



VISIBLE LIGHT

The story of the first successful transport in human history.

“One of my strongest and most persistent wishes [is] to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.” – H.P. Lovecraft

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C. Thomas Hempstead was an odd duck, even for an eccentric scientist. He operated out of an old Victorian mansion in Providence, Rhode Island which once belonged to his father. The family was loaded. The family had made money in, of all things, sneakers. His father was very supportive of the young man. He had the advantage of being able to avoid looking for research investors. Quitting MIT before he was even 21, he never even completed a degree. He's started his career by inventing multi-processors. First, the chip designed to perform two processes at once and then he moved on to processors which would perform four. Tom became obscenely wealthy. His empire made the Sultan of Brunei look small time.

But it was his latest creation everyone had been excited about. Throughout human history getting from place to place was an art form. Mankind had advanced from walking to riding, sailing, driving, flying and finally into space strapped atop blazing rocket engines. Both nothing was ever fast enough. The ultimate dream was instant transport. I remember Tom's first public demonstration in Madison Square Garden in New York. Hempstead took what looked like a computer chip hanging from a silver chain and placed it around the necks of two rats. The chips contained detailed targeting information. It was the most brilliant part of the scheme. It eliminated the need for a receiving mechanism at the destination. You simply programmed a chip and walked through a door, simple. If your calculations are precise enough, you could visit planets in other star systems. Although it would be wise to be wearing a spacesuit, in the event of unforeseen issues.

In front of the rats stood a high-tech doorway. Red, green, and blue lights flashing. Information screens scrolling raw data at speeds beyond human reading. It was nothing more than an arch or frame without any physical door. The crowd went totally silent. You ever see a packed crowd go completely silent at Madison Square Garden? It's astounding, there's nothing like it. Everyone was holding their breath. You could have heard a pin drop. In went the rats. There was a flash of light and they reappeared 400 yards away on top of a block of cheese. Tom always had a weird sense of humor.

Most of the audience though it was simply a magician's trick. They politely applauded. But no one in the scientific community showed even the slightest interest. Tom wasn't happy. Which is, to be honest, an understatement. This is when he became a serious recluse, working exclusively out of his mansion in Providence. From time to time he sent rats for evaluation to veterinary labs across the country. The lab results were always completely normal. No abnormalities, standard life span... nothing unusual. I think the damn thing even cured a few of the rodents of cancer. There was some protest from animal rights groups when he ordered Rhesus monkeys. The protests quieted down when noted physics reiterated the scientific claim of it all being merely a fancy illusion. They politely suggested the man had slipped a few gears. They did, however, agreeably suggest Hempstead had never harmed a single animal, so the uproar died down.

Months went by with more shipments out of the Providence mansion of monkeys to schools of veterinary science. All the primates examined were determined to be in perfect health. One, named Graham, was even given to the Washington Zoo. Hempstead claimed the animal would soon be of historic value.

I was more than mildly astounded when I got the call from his staff inviting me up to the house. I'd been running his computer business for twenty years. We'd commonly chatted over the phone, but I never

once been invited to the house. The house was his sanctum. The place where he removed himself from the world.

I drove up the small hill leading to the mansion. The locals all joked about it. Calling the site Big Hill. Rhode Island generally being on the flat side. The house stood all by itself overlooking the rest of the city. I parked the car in the driveway and proceeded up to the front door.

It was opened even before I could reach the bell. "Thank you for coming all this way." It was Dr. Plowman. Tom's personal physician. Now when I say personal, I do mean *personal*. Plowman only ever saw one patient. His tone was somber. "I don't know what to do."

I smiled politely. "You know Tom can always call me?" Plowman gave me an odd look. "What? Did he take out all the phones now?" I shot back.

About ten years ago, Hempstead sold off his giant collection of cars. The assortment had once made the Gosford Classic Car Museum look like a small parking garage. But Tom insisted they were all obsolete and no one would want them after the transporter was completed. I figured he'd now decided the phone was obsolete too. After all, you could simply go visit the people you wanted to talk to... anywhere.

"I could explain it," Plowman suggested, "but it would be better if you came along with me to the study."

The place was dark even with all the lights on. Apparently, Tom was fond of dusky mahogany paneling and black marble floors. I have to say the place was impressive, a blend of 18th Century gothic and modern high-tech. It smelled like oiled wood and the ionized air. The odor server rooms always give off. I swear it took twenty minutes to get to the back of the house. I could have used a bicycle... another form of transportation Tom was planning on making obsolete.

We found Tom in a large stuffed chair looking like he was about to do the introduction to *Masterpiece Theatre*. He looked a touch older than the last time we met, but none the worse for wear. I wish I could say the same for myself. Taking several large steps forward, I extended my hand. "Tom," I hollered. But he sat there, frozen, his eyes never even moved in my direction.

I check him. Granted I'm no medical practitioner, but he seemed alive. He was clearly breathing. Occasionally, his eyes blinked. But overall, I'd have to say I'd seen a better range of motion with Disney animatronics. "Is he in a coma?"

"Not a traditional one, no," Plowman replied.

"I don't follow."

The doctor sighed. "He still eats if you put food in front of him. Although I haven't yet gotten him to use any utensils. Not something you typically see in your average coma patient."

I shook Hempstead's unmoving form. "Tom... Tom... snap out of it."

"He's been this way for several weeks," Plowman muttered.

"What happened?"

“It happened in the lab, about four floors down. He simply announced he was ready. Put a chip on programmed with the coordinates of the study and walked through the transporter.” Plowman choked up. “By the time we got to the study, he was like this.”

“What happened?”

Plowman gave me a wry glance. “Hempstead was brilliant. An outstanding genius. He probably had the best understanding of the physical world of anyone I’ve ever met. Way below what we know of sub-atomic structure, into the very fabric of the universe itself. But beyond this, he was skilled enough to program his perception into a computer.”

I nodded my head. “I’ve seen him do it. He’d have conversations with a computer so far over my head the two of them might as well have been on a jet cruising at 40,000 feet. He used to joke to me Universal Field theory wasn’t a big enough problem for him to solve.”

Appropriately, there was a flash of lightning outside. “Yes, well,” Plowman sounded dejected. “Apparently, he didn’t have an understanding of the soul. The machine transported him alright. Physically he’s fine. Healthy as a horse. Only whatever it transported left out the one thing which makes us human.”