

NIL-E by A. Mann  
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###

*{Thirteen pages in and this stops at the chapter mark. There is nothing wrong with it. I think I could continue and, perhaps, make a novel of it if I had the time. But I won't make the time, not for a novel. And that is something I need to accept. And figure out some writing style as complicated as a novel, but which can be written in fits and starts, an hour this week, an our that week, as my life allows.}*

###

###

I should, probably, start by saying that I love my wife. I hope this becomes obvious as we go along. But right here at the start, it bear repeating. I love my wife. And I have, since the moment I first laid eyes on her.

###

I was driving along the outer causeway, taking the long way home, enjoying the meteors, as they fell from the sky.

###

I do not believe I am drawing an accurate picture.

###

I am a professor of Astronomy at the prestigious Dinglebart Institute. And as the words fall off my lips (for I often speak aloud whilst typing), I can almost hear someone say, 'Don't use stupid names.'

To which the only real reply is to reiterate in a fake German accent that 'The Dinglebart Institute is nothing to be ashamed of, my dear.'

'Fine. It's your story. I'll be in the garden if you need me.'

'I always need you, my dear. You are my sun, my moon, my stars.' And although I might have gone on, she'd already had enough and was out the door.

###

The fact was (is and forever more shall be) that I was driving through the night sky, like something out of a comedic cartoon, driving my old Duster through the desert sky, the dark of the Galactic Void, a bit too close to the center, don't you know, as I let my thoughts wander where they might.

###

Do I sketch the scene adequately?

###

Can you see the Mid Century Automobile pattering along the Old Milky Way? Scenic Route 66? A blending of this world... and another?

###

The fact is: I work at the Galactic Institute.

# # #

I am an astronomer of some renown.

# # #

Ah, it is true that my one published paper was a bit of a joke, showing how one (which usually means, I) could put together a rather convincing UFO Sighting (of the most preposterous kind) complete with Alien Autopsies and Crashed Spaceships and the mainstream media would eat it up.

# # #

Which they did.

# # #

Yeah, for me.

# # #

Alas, my compatriots in the Scientific Community were not as amused.

# # #

Let us just say, forty years later and they have... um, how do you say?

# # #

Ah, yes.

# # #

They have still not forgiven me.

# # #

So, I think what I am trying to say right here at the beginning is that it may be the beginning for some, maybe even you. But for me, it is, quite clearly, the end.

# # #

So, I take the long way home... contemplating a life dedicated to science. But, um, as I might have said, many of my compatriots do not, as a class, agree.

# # #

So, what I am really saying is that after forty years of teaching (a lifetime dedicated to enlightening the young, if you will), there was no speech.

# # #

There was no fanfare.

# # #

And there was most certainly no awards ceremony, no handing of the baton.

# # #

There was, merely, the long drive home... that I was taking for the final time.

# # #

So, I decided... ah, to enjoy myself, to get off the desert floor and hover in the shimmering sky.

# # #

I do not know how to say this to you.

# # #

Perhaps, it is best to start over.

# # #

# # #

See, there are two things I want to say at the start. And that is: although, it is often said it is best to start a story at the beginning and continue on until you find yourself at the end, I'm already at the end. Sorry, you weren't, here, forty years ago back at the start. But of course, if you had been, I am quite certain that by now you would have long since grown bored.

###

Second, I love my wife.

###

That's me!

###

Can you see me?

###

'Maybe you should try going third person?'

###

It may be good advice.

###

Professor Mann...

###

No, you see, even that is no longer correct. He was or had been, only hours before Professor Mann. But now, he was back to being merely Mr Mann.

Those were the little things that were going to take some getting used to: the lack of being a professor, the lack of structure to his day... not even that his life had ever had much structure... or his

classes given much guidance.

I mean, professor?

What does that even mean in this day and age?

The students didn't care.

And although he had been head of the Astronomy Department at the University of New Mexico... Desert... Basin... Campus! That had almost no meaning, as there was no other faculty in the department... human being... or otherwise.

So, a career made redundant before it had even begun.

And now it was over... ending... had ended.

His desk cleared out.

His office supplies (complete with tacky UFO Alien Toys and Dolls) emptied into the trunk of his car.

And he, himself, on the long way home.

###

'Hey, Cassiopeia. Nice to see you.'

###

'Hey there, Andromeda. How's it hanging?'

###

'I used to care about you, phases of the moon. What the hell happened?'

###

Of course, in truth, there wasn't any sadness. That had come and gone within years of achieving tenure. Sure the students

laughed at him. Sure, the world of academia laughed at him. But he had made the joke.

# # #

You fools!

# # #

You say you search for truth...

# # #

But you would not find it if it came to your academic gala events dressed as a purple-suited yellow-tentacled Alien Love Menace.

# # #

I'm sorry, do you not find my attire convincing?

# # #

Or is it rather that you think I have gone completely off my rocker?

# # #

No matter.

# # #



It was a fun.

# # #

It was a wild ride.

# # #

It was a career that started in all earnestness, forging blindly ahead into the unknown... that by the end had veered off into...

# # #

'Welcome to Astronomy 2604, better known as Alien Anthropology. As most of you already know, that Astro 2604 part counts as a secondary science elective, while the focus on Alien Anthropology handily fulfills the capstone requirement for an Anthropology Degree. Oh, and bonus points, as I almost forgot to mention. In my forty years of teaching this class, I have yet to award a grade lower than A+, because you know what they say, Here at Desert Basin, if you don't want to learn, you don't have to!

# # #

Say that last part in unison, if you want to. It's your senior year, after all.

# # #

My students loved me.

# # #

Well, I mean, those who went to class.

###

I, suppose, here, it might make sense to look upon a crowded lecture hall the first day of class, filled to overflowing... and not nearly so many there the next week.

###

Or if one were more numerically minded (unlike most of the student body, here at Desert Basin), one might wish to imagine chart drawn on poster-board, showing a pair of interlinked graphs. The first, illustrating a positive correlation between my liberal grading policies and classroom enrollment. I mean, at least on paper, the class was a success. And the second, showing class attendance negatively correlated with the same. Which is to say, in the end, very little learning was taking place.

###

But that was hardly the point.

###

Everyone on campus knew I was The Mann.

###

And that was good enough for me.

# # #

'You're the Man Mr Mann.'

'Why thank you random student who may or may not be currently enrolled in my one of my classes. Don't you have a class right now?'

# # #

Ah, Mr Mann, the real question should have been, 'Don't you?'

# # #

# # #

I should take a deep breath, pull out of the story (what story), and mention that I do not find the action to be as well described as I might like.

# # #

I haven't described a single person.

# # #

Nor really, set the scene... any scene.

# # #

So, let us got back to the beginning, which is in fact the end, even though every end is the start to something else, and take a closer look at Mr Mann.

# # #

Mr Mann looks a lot like me.

# # #

Though, not entirely like me.

# # #

So, um, although Mr Mann is clearly a ruggedly-handsome extra-ordinarily good-looking man-about-space who knows both what he and the Universe are about, he's going a bit bald. We know this, because he's wearing a skull-cap, which is sort of like a wig, only it's the type of wig that is designed to mimic baldness. It's not a full-on baldness, but the baldness of an older gentleman (newly retired), who hasn't really yet decided on whether or not he should be full-on bald yet. So, it's sort of the baldness that you look at and sort of say to yourself, 'That bald guy could use a haircut... or at least, pull a comb through his hair or something.' This last is, of course, on account of the desert air. I may have mentioned that that man is driving an old Duster, top down, at night. But really, Duster/Dart it's all the same to me. Besides, there really is nothing old about the car. It sparkles. But the man (Mr Mann) does not. If he seems to gleam a bit, that's perspiration. He's been driving far too close to Comet's Tails and picking up the spray from an errant Super Nova or two to be really at ease. And let's face it. Although he was planning on taking the long way home, he was, in point of fact, intending to go home. And now, he's maybe a bit lost.

So, I'm thinking now would be a good time for him to wipe a bit of sweat from his face, dab at his forehead, and take off his glasses, maybe give them a good cleaning, which seems sort of

dangerous, but then, you know, Auto Pilot. He is in a spaceship, after all. And I am jumping ahead once again.

So, let me just wrap the description up by noting that Mr Mann wears the standard NASA Moon Launch Control Room uniform of black slacks, shoes, and tie, offset by a white shirt, pocket protector (crammed gloriously full and rumored to be in the room at launch, if you believe everything you read), and a bit of a paunch, made all the more noticeable by inclusion of a pillow (throw, from the Living Room) under his shirt.

###

I hope I have set the scene.

###

And he is driving down the highways and byways of the night sky, swerving around the moon, skidding past meteor and comet alike, top down, radio blaring, playing a song he has been waiting to play since second grade.

###

Namely, Alice Cooper's *School's Out!*

###

Put down the book.  
Play the song.  
I shan't continue until you do.

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