

Signs of the Times

by

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When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the thing does not happen and the word is not fulfilled, then it has not been said by the Lord. The prophet has spoken presumptuously. You have nothing to fear from him.

—Deuteronomy 18:22—

Despite what Local #502 of the Doomsayers and Gloomcasters Society said, Eward Freen didn't really think of himself as a prophet. He was just someone who could read the signs of the times, and couldn't keep what he learned to himself. In fact, as far as Eward Freen was concerned, he was about as ordinary as they came.

He was only saying what he felt had to be said, after all. He wasn't a prophet. How could he be? He was a scientist—and a mediocre one at that. His work at the University on behalf of the Ford design team was proof enough for anyone. Few of his colleagues would deny that most of Freen's recent modifications had been less than stellar. Self-changing sparkplugs that developed a tendency to spontaneously self-change as soon as the engine warmed up. A Windows-based automatic global positioning system that managed to reset its internal clock to the Mayan solar calendar every time the vehicle made three left turns in a row. *That* one had taken a while to fix. A crash-avoidance radar that, well, you get the picture.

Indeed, if not for his one brief, shining moment of inspiration, he might not have had a job at all. Early in his career, Eward Freen had developed a highly refined combustion process that allowed Ford to reintroduce its justly famous 429 Cobrajete engine to a fuel-conscious but excitement starved economy. Almost overnight, his invention had reinvigorated the true muscle car movement, and Freen had endeared himself to his corporate underwriters forevermore. After all, two words that should never be used in the same sentence were "turbo" and "Civic."

His real passion, though, was the signs of the times—what was going on, where, and what it meant. Freen knew that his message this evening might be slightly more than the straights wanted to hear. But, he reasoned, that wasn't entirely his fault. There were plenty of other prophets around these days—so many, in fact, that *Cosmo*, now the nation's leading newsmagazine, had given over three full pages per month to their predictions. Granted, three pages out of four hundred wasn't much, but, nonetheless, they were saying things that on the surface would sound just as ridiculous, just as far-fetched as anything he had to offer.

Why, he'd read in *Cosmo* just last month about members of a new religious group in San Francisco who were convinced that the ultimate salvation of the world could only be achieved through a mass bungee-jump—sky-clad, of course—from the south side of the Golden Gate Bridge. According to the group's leader, an unlikely looking man named Bert Kaplan, a northside jump would signal the Apocalypse, the southside Paradise on Earth.

Jumping clothed from either side would simply mean four more years of Republican rule.

So, while the world was full of prophets these days, Eward Freen was a scientist and he felt that precluded him from being a prophet. Which is why wasn't sure just how happy he was to see five members (the *only* five members, if the truth were known) of the DGS #502, fully kitted out in doomsayer regalia, striding down the center aisle of the University's main lecture

hall minutes before his presentation was to begin. Small beads of sweat sat up at his temples, others collected, shimmering, on his upper lip. A rivulet of perspiration tickled its way down from the edge of his thin comb-over. Shuddering a little, Freen reached for the water glass beside him as the three men and two women took over five of the last ten empty seats in the front row of the theatre.

He knocked the glass over completely when the humming began.

With only minor variations, they were all dressed exactly alike. A black velvet cape completely covered their shoulders, falling to just above their waists. While one could only occasionally see flashes of it as the DGS members fussed about, arranging themselves in their seats, Freen knew from unfortunate personal experience that each cape was fully lined with extra-heavyweight aluminum foil, the kind advertised as “tough enough to go from the depths of the freezer to a red-hot oven with less damage than any other leading brand.” Aluminum foil and black velvet, the capes were designed to protect the wearer’s vital areas—lungs, heart, pancreas, liver, kidneys, as well as the upper third of the small intestine.

Proper digestion, it seemed, was extremely important to the DGS #502.

On their heads, the DGS #502 wore identical, bright orange hard-hats, each emblazoned with the clenched-fist-and-ouija-board insignia of the group. These, too, were well-lined with aluminum foil, some of it just peeking out beneath the rims of their hats. For an absurd moment, Freen felt mocked, as though the DGS #502 were sticking out tiny aluminum tongues at him.

While they agreed that cloaking their vital organs was a necessity—who knew when another horrific episode of psychic organ harvest would take place?—each member of the DGS #502 had a different reason for their foil-lined hard-hats. David Bremmer, for example, a somewhat overcooked holdover from the Cold War, was convinced that, for years, the Soviet military had been using huge mind-control projectors to lull the West into complacency and eventual disarmament.

“How else do you explain Britney Spears, the return of those damn hippie bell-bottoms, and the 2000 Presidential election?” he was fond of asking at group meetings.

Operating from heavily fortified bunkers located in the Sakhalin Islands, these projectors used ordinary telecommunications satellites to bounce their insidious mind-control rays all over the United States, Canada, and the more liberal parts of the United Kingdom and the Outer Hebrides.

“But, David,” Peggy Brigham would almost invariably counter, “the Soviet Union doesn’t exist anymore.”

“You see how well it works?” Brenner would shriek. “You see how advanced the system has become?”

For her part, eighty-five year old Peggy, who, in addition to the DGS #502 (which she regarded as a rather nice night out once in a while), was a life member of the Daughters of the Great Trek, thought Brenner’s suspicions just a bit silly, however fond she was of Brenner himself. She knew that the Soviets were no longer a threat, and had probably never had mind-control projectors anyway. She wore her hat because of the rays from Jupiter. The blue ones, not the red ones. The blue ones that made you nymphomaniacal. Although she came from good Mormon polygamous stock and was well into her eighties before she learned the true meaning of the word, Peggy was deathly afraid of being thought nymphomaniacal.

Larry Wattershead, on the other hand, the group’s president-elect, just wasn’t sure about any of it. He was just a slender, nervous man who managed the hardware section of the local Target store. He bowled on Tuesday nights, barbecued on weekends, and subscribed to *Cosmo*. While, by and large, malevolent radiation from either Jupiter or the Sakhalin Islands

seemed a rather remote threat to him, it simply wasn't in Larry's nature to take chances. Of any kind.

In addition to his hard-hat, he also wore a foil-lined athletic supporter under his faded blue jeans.

Despite their individual peculiarities, the one thing most members of the DGS #502 shared in common, that is, the one undisputed reason aluminum foil formed such an essential part of their wardrobe, was a dread fear of microwave ovens. "Satan's Bake Shop," Geraldina Humphries called them. The most religious member of the group, Geraldina was also the town's librarian and part-time secretary at the local Alliance For Christ's Apostles (Reorganized) Church. She had heard her pastor say on many occasions that since their introduction in secular society in the 1970s, microwave ovens had formed a major part of Satan's arsenal. They weaken the mind, he had said; they make men impotent; they cook food from the inside out—which was definitely *not* what God had intended.

All irrefutable signs of the devil at work.

As far as Geraldina was concerned, the efficacy of aluminum foil in turning aside the flaming missiles of the Evil One—especially those which burned from the inside out—was equally well documented. "Why, praise the Lord, just look what happens when you put a wadded-up ball of that heaven-sent stuff in a microwave cranked up to full power."

Geraldina had just been released after spending several months in jail following a plague of unfortunate fires in the home appliance departments of a number of local stores. As a result of these, and though she had pled freedom of religious expression in court, she was now banned from Circuit City, Best Buy, Sears, Wal-mart, and the Home Depot. She could still shop at Target, but Larry made sure that one of his staff was on hand to "help" her any time she came into the store.

Not every members of the DGS #502 was as troubled by the possible dangers of microwave ovens and Svengali-like rays from behind the Iron Curtain as the others, though. At least one member of the group just liked the look of black velvet, aluminum foil, and orange plastic. Ross Card owned one of the local video franchises. Until a year ago, he had boasted the largest selection of XXX-rated tapes and DVDs in the region. Unfortunately, his business took a turn for the worse when he seriously misread Peggy Brigham's request for an instructional tape on two-stepping. In just one day, two things happened: Ross lost his license, and Peggy, horrified by what she took to be a documentary, discovered that she never, ever wanted to be thought of as nymphomaniacal.

While Ross never understood quite how anyone could mistake "Double-Dipping Nympho Girls from the Round-Ass Nebula" for a country-and-western dance video, he knew a trend when he saw one. And, as ordered by the court, he sold, traded away, or just stashed in his basement his entire inventory of porn, replacing them on his store shelves with the absolute worst in science fiction, country line dancing instruction, and Oral Roberts inspirational DVDs. He renamed the store "The Planet X Corral," forgave Peggy Brigham, and joined the DGS #502 in a pointless bid to boost sales, though discovering in the process that hard plastic and cold aluminum foil were kind of exciting.

This, then, was the common thread that had drawn them all together that evening to hear Professor Edward Freen's lecture.

Even though their humming was becoming a bit much, Freen gradually settled down, resolving simply to ignore the DGS #502. They were, after all, only five relatively harmless people (Geraldina Humphries excepted, of course) who lived their lives in a quiet, shattered state of paranoia and suspicion—not unlike most of the people he met from day-to-day. He could deal with them. He could.

His hopes were dashed, however, when he saw most of the University's Board of Regents Executive Council coming through the hall to take seats directly across the aisle from the DGS #502.

The Regents, though slightly confused, still nodded politely to the Doomsayers, who responded by conspicuously putting their hands beneath their capes and humming louder—which the Regents took to be some sort of odd greeting. Perhaps they were Masons, or Shriners, or some strange splinter group from the Loyal Order of Moose.

Eward Freen was not the only person who noticed the coincident arrival of these two disparate groups, however. Terrilyn Corbett, the young adjunct physics instructor who had organized the monthly lecture series, looked from the DGS #502 to the Regents and back again. Shaking her head, she leaned over to Freen and whispered, "What are *they* doing here?"

"Well, this is a university function. I suppose they felt it was their ob—"

"Not them," she spat, flicking her head toward the line of black velvet and orange plastic. "Them."

"I don't know. I imagine they came to hear the lecture."

"I mean, what are they doing *now*?"

"Oh, they're humming," replied Freen after a moment.

"Humming?"

"Hmmm? Yes, humming."

"Oh." Corbett lapsed into silence for a few seconds, looking around the auditorium carefully. She turned to Freen again. "*Why* are they humming? Why are they humming before *my* lecture series?" With more than a hundred thousand dollars in student loans on which she was in imminent danger of defaulting, Corbett desperately wanted a tenure-track position—any position—and she saw this series as part of her ticket. Freen, on the other hand, knew that it wouldn't matter, not really. He sighed.

"They think they're in less danger when they're humming."

"Less danger."

"Yes. Less danger."

Corbett paused again. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the danger. Are they in less danger when they're humming?"

"I don't think it makes any difference, Terrilyn," Freen replied, smiling slightly and turning to face his colleague for the first time since the two groups had walked into the room. Corbett's shoulders relaxed a bit. "No, it really doesn't make any difference. They're in just as much danger, humming or not."

"Oh." Terrilyn fell silent again, pondering for a moment the possibility of an adjunct position at the community college in Faro.

Eward Freen sighed again.

"The humming, Professor Corbett, is to fool listening devices and auditory mind-control projectors. It's really quite simple. Whenever the Doomsayer-and-Gloomcaster members are not speaking directly with someone—that is to say, their minds are not specifically occupied and they are, therefore, subject to external control—they hum."

Corbett stared at him, at them, at him again. "They hum."

"A defense mechanism. To defeat the devices, you understand."

Terrilyn Corbett, *cum laude* Ph.D. in particle physics from Fargo State University, clearly did not understand.

"Also," Freen continued, "you may be interested to know that an important part of their ritual after each DGS meeting is to go to the nearest Baskin-Robbins for blueberry milkshakes."

Some members believe, and the rest are neither sure enough nor willing enough to contradict them, that the acid content in the blueberry syrup nullifies gamma ray concentrations which are well known among the group to be harmful.”

“They pour blueberry milkshakes over themselves?” she asked, eyeing the expensive velvet capes.

“No, of course not. That would be absurd. They drink them. The acid is metabolized and the gamma concentrations are defeated that way.”

“I see,” said Corbett, who clearly did not. “But— but, *that’s* absurd!” she whispered harshly.

“Really? Surely you’ve read Prof. Ihop Jackstack’s famous paper on the topic in *Physics Today* two years ago?”

“Someone wrote about this?” she replied, digging in an overfilled lecture bag for her Palm Pilot. “You’re kidding!”

“Yes.”

Corbett’s eyes narrowed as she glanced conspicuously at her watch. They were already a few minutes late and the hall was full. Students of all types, professors from various disciplines, members of the university administration, as well as an interesting cross-section of the general public had turned out to hear Freen. She had no idea what the man was going to say—he’d been a last-minute replacement on the schedule when Dr. Bentheart was arrested for breaking into Ross Card’s basement—but somehow the fact that the DGS #502 had found out about it and chosen to attend Freen’s lecture did little to increase her confidence.

A gradual hush washed over the lecture hall as Terrilyn Corbett stepped to the podium, and the house lights dimmed. She brushed a lock of sandy-blond hair back from her forehead, adjusted her glasses, took a deep breath, and began.

“Ladies and gentlemen, friends, colleagues, members of the community,” she looked down at the five foil-lined capes in the front row and decided against adding ‘and assorted whack-jobs,’ “I would like to welcome you all to the seventh in our series of evening lectures, ‘Toward the Unknown.’ As you know, we have been privileged to hear so far from many of the distinguished scientists and researchers working here on the campus. We heard Professor Wan discuss her work in solar flare density, and who could forget Dr. Turnbull’s fascinating talk on the possibility of asteroid spores?”

She paused, her mouth suddenly dry, and reached for one the cheap, cut-glass tumblers left on the podium by the stage manager. The water was tepid, and Terrilyn Corbett wished fervently for it to be vodka.

“Tonight, though, is really quite remarkable. I don’t believe we’ve seen the hall this full in the history of the series.” A whisper of enthusiasm rippled through the audience. “In fact, I’m told that there are even people gathered in the common areas and the washrooms who will be watching tonight’s lecture on closed circuit monitor.”

The whisper increased to a murmur and several people—two of whom wore black velvet and aluminum foil—nodded knowingly at Eward Freen.

“Many of you may have heard that tonight’s scheduled speaker, Dr. Bentheart, is unable to be here this evening—“

“Fornicator,” snorted Geraldina Humphries, as Peggy Brigham nodded in agreement. “Onanist,” she hissed.

“Yes, well, um, yes, well I am very pleased to introduce in his place Professor Eward Freen, who has kindly agreed to present at the last moment. Professor Freen has been in the Faculty of Engineering for the past—“ she looked behind her and Freen held up both hands, fingers spread wide apart “—ten years, and while his most recent work has involved the

automobile industry, his research interests include the study of microwave emissions and their possible use for long-range, sub-space communication.”

The DGS #502 hummed a little louder at that and Peggy Brigham adjusted her cape, pulling it tight about her shoulders and covering her shrunken breasts. Terrilyn Corbett swallowed dryly and took another drink. She had no idea if her introduction of Freen was correct or not. At that point, she didn't care.

“At Professor Freen's request,” she continued, “tonight's presentation will take the interrupted lecture format. While Professor Freen will pause occasionally for comments and interaction, and there will be a proper question-and-answer period following the lecture, if someone has a question during the presentation itself, he will be more than happy to—“

“Get on with it!” shouted David Bremmer, “Enough of this commie cod's-wallop, let the man talk!” He had no idea what “cod's-wallop” was, but he'd always liked the sound of it.

Corbett squinted into the darkness and surrendered.

“Yes, well... Professor Freen,” she muttered, backing away from the podium and groping in the darkness of the stage for the back of her chair.

“Thank you, Professor Corbett,” Freen began graciously. He turned to face the audience. “It's a pleasure to be here with you all this evening. I sincerely hope that it will be worth your while, because I believe that I have some rather startling things to offer you.”

The crowd shifted a bit. Not nervous, just settling in for the long haul.

“It all started rather innocently, I suppose, serendipitously, you might say. As many of you aware, and Professor Corbett has pointed out quite correctly, my main area of interest apart from air-bags, global positioning systems, and crash avoidance radar is the use of microwave generators for long-range, sub-space communications.”

“Live long and prosper, dude!” shouted someone from the first balcony. Without success, Terrilyn Corbett peered into the darkness beyond the spotlights to see if she could identify the culprit and affect his final grade accordingly.

Freen smiled, “Yes, well, you too, young man. However, in the course of my research, I discovered something much more serious. I cannot say what the precise import of this discovery is at the moment. I don't know whether it represents a threat or a promise. What I do know is that it is important. Very important. Critical, in fact.”

“Um, Professor?” a bored voice floated down from the middle of the auditorium.

Freen shaded his eyes against the glare of the spotlights and called, “Yes, you have a question already?”

“Um, yeah, um, Professor, is all this stuff going to be on the final exam?”

A ripple of laughter wove its way through the crowd as Terrilyn Corbett closed her eyes and fantasized about her old job at Taco Bell.

Freen didn't answer right away. He adjusted his notes on the podium, took off his glasses and cleaned them with his tie, then took a deep breath of his own.

“I hope so, young man, I really do. But, if I'm right, then there may not be a final exam at all.”

Peering down, he ignored the intermittent clapping that came from the audience, and pressed a switch set into the face of the lectern.

“If you will turn your attention to the overhead monitor screens, I would like you to see just one in the series of puzzling events that has led me to my lecture this evening.”

All eyes in the huge hall looked up. An enormous composite video screen mounted above the podium began to glow. As the picture resolved itself, surprise and indignant mutters began to course through the audience. Larry Wattershead squirmed in his seat, as though wishing he'd bought a jock strap just a size or two bigger. Two other members of the DGS #502

looked at each other and hummed approvingly. As one, though, the entire Executive Council of the Board of Regents folded their arms across their chests and scowled at Eward Freen.

Terrilyn Corbett craned her head forward and looked up. At that moment, Taco Bell faded and she would have given her right arm for a vodka tall. Straight, with no ice. And leave the bottle.

Gradually, a large, grainy, black-and-white photograph came into focus. A field of wheat, obviously taken from a newspaper. Part of the field, however, was flattened into a precise, geometric pattern, the various whorls and satellites radiating out from a large circle in the center of the design. A woman dressed in overalls stood, dwarfed, in the circle's center. Faintly, in the background, a microwave tower pointed skyward.

A crop circle? thought Corbett furiously. I ask for science and this nobody gives me an old Mel Gibson movie?

After a few seconds, the picture shifted, shrinking and retreating to the upper-right corner of the screen. Below it, a newspaper article appeared and slowly scrolled upwards.

CROP CIRCLE MYSTERY CONTINUES

Ashcroft (AP) There were more mysterious crop circles found yesterday, just outside the sleepy little town of Ashcroft. Six of the baffling marks were found by farmer Shirley Socorro in her barley fields. The circles were between eight and thirteen feet in diameter, and together made a perfect circle almost ninety feet across. Circle researchers from across the country —cerealogists, to those in the know— have so far been unable to determine just how these particular marks were made. While many have tried to prove human involvement, non-human production has not been ruled out. 'One thing we can say for sure,' offered cerealogist Michael Billings, 'is that these things don't occur naturally.' Billings added that these latest marks bring the total number of crop circles found in the area to fifty-one. 'It's the largest cluster since the great Kellogg Convergence of '04.'

"More of these strange marks began appearing almost a year ago," Freen continued, pointing to the overhead screen. "Those in Ms. Socorro's fields are not unique. While they have baffled scientists for decades, this time there seems to be, if you'll pardon the pun, a definite pattern."

Another newspaper clipping replaced the one on the screen. It remained for a few seconds, then shrank and retreated upward. Then another, and another, and another. For two minutes, no one in the audience said a word as newspaper photographs appeared with increasing rapidity.

"For example," Freen said, using a laser pointer to pick out one of the more than thirty pictures now arranged like a crop circle collage on the screen, "marks such as these appeared in an abandoned field beside a local church. Some of you may remember the reports about that. In order to make its budget, the church had just rented out its steeple to house a microwave transmission tower, very similar to the repeater tower in the far corner of the Socorro's barley field." Freen put a hand to his throat and adjusted his tie. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is no coincidence. Everywhere these circles have appeared in the past year there has been increased microwave activity in the immediate vicinity."

Freen paused for a few seconds, swallowing, trying to decide whether he wanted to continue or not. He had tenure, it was true, but with the entire DGS #502 now humming loudly enough to be heard throughout the hall, not even that was bulletproof. He plunged ahead.

"I believe there is a connection. How could there not be?"

The buzz in the hall grew louder. Freen could hear laughter and a few muffled cries of "Flake!" "Crackpot!" and "What about the commies?" He thought he heard "Onanist" as well, but he couldn't be sure.

"Amen!" shouted Geraldina Humphries, though, trying to silence the nay-sayers in the hall with the insistent bellow of faith. "Amen!" she repeated, before rejoining her comrades in their humming.

Freen held up his hand for silence.

"Please consider the facts, ladies and gentlemen," he continued, his voice rising. "The first circles appeared just after the installation of a new microwave tower in this city. An extremely powerful microwave tower. And, I repeat, wherever they have appeared in this area since then there has always—*always*—been a microwave generator—from an ordinary household oven to a large transmitter tower—operating in the area."

"There are microwaves all over the place, you idiot," shouted someone from just behind the Board of Regents. At least Freen *hoped* it was behind them. "That doesn't prove a thing!"

Humming loudly, David Bremmer turned and glared in the direction of the offending voice.

The Chairperson of the Board of Regents suddenly stood up, taking full advantage of the interrupted lecture format. He held up his hands, appealing for quiet in the hall. "Professor Freen, do you seriously expect us to believe that there is a connection between microwave ovens and these—these crop marks? You can't be serious, sir!"

The DGS #502 joined their colleague and hummed loudly at the Chairperson. Both David Bremmer and Ross Card began to fumble with something under their capes. Larry Watershead looked over at them, blanched, and vigorously shook his head.

"I assure you, Mr. Raditch," Freen continued over the renewed noise in the hall, "I am completely serious. To say that it is just microwave ovens is a wee bit simplistic, but essentially correct, nevertheless. I mean, if it were just these data alone, I wouldn't believe it either. Quite frankly, I wouldn't have believed it at all."

"This is preposterous, Freen," squeaked Elspeth Tanner, the only female member of the Executive Council. "Is this the sort of— sort of—"

"Cod's-wallop!" offered David Bremmer, grateful to be of help in the situation.

"Thank you. Yes, the sort of *cod's-wallop* on which you have been squandering the precious resources of this fine institution? Explain yourself, sir!"

She sat down abruptly. For a moment, David Bremmer stopped humming and leaned across the aisle. Carefully, he placed his hand on Elspeth Tanner's arm. She squeaked again, but couldn't pull her arm away. Bremmer drew her close across the space that separated them.

"Ma'am, take it from someone who knows," he said, looking at the frail little woman soberly and tapping the side of his bright orange hard-hat with the middle finger of his free hand. Unfortunately, that slight movement dislodged a small ribbon of tinfoil, which slowly unraveled down his forehead.

"Yes?" she asked, her breathy squeaks climbing two-thirds of an octave.

Bremmer glanced around the room, and said with utmost gravity, "Like rust, the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and Britney Spears, communism never sleeps. Take it from someone who's been there."

As he released her arm and sat back in his seat, Elspeth Tanner nearly collapsed against the Chairperson, her breath rushing out with a great WHOOSH. She snatched her arm back.

“Oh, you great stupid man, of course it does,” she squeak-snapped. “They can’t even build a decent clock-radio, for God’s sake!” But she blanched in confusion even as she said it. The rest of the Executive Council stared at her in disbelief.

The noise of the crowd had increased to a dull, muted roar—like hundreds of people all muttering the word “Rhubarb” at the same time. Freen tried desperately to regain a control he knew had slipped away far too early and far too easily. Programs were rustling, people argued back and forth across their seats, while some shrugged into their overcoats and prepared to leave. Eward Freen looked back at Terrilyn Corbett and spread his hands. She shook her head. Freen beckoned her again, pleading with his eyes. Finally, she threw down her own program and stepped up to the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please. Science is a search for truth which often navigates us through unpopular waters. So it is incumbent upon us— Ladies and gentlemen... Ladies... AND... GENTLEMEN! Shut the *fuck up!*” she shouted finally, her slender hand pounding on the podium. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she looked back at Freen accusingly. “Ladies and gentlemen, however mentally retarded we think Professor Freen’s theory, we owe him the courtesy of hearing him out. Please. I mean, come on, you’ve already paid for parking.”

A few people had already left, but the majority of the crowd subsided in the face of the young woman’s anger, and, amazingly, Freen found himself able to continue. Despite the tic that had suddenly developed over his right eye.

“I realize that this must come as something of a shock to some of you,” he understated, pointed ignoring the humming of the DGS #502. “But, please, try and bear with me.”

“Let the Freen speak!” shrieked Peggy Brigham, leaping out of her seat and whirling to face the rest of the hall. She pointed a thin, bony finger at the man in the spotlight. “The Freen speaks!” She turned back to the stage and winked at Eward Freen. “Go on, sonny, you tell ‘em.”

“Uh, yes, well, thank you, ma’am, Mrs... Mrs. Brigham, is it?” Freen asked, trying to collect his thoughts, hoping that scientific jargon would anaesthetize the crowd. “Now, as those of you are familiar with microwave technology already know, microwaves are nothing more or less than packets of electromagnetic radiation which travel in a straight line at frequencies ranging between zero-point-three and zero-point-zero-zero-one meters. Quite small, really. However, because they are unaffected by ionospheric distortion, they are eminently suited to long-range communications, especially from the planet’s surface into space. This has been a hobby of mine for the past several years.

“However, since the power required is quite substantial, and part of my interest in this involved determining to what extent microwaves presented a threat to organic life, I began a modest, but related research project into the use, distribution, and safety features of commonly available microwave ovens. That’s when it happened.”

Terrilyn Corbett was no longer listening. She had taken an emery board from her purse and was busily working her right index, middle, and ring fingernails into long, sharp points. She’d figure out just where to put them later.

“Just over a year ago,” Freen continued, “my wife and I were sitting in our living room. I was idly making notes on microwaves from a stack of consumer magazines—comparing the rated shielding with government standards, that sort of thing. She was trying to fix the television set. When, for the first time in several days I pressed the remote control switch and the television came on, it was one of those truly serendipitous moments of which great scientific discoveries are made.

“The evening news had just come on. And the announcer was explaining how another of these mysterious crop circles had been found. In a sidebar piece, another reporter talked about when crop markings like this first began to appear. Something struck me odd about the date. I checked through my stack of notes, and found that almost three months to the day after microwave ovens went into large-scale use in homes across North America the first crop circles began appearing in fields and pastures around the country. Always mysteriously. Always unexplained. Almost always present.”

The Board of Regents huddled together in their seats, completely ignoring Freen now, concentrating instead on saving their own jobs by working out just how much it would cost them to fire him from his. The truth was that four out of five of them had voted to approve his original grant request for this “on-the-side” microwave research, thinking that if he came up with something useful, somewhere down the road a corporate giant like Wal-mart might come through with a healthy institutional endowment. The fifth Regent knew that he would have voted for the grant if Channel 7 hadn’t been running “A Dynasty Christmas: At Home in Texas Again” that night. They barely heard Freen continue.

“Quickly, but with very little to go on, really, researchers from a number of different organizations came to examine the marks, but all were at a loss to offer an adequate explanation. Although they had no idea how they were being made, many of these scientists, as well as some of the non-specialists, continued to maintain that they were manufactured by humans. As you may know, speaking for many Christians in the country, Jerry Falwell went on record saying that there cannot be intelligent life elsewhere in the universe because the Bible makes no mention of it, and, therefore, these crop circles must be terrestrial in origin.”

“Blasphemer!” shouted Geraldina Humphries unhelpfully.

Freen ignored her and pressed the lectern control again. Another picture resolved itself onto the screen—a close-up of the first crop circle he had shown. Shirley Socorro’s denim-covered leg—greatly magnified—was just visible on the left.

“In each case, the individual grain stalks had been pushed over, bent flush with the ground but not broken. Not a single stalk broken, not one. In some cases, there were other evidences just as puzzling.” Eward Freen began to wave his arms. Burn marks with no other sign of combustion and no apparent thermal source. Adjacent to the circle perimeters, outdoor christmas lights were found smashed, as though they had burst, but with their filaments intact in every case. When the power was turned on, the lights worked for an instant, then the filaments burned themselves out. In some places, car windows were found exploded, blown outwards in all directions—but the cars themselves had been locked and showed no signs of forced entry. Rapid air pressure changes due to the grounding and take-off of an enormous ship, perhaps? I don’t know.”

Eward Freen spread his hands in mute appeal. The audience was silent.

“Over the course of these investigations, all manner of manual attempts to reproduce the phenomena failed. And people tried everything—boards, snowmobiles, tractors, toboggans, anything and everything they thought might recreate the strange marks. They even used—“

“Porcupines!” someone shouted.

“Um, I beg your pardon, what?” Freen asked, shading his eyes once again against the glare of the stage lights. “Porcupines?” He looked back at Terrilyn Corbett, who glanced up then steadfastly refused to acknowledge him further.

A very tall, very old man unfolded himself from one of the seats midway back in the hall, and slowly stalked in the penumbra of light at the foot of the stage. He pointed up at Freen.

“Porcupines, boy. Damn little buggars come wandering around the fields looking for a place to sleep. Circle around while they’re bedding down. Trample the grain. Perfect circles. Porcupines.”

“Well, sir, while I appreciate your comment, I really don’t think—“

“That’s for damn sure, boy! Come down here, scarin’ people. Afraid to cook dinner in their own homes. Damn eggheads.”

“What I mean, sir, is that unless these porcupines have developed an intimate working knowledge of spatial geometry and differential calculus—because these crop markings are highly complex and very precise—“

“Check the circles, answer man, check the circles.”

“Excuse me, check them for what?”

“Porcupine shit, you knothhead. We had ‘em all the time on the farm. Best proof there is of porcupines.”

The very tall, very old man walked back into the darkness and Eward Freen heard the chair seat creak as he folded himself back in. Nervous laughter rippled through the room. Terrilyn Corbett looked up for a brief moment, then furiously began to file the nails on her left hand. This one she knew where she’d put.

“Yes, well, be that as it, uh, may, even that isn’t the most fantastic explanation for these phenomena,” Freen said, as a faint echo of “Damn knothhead” carried down to the stage. “From the very beginning, there were researchers who claimed that crop circles were the marks left behind by...” Freen paused again, looking across the darkness for the old farmer, “by the landing gear of extraterrestrial spacecraft.” He held up his hand again. “After much consideration, ladies and gentlemen, this is what I, too, believe them to be. Extraterrestrial craft guided here in some fashion by the very microwave ovens we have used to make our own lives easier.”

The quiet was broken permanently. He had finally said it—what so many hoped and others feared he would say. He had read the signs of the times and he had told the people. It was out of his hands now. Suddenly, people were on their feet, shouting, waving their arms, demanding that Freen acknowledge them. The five members of the DGS #502 hummed approvingly—so they’d been right about microwaves after all.

Of course, that was mixed blessing now that the aliens had found them.

Larry Wattershead looked around anxiously, suddenly wishing tonight was bowling night. He wondered if the aliens knew about bowling, and thought that they probably did. Though they might not see the point of it. David Bremmer was suddenly sure he saw well-trained commie agents aiming hand-held mind-control projectors at him. He’d known all along the technology had to be alien; commies can’t even make a decent toaster oven. He leaned over and hummed tensely in Geraldina Humphries’ ear. Her church also believed in commies. Peggy Brigham reached up and settled her hard-hat more firmly on her head.

Terrilyn Corbett, Ph.D., however, suddenly watching her own career shrink to nothing, caught in the vortex of what she would later describe as “the Freen effect,” leaped to the podium.

“Thank you! Thank you, Professor Freen!” she shouted, shoving him away from the microphone and grabbing at the lectern both hands. “Thank you for that very... um, interesting presentation.” She looked conspicuously at her watch. “Well, golly, we’ve just about run out of ti—”

She stopped short as something flew up from the first row and hit her squarely in the forehead. Blinking back tears, she looked down. There between her feet, glinting in the glare of the spotlights, lay a wad of aluminum foil the size and shape of a golf ball.

“All right, who threw this?” she demanded, picking the foil ball up and shaking it at the front row. “Which one of you WHACK-JOBS—”

Another aluminum foil missile glanced off her shoulder, while a third missed completely, sailing between her and Freen to land somewhere backstage. She squinted into the first row and watched as David Bremmer and Ross Card handed out more aluminum foil balls from underneath their capes.

“Let the Freen speak!” shouted Peggy Brigham, standing now on the edge of the stage’s penumbra. In her hand she cradled on last foil sphere, this one the size of a baseball.

David Bremmer hummed and gave her a “thumbs-up.”

Beaten, Terrilyn Corbett retreated back to her own seat, muttering to herself, and thinking dark thoughts involving many spools of wire cable, four set of handcuffs, four blocks-and-tackle, and several large pickup trucks.

“Please, ladies and gentlemen, please!” Freen was fairly shouting himself now. “I believe they were right! I believe that crop circles such as these,” he pointed and the screen above flickered again to display a perfect circle made up of eight, smaller but equally perfect circles—Peggy Brigham’s aluminum baseball bounced off the screen—“I believe these represent actual physical evidence of landings by alien spacecraft. Very large spacecraft which have used our own microwave radiation to home in on our planet.”

“Professor Freen!” shouted an earnest young physics student in the third row. Waving her arms for quiet and hoping to impress her thesis advisor by injecting a little rational thought into the proceedings, she continued, “Professor Freen, what you’ve just proposed is physically impossible, at least as far as microwaves are concerned.” She glanced quickly at some notes she had made during the aborted lecture. “I scribbled down some rough calculations while you were speaking and, while I agree with you that, in rare instances, I suppose a microwave transmission of enormous power, under the right conditions, you understand, could conceivably be used as a kind of— of homing beacon, I suppose, to suggest that ordinary microwave ovens could provide such a signal is utterly absurd. They are far too low-powered and far too well-shielded.”

“Unbeliever!” screamed Geraldina Humphries, firing a tinfoil ball of her own. “Blasphemer!”

“Oh, I am not!” shouted the student, batting the missile away with a yellow legal pad covered in mathematical hieroglyphics. “I’m a student... and an Episcopalian. And what he said is technically impossible, it’s simply not permitted by the laws of physical science. It can’t be done!”

“Be warned, young woman, young *episco-PAGAN*,” grated Geraldina Humphries, rising from her seat and shaking a meaty fist at the student, “beware the words of the Lord: ‘A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.’ Take heed, heretic,” she pointed to the stage, “the Freen will not be mocked.”

Never taking her eyes off the student, which was no mean feat for a woman her size, Geraldina Humphries sat back down.

“I am not a prophet, Mrs. Humphries,” said Edward Freen, interrupting quickly. “I am just a scientist. And, Ms. Frost,” he continued, indicating the student, “you are correct. What I have suggested is not permitted by the laws of science. But, then, at one point in our history, neither was heavier-than-air flight, or flight faster than sound, or flight beyond the reaches of Earth’s gravity. In all of these, and in your denial of my thesis, you are forgetting both the Haifetz Pomposity Principle... and dogs.”

“Dogs?” asked Maxine Frost.

The crowd fluttered again, but Edward Freen plunged on regardless. No one heard the rustling sound of Terrilyn Corbett's notes for her closing remarks hitting the floor behind her. She motioned quickly for one of the stagehands. When he arrived at her seat, bending low to stay out of the light, she whispered furiously in his ear. The young man shook his head repeatedly, but Corbett grabbed him by the shirt collar and shook him hard. Eventually, he nodded and left the stage.

All the while, Edward Freen continued.

"Basically, the Haifetz Pomposity Principle is a statement about the relationship between knowledge and reality. As a species, we humans have an overwhelming tendency to believe that once we have discovered a principle that appears to work in the physical world, that discovery lends to the principle the force of law, the weight, if you will, of reality. The problem is that it is arrogant in the extreme and absurd in its arrogance."

Edward Freen looked down from the podium and smiled gently into the darkness. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Ms. Frost, but there are no laws of nature. Not really. Not in any true sense of the word. There is merely the sum total of our knowledge at any given point in time. The Haifetz Pomposity Principle cautions us against blindly conceiving reality only in relation to the sum of our knowledge to that point in time. Do you understand?"

A promising young graduate student, Maxine Frost did not understand, but nodded anyway, murmuring, "Yes, I think so."

"Good. Because that's a very important thing to remember. Now, another way of stating it is to say that just because we cannot do it does not mean that it cannot be done. Which brings me to the dog."

He smiled. The noise of the crowd had subsided a bit, and they actually seemed to be listening to him again. Either that or the commie mind-control projectors were finally back online.

"Power of *transmission*, as you have put it, is not the issue here. And to believe that it is is to miss the point entirely." He raised his voice. "Ms. Frost is absolutely correct when she says that microwave ovens do not have the power to transmit a signal through the ionosphere into space. But, that does not preclude others—" he glanced up at the ceiling of the auditorium "—that does not prevent *others* from possessing sensors powerful enough to reach *through* the ionosphere and lock onto such radiation as there is. We can't track an animal or a human by their scent alone, the spoor presence—the *transmitted* power of the odor, if you like—is simply not strong enough for us to follow. However, we are all familiar with the abilities of the humble domestic dog—*Canis canis*—to follow days-old scent, and to find escaped felons, lost children, and the like. Their olfactory power is much more powerful than ours, powerful enough to overcome what we perceive as the relative weakness of the signal. And, it is sophisticated enough to discriminate between the thousands of smells that literally clog the atmosphere all around us. Once again: simply because we cannot do it does not mean that it cannot be done."

Dom Raditch, Chairperson of the Board of Regent's could stand no more. Rising imperiously, he flung his coat over his shoulders. "I will see you in my office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, Professor Freen!" he shouted. "Nine o'clock. Sharp! I will not allow you to use the good offices of our university to parade such tripe as this before the public on whom this institution depends for its very existence."

"Heretic! Infidel! Blasphemer! The Freen has spoken!" screeched Geraldina Humphries again, jamming her helmet down on her head and rising from her seat. "Episco-pagan!" she added for good measure, advancing on the Regents at a rapid waddle. "The Lord God Almighty has a special place in *HELL* reserved for microwave lovers like you."

She raised her purse to swat the Chairperson. But in the act of swinging her arm, she brushed the edge of her hard-hat and sent it—and its protective foil—spinning through the air.

Geraldina's shriek of horror echoed through the hall as her hat carved a bright orange crescent into the second row of seats. In a flash she had pulled her cape over her head. Then back down. Then over her head again. Then back down. She couldn't seem to make up her mind which area was more vital, which more deserving of protection.

Suddenly, the auditorium's fire alarm began to sound, its shrill din streaking through the crowded hall, paralyzing some, galvanizing others.

Terrilyn Corbett merely smiled.

In a flash, round tinfoil missiles of various sizes were flying around the hall as people fought to get out. Most of the balls pelted down onto the Board of Regents, but a few still found their way onstage to harass the unfortunate Professor Corbett—who never stopped smiling. Ross Card alternated throwing tinfoil with handing out promotional flyers for "The Planet X Corral." Peggy Brigham tried to climb onstage and touch the cuff of Freen's trousers, but she was pulled away by an elderly man from the senior's lodge who found the whole exchange rather stimulating.

Geraldina Humphries slipped a disc trying vainly to protect the many exposed areas of her body. And by the time David Bremmer had leaped over the intervening seats and made a grab for her hard-hat, it was far too late.

The lecture was over.

Terrilyn Corbett shrugged her shoulders and walked off the stage, smiling, muttering, knowing in her heart of hearts that there was a vodka-something—anything—at the end of her journey. Vaguely, she contemplated a crime spree with Jeremy Bentheart., followed by a career as a tattooist.

For his part, Eward Freen, non-prophet scientist, troublemaker, struggled to calm the angry, scared mob. The remaining members of DGS #502 tried to protect him, but a remnant of the crowd reached him anyway.

Later that night, KBRX-TV carried pictures and a fifty-one second soundbite on their eleven o'clock network feed. As the producer called for a fade-out at the end of the piece, Larry Wattersheadhead could be heard in the background, asking nervously, "Anyone for 'shakes?'"