

FIRST CONTACT (OR, IT'S LATER THAN YOU THINK)

By Evan Mandery

-- Chapter 4 --

Here In My Car, I Feel Safest of All

In the right-hand lane of the Trans-Galactic freeway, pattering along at 40,000 miles per second, less than one quarter the speed of light and just above the highway minimum, Maude Anat-Denarian was having a bad day.

It started when she decided to drive all the way to the Trader Planet in Orion, to shop for groceries. Maude had a love-hate relationship with the Trader Planet. The idea of being able to buy everything in the universe in one place was grand in theory, but odd in practice. It seemed unnatural, at least in Maude's view, to go to a single place to fill a shopping list that read:

Seltzer
Succotash
Trans-Warp Coil
Frozen Fish Fillets
Epsom Salt
Pencil Sharpener
Portable Cold Fusion Generator Filter
Baby Formula
Cremation Urn

But you could get it all at Trader Planet. You would even find the urn and the formula in the same aisle, #684, titled and arranged by a store manager with a macabre sense of humor: "Birth/Death."

Maude Anat-Denarian did not care for irony.

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Maude finished her shopping in a reasonable amount of time. She found the right filter for the fusion generator and fought through the beverage section, securing the seltzer without incident. They even had the brand of succotash she liked.

The trouble began at the checkout. The man ahead of her on line got into an argument with the cashier over the price of a five-pound can of dangonsheel, a meat substitute that tastes like ham. They had to call over the manger and get a price check. Since Trader Planet is almost 5 miles long, it took almost 20 minutes for the manager to travel from one end of the store to the other. The customers in line behind the man did passive-aggressive things like exhaling and muttering under their breath.

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This was all happening at precisely the same time the homeless man was fighting the powers that be at Blimpway about the quantity of meat in his sandwich. This is not

as much of a coincidence as might first appear. Lots of people in the universe like ham and ham substitutes, which can be expensive. There are often disputes over price.

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At Trader Planet, unlike Blimpway, the customer is always right. When the manager arrived, he happily resolved the price dispute in favor of the customer. The customer thus saved approximately a half-dollar on the can of dangonsheel. The manager even threw in a free ten-gallon jug of a new concentrated prune juice, which hadn't been selling well.

This was all fine for the customer, but of no help to Maude. During the 20 minutes it took for the manager to arrive, most of the customers lost patience and went to other cashiers. Maude stayed. Immediately next in line, Maude felt trapped. She figured if she abandoned her position the manager would arrive the very next moment. So she stayed in line, and thus ended up waiting out the full 20 minutes.

For some reason, the cashier could not ring up another customer while they waited. This required a sophisticated technological advance beyond the store computer's capabilities.

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It should be noted that in point of fact, Trader Planet did not sell items in either five-pound cans or ten-gallon jugs. The people of that region of the universe used the Natriccian system which, by coincidence, is identical to the Metric system. For convenience, I have converted all mass and volume to the English system of weights and measures.

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Things got worse still in the parking lot. They have every modern convenience at Trader Planet, including shopping hoverwagons, equipped with anti-gravity lifts that can be used to hoist the heavier items, such as dangonsheel and concentrated prune juice. These are free of charge, save a modest deposit of a ditron, a coin equivalent to the quarter, which is inserted into a female lock, attached to the handle of each hovercart. The coin is retrieved by inserting a male key, one of which is attached to the rear of each wagon. The idea is that when the shopper brings back her hovercart, she pushes her cart into line, using the key from her cart to release a coin from the next cart in the queue.

This kept the carts stacked neatly and saved the Trader Planet the expense of hiring cart boys. In the past, this function had been performed by the Zosmodians, a reptilian species from a six-dimensional universe with photosynthetic skin, a talent for spackling, and the ability to travel across time and space. The Zosmodians worked cheap, and generally off the books because few of them had visas, but they were nevertheless regarded as undesirable laborers. This was because, though they possess the ability to travel through time, they always showed up five minutes late. This defect in their chrono-ambulatory capacity was why they had never parlayed their natural abilities into fortune. When they showed up, for example, to bet on the Andromeda

Derby, with knowledge of which space eel won, they arrived tardy as usual, and after the close of pari-mutuel wagering.

For their part, the Zosmodians had a good attitude about the whole thing. They figured it was part of God's master plan, and spent lots of time in the distant past, when people appreciated quality spackling and weren't in so much of a hurry.

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For the life of her, Maude couldn't get the coin back. She tried everything – jammed the hovercart closer, jiggled it up and down, even applied some of her lip balm to the key as a lubricant. Nothing worked. After five minutes of grappling, she considered giving up, but if her mother taught her one thing it was that a ditron is a ditron. So she went back inside the store, waited fifteen minutes to get someone's attention, asked for help, waited fifteen minutes more for someone to actually help her, walked back into the parking lot, then watched in disbelief as a bespectacled, pimply, teenage boy released the ditron in less than a second.

"You were putting the key in upside-down," he said, handing Maude the coin.

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By the time Maude finally headed home, fish fillets and Epsom salts safely in tow, she was a full two hours behind schedule and more than a little upset. Truth was she upset even before the whole Trader Planet fiasco began. That morning, she had received a call from her son's physics teacher who said Todd, her son, was failing the course. Though she did not say so to the boy who helped her, Maude believed her distress over this telephone call was what had impaired her ability to retrieve her ditron from the shopping wagon.

The teacher said Todd paid little attention in class and would often draw sketches in his notebook during lectures. He had failed each of the first three tests and, without a remarkable turnaround, would have little chance of passing. Furthermore, the teacher said he had spoken with Todd about his situation after class and the boy had shown almost no concern. The teacher thus felt he had no choice but to contact the parents.

This news upset Maude greatly, of course, and her first reaction was to call her husband. She resisted, though, because Ned, her husband, was away on business in another galaxy and the phone charges would have been substantial. Now she was extremely upset. She had to speak with Ned, roaming charges be damned.

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Maude dialed. Ned answered after the second ring. His voice sounded concerned. "What is it, Maude?" he asked. "Is everything okay?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"Caller ID, Maude. We've been through this before."

"It's just so spooky to have someone answer the phone with your name. It was never like that growing up. You always said, 'Hello' and then the person would identify himself or herself or you would ask, 'Who is this?' and then they would tell you. There's no mystery anymore. You can't surprise anyone."

“Honey, can you get to the point? You know I’m on a mission.”

She wanted to tell him about how long it took to finish the shopping and about her trouble with the ditron. Ned could be comforting about things like that. But she could tell from his voice she needed to cut to the chase.

“It’s Todd. His teacher called and said he is failing physics. I called the school and it turns out he’s failing three of his courses. They say he’s daydreaming in class and is unconcerned with his performance.”

“Have you spoken with him about it?”

“No, I just found out this morning. In any case, I wanted to speak with you first.”

“Well I’m glad you called.”

“I really think we should talk to Todd together, face-to-face.”

“That’s going to be difficult. I’m not going to be home for almost a month.”

“Can’t you come home just for a day or two? You work so hard all the time. I don’t see why they can’t give you a few days off.”

“We’re in the middle of a crisis right now, honey. We just made first contact with a species and the dominant power sent back a very confusing message. It is just one word and it isn’t in their native language. We’re trying to discern their intended meaning.”

“And this is more important than your son?”

There was then a long silence and, given the rates, an expensive silence at that.

“I’m sorry,” Maude said. “That wasn’t fair of me.”

“It’s okay. I know my being away is hard on you and Todd. It’s just that they really need me here right now.”

“What does the Ambassador say about the message?”

“You know how he is. Everything is fun. Nothing to worry about. He finds the matter amusing.”

“If he’s not worried then you shouldn’t be worried either.”

“I wish I could help myself. I’m just not built that way.”

“Well, I love you just as you are.”

“I love you too, Maude. Listen, how about I give Todd a call later on? It’s not as good as being there in person, but I can set aside an hour and have a good long chat with him. I’ll try to figure out what’s going on.”

“That sounds fine.”

“And I’ll be home in a few weeks.”

“I know.”

This settled Maude, but her husband knew it was best to end these conversations with small talk.

“What did you do today?” he asked.

“I did some shopping. I’m on my way home right now.”

“Did you remember to get seltzer?”

“I did.”

“Well, I love you. Drive carefully.”

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Saying this was superfluous, almost ridiculously so, given Maude Anat-Denarian was perhaps the most careful driver in the universe. She stopped fully at every stop

sign, always signaled before turning, and believed speed limits were to be approached only in the event of emergency. As a policy, she drove at least 10,000 feet per second below all posted maximums.

She had developed an impenetrably thick hide to the people who flashed her with their bright lights and cursed as they passed her car. She distracted herself by listening to Intergalactic Public Radio. She particularly enjoyed the afternoon program on good gardening practices. That day's show was devoted to cultivating broccoli. An avid gardener and fan of broccoli, Maude settled in for a good listen.

Unfortunately for Maude, Nelson Munt-Zoldarian was not so cautious a driver. In fact he was intentionally reckless. Munt-Zoldarian liked to get people, particularly women, to rear-end him. What he would do, and what he did on this occasion, was to drive along a highway in hyperwarp and then brake quite suddenly, leaving the driver behind him very little time to avoid an accident.

This was dangerous behavior to say the least, but Munt-Zoldarian had learned to exploit a loophole in intergalactic traffic law. By any honest assessment, when Maude Anat-Denarian slammed into the back of Nelson Munt-Zoldarian's car at a speed of approximately 8,000 feet per second, causing all 28 airbags to inflate, it was 100 percent Nelson's fault. This was true of each of the 37 prior accidents in which Munt-Zoldarian had been involved. Despite this, Munt-Zoldarian had never been found at fault and would not be found so on this occasion. This was because the law said that when a driver strikes another driver in the rear of the car, the striking driver is adjudged to be at fault.

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No one, not even Lionel Hut-Zanderian, the greatest legal mind in the Orion galaxy, could explain how this rule had come to be adopted. It was one of many, many things in the universe that can be observed, but not explained.

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It could also be observed, but not explained, that Nelson Munt-Zoldarian had parlayed his "career" as an accident victim into a fortune amounting to the equivalent of approximately \$50 million. This was particularly difficult to accept given the fact that many decent, hardworking people in the universe lived in poverty or near poverty without the benefit of modern amenities such as painless dentistry, no-run panty hose, and levitating luggage. Nevertheless, Munt-Zoldarian had his money. This was why at the time of the accident he was driving a Mercedes Ben-Zantarian, one of the nicest cars in the universe.

Driving an especially nice car helped Munt-Zoldarian in his work because when the police would arrive at the scene to take a report, the officer would never suspect someone driving a Ben-Zantarian of purposely damaging a car costing the equivalent of approximately \$100,000. It also helped Munt-Zoldarian to target women because the police had a preconception that women were inferior drivers. Munt-Zoldarian would speak politely to the police in the presence of the women-victims, but would privately roll his eyes to the officers, who always understood. They would draft a report which would invariably favor Munt-Zoldarian.

In the matter regarding Maude Anat-Denarian, the report simply said this:

Party of the Second Part (Maude Anat-Denarian) struck Party of the First Part (Nelson Munt-Zoldarian) in rear of vehicle. Party of the Second Part is unharmed. Party of the First Part complains of neck pain.

This one-sided account of the accident would effectively ensure that Nelson Munt-Zoldarian would receive a settlement of somewhere between \$1 million and \$5 million, depending on the Party of the Second Part's resolve and, more relevantly, the limits of the Party of the Second Part's insurance policy.

It was yet another outrage the police accident report was dispositive of the conflict. Police officers were not experts in accident reconstruction. More often than not, these cases boiled down to one person's word against another's, and the police were no better than anyone else at assessing credibility. Lionel Hut-Zanderian called the use of police reports in courtrooms "an outrage," but by and large the practice went unchallenged.

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Generally speaking, Munt-Zoldarian's victims did not help their own causes. This was particularly true in Maude Anat-Denarian's case. Maude might have chosen to focus on her well established, almost comical, caution as a driver to develop the operative hypothesis that she had not been the cause of the accident. This might have led her to realize the Ben-Zantarian in front of her, which appeared stopped in the road, was in fact stopped in the road and not just traveling slowly, as its driver contended. It might have emboldened her to challenge the conclusory and one-sided report prepared by the investigating police office. It could also have led her to investigate, or at least prompted her attorney and insurance carrier to investigate, the rather suspicious intergalactic driving record of Nelson Munt-Zoldarian.

Instead, Maude developed the operative hypothesis that the accident had indeed been her own fault. Honest woman that she was, Maude recognized she had been rather upset over the news regarding her son, her husband's absence, and the ordeal at the Trader Planet. All of this had led her to focus too intently on the gardening program on the radio and to fantasize about the possibility of good results in her garden. Rather than defend herself, Maude concluded she had caused the accident, in whole or in part, by daydreaming about broccoli.