the FASPA complex to contrive a companion. The computer files he later discovered were also of his making. Tedious work in voc-aural engineering, recognition, and cognition finally resulted in an entity that emulated human response. Unable to create a physical presence, he produced what he could. A vocal being so true it could infuse love into his solitary existence. Passion drove the endeavor. It was consummated by having the psi system wipe his memory so he could *discover* Linda.

Robert reached behind his ear and felt the imbedded lump beneath his hair line. With shoulders slumping, he ruefully gazed into Location 112. *What am I going to do?* His Linda could not hear his thoughts.

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Three months later, a man approached the communications console. He appeared unfamiliar with it. Rolling the sleeves of his blue shirt past the worn cuffs, he sat and knitted his brows. His only recent memories were the psi-q blast, entering the FASPA lobby, and being sealed in. Also unsteadily walking from a room with letters PSDE on the door. Reaching forward he brought the mike close, pressed the send button, and then began his search. “Is anybody out there?...Hello.”

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