

*The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

# The Color of Time

*Monte Davis*

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Oh how the air is filled with cell phone conversations!

How many electromagnetic words are passing through your brain this very second? Go ahead and venture a guess. (Pause to allow time for guessing.) That's probably pretty close, but the actual number could be *even higher*.

Right now, slicing quasi-harmlessly through your head and torso and limbs are other people's greetings, affirmations, tirades, instructions, meaningless jibber-jabber, and queries. Queries like:

*Whadaya want from McDonald's?*

and

*Where'd ya put my stupid toothbrush?*

and

*Your sister won't come to the door, so should I just leave the antivenin on her porch?*

And the instructions passing uninvited through your hypothalamus and sweetbreads go something like this:

*Pick up some Lysol, cuz your cousin stopped by.*

and

*I'm tellin' you, Janet, clip its wings or I swear I'll rip its head off.*

and

*Carl, come home! That alien's back! He's in our backyard right now, playing with the dog.*

All this and more, strumming the molecules of your body while you sit there reading *The Town Drunk*. It's really something. Say what? You want to know more about that last one we listened in on? The alien-in-the-backyard one? Personally, I would've preferred to follow up on the antivenin one, but that's just me. We can go back to the alien one. Maybe we can hear both sides of the conversation if we concentrate hard enough.

*Yes, of course I've tried scaring him off. Nothing works. Come home, Carl! Please!*

*Get the BB gun close if that'll work*

Okay, time out. We're not picking up the guy-half of the conversation very well. He's cutting out. Focus with me. Let's see if we can pull him in.

*I'm not gonna shoot him with a BB gun! That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard in my life.*

Well, that was the wife, but here comes the husband again. Focus with me.

*Then try the fireplace poker or a golf club. I've got a meeting in fifteen minutes.*

That was better, but he's still cutting out. Let's just keep listening anyway and do our best.

*Are you trying to get me killed? Or abducted?*

*No. I just don't want an alien in my backyard that's all.*

*Should I call the police?*

*No way! I don't want cops snooping around the house. They might find the you-know-what*

*Then tell me what to do!*

*What's he doing to the dog?*

*Boomer loves him. They're playing fetch with a—Oh no! Carl, he's on the deck! He's coming to the door! What should I do?*

*Is he that same bug-eyed green one that was out there last weekend?*

*Yes! He's trying to open the door! He's—*

*Calm down woman, for crying out loud!*

*I gotta go. Please promise me you'll come home!*

*Oh all right then. I'll be in a few min*

So much for that conversation. That was weird. Do you ever wonder if the phone company people listen in on this kind of stuff all the time? They probably feel guilty about eavesdropping at first, but then get more comfortable with it over time.

But back to my main point. Phone conversations are passing through us every second of every day. And so are satellite channels—thousands of them! And local television and radio and police bands and so on. It's a veritable electromagnetic stew, and we're the chunks of meat and vegetables floating around soaking up this radio flavor. Everything goes into the pot with its own taste, but after a few hours of simmering, it all tastes pretty much the same. Makes me wish I could charge a fee for every McNugget of information that propagates through my—Huh? You're still curious about the alien in that couple's backyard? Well, their phone conversation's over; we can't just—

What?

Hmmm.

Actually, you're right. You have me on a technicality. This *is* fiction, and science fiction at that. And, yes, we *can* make up our own rules as we go along. Something to do with point of view and so forth. Okay, okay, we'll do the omniscient POV thing and go to the couple's house and see what's going on.

Okay, we're approaching the house. It's a nice two-story jobber with a three-car garage and a well-manicured lawn—all the indicators of multiple mortgages and high credit card balances. Look, the husband's pulling into the driveway now. Whoa! Check out the dubs on his H2. This guy's either loaded or he's up to his earlobes in zero-percent financing. He's getting out, wearing his business-casual Dockers and a shiny golf shirt. Moving quickly to the door. Key in the lock.

He's in.

Let's follow.

“Robyn,” he's saying. (The yuppie spelling is only an assumption on my part, but dollars-to-donuts, I bet I'm right.) “Robyn!”

“In here, Carl.” That was the wife's voice from the kitchen. She sounds a little prettier in person than she did on the phone.

“Are you okay?” Carl's rounding the corner into the kitchen, and so are we. (We're invisible.) There's Robyn. Not as pretty as she sounded just now, but not too shabby either. Nice arms. A word falls from Carl's lower lip like the first penguin who tried to fly off a mountain: “Where's—”

Carl almost asks, *Where's the alien?* but he cancels the question because the alien is sitting right there in the breakfast nook at the bay window. With a plate of cookies and a glass of chocolate milk on the table in front of him.

"He's actually very nice," Robyn says. Her sundress showcases her elegant arms perfectly. She's nibbling her lower lip and appears to have entered into a moment of reflection. This should not surprise the reader, since she has just made direct contact with an alien lifeform.

"Please," the alien says, "join me." He motions toward the chairs across the table while gazing alternately at husband and wife with the biggest, blackest eyes you've ever seen on a humanoid. He's green and hairless with a bulbous noggin and a lanky, emaciated body. He looks just like the aliens in a hundred movies except that he has bolts protruding from the sides of his neck. Just like Frankenstein.

Robyn takes a seat and looks at Carl. She nods toward the seat next to hers. Carl sits obediently, his chin at gravity's mercy.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," the alien says. His voice is low and slow and meek in a way that gives the narrator cause to find him harmless. Surely the reader will agree. "The cookies are delicious."

"Thank you," Robyn says. "They're from a roll, but Carl likes them better than my homemade."

"I'm sure your homemade are excellent," the alien says. "Please call me Kig."

Okay, Kig.

"I'm Robyn, and this is my husband, Carl. We've seen you in our backyard before. Do you want us to take you to our leader or something like that?"

The alien laughs and nearly chokes on his cookie. He coughs, peppering Carl's shiny golf shirt with dough nodules. "I'm so sorry." He wipes his lips with a napkin and hands another to Carl. "No. I have no interest in leaders. I'm here to study your wife, er, I mean, your *way of life*, that's all."

"How do you plan to do that?" Robyn asks. To me, she sounds just a tad skeptical.

"Oh," Kig says, "I've already been doing it, you see. We have many methods. I'm past the early stages and into the face-to-face part. It's great to finally meet you like this."

"You're not going to... *hurt us*, are you?" Robyn asks.

"Never," Kig says. "Look, we're like... we're like your IRS. We used to have scary ways of doing things, just like the IRS used to employ hardball tactics. But we, like they, didn't approve of the negative press it generated. All the abductions and probings and so on made us look like... well, like IRS agents. So we're trying a softer approach. I'm just trying to get to know your

family. Starting with your dog.”

“Boomer likes you,” Robyn says. “That’s one reason I decided to let you in.”

“Boomer is a fine animal,” Kig says.

Robyn is turning in her chair, looking out the glass door into the backyard. “How did you get here?” she asks. “I don’t see a flying saucer anywhere.”

“I have a vehicle,” Kig replies. “It’s called *Hiskan Aa Kibdid*, which translates roughly into *The Color of Time*. It’s pretty fast and can take me just about anywhere or anywhen I want to go. And, as a matter of fact, it does resemble your circular dining surfaces.” Kig touches the rim of the plate set before him. “It’s an old ship, but a good one.”

“Where is it?” Robyn asks.

“It’s in your backyard,” Kig says, “but you can’t see it or touch it because I’ve got it dialed out of phase with your dimensional root reference. Kind of hard to explain, actually.”

“Oh,” Robyn says, no doubt fearful that silence might appear rude.

Carl is still pathetically silent, his eyes and mouth showing no signs of closing.

(We’re still invisible, and I for one am developing a craving for cookies.)

“So,” Kig says, “may I have your permission to drop by from time to time? Maybe join you for meals or watch a football game with you some Sunday? I’ll put it all in my report, and I promise I won’t hurt anything.”

Robyn looks at Carl, then back at Kig. “Sure,” she says. “I think it’s nice the way you play with Boomer. We really don’t spend enough time with him anymore.”

“He’s a lot of fun,” Kig says. Now he’s turning his head.

Oh no. Oh no. He’s turning his head... *toward us!* He’s looking right at us! *And pointing!*

(Gulp.) “Would you mind introducing me to your friends?” Kig asks, looking back at Robyn.

“What?” Robyn asks.

“Your friends,” Kig says. “Would you mind introducing me?” The alien is eyeing us again. (Yes, I’m talking about you and me, reader and narrator, the Peeping-Tom eavesdroppers. This was your stupid idea, not mine.)

Robyn is looking around the room and out through the patio door. “Who? What friends?”

“You can’t see them?” Kig says. “Interesting. They must be phase dialers. I hadn’t expected this.” The alien is standing up.

Great job, reader! Now we’re phase dialers! If you’d just let me finish about the cell phone conversations, this would never have happened.

“When I said we don’t abduct people anymore,” Kig is saying, “I meant that we don’t abduct the subjects of our research projects. We don’t abduct nice folks like you, Robyn and Carl. But phase dialers don’t fall into that category.”

“I don’t understand,” Robyn says.

“Never mind,” Kig says. “Thanks for the milk and cookies. See you again soon.”

*SIZZZZLE! WHAM! BOOM!*

Oh, great! Now we’re in the flying saucer. We’re in *The Color of Time*! And we’re strapped to what feels like a stainless steel dentist chair. That’s been in a freezer.

Kig is opening a panel on the wall, revealing an array of shiny tools. One of them looks like a giant corkscrew with a metal hoof on the end.

(Grade-school-age nervous tick resurfaces.)

“Let me put your minds at ease,” the alien says. “This won’t be much worse than doing your taxes. Without TurboTax, that is. Ever been audited?”

Way to go, reader.

Way to go.

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