

# SULLIVAN'S LAW

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Prize-wishing author of  
*Sullivan's Travels*

**O<sub>2</sub>L**

## **SULLIVAN'S LAW**

**This is a work of fiction (duh). All the characters (and some of them are *real* characters) are fictional, bearing no resemblance to any real persons, except Elmo Drubh, who is the role model for all internal control officers.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**Y**ou've never been to Virja (yet), but imagine a world devoid of greed, racism and sexism. A world that follows the **Desiderata** – where citizens go placidly amidst the noise and haste. Skip the noise and haste - Virja's citizens are quietly content, schooled from birth that there is "*enough to go around as long as no one takes too much.*"

Yet there can be a downside to peace and tranquility. No exciting war movies to watch on TV. No crime or crime shows either. And sexual equality took the wind out of the sails (and sales) of pornography.

Sullivan (don't ever call him Sully) found out that Virja is not a Perfect Planet, but it was a considerable improvement over his natal world, Earth. Not quite the world Langston Hughes<sup>1</sup> dreamed of. A world where "greed no longer saps the soul," and joy "attends the needs of all mankind."

A world that banished racism by eliminating race. Perfecting the human genome resulted in a hybrid humanity (they look a lot like us) that eradicated sickle cell anemia, Tay-Sachs, autism, Alzheimer's, diabetes and a host of other ailments still assigned disproportionately to various races and ethnicities on Earth.

The downside for omnivores – Virja is rabidly vegan. Until Sullivan's unlikely arrival via Facebook<sup>2</sup> (and his subsequent catalytic effect on Virja's excessively tame society) there had been no problem of serving meat and dairy on the same dishes. All animal-based products were taboo, even gelatin. Virja was one place where there was no room for Jell-O.

You would know all this if you had read *Sullivan's Travels* first.

But that is all changing now on Virja. Coincident with Sullivan's arrival, a lowly stock boy named Faldo (resupply specialist,

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<sup>1</sup> Poet-author of *I Dream a World*.

<sup>2</sup> Weary of his former toil (an anonymous cube farm), in desperation Sullivan posted a taunt on Facebook that he was willing to be abducted by aliens. Who was it who said "Ask and ye shall receive"?

please!) parlayed a head injury into an underground dairy<sup>3</sup> – producing bootleg butter and black market cheese in less than hygienic conditions. What passed for government on Virja (much like your typical school board, devoid of citizen involvement, accountable only to itself) was stymied by such civil disobedience. It had disbanded its police force long ago, when crime and violence ceased to be an issue on Virja.

Having read *Walden*, Sullivan was Thoreau-ly qualified to advise his foster planet on how best to deal with the source and side effects of Faldo's short-lived (like Faldo) dairy. Hint: like meth, methane is also explosive.

Trading his own placid, cubicle-based existence in a nameless, faceless bureaucracy on Earth for an extemporaneous existence on the far side of the galaxy, Sullivan is now putting down roots on a new world, with a new love, a new language, and a new occupation.

But first, something completely different....



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<sup>3</sup> And I do mean UNDERGROUND!

## Chapter One – The Incompetent Alien

"Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people." - **Eleanor Roosevelt**

### PREFACE

*One might think that a civilization capable of interstellar or interplanetary flight would be more advanced than our own; that people with the technology capable of destruction on a planetary scale would be more civilized than peaceful goatherds or Polynesian peasants. That need not be the case.*



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### WEEK ONE

**M**r. Frim was on a mission. **His assignment:** Find out what makes Earthlings tick.

At first, his work was accomplished at a distance – intercepting radio and television broadcasts – but later on he found it necessary (and informative) to make early morning forays into sleepy neighborhoods, stealing morning newspapers from unsuspecting porches and oblivious sidewalks. The suburbs were ideal for this – with soccer fields and deserted parking lots to accommodate his nocturnal shuttlecraft, while slumbering commuters remained blissfully unaware of his presence.

Why the newspapers, you ask? The languages he intercepted from broadcasts puzzled him. Too many languages for one measly planet, but the language that struck his fancy was English. He liked the way each sentence pitched down at the end. In time he became reasonably fluent in its spoken form. The written form was something else.

Mr. Frim considered himself an astute observer. Most of the voices he heard on the radio were either evangelists with Bibles to thump, disc jockeys with their own brand of prattle, or right wing lunatics foaming at the mouth – which made it difficult to understand their words, much less their logic.

Television was more helpful, to a point. He marveled at all the exercise equipment earthlings demonstrated night after night to tone their tushes, creating six pack abs to compensate for six pack non-abstinence. Likewise, the technology applied to simple kitchen tasks was quite impressive (Ronco TV commercials were a paradigm). Mr. Frim admired any device that could make mounds of cabbage salad, though he had no idea whether the final product could be used as nesting material.

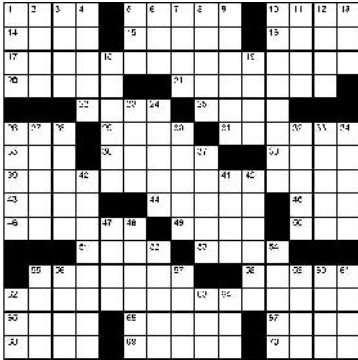
Mr. Frim was disappointed that his shuttlecraft lacked a compatible cell phone to call all those late night wenches with comely come-ons. He knew the first minute would be free, but feared the authorities would trace his call if he spoke for more than 45 seconds.

Coming attractions for *CSI* shows looked like commercials to him, so he believed instant lab results were possible. Whenever he stole a morning paper, he always wore rubber gloves to prevent trace elements of DNA from lingering on the curious planet.



In time he learned that all the television programs *per se* were fiction (especially those shows labeled “reality TV”), **but** the commercials had to be factual. That’s because the Federal Trade Commission and the Food & Drug Administration clamped down on hyperbole. Mr. Frim’s mental metabolism was such that he could actually read all the disclaimers, caveats and side effects in real time. News shows were somewhere in between, with banal stories of lost puppies, quick recipes for working women, exciting news about weight loss plans, and idiotic banter by pre-pubertal weather-children, or exclusive interviews with mediocre athletes.

Newspapers were another thing entirely. Yes, there were news stories – often the very same story being broadcast that day by copycat TV stations. That helped Mr. Frim decode the unfathomable spelling of many non-phonetic words. (Reading left to right – not top down - was also mandatory.) But newspapers also had other sources of information unlike anything found on broadcast media – Crossword Puzzles.



Being crossword puzzles, Mr. Frim logically deduced they were created by unhappy people angry about something or other<sup>4</sup>. Small wonder, for those puzzles bespoke extinct animals (DODO, MOA, AUK), dueling (frequent references to EPEEs, with an occasional SABER), improperly closed doors (AJAR) and needle cases (ETUI).

The needles in question were undoubtedly used for recreational drugs, which could account for the half-open doors. Mr. Frim strongly suspected that crossword puzzles were created by right wing talk show hosts who were always angry about small cars and big government.

There were many words that ended in “ON” (ARGON, XENON, NEON, FREON, NIXON, NYLON, and PYLON). He was reassured that all the lights on Earth at night were NEON (the other inert gases irritated his sinuses). He was similarly pleased that many atoms had positive electron charges (ION), because negative electron charges made him sad. And all NYLONS (whatever they were) came in ECRU. Old war movies intimated NYLONS were a medium of exchange for mating rituals.

**Crossword puzzles did not answer all his questions.** For example, erectile dysfunction had nothing to do with constructing bridges, pyramids or stone circles. How strange that a man would take a pill to stiffen his resolve, then he and his partner would sit in separate bathtubs, undoubtedly full of cold water to cool their passion.

From precise examination of crossword puzzles he divined there was a country on Earth called LAT. It had a very limited vocabulary (ET AL, ETC, ETTU, ESSE, AMO, AMAS, AMAT, QED), perhaps due to low IQs. All laboratories were required to

<sup>4</sup> Usually TV evangelists, right-wing politicians and PETA members who’ve run out of ketchup.

culture AGAR; every mine that produced ORE or ORO had an ADIT; Ireland had multiple names (ERIN, EIRE) - was one for the north, the other for the south?

IOTA and IONA were Greek and Scottish islands, respectively. Geography was not Mr. Frim's strong suit. He presumed there was a logical reason why Viagra Falls was such a popular honeymoon site, and searched in vain for the vineyards of the Grape Lakes (ERIE was most frequently cited). The Bering Strait looked crooked to him and the Golf of Mexico contained no country clubs or putting greens. Puzzling indeed.

Everybody wore either a SARI or a KIMONO, which they kept scrupulously closed with an OBI (lest it be AJAR). They spread OLEO on their bread and OLIO on their sheet music.

He couldn't figure out what made an ARIA and an AREA sound different. Mel OTT was the world's greatest baseball player of all time (probably a pitcher, or EWER); Bobby ORR was the world's greatest hockey player (though why a school truant was lauded remained to be seen). ARTE Johnson was a great comedian, while Charlie Chaplin was probably almost as important as his wife OONA.

Earthlings were sloppy eaters, leaving ORTs behind. POI was made from TARO, and TOFU was made from SOY. Shouldn't the things being made have longer names than their source ingredients?

All Native Americans lived in TEPEES and drove UTEs. Their walkways were covered (STOA) to avoid prying eyes from spy satellites, and their aquariums were clogged with TETRAs and OPAHs.

He confused LARD with NARD (don't we all?), wondered if SLOE gin intoxicated more gradually, and surmised the Hawaiian goose NENE was a social gesture. The Hawaiians seemed a friendly lot, always giving flowery garlands to their visitors (LEIs)

He knew that ASTA and ASTI referred to a dog and a wine region. Perhaps lap dogs lapped up wine. He wondered if OSIRIS's wife



ISIS (who was also his sister) had genetically defective children. They were all called NEE at birth (a rather unimaginative name in his book). Not to be confused with KNEE, the dandling site (whatever a dandle is).

Mr. Frim wondered if Prince Valiant's wife ALETA was an ALEUT from ATTU. She probably shaved her legs (GAMS) with an ATRA. And could he RAKE up leaves with a ROUE?

He didn't know what a birthright was, but wondered how much ESAU got for his. Speaking of the Bible, he wondered if EVE ever got EVEN with ADAM for being blamed for the FALL. NOAH, CAIN and ABEL also got frequent mention.

All the birds on Earth seemed to have four-letter names (WREN, KIWI, LARK, ERNE, IBIS, DUCK, HAWK) The planet was also overrun with EMUs, GNUs, KUDUs, and KUDZU (speaking URDU?). Whatever an IDES was, it was not a good time for Caesar (who invented SALAD for the OBESE).

One thing was certain – all these words were very important on Earth, because the answers that appeared the following day in the papers were all in CAPITAL letters for emphasis, just like the headlines.



Now it's about time that we explained Eleanor Roosevelt's quote. **People, Events and Ideas.** Mr. Frim knew a lot about people and events from watching TV (information most frequently purloined from the press). Local newspapers went several steps further (no doubt justifying the sacrifice of wood pulp) – expanding on coverage of **people** which seemed to be divided into two categories: celebrities (often found on page 2) and people on the move (obituaries).

TV programs corroborated much of the data contained in newspaper **celebrities'** coverage, but it was **obituaries** that Mr. Frim appreciated most of all. From obituaries, which read a lot

like vainglorious advertising, Mr. Frim determined that Earthlings had developed interplanetary, if not interstellar travel. “Gone to a better place”, or “greener pastures” no doubt alluded to elderly or infirm individuals who sought a planet with lesser gravity and cleaner air.

The obituaries also bragged about individuals chosen to meet with the King. “In the arms of the Lord”, or “seated with the King (ALA, ALI or ELVIS, it was hard to tell who was the greatest). Mr. Frim had no way of knowing without firsthand information that a viewing or wake involved the deceased, and mortuary science being what it is, he might have presumed the person “on the move” was resting after too much partying.

**But enough about people - what of ideas, you ask?** TV seemed to be devoid of same, witness the me-too nature of TV series year after year. Newspapers held the answer: **Letters to the Editor** were replete with excellent ideas, from suggestions for improved government services (with lower taxes to boot), to recommendations on a par with British Parliamentary discourse (“I suggest the right honorable gentleman should relocate that noxious notion to a locus devoid of solar illumination”).



## **WEEK TWO**

**M**r. Frim was diligent and persistent. This was considered a virtue in some species, a nagging annoyance in others. He continued his study of Crossword Puzzles, divining that Earth's Chicken King was named ALA, not to be confused with ALLAH (whoever she was) or the truly great ALI – who might outrank the Chicken King.

This proved a disappointment to Mr. Frim, whose highly intelligent race had evolved from Jurassic chickens.

Then he discovered ANAGRAMS in his purloined papers. His skullduggery, expropriating newspapers from unwary suburbanites did not trouble him, reasoning that suburbanites were lower on the social ladder; but it did prompt numerous phone calls to various circulation departments by angry subscribers. No pattern of journalistic abduction was detected due to Mr. Frim's random approach, which involved not only the United States, but also Canada, England and other members of the British Commonwealth like New England and Australia.



Mr. Frim reasoned that ANAGRAMS might be coded equivalents of TELEGRAMS (singing or non-) and his personal favorite, CANDYGRAMS. It being winter, STRIPPERGRAMS were out of season. Just as well. Naked humans reminded him of plucked chickens – not a pretty sight to an avian life form.

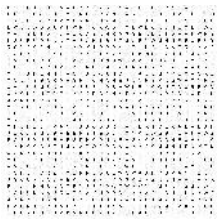
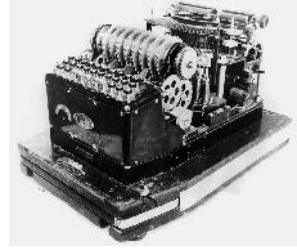
In time, he concluded that secret messages were concealed within each daily ANAGRAM – the very word ANAGRAM being an anagram of RAGMANAA – who at that time was First Prime to their very own Chicken King, TUIE (himself an anagram of ETUI). A coincidence you say? Laws of probability in a more than finite universe? Perhaps, but Mr. Frim could not accept that premise. His random approach to newspaper-napping made coincidence mathematically improbable.

His personal digital assistant Phred also made short work of each day's CRYPTOQUOTE, running it through their equivalent of the ENIGMA machine<sup>5</sup>. Results were dutifully relayed to headquarters on his hyper-laser uplink. The speed of light could exceed 186,000 miles per second if there were no star troopers lurking behind the asteroids.

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<sup>5</sup> An electro-mechanical rotor machine used by Nazi Germany during World War II to encrypt and decrypt what they thought would be secret messages. Phred's own device was solid state, about the size of a USB thumb drive, in case you ever want to take your thumb for a drive.

WORD SEARCH was another issue entirely. Mr. Frim was quite aware of the plethora of secret messages contained in *The Congressional Record* – usually “vote for me” or “my learned colleague is a horse’s ass”. But WORD SEARCH told him ahead of time what words to look for – up or down, left or right, even diagonal. To make matters worse, they hinted at a secret word not provided in their list.



Mr. Frim knew that some religions and language groups preferred writing from right to left, but diagonal was a frightening departure. Phred could not cope with such disorder, nor could the shuttlecraft’s main computer (the iGod).

Thankfully he was unaware of the real secret messages concealed in classified advertising. King Tuie’s rival, Baron Sunday<sup>6</sup> communicated with his operatives via this inexpensive mechanism (cost-free actually, since he used stolen credit card numbers when placing the ads).

It was all about OIL. Baron Sunday had devised a foolproof way to pilfer that vital resource with his submersible space ship. World Powers (not to be confused with WORD POWER) would never complain about UFOs (Underwater Foreign Objects in this instance) siphoning off oil spills from off-shore wells or leaking tankers. Tar balls were especially popular with Baron Sunday’s crew. Tangy and salty, they went down smoothly, metabolized readily, and compensated nicely for a lack of fiber in their underwater, hyper-efficient diet.

While Baron Sunday’s crew sought instant gustatory gratification from their clandestine resource extraction, Mr. Frim’s organization took the long view. Carbon Dioxide, nemesis of environmentalists, and by-product of fossil fuel combustion,

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<sup>6</sup> Not his real name (which requires a three-octave trill). Assigned to him in recognition of his proficiency at procrastination.

contained two vital elements that King Tuie (pronounced "Touhey" if you are Irish - and if you are Irish come into the parlor) needed to keep his home fires burning. Carbon and Oxygen. King Tuie's cold water fusion reactors thrived on Carbon Dioxide, producing vast amounts of Carbon - a vital ingredient in carbon fiber ski poles, carbon paper, and pasta carbonara. The bonus - Oxygen, excellent for respiration; and its allotrope O<sub>3</sub> was exceedingly helpful in restoring their own planet's ozone layer.

While Mr. Frim continued searching for hidden messages in the daily newspapers, his personal digital assistant Phred analyzed television commercials - which as we all know contain kernels of truth and wisdom in every sound bite.

Phred had concluded that among the major motivations of Earthlings were white teeth, clean smelling laundry, shiny hair and wrinkle-free skin and clothing. Phred could relate to Earthlings when it came to preening. His own silky feathers, all too frequently ruffled by Mr. Frim's demanding workload, were a source of pride to him.

**Feathers?** Yes, did you think Mr. Frim's personal digital assistant was an electronic device? Certainly not! Mr. Frim was a high-ranking member of King Etui's retinue. Digital devices were for school children and vassals, not the nobility.

Many of the television commercials Phred studied spoke of instant gratification - suggesting that Earthlings were in league with Baron Sunday. Instant coffee should have been an oxymoron (like light beer). Microwaveable food ready in seconds, instant lottery tickets, and fast food all hinted at a culture anathema to all that Phred and his superior, Mr. Frim held sacred.

Phred shivered whenever a Tyson or Purdue commercial was displayed on his monitor. Enslaving his distant cousins then slaughtering them indiscriminately as a source of nutrition was unthinkable. He had even heard tell of a boneless chicken ranch where genetically modified poultry could not even stand on their own two legs. Then there was the insidious pop-up timer, inserted post mortem (he hoped) into the bosoms of the dearly departed.

How could a semi-civilized race ingest his kindred so cavalierly? Phred suspected the secret herbs and spices in the Kentucky Colonel's product must have been addictive, and/or hallucinogenic. Mr. Frim did not share Phred's opinion on that, but of course was equally aghast at the thought of fowl feeding habits.

Ducks were another thing entirely. Phred and Mr. Frim despised ducks, with their incessant quacking, superior attitude and toilet habits to rival the most unclean of fowl – geese, who were beneath their contempt. On their home planet, geese were fit solely for menial labor, lacking the intellectual ability for higher labor. They were not even good typists. There were those who suggested that one of Baron Sunday's distant ancestors was part goose.



### **WEEK THREE**

“Take me to your leader.” That is what we expect all Earth visitors to say the minute they step off their ship, raising one hand or wing or tentacle in the alleged universal gesture of peace. That was the last thing Mr. Frim ever wanted to happen. His mission was strictly covert.

Mr. Frim was grateful for that aspect of his mission, for it would be exceedingly difficult to determine just who the LEADER was. Did a mayor outrank a president? Did the Secretary General of the UN have to take minutes at their meetings? Was a Governor the leader of a state, or a device designed to slow down the speed of a vehicle? Canada and England had Prime Ministers, though they might be solely religious functionary. His beloved crossword puzzles often spoke of EMIRs or AGHAs, with an occasional SEN or VEEP (of lesser import than a PREZ). Perhaps ELVIS PREZley was the one to talk to.

No matter, Mr. Frim was restricted to information gathering. The diplomatic corps would get to travel to Graceland to meet the

KING (with a side trip to Arkansas to confront Mr. Tyson, the boxer turned poultry plunderer). Things were coming together nicely. In another week or two, Mr. Frim and Phred would be ready to return home, where a hero's banquet would be in order.

Or so he thought.

Week three turned out to be a disaster. Early one morning in a sleepy suburb Mr. Frim nestled his shuttle discretely in a shady grove (not to be confused with the folk song of the same name), and rustled through the undergrowth to pilfer his morning paper (or did he pilfer through the undergrowth to rustle the paper?). He was eager to retrieve the crossword puzzle answers from the day before, to see if the killer whale (ORCA) was still alive, or if anyone found Captain NEMO.

Mr. Frim's latest target was a cozy little cottage on a dead end street, with white picket fence and impeccable herb garden – the kind of place where one would expect to find Miss Marple.

Mr. Frim eased open the gate and waddled up to the front door (his species walk like pigeons after all). Just as he reached for the morning paper, disaster struck. His feathery fingers closed around one end of the rolled journal at the same time its rightful owner laid claim to the other end of all that's fit to print.

Eloise Pendergast was unflappable. A retired middle school teacher (hence the unflappability), she looked kindly upon the extraterrestrial misdemeanant, her own demeanor characteristically calm.

“Now dear, I don't suppose you are the substitute paperboy making a late delivery. No, I suppose not.”

Mr. Frim was on the verge of molting from fright. Discovered! So much for covert missions. His first and last assignment, or so he feared.

“There must be something very important in this paper for you to go to so much trouble to retrieve it. Tell me.”

Mr. Frim was speechless. Instead of frightening the elderly, gray haired lady (she preferred to think of it as tarnished silver), it was he who was afraid.

“What’s the matter? Cat got you tongue?”

The very mention of ‘cat’ triggered spontaneous ejection of several pin feathers.

Mr. Frim summoned the courage to reply. “Yesterday’s crossword puzzle. Did the whale survive?”

“Why don’t I make us a nice cup of tea, and we’ll see.”

Completely against protocol, Mr. Frim accepted the invitation. On his planet the expression “curiosity killed the cat” has an entirely different, more cheerful connotation. Besides, he figured if he were to race away in panic that would hardly set the stage for future trade negotiations. And maybe, just maybe, the lady’s neighbors would discount her recollection of their close encounter.

In any event, Eloise Pendergast calmed our feathered felon with chamomile tea. Well perhaps ‘feathered felon’ is an excessive alliteration, unless the cozy cottage was in Arizona, which takes a dim view of undocumented aliens. Mr. Frim would be highly insulted to be called “undocumented”. After all, he had a noble pedigree and several graduate degrees to his credit. Thankfully, student loans were unheard of on his home world.

Generously, Eloise turned to the desired page, and directed Mr. Frim’s attention to the answers from yesterday’s crossword. The whale survived another day. Mr. Frim had seen many *SAVE THE WHALES*<sup>7</sup> bumper stickers throughout his three week surveillance of Earth. It was good to know the ORCA had supporters.

While Mr. Frim sipped his tea (a tricky venture given the size of his beak), Eloise took out a pen (a pen!) and began filling out that morning’s puzzle. Mr. Frim was mesmerized. By the time he had reached the bottom of his cup, she had completed the puzzle.

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<sup>7</sup> The Japanese refrigerate them in very large Tupperware containers.



“Are you a genius?” he asked. “How could you figure things out so rapidly? Even my personal digital assistant Phred takes hours to solve each puzzle, and sometimes he makes up words to do so.”

“A genius? By no means, dear. Just your average pensioner with nothing better to do on a sunny morning. There are thousands, no millions of people like me who zip through the puzzle each day to keep our wits about us.”

‘She used a pen!’ Mr. Frim thought to himself (hence the single quotes). He had sadly underestimated the intelligence quotient of Earthlings using TV and radio as a brain barometer. Perhaps being caught *in flagrante delicto* was the best thing to happen to him on this assignment.

“I do humbly apologize for the attempted purloining of your New York Post. Where I am from, home delivery is out of the question. And I do so want to learn more from you about crossword puzzles. Where does the Chicken King ALA live?”

Eloise, normally unflappable, even inscrutable, passed some chamomile tea through her dainty nostrils. A tastefully embroidered napkin was called into service to conceal her social gaffe. The dear thing was sincere, if unenlightened.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I hesitate to tell you that Chicken a la King is repast, not royalty. The poultry on our planet never quite evolved to your own species point of intelligence, though a few of them did run for Congress last year. We humans are rapacious raptors. Our talons obsolesced by tools, our prey confined to pens, our feathers contained in pillows. I suppose things are quite different where you come from.”

“We are aware of the foul ways of Purdue and Tyson, but never quite realized the intellectual limits of our terran cousins. Tell me more.”

“For one thing, Admiral Byrd was human, and the doves and hawks in Congress are just politicians.”

It was fortunate that Mr. Frim had concealed his craft in that shady grove (cue the banjos), for many hours passed while they talked. The sun was high in the sky before he realized it. No way to orbit now until nightfall.

His personal digital assistant Phred was growing quite frantic. And growing frantic made him expand like a blowfish (a distant cousin on his mother's side). His pressure suit was under increasing stress with every passing hour. Earthlings had an expression – neither fish nor fowl. That did not apply in Phred's hybrid<sup>8</sup> case.

Mr. Frim glimpsed his shuttle through Eloise Pendergast's dining room window. A quick uplink to Phred reassured his scaly subordinate. Mr. Frim then resumed his discourse with Eloise. Twenty-five years in the trenches with adolescents prepared her well as Earth's first ambassador to the Court of King Tuie.

“So you are telling me that all the purported leaders of Earth are just figureheads? Who then should we talk to?”

“Money talks more than politicians, dear. If you can imagine anything talking more than politicians. My advice to you and yours, if you want to engage in commerce with Earth, go with the big businesses. You know, the ones sponsoring the PBS News Hour. They are the only ones interested in an educated populace, because they figure the more we know, the more we will desire, and the more we will spend. The unimaginative just spend their money on lottery tickets.”

“I found a lottery ticket once, in a BigMart parking lot. I thought it was a scratch ‘n sniff, though when I rubbed it with my beak, all I could smell was ink and silver paint. Not even real silver.”

“I suspect any race capable of interstellar travel has harnessed its risk taking, excluding gambling and the stock market. Am I right?”

“No, gambling does nothing for us. For real risk taking, we blast off and explore new worlds and new restaurants. But perhaps you

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<sup>8</sup> His father was the keeper of the Eddystone Light.

could explain the stock market to me. I picked up a few Wall Street Journals last week, and all the numbers were so confusing.”

“Well dear, it’s all about money. Money by itself is very boring. Most of your money goes for food and medicine, and light and heat and rent. What’s left over just sits there in a bank, drawing little interest, and I do mean little.”

“Then what are stocks?”

“People get bored looking at their money, which doesn’t change much from day to day. So they use the money to buy stocks, then spend more money on daily papers to see how their stocks are doing. Some days the newspapers say their stocks are gaining, so they go out to restaurants to celebrate. If they really do well, they sell the stocks to someone else, then buy even more stocks.”

“And if the stocks are losing?”

“If the numbers get smaller, they complain to one another, then go to the bar to console themselves with alcohol. The only winners in the game are the owners of bars and restaurants. And if they are smart, every bar owner also owns a restaurant. That’s called hedging your bets, not to be confused with a hedge fund.”

“A hedge fund?”

“The only hedge fund I have is money set aside for some privet plants I’ll be adding to my garden to keep the neighbors’ dogs and cats out.”

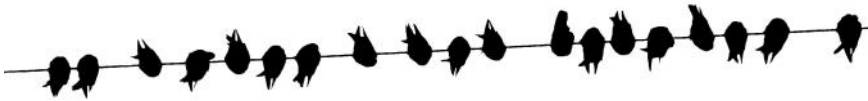
At the mention of ‘cats’, Mr. Frim grew agitated. Eloise poured him another cup of chamomile. She preferred catnip tea herself, but didn’t want to aggravate the situation.

“Oh dear, look at the time. You must be famished. A cup of tea won’t do it for a growing boy, er... bird. You must stay for brunch. I suppose eggs are out of the question. Perhaps pancakes?”

Eloise then regaled our off-world visitor with a linguistic lesson. There were many human metaphors that could be deemed insulting to avian life forms. Like “bird-brained”, or “ruffled his feathers”,

“strutting like a peacock”, “what’s good for the goose is good for the gander”, “feathering one’s nest”, “featherbedding union contracts”. Not to mention “flighty”, “pecking order” and “gullible”. Well okay, I lied about gullible, though it does make a good pun.

Mr. Phred learned that stock splitting was a good thing, capital gains were an infrequent occurrence in the current economy, unfriendly takeovers did not involve deadly weapons, and golden parachutes were of no use to sky divers. The pancakes were pretty good, though.



## **WEEK FOUR**

### **MR. FRIM DISCOVERS SUDOKU**

**A**nother day in orbit around Earth in his cloaked shuttle, Mr. Frim pondered the mysteries of the “big blue marble” now positioned above him. Though words like ‘above’ and ‘below’ have little meaning in zero gravity.

It should be observed that 58 years before his arrival, a tree in an Oregon forest had discharged its annual quota of seed pods. A small percentage of them took root in the forest duff below, growing from infancy to adolescence. A smaller percentage survived the winter appetites of starving deer, to make it to adulthood.

One such tree now stood proudly in a forest glen, sun glistening off its shiny leaves. A truly magnificent specimen that drew the attention of Sven Svensen, professional lumberjack. At a glance his keen eyes assayed its heights, and calculated the value of the board feet to be yielded once his chain saw surgically excised it from its environment.

The largest pieces were destined for Osaka, Japan. Shorter pieces would find their way to the furniture factories of North Carolina.

But the shortest pieces would be consigned to an even nobler purpose. Paper-making.

Ever since humanity upgraded from cuneiform clay tablets to papyrus scrolls, vellum and parchment, there has been a fascination with paper.

There is the paper in your wallet, with embedded red and blue fibers, engraved and intaglio-printed with iridescent ink. There is the coarse product of daily journalists, and the ubiquitous product of lunch counters and dining rooms. The perforated product in one, two or three-ply models rolled up in bathrooms. The bright white product cut to 8½ by 11 inches to feed millions of home computer printers.

But most sacred of all, the paper cut to various sizes, then run through printing presses of industry and government alike to create FORMS! The holiest of these being IRS tax forms.

April was fast approaching down below (above?), and with it the annual gnashing of teeth in the land of the free, and the home of the Braves.

In his frequent, clandestine forays to Earth, Mr. Frim had acquired much intelligence about the English-speaking world, especially the United States – a land held together by ribbons of concrete called the Interstate Highway System, with steel bridges to nowhere delaying their continental drift.

His shuttle craft now crammed with daily papers, his fascination with crossword puzzles was replaced with an obsession with Sudoku. His personal digital assistant Phred had completed cataloging all the clues and answers of crosswords into a monstrous database that now occupied a memory cube the size of a thimble. Fortunately there were enough zeros amidst the ones to counter their weight, lest his orbit decay<sup>9</sup>.

Mr. Frim focused now on this numeric nuisance, wondering why so many Earthlings devoted hours to getting all the numbers right -

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<sup>9</sup> Flossing and gargling would not help.

or despairing, then waiting until the following morning for the answer. Why did it matter?

The answer came the evening of January 6 as he watched a rerun of *All in the Family*. Why he chose to watch that program would be a story in its own right. What triggered a synapse was a commercial from a tax preparation service. The annual IRS ritual was actually another seasonal game for Americans – along with football, baseball, hockey, basketball and *Survivor*. A contest on a par with *Wheel of Fortune* or *Jeopardy!* Win thousands of dollars if you get all your numbers in the right place.

Mr. Frim did not fathom the poetry of this moment – his sudden intuitive leap of understanding occurring on the Epiphany. Americans were just using Sudoku for practice.

He confirmed that at his weekly tea and pancake breakfast with Eloise Pendergast. She was kind enough to share with him the booklet her government had thoughtfully mailed her months prior. A booklet replete with forms, tables, charts, rules and regulations to boggle the mind of even his highly intellectual, feathered brain. Small wonder that Eloise’s neighbors toiled month after month on Sudoku squares.

Mr. Frim asked Eloise “What is the source of all the prize money?”

He could not believe it when she admitted that everybody played the game, sending their hard-earned dollars to a warehouse in Washington, where it piled up until April 15, when the annual game began.



Now Eloise did not approve of gambling. Cards or dice or horses or scratch-off tickets. But she observed that if people didn’t play the game and win back some of their money it would just get spent on bombers and missiles and bridges to nowhere.

America had enough bombers and missiles now, so they would just give them away to countries that didn’t have them. Otherwise people in the bomber and missile factories would lose their jobs,

then have no money to play the April 15 game. They would then be forced to trade their food stamps for cigarettes and beer, with nothing left over to feed their children.

The annual numbers game was a noble effort, and one on which the security of the free world depended.

Mr. Frim still had questions, but there was no question that Eloise's blueberry pancakes were superb. And the Darjeeling tea was...*Now wait - this was a story about Sullivan. Where's this other guy fit in?*

Recognizing the fact that Mr. Frim was actually assigned a name, you can be sure he will reappear in coming chapters. But now we take you to the Planet Virja, where Sullivan's outside the box intellect is in demand.

