A Face Like an Angel

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Abstract

HARRY Coles, Jonesboro High School geometry teacher, sat on his bed, vainly trying to undo a knot in one lace of his black dress shoes. When he had begun dressing, he was whistling Seventy-six Trombones, now he whistled “The March to the Scaffold” from Berlioz’ Symphonie Fantastique. His moisture-laden brow contracted as he labored in vain, the knot seeming almost Gordian. ..
Then he walked softly down the rest of the stairs. At the bottom he began humming and tramped noisily into the kitchen. At the refrigerator he opened the door and pulled the dish of peaches out and down onto the floor with a crash. “Look, Tad, you broke it.” The child backed down the hall. “The daddy will be down soon to punish you.” At the bottom of the stairs the boy turned and looked up, waiting. Light slashed thinly into the dark on the stairs as the boy’s father came charging out of his room and started down the steps. The child closed his eyes but he could hear the astonished cry followed by the dull thumps. Then the only sound was the pinging of the marbles against the woodwork.

The boy opened his eyes. He stood for a moment and looked at the still form of his father and at the horrified, dead eyes that stared up at him. “Daddy, you shouldn’t have stopped for your slippers. Tad says that with bare feet you might only have broken a leg.” Then he looked to the top step at the stunned woman clutching at the bannister. “Mother, will you please fix us a snack? We’re hungry. And, Mother --- no more peaches. Tad doesn’t like them either.”

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Suddenly a brow plop sounded and, much to Harry’s amazement, a nine foot square of his ceiling disappeared or,
rather, changed color to brown. It had been white. Now, it was brown. Simultaneously, four long, brown tubular things appeared dangling from the corners of this phenomenon.

"What the blazes?" said Harry. He had taught himself never to swear because Mr. Stone, the principal, didn't approve of strong language. Harry was unlikely to react violently to anything, teaching Euclid to bored sophomores had taught him self-restraint. And given him ulcers. His only real joy in life was Marcia—brown haired, fawn-eyed Marcia—whom he liked to describe with "lipstick so red you want to grab her and kiss her." And Marcia was due at his apartment for dinner in exactly one hour.

"What the blazes?" Harry repeated as, fantastically, a pair of blue-trousered legs eased themselves into view near the middle of one edge of the brown square. Harry sat, very quietly, as a black-trousered pair of legs appeared at the edge across from the blue pair. Then to, his enjoyment, an obviously feminine pair of legs appeared under the third edge. Very obviously feminine legs. Naturally, a fourth pair of legs then appeared opposite the third pair. These, too, were feminine.

With eyes slowly contracting from their look of disbelief, Harry lay back on his bed in order to relax. What he needed, right now, was to think—hard.

"What were these legs attached to or, more realistically, where were they attached?" He'd read a lot of speculative fiction about space-time warps and other curiosities, but these things didn't really exist. And even if they did, they just couldn't happen to him. Not with Marcia due, he looked at his watch, in fifty-three minutes.

Harry looked up at the eight legs again and noticed them wiggling, as if trying to escape some horde of mosquitoes. "Funny," he thought, "maybe they really don't want to be here at all. Maybe the brown contraption is the cause of this mess. Maybe they've all got dates, too. But how will I ever know?"

Then one pair of trousered legs stopped its aimless kicking and began probing actions, as though hunting for a reference point. Soon the others were acting in a like manner. To Harry, purposeful searching indicated intelligence and, therefore, possible communication. He pulled himself up
and walked across the room to get a chair. Placing it directly under the first pair of feminine legs, he climbed up and and grabbed hold of one shapely ankle. The resultant kick from the other foot upset his balance and he became suddenly re-acquainted with his worn, green carpet, a cloud of pain surrounding his backside.

Picking himself up, he again mounted the chair and grabbed hold of the ankle. This time he was prepared for the violent reaction of the other foot and, as it tensed to kick, slapped at it. It stopped in mid-kick and relaxed. Meanwhile, Harry had removed the shoe of the foot he was holding, dropped the shoe to the carpet, and begun tickling the sole of the foot. This caused a more violent reaction than before.

Once again Harry picked himself up from the rug and looked up at the feet. He'd established that the creatures didn't like to be tickled. And he only had forty-five minutes until Marcia showed up. Then Harry had an idea, not a very good idea but, at least, an idea.

"Shades of Anne Sullivan," he breathed as he grabbed a pitcher of water. Wetting his fingers, he climbed back onto the chair and grabbed hold of the now familiar ankle. Then he shook droplets of water onto the foot, followed by poking at the bottom of the foot with his index finger. Dih-dah-dah, dih-dah, dah, dih, dih-dah-dih. W-A-T-E-R. The foot did not respond and Harry's watch showed 7:20.

Suddenly the foot stiffened, then arched itself with toes pointed back towards the knee. Three times it came forward quickly, three times slowly, and three more times quickly. Dih-dih-dih, dah-dah-dah, dih-dih-dih. S-O-S in Morse code. At least Harry hoped so, because he only had thirty-eight minutes left.

He tapped out, "Who are you?" on the foot.

"Caryl Angele," it said.

"No, no. Who are you?"

"My name is Caryl Angele, I'm an engineer in communication theory, and my foot is getting cold."

"No. No! NO! When and where are you? And what is this brown thing?" The clock showed seven-thirty.

The foot paused for a moment, then began frantically
motioning. Harry's Signal Corps training was taxed to the limit as he read, "The brown part of your ceiling is the underside of a bridge table. This table has non-contiguous edges—its inside is bigger than its outside and the edges don't really meet. Because of this, four people can stretch their legs out and not bump into each other. The table contains a device that, in effect, stretches space. What my husband, the blue trousered legs, thinks, is that this particular table has also twisted time."

"Ugh," Harry grimaced. The clock showed 7:38 and Harry knew that Marcia would never understand about the four pairs of legs.

The foot continued, "By your use of Morse code, we presume you are living in the twentieth century. We come from 2090 in your future. Somehow, with both time and space jammed, we are stuck at our card table. We can move each half of our bodies, but can move no further under or away from the table."

"That's just grand," said Harry. His watch called out fifteen minutes of eight. "What do you suggest?" he asked Mrs. Angele. "Surely you know how to fix the table."

"Yes, if we could get someone under it. But, for the moment, that's impossible. It's up to you to figure out how to untwist time without untwisting space. To do the reverse would bring our legs crashing together in your time, and untwisting both would bring our legs together in our time. Either way, we suffer injury." The clock sang ten minutes of eight.

Harry climbed down from the chair and sat on his bed. "Why me," he muttered. "Why me? Here I am, a nice quiet math teacher who never bothered anybody. Why was I cursed with four pairs of legs hanging from my ceiling and the inside of a non-contiguous card table?" Once again he rose and mounted the chair. "Can you give me any ideas?" he asked the foot.

"Well, can you see any loose wires or anything else that might be the cause of our predicament?"

Harry looked up at the bottom of the bridge table. Right in the center of it was a small black box he hadn't noticed previously. An oval shaped label bore the word SNAFU and
under it the legend "Standard Normal Auto-Focusing Unit." It also carried the name Fubar Manufacturing Corporation, Limited, Madras, Republic of India. Protruding from the box was the end of a yellow-clad wire.

"There's a yellow wire sticking out of a black box," he told the foot.

"That's it," said the foot. "All you have to do is plug that wire into the socket on the side of the box. I guess Herb's pounding the table when I trumped his ace of diamonds, setting his grand slam, caused the trouble."

Harry reached up, but couldn't quite grasp the wire. Five and a half feet of him, two feet of arm, two feet of chair just didn't do the job. Harry's apartment had eleven foot ceilings. Cursing loudly, which made him feel much better, he climbed down and strode to the bookshelf. Quickly grabbing an armful of thick, heavy math books, he raced back to the chair. His watch showed one minute of eight.

Quickly stacking the books on the seat of the chair, he clambered up his makeshift stepladder, grabbed the wire and plugged it into the socket. With a sudden poof, table and four pairs of legs vanished. At the same instant, the door of Harry's apartment flew open.

"Harry Coles, what in the world are you doing?"

"Hi, Marcia," said Harry. As usual she was wearing her green satin dress and her Paradise Revisited perfume. "I'm just checking the weather up here," he smiled, climbing down from his perch.

"Harry Coles, you are a nut. A very lovable nut, but definitely a nut."

Harry smiled, remembering Caryl Angele's exquisite legs, and said, "Right." Then he took his own angel in his arms and gave her a very big kiss, as he kicked the other Angele's shoe under his bed. Maybe one day he would find out what the other half of her looked like.