

INSIDES

JEFF WALKER

It was like ink, this stuff: black, wet, very opaque. Nothing could get through it. They punched holes in her, flooded her with it. I had a past life on Atlantis, you know. My psychic told me. I was a high priest. A rival priest inserted black wedges in the seventh level of my aura to disrupt the flow of energy, ended my career. But those stories are always suspect, particularly ones set in Atlantis. This ink stuff was real. Look, there she is being filled with the junk. Stop it! What a mess. Now she's stuck.

She was abducted by extraterrestrials at an early age. Took her right up-marked her-changed her insides. The usual story. I wonder if I'm doing it again. My psychic says I articulate too thoroughly, meaning, I guess, I talk too much. I had a past life where I was a faceless nonentity in an inarticulate mass, in China. I never thought of myself as an individual. My psychic says that's one of my core lives.

So they brought her back in a UFO that looked like a station wagon, except it flew. Some crazy alien idea of camouflage. This one crashed in the lake. Once it hit it behaved just like a station wagon in water. She bailed out. The aliens drowned. I think their bodies were retrieved by the Air Force. Sad.

She feels creepy in a man's body. Never knows what to do with her-you know. But it's unavoidable sometimes. I mean, men did everything, just about.

This is a partial list of improvements the aliens made to her body: They took out her tonsils. Where one tonsil had been they put a special organ that gives her the limited ability to travel freely in time. Where the other had been they put an organ that lets her jump for a while into someone else's body. She doesn't usually go very far, sometimes only a couple of hours, if she wants to make something right that went wrong. Most of the time it's more trouble than it's worth. Plus she's not the kind to take advantage. She has to look at things, and concentrate. Things that move in a particular way, like all the parts change but the whole stays the same: trees, water. Anthills are very good. She sees patterns. When the time is right she jumps.

I have my own ideas how it's done. You know about chaos theory? No one talks about chaos anymore, now it's all ergodicity theory. Anyway, there are these "strange attractors." They loop and loop but never come back to

the same place. But when they get close, you jump. Or maybe it's like magic squares. These were used widely on Atlantis. They look like grids of random numbers, but all the rows and columns add up the same. If you fold the paper so two numbers that are almost the same touch. . . . I've thought a lot about it. But these are just models, to help you see the patterns. She's got the hardware, the organs, the things the aliens put in. Without these it's no good.

After she went in the water, her powers lay dormant for many years. She almost forgot the whole thing. Then, one day, she jumped. Just like that. She was staring at some anthill-always seemed to be doing that, at least since I knew her. She and I go way back, you know. We were servants together in a medieval household. We were monks in India. We keep being born and meet again, according to my psychic.

That first time she went all the way to the Civil War. She was born in the South, like me. She had a natural curiosity. Also she had a term paper due, so it was on her mind. She appeared in Savannah just after General Sherman came through. She was a man. I already told you how she feels about being in a man's body. Plus there wasn't much chance for bathing.

She was in a very confused state. Part of her believed it wasn't really happening, that she was crazy or something. The way she got back is worth mentioning. It was a still day, not much moving, no ants around. She saw this abandoned house all shot up, got a good pattern off the shell marks. Anyway, it scared her plenty. After that, like I said, she never went very far. But she had caught their attention. They knew what she was doing.

I don't think it's fair. There are certain things you expect, things you can count on, like . . . members of a superior race should have it together. They're either evil or they're benevolent, but not screwups. These guys were loose cannons. They weren't supposed to mess with the locals, at least not like they did with her. Lift her up, look her over, fine, but not alter. No-no. The ones in charge felt they had no choice; they shut her down.

My psychic told me my first life on Earth was some time between the last two ice ages. I spent time in other places before that. Earth is one of the more attractive locations to live in the universe; there's more diversity here. Most others are a lot more regimented, and dull. I don't know where the aliens came from. I hope it's a nice place. They could see she was unhappy and they felt responsible. They weren't monsters. They came back and took her away. We never had time to say goodbye.