

John Sladek

**Is There Death
on
Other Planets?**

The Lost Version



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Peter's belt itched him. He scratched with one hand while hefting his beer with the other. The belt matched his ragged pants, being a piece of tarred rope from a space ship.

'What say ye?' asked the man in the green hat. 'Dost want to be an agent of the U.S. government, or not?'

Peter's hand scratched abstractedly. 'Me a spy! Here on La Merde! Why, I've been waiting all my life for a chance like this. It's a miracle!'

'Tis no miracle, christian. 'Swounds, somebody's picked every time,' said the man wearily.

'But I don't even look like a spy. Spies have beady eyes, and mine are innocent and pink.'

‘Sblood,’ spat the man in the green hat. ‘Thy ignorance passeth all understanding. ’Tis but as the great n-tuple spy Waldmir Vichlier said, to wit: “More than anyone else, a spy must look like anyone else.” Now here’s the plot. La Merde wants war with us. But they shan’t begin to bombard Earth with missiles until their computer giveth the word. A superstitious lot, they yet believe in such omens.’

Peter’s hand moved farther down inside his worn trousers. He continued scratching vigorously.

‘Now your job is but to steal the engine that programs the computer. The thing is but a trifling device, easily concealed in this satchel. Thou’rt to deliver it to a man at the rocket terminal, one Joseph, a vendor of lewd pictures. Get it?’

‘But how am I to get it? The programming device is locked in the War Department’s safe.’

‘Naught’s simpler.’ The man laid a package of cigarettes on the table. ‘This is in reality a time machine,’ he said. ‘You shall sojourn into the future, watch yourself ope the vault, and thus learn the combination. Then come back to the present and ope the vault.’

‘Seems like there’s a paradox there somewhere,’

remarked Peter, still scratching.

‘Ne’er mind,’ bade the stranger. ‘When we have the engine, we shall program the computer to believe that the war is done, and that the U.S. hath won. Our troops will land immediately, and our army of trained tourists will follow on their heels, to assuage with gold the La Merdeans’ pains of loss.’ The man’s beady eyes gleamed with anticipation. ‘Wilt do’t?’

Peter, whose both hands were now inside his pants, nodded rapidly.

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The device looked like a very old phonograph record. Peter crammed it into his satchel and headed for the terminal. A small, weasel-faced man followed him. Peter ducked into Annie’s Earthside Bar (‘Your home away from home – positively no credit’).

Annie leaned toward him, her raven hair brushing his cheek. ‘If it isn’t Peter O’Hare,’ she said breathlessly, ‘the only man I ever gave anything to.’ Her throat was like alabaster, and Peter could feel her nipples hardening against him.

‘Annie, you’ve got to hide me,’ he pleaded. ‘There’s a price on my head.’

A ferine gleam came into her eyes.

‘Would it cover your bar tab?’ she whispered.

It was too late. Pressing the device in his pocket, Peter could see the little man would find him there. Peter ordered a drink, and began telling Annie of the fauna of Earth, which she had never seen.

‘Then there’s the animal *ghosts*. Like the bansheep. You’re walking along in Ionia, alone at night. Suddenly you hear this awful wail. Gaaaaa. You see something big and white, moving out there in the dark –’

‘You told me that one,’ she said.

‘Well, how about the Grisly Bear? The blood-dripping spirit of a bear that prowls the forests of Iowa. He can’t get back to his body, because someone killed it while he was sleeping. He prowls in Ireland –’

‘I thought you said Iowa.’

‘I meant Ireland,’ said Peter, glancing back at the short man, whose eyes were fixed on the satchel. ‘Ireland is where all bears’ souls go when they hibernate. That’s why they call it Hibernia.’

‘Fie on’t!’ shouted the small ferret-like man. ‘Marry, sir, you lie. What hastow in the satchel, caitiff?’ The man

drew a laser gun. 'What's in the satchel?'

'None of your beeswax,' Peter smirked.

'Wax? A waxing? An old phonograph record? Then do I arrest you in the name of —'

Peter took a tight grip on the satchel and passed out.

He came to in an opulent apartment, where an equally opulent girl was arguing with the ferret-like man. Waving a saw, the girl exclaimed, 'It's the only way. The satchel's made of some impenetrable material, and he refuses to let go of it.'

'Thy wits stinketh, Roberta,' the man replied. 'We need only search him and get the key.'

'Ugh! I refuse to touch that filthy creature,' she said, giving a ladylike shudder.

'I'm awake,' Peter announced. 'Here's the key.'

'Try'st thou no tricks,' snarled the little man. 'Roberta, keep him covered with the saw.'

The lock refused to budge. 'Sticks a little,' advised Peter. 'Here, let me try.' While he pretended to ply the lock, Peter said, 'Have I told you about the were-hen? In Eastern Iceland, when the henbane blooms, and the

moon begins to look like a big deviled egg, then the peasants lock all their doors —’

With one blur of motion, Peter was up and leaped out the window. To his astonishment, he found himself back in the same room. ‘What happened?’ he asked, as Roberta once more aimed the saw at him.

‘You cannot escape,’ chuckled the weasel-like man. ‘For the simple reason there is no place to escape to. You see, we are in a re-oriented universe, bounded by the walls of this room. There is no outside.’

‘For that matter, darling, why try to escape?’ breathed the girl, moving closer, and starting to exude an odor of musk. ‘Wouldn’t you rather stay here with me, always?’

‘If this is a closed universe, what would we have to eat?’ asked Peter warily.

‘We could live on love. Put down your satchel and kiss me.’

‘Nope. There’s something phoney about you, woman. Your teeth look too real, for one thing. Also that musk. You seem to be exuding it through a single pore on your alabaster neck. Something phoney about you, all right. Wish I could put my finger on it —’

At that moment, Peter did put his finger on it, and a million volts of power crackled in the air about his hand. Luckily, the CIA man had fitted him out with a special insulating callous on that particular finger; Peter was unharmed. He leaped away from Roberta, for her whole body was throwing off a deadly corona.

‘Holy mackerel!’ he exclaimed. ‘A robot. I should have realized. Only robots call everybody darling.’

She stumbled after him about the room, until she tripped over a curiously-carved buddha, and the room’s walls disappeared!

Peter found himself under a blinding white light, while shadowy figures moved about him. ‘Who are you, varlet? What have you in that satchel?’ said a voice. It was the ferret’s voice, but full of scary echoes.

‘Rumpelstiltskin is my –’ Peter received a stunning blow on the ear, that made bells ring, and stars whirl. The bells and stars were real; he was in a space ship. The alarms signalled a meteor swarm, dead ahead.

Why isn’t the ship automatically veering off? he wondered. A shadowy figure hunched over the controls, holding the steering wheel locked on course. It leered round at him, a feral face with a cruel, mad smile.

‘Unless you give me that satchel this instant, I shall send us both to our deaths,’ the weasel-like man chortled.

‘Speaking of death,’ said Peter, ‘I have heard tales from the West Indies, of animal zombies. Have you heard of the Undead Duck?’ Deftly, he swung the satchel at the preoccupied face. The ferret was slapped to the floor, and the ship began to veer, but too late! Already, the meteors were there, patiently boring into the hull!

At once, Peter shifted into reverse, minus the speed of light. Hurling across the universe, his ship met his complementary ship, moving at plus the speed of light. POW! VARROOM! Matter met anti-matter, and both exploded in a flash of light and anti-light! Zinng! Off went Peter at sidewise the speed of light, pursued by residual matter in the form of a slimy alien, all mush, with two beady antennae.

‘Base wretch!’ thought the alien at him. ‘Have at thee, knave. Wait till I get my mandibles on thee.’

‘You’ve got another think coming,’ Peter’s mind shot back. ‘I’ve been pursued by worse.’

‘Put down your satchel and tell me,’ thought the monster.

Without slackening his pace, Peter told of being pursued in India, by a huge, lumbering beast, which was totally invisible: the Cellophant!

But the distraction had slackened Peter's pace, and the alien was gaining! Peter saw a lump of inert matter by the roadside. He dodged behind it and let the creature blunder on past. 'Whew!' he said, glancing at the inert lump. On closer inspection, it proved to be really a fast, late-model car. Peter leaped in and wheeled the machine expertly down the road.

A speck appeared in the rear-view mirror, and grew. It was a taxi. Peter speeded up, but the taxi continued to gain; now he could see the driver's pointed nose and beady eyes.

Peter knew he could never outrun the taxi. It was probably a disguised ground-effect machine. Dead ahead was Hairpin Turn. This spot had received its colorful name from the fact that one could throw a hairpin over its edge, and never heard it hit bottom. Often women came to toss bobbypins into the abyss, and listen in vain for their clatter. Just now, in fact, a lone woman stood at the brink, jettisoning *objets de coiffure* over the precipice, and unsuccessfully endeavoring to ascertain their collision with the ground.

Disengaging a pin from her lovely raven hair, she precipitated it into the chasm, and strained her ears unsuccessfully to perceive its impact.

Peter perceived she was naked beneath the trenchcoat. As the taxi drew abreast of him, Peter cramped the wheel sharply, and forced the other vehicle to the edge. As it plunged into space, the taxi caught its rear bumper on the woman's trenchcoat, and ripped it from her. Peter screeched to a halt, and stood with his arm around the girl, watching the taxi tumble end over end. It burst into flames, and they heard the luckless driver's 'Ayeiiiiiiiiiaaa!'

As they drove away, Peter switched on the radio. His arm touched her breasts, and they grew hard and sharp as the muzzles of two ferrets.

‘– and partly cloudy. The most sensational news story of the day is the escape of condemned criminal Jean Pierre Lapin, alias Peter O'Hare, slated to die this noon by the guillotine. Police say the notorious satchel thief made his escape this morning, from the midst of an interrogation. He is believed to be hiding in parallel universes, other dimensions, or the French sewers.’

The glove compartment popped open, and out stepped

a small, beady-eyed man. He held a microphone in one sharp-faced fist, and an ugly automatic in the other.

‘It is I the villains pursue,’ he explained. ‘Sdeath, I’m wont to hide me. Pray, conceal me, good sir, in that satchel you carry. I shall reward you – with death.’

‘Have I told you about the Octicorn?’ asked Peter. ‘He is a strange beast of Idaho, having the body of a unicorn and the head of an octopus. He runs madly about, utterly harmless, and annoying no one, waving his big, flabby head about –’

‘I do not care for animal jokes,’ said the man, coldly. ‘Greta here and I are ingeniously bred, carefully trained foxes. Rather, I am a fox and she is a vixen. I forget whether our children are called pups or cubs. While she stopped your car, I hid myself in your radio.’

‘A vixen! The little minx!’ exclaimed Peter, pinching the girl’s cheek. She bit his hand. The man snapped his fingers.

‘Greta, your work is done,’ he commanded. She obediently climbed over to the back seat, curled up, and commenced licking her crotch.

‘Good gravy!’ cried Peter. ‘This reminds me of an Arab

I once knew, who ran a flea circus. Perhaps you've heard of the 1001 Arabian Mites? No? Well, one got loose. To make sure, the Arab had to count them. One mite, two mites, three mites ...'

As he spoke, Peter worked loose two wires from the dashboard. These he led back to the gas tank while his story created the necessary diversion. Fishing a copper and zinc penny from his pocket, he spit upon a piece of paper and placed it between them.

'Nine hundred ninety-eight mites, nine hundred ninety-nine mites ...' Pressing the two wires to his improvised battery, Peter hurled himself from the car. He felt a blast of heat, and a moment later, heard the distant roar, as the vehicle blew up.

'The old penny-battery trick always works,' he mused, watching a column of smoke rise from what once was Kansas City. Great clouds of locusts swept by him, on their way to devastate wheat fields and dominate the earth.

Peter rushed to his anti-grav machine, which opened to the image of his thumbprint. As he lifted off, he felt he was not alone in the control room. He continued to turn and adjust the huge steam valves as if nothing were

wrong. All the same, he knew he was being watched, by someone – or something. He whirled around.

‘G-good gosh!’ he gasped. A Horrible Spore was rolling toward him, seeking food.

‘Prithee, drop that satchel of food,’ it roared, ‘or I shall eat you, satchel and all.’

Peter edged toward the door, saying, ‘Have I told you about the weirdest creature I’ve ever met? It was in a cave in Ithaca. There were a number of bats swooping about, and hanging upside down, as they usually do. But there was one bat who hung right-side up, during intercourse. He called himself Bat 69.’

Peter had reached the door, but the Horrible Spore had reached him. In an instant, it surrounded him, and began its peculiar pattern of digestion, a fission process. He was immediately split into duplicates of himself, and these fissioned in turn. Soon there were inside the Spore a hundred thousand Peter O’Hare’s.

Soon the novelty had worn off of shaking hands with himself, and Peter grew bored. ‘I hate crowds!’ the throng roared, as with one voice. ‘We want Peter O’Hare,’ one Peter yelled. He realized he had to pull himself together.

He knew a bit of mob psychology, enough to know that by nature, they are quarrelsome and arrogant, willful and dissatisfied. Mobs long to plunder and burn; are terrible when frustrated, and in general, cowards. Peter keenly felt all these qualities within himself.

There was nothing to plunder, and only the Spore's stomach to burn. Seizing torches, the crowd set fire to the Spore, which disgorged them on a desert plain.

The pent-up mob milled about, frustrated. Great droves of Peter threw down their satchels and wandered away, weeping, to die cowards' deaths. A few of the Peters, however, took up the abandoned satchels and collected them in great heaps. They began to quarrel over whether to plunder or burn this luggage, and soon were in a furious battle. It was difficult to tell friend from foe in the melee of fists and torches. Friend killed friend, and foe burned foe, until the sun went down on their madness.

The last Peter O'Hare fell asleep by the embers of his late allies.

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Her name-badge said Melissa Pitt. She had long, raven hair and a white lab coat that fitted well, over soft

breasts and hips. She was shaking him awake. ‘Doctor, get up. We have work to do.’

‘Hmm? Oh yes. Must have fallen asleep over the From-minger equations. But who wouldn’t?’ He grinned, and Melissa’s hips made a tiny spasm. Dr. O’Hare was well aware of the power of his crooked grin. ‘Where were we, Melissa?’

‘We must save the universe from certain destruction,’ she said. ‘Two parallel universes have got off course. They will collide in minutes, exploding into a drop of pure energy, unless –’

‘Do you mean –?’ he gasped, shrugging on his own lab coat. One side had been cut away, to accommodate the satchel he always carried.

‘Yes, Doctor. Only you can find a way out.’

Picking up his slide rule, the scientist rapidly calculated a way out. ‘We will each go back into the past of one of the universes. There we will make the necessary alterations to insure the two will never meet. Unfortunately, we would never be able to come back.’

‘Do you mean –?’ she faltered. ‘Then Doctor – Pete, I’m confessing that I love you. I’ve always loved you, in my

solitude. Who'd ever think it would end like this? We'll be imprisoned in skewed universes, trapped – in two different worlds. If only – If I had something to remember you by.'

'Do you mean –?' he gasped, sliding his hand under her lab coat...

'NO!' She pushed his hand away. 'There isn't time, darling. If you only could give me some little token – say that satchel –' She sobbed, and a bright tear splashed into the test tube she held.

Peter turned away to hide his own emotion and relieve it in private, and as he did so, he noticed the lab had only three walls! Where the fourth should have been was a dim void, filled with hostile, gleaming eyes. It was a trap, then. Well he knew the La Merdean police, with their combination lineup and psychodrama, for Peter had often been arrested for Skluppery, or obscenity of personality.

Scanning the dim faces, Peter snatched up a weapon. At last, he saw the ringleader, a cadaverous man who smiled cruelly above a sinister beard. Peter fired at him, and as the tyrant slumped dead in his box, Peter cried 'Sic semper tyrannus!' and fled.

In the rocket terminal, Peter was accosted by a man in a green hat. He showed Peter the lewd pictures which were both credentials and living to Joseph.

‘I am Joseph. Give me the satchel,’ he said brusquely, and tried to snatch it from Peter. In doing so, the hat contacted Peter’s sleeve, and some of the green came off. The hat had been painted!

‘Imposter!’ cried Peter, and ripped off the person’s hat. A quantity of raven hair tumbled to her shoulders.

‘I only wanted to be near you,’ she pouted, and fingered his green sleeve, adding, ‘You’ve treated me most discourteously. We must away, or the other spies will kill me.’

‘We’ll go to another planet,’ he promised. ‘They’ll never find you.’

‘We’ll start fresh. A new life.’

They strolled toward the setting sun. Suddenly, her hand was no longer in his. She was fumbling with the catch on the satchel.

Peter sighed and deftly judo-chopped her across the lovely throat.

‘Deja vu,’ she said, slumping to the ground. A panel in her luscious belly slid open, and a ferret-faced man stepped out, an ugly revolver in his fist.

‘Deja vu,’ he sneered. ‘Gimme the satchel, whoreson!’

Peter snatched the gun and kicked the man unconscious in one clean motion. ‘All well and good,’ he said, pocketing the weapon to brush at a tsetse fly. ‘But how am I to get out of this hell?’

He realized for the first time that the incessant drumming had stopped. It was beastly hot, and all the jungle noises seemed to have stopped. Those savages are surely up to some devilment, he thought, and pictured himself in one of those big pots. Big iron pots, they are. Wonder where they get them?

A white-robed figure stepped out of a thicket. He was white, and had a dissipated look.

‘Are you by chance the White God?’ asked Peter.

‘No, in sooth,’ admitted the man. ‘I am Virgil, come to guide you from this Hell.’

‘Great Scott! What do they call this place, O noble Mantuan?’

The poet looked blank for a moment. ‘Oh, the Slough of Despond, I guess. Here, pilgrim, let me carry thy burden.’ Eagerly, Virgil reached for the satchel.

‘Here, hold this, instead,’ snarled Peter, and pumped eight slugs into the poet, who assumed his true shape and scuttled away.

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As he loosened Joseph’s bonds, Peter related the case to him.

‘But how did ye know he wasn’t the real Virgil?’ asked Joe.

‘Rub your wrists to restore circulation, while I explain,’ said Peter. ‘He gave himself away when he mentioned the Slough of Despond. You see, Faulkner didn’t invent the name until years *after* the *real* Virgil’s death.’ Peter reloaded his gun.

‘But I thought Bunyan invented the name. Still, that was sure quick thinking, chief.’

Without answering, Peter punched the dents out of Joseph’s green hat and handed it to him. He held a pocket mirror, while Joseph adjusted it to the right angle. Then he put eight slugs in him. ‘Bunyan, my ass,’

he said.

Well, that's the spy-game, he thought. The hero-game, too. One week the Arcrusian space-pirates get out of hand, and the next week, at about the same time, something rises from the ocean to nibble at Los Angeles. I'll sure miss Earth, though. Right about now, it's turning into a ball of flame, as La Merde goes to war.

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Chuckling, he pushed open the door of Annie's Earthside Bar.

The End