



HERB ASIDE

A Tale of Terrifying Humor

What follows in these pages is the tale of two individuals trapped in a cage with a broken lock and a lost set of keys. They are about to solve an improbable mystery, the goal of many before them and countless many still to come.

©2019 David Woodruff – all rights reserved

It was unnerving. Everything about this place was strange and wonderful at the same time. It was definitely a prison, but the most unusual prison Herb could imagine. Most cages were small, but this one was huge; about the size of a city block. And the smell. You wouldn't believe the smell. It was like a cloud of apple blossoms. Herb and Al had spent a great deal of time, in the beginning, exploring it. Naturally they were looking for a way out, but there was none to be had. The walls, ceiling, and even the floor were immensely thick pieces of glass.

Both Herb and Al had unclear memories of their early life. Herb had the impression of a crowded environment filled with thousands of souls, a vague impression of a competitive, but joyful struggle to survive. But his memory of this time was clouded and hazy.

Now their world was contained in four transparent walls. It was where they grew up. Where their real-life began, their adulthood. Herb couldn't say much for the architecture, because there wasn't any. Not a structure in sight. The place was filled with mountains of food and there was enough fresh water to fill a thousand swimming pools. The good news was Herb and Al wouldn't starve to death. It took them quite some time to recognize who their captors were. They were massive, absolutely massive. Herb couldn't imagine a creature of their size even existing. They moved in ultra-slow motion. Which is why Herb and Al didn't notice them right off.

Al blinked his eyes. "What do you think they are doing?"

"Watching us," Herb replied.

"How can you tell."

"Look at the eyes. Those huge unblinking eyes."

"Yea, they do seem to be pointed in our direction. How big do you think they are?"

"Their eyes?"

"Yea. Would you say ten times our size?"

"I don't know. Probably closer to twenty times, maybe more. Can you imagine the mass?"

"What bothers me is how they don't ever seem to blink. It's chilling."

Herb's tone took on a resigned quality, almost a form of tacit acceptance. "Yea. I know." The two creatures wore colorless clothing which seemed uncomfortable. Hard, as if washed in heavy starch. Was it a uniform? Herb couldn't tell. It seemed to lack any evidence of insignia or rank. As he was thinking this, Herb's eyes changed, taking on a glowing quality. Herb was filled with excitement. "Let's both walk in a circle, counterclockwise at the same time."

Al sounded confused. "What for?"

Herb excitement never let down for a minute. "Just look at them. They're studying us. I say we mess with them. Let's make them think we have a specialized way of communicating. What do you say?"

Al slowly warmed to the idea. Maybe Herb was right. If they were studying us, it might be a good idea to mess with their perceptions, change the results. "Yea, okay. I only have one question."

“What?”

“Which way is counterclockwise?”

“Just turn to your right and keep walking in a circle.” They glanced at each other and nodded. “On your mark, get set, go.”

“Do you think this is working?” Al inquired in an excited voice.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to tell, they never seem to move.”

“This is making me dizzy,” Al complained.

“Okay, we’ll stop together, on the count of three. Ready? One. Two. Three.”

Al took a moment to catch his breath, wheezing and huffing as if he’d just finish jogging around the street. “Do you think it worked?”

Herb seemed pleased. It appeared they had generated a response. “Look!” Herb shouted, “they’re writing something down.” Herb was elated.

“Can you read what it says?”

Herb was indignant. “What, I’m an expert in alien languages all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” Al sounded a little annoyed, “I’m only asking.”

Herb and Al found it odd, not only did the creatures seem unchanging, but the food never went bad. The creatures never changed it. It was always fresh. Of course, this interfered with Herb’s main plan of escape. Exiting the cage when they came to replace the food. I was a little unsettling though, the floor the food was on was the same floor where they had to relieve themselves. Seriously unsanitary. Herb and Al always went in one corner and then ate from the top of the pile in the far corner. It made their captors scribble notes, which pleased Herb to no end.

Al, however, had long given up caring ... since they couldn’t read what was being written anyway. Maybe it was all mindless scribbling. Or they were simply drawing pictures, doodles. Who could tell? “I think one of them is female,” Al commented.

“What makes you think one’s a female?”

“The one on the right has longer hair.”

Herb squinted. “Well, if the other one’s a male, it makes sense. He keeps looking over at her.”

“The furtive glances?” Al replied.

Herb took a good, long look. “Yea, and the way she notices, but pretends not to notice, you know?”

“It’s like she wants him to notice but doesn’t want him to do anything else but notice.”

Herb contemplated the scene. “It’s like she’s playing a game. It was if his glances reinforced her self-esteem, but she wants to keep him at arm’s length.”

“Hey, you two,” Al yelled at the glass, “get a room.” They laughed. Al sounded excited. “Take a gander at what’s going on now. He’s glancing and she coyly turning the other direction.” They both watched intensely. “Now she’s writing something down.”

Herb was caught up in the event. “Do you think she is writing about him?”

Al got irate. “What, now I’m the alien language expert?”

Both Al and Herb panicked when they went away. Had they lost interest? For quite some time they worried about starvation, but the food always tasted the same. If they could only learn this food preservation secret and escape, they could revolutionize the food industry. They’d be rich beyond their wildest dreams. A vast amount of time passed where no one watched Herb and Al. Eventually, they became used to it. Al started to get cramps in his legs. Both Herb and Al showed signs of age. First it was the odd grey hair or two, followed by full streaks. None of this was surprising. What was surprising was when the two creatures returned.

Al crept close to the glass. “Why do you think they came back?”

Herb gave him a wry grin. “I’ve no idea. Maybe they want to study our aging process.”

“I guess that theory works as well as anything else.” Al paused, straining his eyes to see through the glass. “Can you believe it,” Al croaked, “They look the same as I remember them. They haven’t changed a bit. Not even a single grey hair. See his eyes? My eyes used to look like he does ... but not for some time now.”

“You’re right. It’s uncanny.”

“Do you think they live forever?”

Herb paused to think. “You think they might be immortal?”

“Might explain why they are studying our aging process,” Al concluded. “What happens when we get really old?” Al came close to shivering as he described this scenario. “What if we get sick? Do you think they just sit around and watch us die?”

Herb cleared his throat. “I’m not sure what prospect is worse, dying in agony or them watch us dispassionately while as we die in agony.”

Occasionally, Herb and Al continued to attempt to perform odd stunts to feed the alien's false data. They enjoyed watching the two creatures madly scribbling in their notebooks. But as time went on those occurrences diminished. Especially after Al fell over. The two of them were trying to hold onto handstands for as long as they could manage them. It had been easier when they were younger, now it was a real stretch. Al came down hard on his ankle and twisted it. He struggled with the pain and hobbled around for quite some time afterward.

As time danced by, the light seemed to dim. At first, Herb suggested to Al it was just the effect of their aging. By now, they had both given up all their plans for escape. None of them had even come close to achieving any appreciable results. But, more importantly, age was beginning to have an impact on their attempts. Around this time the creatures scribbling became more intense. Herb and Al had long ago

figured out the symbols they were writing represented letters. After a time, they were able to construct an alphabet.

The letter size always amused Al. Each character was three to four times larger than they were. Even when the female wrote, and her handwriting was by far smaller and neater than the male. They began noticing patterns. Collections of certain letters into repeatable patterns. It wasn't long after this when they figured out the first words, Al passed away. Herb wanted to bury him, but he found he didn't even have the strength to drag his body to another edge of the cage. He had no choice but to leave him where he fell. There were not even any sticks of wood to mark the place with a cross. Fortunately, the food, still fresh, was soft. it had the consistency of soft clay. Herb carved an epitaph into a large piece the two had always enjoyed. This verity had a sweet taste to it. Almost as if it was half made from sugar. Herb carved, 'Here lies Al – all he wanted to do was go home.'

Herb desperately desired to add a date to it, but without a calendar, it was neither possible nor meaningful. Herb stared up at the two unchanging creatures. The cold uncaring look in their eyes sent a shiver up his spine. How could any creature merely stand there and watch? Herb wiped a tear from under his eye.

There was something inexplicable about it. It was then Herb began to remonstrate on the effect of immortality. If you had all the time in the world, you couldn't conceive of the notion of compassion. It was mortality that gave you an understanding of the meaning of time. The limits on your time gave you empathy. As you reached your end, Herb noted, waiting around wasn't a thing to be taken for granted. When he was young, waiting was merely something that happened. It was blip, a tiny anecdote in the story of one's life. It was a small element of existence, easily put behind you. Now, at his age, waiting around was a huge percentage of the tiny amount of time Herb had left.

As he was thinking about this, one of the creatures rose and turned on a light. The cage was suddenly bathed in its warm glow. "So, it wasn't age dimming our eyes," Herb thought. He felt the weight of intense sadness upon his shoulders. His friend Al would never know this answer. Still other effects of age didn't change. Herb found it harder to get around. What had once been a nice walk around the block was now an exercise in struggle. This was the hardest thing to accept.

Only at the very end did Herb get a good look at the male's notebook. The symbols at the top were stronger and larger than the rest of the text. They must be a title. If he could only figure them out. If he could only understand their meaning. Perhaps it would explain what was going on ... why they'd been imprisoned in this place. He spent his last days staring at the straight and intersecting lines which kept all this an unsolvable mystery.

F * R * U * I * T F * L * Y E * X * P * E * R * I * M * E * N * T

It was the last thing Herb ever saw.