

Art and Aliens

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

For all the information offered by the internet, how to commit suicide was sorely lacking.

Irene Vanhooven was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed, staring at her phone. She was scrolling down the page offerings, trying to find something that looked promising. There was a page on how to minimize the pain of cutting your wrists, but it involved a lot of materials. She didn't have a car, so the classic exhaust-and-garage-door setup wasn't an option. Everything was either complicated or painful or just involved way too many materials. She was afraid she'd have to accept it: there was no easy way to kill herself.

Movement caught her eye and she glanced up. A couple were passing by the doors of the art gallery. They didn't even glance inside. They were too busy smiling, laughing, being happy. Maybe being in love. Irene sneered jealously after them, but didn't even get up. The bright gallery around her, with cream-colored walls and vibrant lighting cast away all the shadows. Or would have if there had been anyone in there to cast a shadow. The entire space was completely empty. Her paintings were totally unobserved.

Like usual.

Irene wasn't crying. She felt too numb for that. If she were in pain, it might have been easier. Instead, a thing had happened and nothing had come from it. If she'd tried and failed, she might have been able to pick herself up. But she hadn't failed as an artist. In order to fail as an artist, an audience need to respond unfavorably to her art. But without any response at all, she wasn't sure if she was even an artist. She was a tree falling in the woods with no one around, screaming the whole way with no one to hear her.

What hurt the most was that it didn't hurt. She didn't feel undermined or invalidated or betrayed. She just felt...nothing. The numbness was all she could feel, and that was simply too much.

"Screw it," she declared. She threw her phone away. She didn't even check when it crunched before skidding to the corner. She undid the cheap department store belt around her waist. She wondered if her hip-hugging jeans would slide off, but she decided she wouldn't care in a minute. She looped the strap around her neck, across the front, swapped ends, and pulled it back. She pulled her belt taught, but began to cough.

She retracted her hands, letting the belt dangle. "Oww," she complained, rubbing her throat. Now, she let out a dry sob, her irritation growing. "Why does this have to be so damn hard?" she asked the entire crowd in the art gallery. In the silence, she looked up at the ceiling and spotted an I-beam overhead with a loop clamped on. Meant for hanging sculptures, it looked sturdy enough.

Irene went to the back, passed the refreshments table that had gone untouched. She kicked the table with the side of her foot as she passed it. Doing so caused the glass decanter with pink lemonade to fall and smash. Lemonade went everywhere. It was the most interesting thing that had happened in the gallery. Certainly more interesting than her paintings, judging by the turnout.

Irene drug a folding chair out from the back and set it under the loop. She stood up and formed a circle with her belt, hanging the makeshift noose from the loop. She started to slide the noose around her neck when the gallery door opened. Irene froze, the noose just around her head. A man leaned inside and smiled nervously. "Hey, which way is 49th?"

Irene was perfectly still. She didn't even lower her hands from the noose that cupped her face. Utterly amazed, she looked uneasily to her right and told him, "That way." He didn't even say 'thank you' before he departed, leaving her alone to her noose and folding chair.

"Oh for heaven's sake," she told her paintings. She let out another sob as she put the noose around her head. She wasted no time in kicking the chair out from underneath her. She dropped suddenly and then all was black.

And then all was bright.

Irene inhaled abruptly, then began to cough. She rolled over onto her side, feeling like she was hacking up a lung. She heard voices and someone talking, then a plastic cup of water pushed into her hand. She accepted it and spilt water on her face as she tried to take a sip.

"Ms Vanhooven?" asked a voice from the other side of the bed. "Can you hear me?"

Irene coughed again, balled up tight. She nodded and groaned. As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she was greeted with agony. Everything in her entire body hurt, from her toes to her hair. It all

ached, it all throbbed, it all burned, like her whole body was waking up. She managed to straighten out into the pain and just moaned.

"Ms Vanhooven?" repeated another voice. "You're in County Regional." A figure appeared above her, a dark shape against a backdrop of blinding light. "Can you tell us what happened? What do you remember?"

Irene winced, the light painful above her. "I..." Her mouth was dry. Her throat hurt, inside and out. At least the pain in the rest of her body was beginning to subside. She managed to lift her hand, to block out some of the bright light. "I...was at my showing."

"Yes," said the male voice. "You were brought here a few hours ago." Irene's eyes began to focus and she could make out the face of the man above her. "Do you remember anything before you blacked out?" asked the man with a massive head.

Irene had thought he had been leaning uncomfortably close, but as her vision sharpened, she realized that he simply had a head of astronomical size. Easily three times larger than it should have been, he looked like a wobbling bobblehead. Worse, his cranium was warped and misshapen, like his entire skull was covered in gigantic, massive growths of the worst kind. Irene started to panic at the unusual sight and she turned from him. A nurse was on the opposite of the bed. He wore a red set of scrubs which couldn't have possibly fit because he had a massive bulge on his back that was half-again as wide as his torso.

Irene clamped her eyes shut and covered her face. "Oh god," she whispered, hiding her sight.

"Ms Vanhooven?" asked the doctor. "Can you speak? I need you to confirm some things." He asked with a hint of urgency.

Irene parted her fingers just enough to peek through them. She looked up at the doctor, his gigantic, warped head terrifying her. "Ms Vanhooven, can you tell me your full name?"

Irene glanced at the nurse with the double-back, like a hump from waist to shoulder. "I'm...Irene Katherine Vanhooven?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"How old are you?" the doctor asked.

"Twenty-eight?" she risked, still terrified of the gigantic head that would crush her if it fell upon her.

"And what's the last thing you remember?" the doctor asked, a little leadingly. He wasn't looking at her; he was scribbling on the clipboard he'd brought in with him. What he jotted down seemed more important than what she said.

Irene swallowed, her throat burning. "T-trying to h-hang my...myself."

The doctor looked across at the nurse and the two shared worried looks. "Ms Vanhoooven, it's important that you know that you are in a safe space," said the cranium the size of a small car.

Irene looked passed the doctor and the nurse. Another nurse walked by. Her arms were massive, like cancerous growths had long overtaken every inch of skin. Her head was giant too. The nurse at the station had a regular head on one side, and a massive growth on the other side. Everyone, patient and doctor alike, was covered in huge, misshapen growths all over their bodies.

She realized the doctor had been talking and she looked up at him. Without thinking, she reached up towards him, towards his giant head. Her perspective was thrown off, though, and she couldn't figure out how to touch him.

"The police are going to want to talk to you, but only when you're ready," the doctor was explaining. "For right now, we are going to keep you overnight to make sure you didn't sustain any permanent damage to your throat and so you can see a psychiatric—"

"Can I go to the bathroom?" Irene asked abruptly. She started to stand up, but the nurse and doctor both held her down.

"Hang on, hang on," said the nurse, his giant back jiggling as if it was liquid-filled.

"Ms Vanhoooven," the doctor urged her. "Ma'am, we're worried about your mental state."

"I-I'm not going to do anything," she said, trying to stay calm as two misshapen, malformed giants held her to the bed. "I just...I just...I need to pee."

Again, the pair of malformed medical professionals shared worried looks and the doctor said, "Okay." He removed his hand, the nurse doing the same. "Let Dereck here escort you to the bathroom. He'll wait right outside, and then he'll escort you right back."

As the doctor spoke, Dereck lowered the guard railing on Irene's left side. He bent over slightly to do so, giving her a clearer view of the growth of his back. It looked like an extension of him, like a wart that had continued to grow until it was almost the size of his chest. Irene had to fight not to reach out and touch it.

Her way opened up, Dereck took her arm. She started to scream, only to realize he was supporting her, not restraining her. "It's okay," he told her very professionally, very patiently. She indulged in just a moment of terror, totally unnerved by so warped a person.

The walk across the emergency room was a stroll through a horror gallery. Men and women, vibrant and infirmed, every person Irene saw was warped and twisted in some horrible way. Growths on their backs. Additional limbs. Hair and tendrils. Additional eyes or mouths. Every single person was grotesquely misshapen like some monster from a nightmare.

And yet they were going on with their day. Nurses chatting at the station. A mother with her child. A doctor administering an exam to an elderly patient on a stretcher. Everyone was totally normal, except for every single person in the hospital.

Dereck opened the door to the bathroom, letting Irene shuffle inside. The tile floor was cold and the room smelled of harsh cleaning chemicals. "I'll be right here," said the nurse with two backs. Irene nodded to him and shut the door. She closed her eyes and covered her face. "This isn't happening," she whispered to herself.

As if by instinct alone, she realized there was a mirror before her. She very slowly lowered her hands, looking through parted fingers.

As soon as she saw her own third eye, she threw herself back against the door. Her hands slapped against it, she shivered in terror. She slapped at her forehead, trying to smack the eye off her skin as if it was a bug. Frantic, she tried to dig into her skin, but the pain made her yelp. The lucidity of the pain caused her to bend over and she covered her face again.

"Ms Vanhooven?" called Dereck, knocking quickly.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Irene yelled through the door, still bent over. "The, uh, the toilet seat's cold."

Irene ran her fingers through her hair and slowly stood up. "Okay," she whispered. She opened her eyes a bit, just enough to process light and get a vague sense of her surroundings. "It's okay," she repeated. She opened her eyes fully and looked down at her hands. The instant she saw a second set of thumbs, she closed her eyes again. A jagged, uneasy breath came out, but she stayed in control.

"It's okay," she repeated. She opened her eyes again and saw the thumbs. Extending from the base of her wrists, the second set of thumbs ran along the ridge of her hand, coming to a stop just before the base of her pinkies. She had growths on her forearms, like additional muscles packaged in deep under her skin.

She looked again at her reflection and saw the third eye. As big as her other eyes combined, it blinked periodically, the same color as her natural eyes. Her ears had an additional lobe and she appeared to have some kind of fin coming out of the crown of her head, almost like a dinosaur's.

Irene stared for a moment, just looking at herself until her racing heart slowed. Trembling fingers inched up towards the ridge on her head and she very fearfully taped at it. At contact, though, she felt only her head. She walked closer to the mirror and leaned in very close. She pulled her hair back from the ridge, able to see where it protruded through her skin. Almost like a nail, the ridge had a cuticle and toughened tissue. But when she actually touched the ridge, her fingers passed through it. She touched the second thumb on her right hand, then on her left. She touched her forearms, then again at her third eye. All transparent. "Is this an illusion?" she wondered.

She looked at the hand dryer right next to the sink. A metal diagram showed a three-panel demonstration of using the dryer. It showed a person rinsing their hands, waving them under the dryer, and letting the hot air run its course. The person had two arms, two legs, two eyes, one mouth. Normal.

Irene looked in the mirror again and spotted a poster on the opposite wall. She turned to an anti-human trafficking poster, warning her of the signs of human trafficking. The young woman on the poster

looked totally normal. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, one mouth. Normal. "Okay," Irene concluded with a shred of comfort. "I'm crazy."

Irene's home looked the same. Through the front door, pictures of family lined the narrow hall. Stairs to the left went upstairs to the bedrooms. To the right, the kitchen; living room on ahead. Pale brown paint. Short carpeting. Popcorn ceilings. Buzzing lights. The smell of lumber and pine trees coming through the sliding glass doors. The orange-scented kitchen cleaner her brother insisted on using.

Home.

She turned back around as her boyfriend, Jake, followed her in. He carried her things in a reused grocery bag. She wasn't sure how he got the shoulder-sling over the massive bony protrusions on his shoulders, until she remembered the protrusions weren't tangible. Weren't real.

"How's it look?" Jake asked as he nudged the door closed behind him.

Irene looked again at the hall and nodded. "Like home," she said. She barely flinched when her brother came in from the backyard. A year younger than her, Aaron was almost twice as big. A knee injury ruined his football scholarship, but he'd kept in shape. That shape now included a long tail and two huge growths on either side of his back like leathery balloons. "Hey," she told him, forcing herself not to let his warped body unsettle her so much that she couldn't give him a hug.

"Hey, Snitch," he cooed, using her petname from childhood. "How ya feeling?"

"I'm okay," she said, somewhere between placating and genuine. "Still...trying to figure stuff out."

Jake set her stuff down and took the recliner. "She's got to go back tomorrow."

"They think something's wrong?" Aaron asked her.

"Therapy," she admitted. "They, uh...the whole thing was just..." She shook her head. She paced a little in the living room, rediscovering the space. She caught her reflection in the TV and saw her third eye, saw her thumbs. "I'm still getting, some, like, stuff."

"Say what?" Aaron asked, checking with Jake.

"I'm hallucinating," Irene said. "I've got some brain damage from...or it's...I don't know what it is."

"You're hallucinating?" Aaron said.

"She thinks she sees extra limbs on people," Jake told him. "She thinks I've got, like, shoulder bones or something."

Aaron snickered and said, "Cool. What have I got?" He made a gesture like a flesh-eating pimple.

"This is serious, Aaron," Irene scolded him, even as she snickered.

"I know, Snitch, but still, what do I look like?" He did a belly-dancer's turn.

"A tail and two humpbacks," Irene told him.

"The bells!" he howled suddenly. He mimed swinging from a rope. Laughter ensued, and for a moment, Irene forgot her troubles.

Night fell.

The sound of Jake in the shower filled Irene's bedroom with the white noise of falling water. Drowning out video games from Aaron's room, Irene sat before her computer. The smallest of the three rooms, Irene had selected it when the three had gotten the townhouse together. It was almost more of a closet than a room, but its cozy space made Irene feel safe.

Lit by a single lamp and the screen of her computer, Irene had one leg pulled up to her chest, her chin on her knee. She watched the computer screen. The browser was open to her MyInstaBoard page. She was logged in not as her artistic, professional self but under her

private personal page. She was opening to a select world of people she trusted. Friends and other artists that she relied on.

'I think I'm going insane', was how Irene had started her search for help. 'Last week, after the abject failure of my exhibit, I tried to commit suicide. I'm still here and that's a whole other thing, but that's not what this is about. It's about what I've been seeing since then'. She went on to describe what she'd been seeing. She hadn't posted to her page, though. Instead, she posted to a medical experience group. And it was on that page that she watched and waited for responses.

And waited.

And waited.

"It's really unsettling," Irene told her therapist. In the soft gray chair, she picked at the fabric, her eyes just off the woman who sat across from her. The woman looked like any grandmother; silver hair, a nice pink suit, giant batwings extending out of her back. Half her face crisply made up with stylish makeup; the other half covered in giant warts that practically obfuscated any facial features. "Everybody looks so weird," Irene told the normal-looking half.

"And it hasn't abated," the therapist asked, taking notes. "It's been almost a week since your attempt and the symptoms haven't cleared up at all?"

"Not at all," Irene told her. "They're always there. And they're always the same, even on people I don't know. I actually know some people now because of their extra limbs. I know the register woman at the grocery store because of her horns. I didn't used to...I couldn't pick her out of line-up before." Irene shook her head. "I mean, this is some kind of stroke, right? Or something misfired in my brain? Oxygen deprivation from my suicide attempt or something like that, right?"

"It absolutely is," the therapist assured Irene. "But until we can find the cause on a CT scan, I don't feel comfortable proscribing medication to address it." Irene didn't look thrilled but she

acknowledged the wisdom with a nod of her head. "You want to tell me about what else is going on?" she asked.

Irene's head rose and she glanced about. "About what?"

"Well, let's put the spectral body parts aside," her therapist told her with a gesture like she was setting aside a block. "You ended up in the hospital because of a really dark moment. There's a lot that you still need to address in that, beyond what you think you're seeing."

Irene shrunk into the fabric of the chair. "Yeah, well," she whispered. She snickered again, but not sincerely. "You know, careers in art aren't exactly easy."

"There's not easy and there's nobody showing up at your exhibit," her therapist acknowledged. "Where was your boyfriend?"

"He had to work at the station," she said. "He's a firefighter. He got yanked off-schedule at the last minute. His union protested but..." She shrugged.

"It must be hard, dating a fire fighter," her therapist speculated. "You've talked about how lonely it can be."

"Yeah, but...I won't say we're used to it, but...well, we're kind of used to it," Irene told her. "I worry about him and when we're together, there's like this pressure to be, like, perfect and stuff. It took us a little while to figure out that we could just 'be' together. We could just take naps with each other and eat cereal and watch cartoons. We didn't have to fill every moment with Living." She used air quotes to emphasize the capital L.

Her therapist nodded, writing down on her notepad. "And your brother?" she asked. "Where was he?"

"I knew he couldn't be there; he was at a conference," she said. "I knew it was going to be a little rough because nobody in my family could make it. But, like, my friends didn't come, even the ones who said they would. Nobody in my art commune came either. That hurt. But none of the fliers, none of the ads...nobody came." Irene choked up a bit. "You know how hard it is to scream to the world 'I exist' and then to have nobody even respond?" She looked at the therapist and smiled contritely. "Do you?" She shook her head and began to tear up, finding her thoughts returning to that darkness atop the chair, the darkness that put her neck through that noose.

“So you let people know you existed, and now you are seeing things that shouldn’t exist,” her therapist observed. “Do you think maybe there’s some kind of connection there?”

Irene’s gaze drifted off, unable to find an adequate answer.

The message was waiting for Irene when she got home. After she’d put the groceries away and sorted the mail, she went upstairs to find more responses waiting. Her carefully crafted and emotionally-draining social media post about her insanity had returned very little in the way of meaningful insights. Most everyone attributed her hallucinations to oxygen deprivation of the brain. Many assured her they would likely pass. Some suggested ghosts. Others, angels. Reading such statements always prompted her to check her hands, her forearms, to see the growths.

There were other messages to. A few likes, a few shares and comments. The usual stuff that came from being an artist online. More than a few were unwelcomed solicitations and threats. The usual stuff that came from being a woman online.

But then there was also a direct message.

The direct message was from an account she didn’t know. An Alex Brian had written her. His account had no friends in common. The account was locked, viewable only to friends, and what little he had shared publicly were memes and written non sequiturs. No pictures. No direct statements or posts.

“Hey, I saw your post about the extra body parts on people you can see,” he wrote with surprising eloquence. “I know what the others are saying, but you aren’t hallucinating. What you’re seeing is real and it is remarkable, truly revolutionary, that you can see that. I would be happy to explain more, but I know you’ll think the answers quite strange. It would be easier if we could meet to discuss it. Do you think you would be open to doing that?”

Irene leaned back, arms crossed, and her eyebrow cocked up. She snorted and remarked to herself, “Are you joking?” And yet, something in the back of her mind tugged at her. She looked down at her arms and her curiosity inched towards desperation.

Jake sat back from her computer and didn't see the problem. "Dude's a weirdo." He gestured at the obviousness of it. "He's probably some perv that'll jump out of the bushes and steal your socks for some fetish thing."

"Yeah, I agree, that's likely but I...I don't know," she shrugged. She held her elbows as she leaned against the doorway, a half-silhouette from the light in the hall. "I just...this is the first person that's even suggested they knew what was going on. And their theory isn't 'it's all in your head'."

Jake turned back to the computer, the hinge of her desk chair squeaking when he did. "I need to fix this," he remarked absently as he looked at the screen again.

"You've been saying that," Irene whispered to her armpit.

"What?" he asked, not hearing. She shook her head, eyes cast down.

Sensing her mood, Jake suggested, "I think this dude's a crank but...I mean, if you really want to meet him, then...then I guess, yeah. Ask to meet him this weekend or something. I'll be off; I can go with you. Aaron might too." He began to stand up, hoping the matter was closed.

"I just don't want this to be a scam," she said as he hugged her. She let him enwrap her but she didn't hug him back. "I want some answers. I need..." She fell silent.

Jake stood up and hugged her. She didn't reciprocate but she let him hug her and she tried to accept the warmth. "What do you need?" he encouraged.

"I need to know this is real," she whispered. "I need...I need validation. I need to know I'm not crazy."

"I know," he told her, still holding her. "But just don't let the search for any answers trick you into accepting the wrong answers."

The Mayfair Shopping Center was less a shopping mall and more a county fair from some Norman Rockwell painting. The stores around the city park all had racks and displays on the sidewalks. The roads around the block park were closed off so the pedestrians could walk easily about. The gazebo was done up with bunting while the flowering pedals fell from the spring trees. Tables and stalls were set up on the grass. Kids chased balloons. A few kites were suspended in the sky.

At a library display, Anne Thrope was setting up prints of her paintings, showing off her most recent work. Irene stared. Anne was laughing as her wife helped, the two already fielding questions from interested shoppers before the display was even fully set-up.

Jake's shadow fell over Irene, but she kept glaring at Anne's display. "I can't decide if I'm being petty, or if I'm within my rights to be pissed."

Jake sat down on the iron and wood park bench. "I think you're within your rights to feel however you want," he told her, crunching on chewy ice in his lemonade.

"There's what I'm entitled to naturally and what I'm entitled to because of what happened," Irene said, mostly to herself. She looked down at her hands. "I can't help but feel like at least some ownership of what happened...belongs to people other than me."

Jake looked out at the bustling city park. "I don't think that's unfair."

"Nor do I, to be honest," said someone behind Irene.

She jerked her head around to see who had snuck up behind her, but she only saw a large tree. She looked up the tree, then stood up and walked around it. "Who's there?" she demanded. Jake turned and looked as well, but didn't get up. "Who said that?" Irene dropped her arms and groaned, eyes shut. "Great, now I'm seeing things AND hearing things. Great. Just great."

"You are hearing things," confirmed the voice, "but that doesn't mean they aren't real."

The voice sounded false, like it belonged to a computer. It was a natural sound, but there was a distinct simulated quality to it. It sounded close, like a person standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Irene, and yet no one was even close to that range except for Jake.

"Who's there?" Irene yelled.

"Calm down," the disembodied voice encouraged. "You'll scare the others."

Irene looked incredulously around at the city park half-full of shoppers. "I don't give a damn about scaring anyone," she snapped. She spun around, certain she would catch sight of whoever was playing a prank on her.

"Honey, babe," Jake urged, finally grabbing her. He held her firmly, trying to keep her from moving. "Honey, listen to me. It's okay."

"I know it's okay; let go of me," she said flatly to him.

"Your boyfriend can't hear me, but you can tell him you can hear me," said the voice.

"So he can think I'm crazy?" Irene asked the voice. "Er. crazier than I already am." Jake stared, dumbfounded.

"You're not crazy," said the voice, as Jake stared, trying to understand what she was saying. "You are seeing the real world. You are finally seeing, for the first time."

An emotional exhaustion overcame Irene. She backpedaled onto the bench and sat down with a flop. Her head in her hands, she looked down at the ground and found she lacked the strength to even cry. "I'm going mad," she concluded. "I figured when I went mad, it would be more interesting, but this isn't interesting. This is just boring and weird and stupid."

"You're not going mad," Jake pledged frantically to her, sitting down with her. "What's going on?"

"Why can't he hear you?" Irene asked the voice.

"Because his brain isn't wired to hear me," it said.

Irene's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You sound like a teacher."

"I take that as a compliment," it said.

"A teacher would," she grouched. She sat up and told Jake, "So I'm hearing a voice. The voice of the weirdo we came here to meet."

He says that you can't hear it because your brain isn't wired that way, but the voice is totally real and totally there and I'm not crazy even though that's exactly what a crazy person would say."

Jake stared slack-jawed for a solid minute. "kay," he finally said.

"Irene, you are not crazy," the voice assured her. "You are seeing things that the human eye is not usually capable of seeing. It's not unlike being able to see into the infra-red or ultra-violet spectrums. What you are seeing is there, but it is not physical."

"What does that even mean?" Irene asked desperately, tiredly. "The warts and wings and growths and stuff that I see on every person IS there but ISN'T there?"

"There's a difference between being physical and being real," the voice explained. "Just as there's a difference between being physical and being tangible."

"So I can see infra-red body parts," Irene tried to understand. Jake sat next to her and tried to reason out what she was saying, and to whom.

"That wouldn't be the most inaccurate way to put it," the voice strained to allow. "Something happened when you attempted suicide," it explained. "I'm not sure what and I could only speculate but something in your brain chemistry changed and now you are perceiving the world around you more fully than you used to. Far more fully than all other humans around you."

"Humans," Irene repeated. "So are you not human?"

"Oh boy," Jake muttered. He turned away and wiped his face, bracing himself for a whole new level of difficulty.

"Obviously not," said the voice. "We began contacting your world just under a hundred years ago. Your kind sent out radio waves but then didn't respond when we answered. It took us over a decade just to understand why you ignored us.

"So you're aliens," Irene concluded. She looked at Jake. "The person we're here to meet is an invisible alien."

He nodded contritely. "Yeah, I'd...I-I'd gotten that," he told her.

She turned abruptly and stared into space, asking the voice, "Is there any way you can convince him I'm not crazy?"

"I'm not sure I can," it said. "I can message him on social media but I'm not confident that will persuade him of anything."

"Why can't I see you but you're still on MyInstaBoard?" she asked.

"Humans have a total lack of perception," said the voice. "You are aware of nothing in your world. You perceive third-hand, by disruptions in the environment. There is a disruption in air pressure and you process that as a sound. There is a reflection of radiation and you process that as light."

"Hearing and seeing," Irene told the voice. "Those are our primary senses."

"For most life in the universe, those are vestigial senses left behind long before space travel is achieved," explained the voice. "Most life doesn't invent machinery to process radio waves; they learn to understand radio waves on their own. Humans are the most handicapped but ingenuitive species in existence. It is for this reason that we set up learning stations on your planet."

"Oh good," Irene realized. "You're the Jane Goodall of humans."

The voice didn't respond but instead, continued. "What you are seeing when you look at people are the components of the body that transcend the physical. Human beings are more than just physical matter. But for some reason, your evolution has never bridged the gap between the terrestrial world and the celestial one. You are almost completely unaware of the world around you. Instead, you process the sum of all existence only by way of air and light vibrations. Your mind is essentially trapped inside bone and visceral organs. It is trying to grasp the world through proxy."

Painful to process, even more painful for Irene was that she felt a sense of truth to it in her soul. She was quiet for a moment, trying to grasp the sheer enormity of it. Out slipped an awed, "Wow."

"It's only been with the advent of electronic communication that we've been able to find ways to communicate with humans," the voice continued to explain. "We can use electricity to reach out and simulate your pictographic language system, but we're still only

beginning to understand how your species communicates. Not merely conveys sounds or images, but actually connects with one another."

"Yeah, you're not the only one," Irene realized. She looked down again and sighed. Jake rubbed her back, at a loss. "So what do I do with this information?" she asked the voice. "I can see people's infra-red organs. Cool beans."

"You're not crazy," the voice told her, simultaneously with Jake saying the same thing.

"I've never been so happy to be overruled," she lamented with a sigh.

"Now that we have a human who can process our speech directly," explained the voice, "you can help us to understand your species better. This way, we can finally make contact and bridge the gap between our worlds. Limiting your perception of the world to what is physical severely limits all the possibilities of communication and understanding. It makes sense to believe only what can be perceived, but when perception is so narrow as to include only what can be recorded through vibration and reflection...such understanding is beyond problematic."

"Okay," Irene shrugged. Bereft of options, hope, or even the slightest idea what was happening to or around her, she shrugged. "How do we start?"

"We already have," the voice told her, a tone of optimism in its voice.

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