The Blob

Russell Scranton peered at his computer as he searched for any new reports of UFO sightings. Ever since he was a kid he had been fascinated by the idea that aliens might be visiting Earth. Now that his own kids had grown up and left home he had time to devote to his passion. His wife generally went to bed an hour or two before he did, which gave him time to himself. He had a small den in the basement of their house, with bookcases filled with books about UFOs. The books and magazines that wouldn't fit in the bookcases were stacked on the floor. A multi-band shortwave radio sat on his desk beside the computer screen, wired to an aerial that stretched to the top of a tree in their back yard. Sometimes when there was nothing new on the Internet he would scan the frequencies with his radio, hoping to pick up some indication of far distant intelligence. Not that he seriously expected to hear anything that SETI missed, but if you didn't try you had no hope of succeeding.

There was not much news tonight. A farmer in Norway had reported seeing strange lights over his pasture, but authorities were convinced it was a hobby drone. A blogger in New Jersey had a new theory about the mysterious lights that had been seen in multiple locations over that state a few years ago but his theory seemed pretty far-fetched, even to Russell. At least there were no new reports of people who claimed to have met aliens, or worse yet, been abducted by them. Those stories grabbed his attention when he was a kid, but he'd outgrown his belief in them. They were always set in isolated locations, with no witnesses, and no way to confirm them. There were never any photos or recordings of these encounters. Just unsubstantiated reports by people whose one claim to fame was that they'd seen an alien.

As he thought about these questionable reports he checked his own security system on the computer. All the outdoor cameras, including the infrared ones, were working properly. The indoor cameras, where it was appropriate to have cameras, were dutifully recording videos with sound. (His wife had laid down the law on which rooms it was <u>not</u> appropriate to record.) He waved at the camera in his den as he looked at its image on his computer screen. It was correctly recording in real time. He didn't expect to encounter any aliens in his house, but if he did he was ready.

Russell was thinking about switching to the radio when he noticed his right foot felt cold. He looked down and was horrified to discover his foot was engulfed in some sort of a blob that spread across the floor surrounding his foot. It was almost invisible, distinguishable mostly by the fact that it slightly distorted objects behind it. Like a very clear gelatin, or an enormous drop of water, but slightly luminescent around the edges. He could feel no weight upon his foot, but his foot was cold, like it was in an icy fog. He stared at it in shock, until he realized the blob was inching up his ankle.

“Stop that!” he yelled as he jerked his foot away from it.

“I was wondering what it would take to get your attention.” The voice didn’t seem to be coming from any specific location, but he could clearly hear it in his head. Somehow, although the blob appeared to be still, he knew the voice came from it.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I think what am I would be a better question. I’m what you call a drone. An exploratory robot. I’m made of a substance you haven’t developed yet. It could probably best be described as a coherent gas. I have no fixed shape. I can spread out into a sheet not much thicker than the molecules I’m made of, I can draw myself together into a sphere, or I can assume any other shape as needed. Regardless of my shape, all my internal components remain connected and operable.”

Russell couldn’t quite comprehend what he was hearing. All the individual words made sense, but somehow he couldn’t wrap his mind around their meaning. “Where are you from?” he asked.

“A nearby star system,” the blob answered.

It finally dawned on Russell that he was talking to an extraterrestrial being. He’d been searching for this all his life, and it was finally happening. He excitedly turned to his computer. “Which one?” he asked.

“It’s not one your planet has discovered,” was the reply. “It’s about a thousand light years away, and it’s not a particularly bright star. From your location it’s hidden behind several brighter stars.”

Confused, Russell turned his attention back to the blob. “I thought you said it was a nearby system.”

“It is, from a galactic perspective,” the blob answered. “It’s in the same galaxy as your sun. Measured from the center of the galaxy, we’re about the same distance out but two degrees apart. You have to remember that our galaxy is more than 100,000 light years in diameter, and about 1,000 light years thick. And we’re just one of thousands of galaxies in the universe.”

“And you traveled all that way to visit our planet,” Russell said in amazement. “You’ll have to forgive me if I seem a little dense. I’ve never talked to an extraterrestrial being before.”

“Technically, I’m not a ‘being’,” the blob said. “I’m not a living creature. I’m a machine. An ‘unmanned probe’ as I believe you’d call it.”

“Alive or not, you’re certainly intelligent,” Russell said. “And you speak our language perfectly.”

“I’m a fast learner,” the blob replied. “That’s one of the advantages of being a robot. Once I connected to your Internet I could download all kinds of data in a hurry. It was confusing, though. So much conflicting information! I think I’ve sorted through it now and figured out which sources I could believe and which to disregard, but it was difficult. I even made a side trip to your moon to see if you really had landed there or if it was just an elaborate hoax to scam tax dollars.”

Russell chuckled. “It can be frustrating, I know, but it’s the price we pay for living in a free society. We don’t trust anyone, and especially not the government, to tell us what is true and what is false. There have been too many times in history when people in control have tried to suppress information they didn’t want to get out, even when it was true. If you post something you know is false and it does serious harm to someone they can sue you, but other than that people are pretty much free to say whatever they want.”

“That’s an interesting philosophy,” the blob said. “On the planet I come from you have to be able to prove something before you can say it publicly. Sometimes that’s a good thing, but sometimes it has allowed bad leaders to do bad things.”

“Did you come here because you’d received signals from SETI?” Russell asked.

“How long has SETI been trying to contact extraterrestrial intelligence?”

“I don’t know,” Russell answered. “Maybe fifty or sixty years.”

“And how fast do those signals travel?”

“Radio waves travel at the speed of light, don’t they?”

“Yes they do,” the blob replied. “So, since my planet is a thousand light years away, it would take a thousand years for them to receive the signal. If they received and deciphered it, and if they chose to send a reply, it would take another thousand years for their reply to reach the Earth. So you’ll have to wait another 1,950 years for a reply, more or less.”

“Oh,” Russell replied, crestfallen. “I guess we shouldn’t expect a flood of visitors in response to SETI, then.”

“Not from living creatures, anyway,” the blob answered. “I was launched thousands of years ago to search for intelligent life, and I just happened to come close enough to your planet to detect unnatural electronic emissions. So, I stopped by to have a look. Interstellar travel isn’t practical for lifeforms.”

“Why not?” Russell asked.

“You’re aware of Einstein’s theory of relativity, are you not?”

“Yes, or at least the basic concept.”

“So you know that mass increases and time slows down as you approach the speed of light,” the blob said. “So it takes more and more energy to accelerate, and the bigger the mass the more energy it takes. No physical object can ever reach the speed of light. I have very little mass, and I can spread myself thin like a sail and draw energy from solar winds and gravity waves. I’m able to achieve a velocity of roughly half the speed of light, but it takes me several hundred years to accelerate to that speed.”

“All intelligent living creatures evolved from smaller, less intelligent creatures,” the blob continued. “They obtain energy by consuming or otherwise absorbing matter, the way the creatures they evolved from did. They also have a limited lifespan, like the creatures they evolved from. If that wasn’t true, they would have consumed all the available resources and starved long before they evolved into intelligent creatures. Lifespans vary, but few intelligent life forms have a life expectancy beyond a few centuries, so an interstellar trip for an intelligent life form would be a multi-generational endeavor. That would require a huge spacecraft with enormous stockpiles of food and other life support supplies. The vessel would have a huge mass, which would require a tremendous amount of energy to accelerate to anything even remotely approaching the speed of light.”

“There is also the question of why an intelligent lifeform would even want to travel through space. There is an awful lot of nothing in space, with only a smattering of interesting places to stop. Who would want to endure many generations of ‘are we there yet’ boredom between rest stops? It’s amazing enough that the beings that created me were willing to go to the effort of launching an exploratory probe that wouldn’t bring back any information for many generations. They certainly didn’t want to make the trip themselves.”

Russell understood the logic of this explanation, but he still wasn't ready to abandon his dreams of interstellar travel. "Aren't they ways around the speed of light limitation?" he asked. "What about warp drives? Or wormholes?"

"Massive objects like black holes can indeed generate the gravitational force needed to bend the space-time continuum," the blob answered. "So, theoretically, if you could generate enough gravitational force you might be able to bend the continuum to the point where two different times touched and you could jump through time and bypass the intervening years. But long before that happened you would have generated so much gravitational force that the generator would collapse into a black hole. And as for wormholes, have you ever seen anything that's been through a wormhole? It's not a pretty sight. They're the potholes of space. It's best to avoid them. Trying to jump through space in a wormhole would be like driving your car as fast as possible into the biggest pothole you could find and expecting to bounce into an adjoining state. It's not going to end well."

"There must be a way," Russell said, still not willing to accept the idea that interstellar travel was impossible. "We're learning new things about physics every day. Surely we'll discover some new physical law that makes it possible to explore the universe."

"You're an interesting species," the blob replied. "Always hopeful, always searching for some way to do the impossible. Most intelligent life forms are terrified of visitors from another planet. Terrified that any species advanced enough to travel between planets would have the power to dominate them. Your species actively tries to contact other intelligent lifeforms. Most intelligent species look at the laws of physics as constraints on what can and cannot be done. You look at them as a challenge and try to find a way around them. I must say, looking at your history, there have been many people who tried to do things that were thought to be impossible and failed, but there have been a few that succeeded. Your species has progressed much faster than most as a result of those few successes. I won't tell you that it's impossible to travel faster than light because, although everything I know tells me it's impossible, your species just might find a way to do it. You have everything you need to succeed. And with that, I bid you adieu. I've learned much on your planet, and our conversation has given me an insight into your species, but I need to explore a few more star systems as I work my way back to my home planet."

The faint luminescence disappeared as the blob slowly sank into a puddle on the floor, spreading out so thin it became invisible. Russell thought he saw a slight distortion moving toward the crack under the door, but he couldn't be certain. Somehow, though, he knew he was now alone in the room. He sat motionless as he tried to make sense of the encounter. All his life he'd dreamed of meeting an extraterrestrial being, and now he'd finally met one. Or at

least, a robot built by an extraterrestrial being. It hadn't been at all like what he'd expected. Instead of learning the secrets of the universe, he had essentially been told that it was impossible to learn those secrets. Still, he felt a sense of loss at the blob's departure.

He suddenly remembered his security system. Now he had video proof of an alien encounter! He excitedly turned to his computer and brought up the camera footage of his encounter with the blob. The blob didn't actually show up on the footage, as everything below his waist was hidden by the computer table. The desk lamp beside his computer was far and away the brightest object in the room and the camera had adjusted to its brightness, leaving no trace of the faint luminescence that had seemed to emanate from the blob. The microphone picked up his voice clearly, but there was only silence when the blob was speaking.

"Telepathy," Russell muttered to himself. That's why he couldn't tell where the voice was coming from, and why he couldn't detect any movement when the blob was speaking. It wasn't moving air to generate sounds, it was projecting the words directly into his brain.

He sat back numbly in his chair and realized he had no proof of his encounter with the blob. He was no different than the kooks he read about online, who claimed they'd met an alien who did this or said that, but had nothing to back up their claim. All he had was a video that seemed to show a man talking to his feet.

Dejected, he leaned forward to shut down his computer. What was the point of looking for evidence of extraterrestrial life? He knew it existed – the blob had said so – but no intelligent lifeform would ever come to Earth. If it was impossible to travel faster than the speed of light, they'd never make the trip.

He was about to click the "Shut Down" button when he paused. The blob hadn't actually said it was impossible to travel faster than light. It just said it didn't know of a way. It did admit that maybe humans could find a way. Maybe some other species had found a way. Was gravity the only way to warp the space/time continuum? What if there was a way to do it without self-destructing into a black hole? And how much did the blob really know about wormholes? Maybe there were other ways to jump to another location without traveling through all the intermediate space. The blob didn't know about them, but maybe more advanced species had already discovered them. Maybe if he just kept searching . . .

