

*When alien missionaries come to tidy up your mind in prep for doing business with you, but start the cleaning process in the wrong place, how do you react?*

## **Snoodles**

By Mike Doolin

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# snoodles

MIKE DOOLIN

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959622-88-8

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-987-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Doolin, Mike

Snoodles by Mike Doolin

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025903376

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2025

# CHAPTER 1

The first Snoodle came through the transfer point on April 1<sup>st</sup> at 2:24 PM, wonderfully disguised as a white hot. It wasn't a white hot, of course. It was a Snoodle Transfer Vehicle Mark 203 Mod 9 Alt 46.

Max never saw it. If he had, the world would probably be a far different place than it is today. That is to say, the world - and most of the people in it - would be the way it, and they, had always been: terminally screwed up.

It's doubtful if Max would be any different.

Certainly it has changed the way some of us think about white hots.

The reason Max never saw the Snoodle Transfer Vehicle - with its cargo of the then-disassociated corpus of one Snoodle - Earth's first extraterrestrial visitor and one bearing the possibilities of worldwide peace, harmony and freedom from want - was that Max was trying very hard to look up Mamie's previously modest but now hiked-up-considerably-and-on-purpose skirt.

And for the most part, Max was succeeding quite well at this decidedly Max-like endeavor.

Mamie Van Pelt was bending over Table 1, wiping down its multicolored Formica surface and light tan hyde of Nauga seats in preparation for the next onslaught against the food reserves of Mom's Texas Hots Cafe. The quiet period between lunch and dinner was now underway; it was time to get some

things done that there would not be time to attend to once the crowds started to return.

And there were almost always crowds in Mom's. They came in waves, as they do in most restaurants. Mom's had been an institution on Monroe Avenue since well before Max had joined the Navy almost three decades ago. It was there when he left, its "Open 24 Hours A Day" neon sign a blinking beacon in the night for the hungry, lonely, bored souls who often frequent 24 hour diners.

It was there when he came back, the sign - or one of its descendants - still blinking. Mom's and its sign are there today. For some of us, there's more to its message than neon words.

Mamie wasn't there when Max left for the Navy. She was five then, and not particularly interested in horny sailors or most of her body parts.

But she was here now. She was quite a bit more interested in horniness and how some of her body parts worked with the other party. That other party was Max. And he was getting a very good look at some of the more functional of those parts.

At least his imagination was. And Max's imagination was very good.

"Hey, Mamie!", Max stage-whispered from his seat on the little three-legged stool he kept behind the serving counter, there in front of the grill immediately behind him, a grill now cooking only a burger, two white hots, a couple servings of hash browns and an order of ham and eggs. The waffle iron around the corner in the kitchen would, fairly soon, beep its invitation to come and remove said foodstuff. But that was about a minute or so away.

Just to the left of the grill was that opening that led to the super efficient full kitchen that Max had personally designed and had installed. It was based on his years of cooking in the Navy, and its purpose was to crank out relatively huge quantities of rather good diner food with maximum efficiency and minimum cost. It was in every regard a showpiece diner kitchen, and had been featured in not one, but two trade journals as an example of what was possible in a very limited space when you thought creatively and took advantage of the research that organizations that were fundamentally space-limited did for their kitchens. The U. S. Navy, of course, was one of those organizations.

Over his years in the Navy Max had worked – and had helped design – several of those state of the art kitchens, most of them aboard ship. He knew how to use space. When you need to feed 5000 hungry sailors three times a day – plus a midnight snack - on an aircraft carrier – an object whose main purpose is to house, repair, launch and recover aircraft and their associated armaments and whose designers don't willingly part with any cubic inches that could conceivably be used to increase the efficiency of that mission – you need a kitchen where minimum movement of cooks and support personnel and maximum throughput is designed in at the very start. Max's little kitchen there in Mom's was one of the very best on the planet at what it did.

"Could you bend over a little more?" Max repeated. "I can't tell yet if you're a real blonde." Mamie had never been, and was not now – any part of her – a blonde. It was a strictly rhetorical statement.

But wait! Before we hear the response to this charmingly profane query, perhaps we should learn more about the brazen cook in the kitchen who uttered it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max Bralin had been born only three blocks from Mom's Texas Hots Cafe. The son of a stunningly handsome Irish father and a pretty, extremely bright Polish immigrant mother, Max inherited the best – and some would say the worst - of both worlds: from dad he got bold good looks, physical stamina, a low level but generalized impatience with the flaming assholes of the world and the ability to quickly identify them as well. As an extra bonus he also received the sex drive of a small herd of goats in heat, one so consistently high as to make Pan leave an orgy in disgrace.

By itself this would likely have been a combination with a high potential for deadly consequences, and Max probably would have been dispatched at the hands of an angry husband or boyfriend long before he turned up here.

His mother delivered the balancing genes necessary for someone like Max to survive in a very territorial world: a hard-nosed determination to get things done, giant quantities of brain cells that worked very well, a wonderful appreciation of the absurdity of life, an almost childlike sense of play and fun, an occasionally crude but always very quick wit, and scads of common sense and people smarts.

Most of us would have some difficulty combining all these varied traits into a personality that worked well in the real world. Max was no different: It was quite a while before he

learned how to balance these sometimes-conflicting qualities and instincts.

Fortunately, most of that serious learning was done in an environment where a lot of other people had similar sets of qualities to integrate, good role models were all around you and easy to find, and discipline was consistent, predictable and integral to the system: the U. S. Navy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Principal's Office at Monroe High School was a familiar place to Maxwell James Stewart Bralin. His visit to it at age 17 and one day started as just another trip there. He had been in it – and the many offices of the lower ranked disciplinarians – countless times. This visit would be different.

He just didn't know it. Yet.

"Do you know why you're here, Mr. Bralin?" the Principal said.

"No sir. I was called out of English class and told to come here. That's all I know. Sir." Max sat on the edge of the scarred maple chair, his hands folded between his knees, his eyes staring at the edge of the Principal's desk.

"You're here because this is your last day of high school, Mr. Bralin. You'll be leaving us today." The Principal rose from his chair behind the well-worn desk littered with little stacks of paper and dog-eared books and walked around it to a side door. He opened it and motioned, then returned to his seat.

"Max. Oh, oh my God, Max! How could this....this ...oh God!" And Max's mother crumpled into the chair next to him, sobbing loudly. Max's father slowly entered the small office



after his wife, looked sorrowfully at his son, shook his head several times and sat tentatively on the other side of Max.

“I’m afraid, Mr. And Mrs. Bralin, that your son’s checkered high school career has come to an end. He is a very smart boy, very smart. Perhaps a bit too smart actually. Either we have nothing left to teach him here or he has nothing left to learn. In either case, we are not prepared to keep him a day longer. He is a constant disruption in his classes, hasn’t turned in a lick of homework in many months, has spent more time in the Boy’s Adviser’s office than the Boy’s Adviser himself, and in general is just not the sort of person we care to have around.

“He turned 17 yesterday, but since that was a Sunday, today is the soonest we could do this. You’ll both probably want to read these papers.” He pushed a few forms across the desk toward Max’s father, who nodded gravely, rose slightly from his seat and took the offered sheets.

“You can sign them if you like – we’ll give you copies, of course. But what they basically say is what I just told you: that your son’s sub-standard academic performance and continual discipline problems allow us to ‘fire’ him, if you will. These forms are basically just a formality. We don’t actually need your signatures or permission to do this. The New York State education law is quite clear. Max’s problems were only our problems until he turned 17. He is not our problem any longer.

“I hope you understand that we don’t do this lightly. You’ve been in this office both with and without your son a number of times over the last several years. Our call to you on Friday could certainly not have been a surprise.”

“No, sir,” Max’s father murmured, his head down, brow furrowed. His mother choked back a sob and wiped her eyes with a soggy piece of tissue that had been helpfully supplied by the secretary whose office they had both waited in while Max was being summoned from class.

Max sat quietly, stunned. What was this all about? Could they really stop him from going to school? Had he really been thrown out of high school? What would happen now?

There was a short knock on the office door and it opened. A taut, slender man in his mid-40s entered and stood next to the Principal’s desk, facing the distraught parents and their son. “I just came to give you a final piece of advice, Bralin,” the taut man said.

“I believe you know Mr. McGlynn, the Boy’s Adviser,” the Principal said, nodding to Max’s parents.

“Yes, yes,” said Max’s mother quietly.

“I know we’ve had our differences, Bralin. But I wanted to tell you that even though I had a hand in getting you tossed out of here, I still like you. You’re a smart kid; I think you still have great potential. This isn’t the kind of environment you learn well in, that seems obvious to all of us. But you do need to get an education somehow. We’ve talked before about you joining the military. I still think that’s where you belong, for a lot of reasons. They’ll knock that chip off your shoulder in a hurry, that’s for sure. You can count on that. And you won’t like it, you won’t like it a bit. But you’ll be able to learn in there. They’ll teach you lots of different things, things you can get interested in, things you’ll enjoy. Things that will eventually

benefit you. And you'll discover that promise of benefits pretty quickly. They'll see to that."

McGlynn paused for a few moments, idly scratched his forehead. He leaned back against the desk and faced Max Bralin.

"I can make a few calls if you like. I know all the recruiters downtown. I spent my last year in the Corp down there, in the recruiting office, and I know the rest of them, the Army, Air Force, the Navy guys, Coast Guard. They normally wouldn't be real interested in you, what with your discipline difficulties. But I think you'd probably test well enough to get in, and I can get them to overlook some of your high school problems. Do you want me to do that for you?"

"That's....that's probably a good idea, Mr. McGlynn," Max's father said.

"No offense, sir, but the question was directed at your son. He's the one who has to make the decision. It was his collective decisions, day in and day out over several years, that got him to this point. He needs to take responsibility for his actions. What do you think, Bralin? Do you want to check out the military? Or do you want to just hang out on street corners with all the rest of the high school dropout losers? Most of them will be in jail inside of a few months. Or worse. Is that where you want to go? You probably don't quite realize it just yet, but this is a major turning point in your life. Do I make the calls? Yes or no?"

Max sat, stunned. This was all happening too fast! One moment he was pulling on Mary Louise's bra strap in English class, the next moment he was getting thrown out of high

school. What the hell was going on here? Could they really do this?

Max looked up at McGlynn. He'd been in his office again and again and again. The Boy's Adviser was always the first stop on the discipline trail, and they had come to know each other well over the nearly three years Max had lasted in Monroe High School. McGlynn had always been straight with him, he knew that. A lot of the teachers were just jerks, the Principal was hard to read but most of the school didn't like him much. But McGlynn, well, even when he had that big paddle in his hands and was getting ready to beat your bare ass with it, he still seemed like an OK guy. All that time in the Marines made him somehow different from everyone else. He was cooler, calmer. Nothing seemed to get to him. You might not like him. But you could always trust him. He always did what he said he was going to do. And he always had a reason for that that made sense, even if you didn't like it much. For a lot of the students he was the only adult in the school who was reliable. Sometimes that reliability spelled bad news for you. But you could utterly trust the guy. Max respected that.

"Time's running out, Bralin. Do you want to hit the streets and continue to be a loser? Or do you want to try to make something out of yourself before it's too late? I have things to do." McGlynn turned slowly toward the door and took the first of the four steps that would move him through it.

"Yes or no, Bralin? It never took you long to make the decision to flip off a teacher or throw a punch. I'm leaving. Do you want to come back to my office and we'll make those calls?"

Max looked slowly to his left, to his father, now staring straight ahead, impassive, unmoving, stoic. His mother had started crying again when he turned to face her.

Max rose from his seat. “Yes, yes, sir.” he said. “Let’s make the calls.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Unfortunately - or maybe not - when Max had taken his Navy tests those many years ago, a scant three days after his truncated high school career had ended, he was suffering from N. America's most blazing hangover. It was clearly illegal for anyone of Max’s tender years to be imbibing intoxicants.

But that of course never stopped any 17-year old boy.

It was always fun to sit there behind his pal Marty’s garage and drink Marty’s father’s beer. He had cases of it around; he never missed the ones they drank.

But now the chit had come due. As it always did.

Someone was slowly chainsawing his brain out, standing there in the synapses and systematically and with great glee removing one neuron at a time. Someone else was at work in his stomach and lower GI tract, laughing evilly as it was filled full of kitty litter.

Used kitty litter.

It was very hard to concentrate on the test questions when your most immediate goal was to avoid puking all over the desk. It was one of those moments in life – we’ve all had them – when you thought you were going to die and were afraid you wouldn’t.

Max didn't do well in his tests. He knew that when he left the room. It was confirmed a few days later, in writing. Max was officially somewhat below average.

Max knew the scores were not an accurate reflection of his real mental capabilities as soon as he saw them. It would take the Navy some time to figure that out.

But Max had learned an important lesson: never take an important test with a chainsaw/kitty litter hangover.

A drill press/sour milk hangover, maybe even a router/spoiled bacon hangover. Even at half throttle Max was brighter and quicker than most folks on his funny little planet.

But never, ever, with a chainsaw/kitty litter hangover.

One of those destroyed everything. Only his autonomic nervous system ran then, and even it wasn't in real good shape. The thinking part of his body was put into limbo while his basic functions scurried around, looking for the pieces which had been so thoughtlessly disarrayed the previous evening.

It was, for someone as bright as Max anyway, a very disconcerting experience. And a learning one, too. Although Max, like many of us, had to learn the lesson rather completely several times before it sunk in.

The Navy was always looking for geniuses. They needed them desperately. It took a lot of smarts to run their multi-zillion dollar war toys....carriers loaded with fighter jets and copters, flight decks that were among the most dangerous work environments in the world; submarines that disappeared for months on end, generating virtually unlimited amounts of power from their reactors, creating their own oxygen supplies; missile systems packed with nukes that could disintegrate

dozens of square miles and hundreds of thousands of people in microseconds; electronic systems that required months and months of intensive training to run and maintain and use. And learning to navigate a hierarchical system that had no real parallel in the civilian world of a 17 year old.

They were, of course, a bit disappointed when Max turned out to be not one of those geniuses. On paper at least. But not completely disappointed. They were still more than happy to take Max. He was healthy, young, malleable, never convicted of a felony. And Master Gunnery Sgt. Len McGlynn (USMC Ret.) had personally recommended him. That counted for a lot. The Gunny had sent them a number of recruits. His ability to read someone – even a completely F'd-up teenage dropout - was very good. Max would do just fine.

And the Navy had lots of places for the Max's of the world, even if he hadn't tested out at the genius level that he actually was.

Cooks school for one.

And so it was that Max became a cook. It seemed evident to his instructors early on that Max was destined for greater things than knowing how to prepare potatoes 38 different ways. Or scale a recipe up to aircraft carrier size or down to a tin can format.

But back then Max really didn't give a damn. Unlike his previous learning factory, the Navy gave him knowledge that seemed to make sense and could be applied quickly in the real world. It gave him a job, a place to sleep, food. Structure in a world that had been until that point a very unstructured place. And exposure to dozens of older, more experienced sailors,

most of whom were smart, funny, kind, trustworthy role models that showed you – hundreds of times a day – what a smart, funny, kind, trustworthy adult male (and occasionally a female) was like.

Max had found a home.

\* \* \* \* \*

As it had been for so many generations of somewhat misguided youth before him, the military was a very good place for Max. He learned to cook, of course. Better, faster and more creatively than nearly any cook in the Pacific fleet. Even if his abbreviated high school career didn't immediately indicate it, he had always known how to take tests, that one massive failure of his question-answering ability aside when he enlisted. And so Max progressed rapidly through the ranks of the enlisted men.

In just seven and a half years he was a Chief Petty Officer. He was not quite 25.

That was as fast as it could be done.

As a Chief Max officially became a Middle Manager. And in Max's case, a very, very good one. Naval officers give commands and make wide-sweeping decisions, just like the officers in all organizations. But the Chiefs run that complex organization. And the good officers know that.

In the Navy, Chiefs are gods to the enlisted men. And archangels to the officers.

So Max was, depending on your perspective, either a god or the next thing to it. He was also a hell of a good sailor.



His test scores were always so consistently high, his performance always so consistently excellent, that it wasn't long before he gained the notice of the officer ranks. They wanted to send him to officer school. The Navy was starting to realize that those enlistment test scores were obviously in error. A mistake had been made. They wanted to fix that. By making Max an officer.

Officers were like that. They knew the enlisted men always had more fun. They compensated for that slightly aggravating knowledge by entertaining the culturally transmitted understanding that they were smarter – or at least better educated - than the enlisted men.

Occasionally, however, they ran into a fun-loving, fun-having enlisted man who was also their mental equal. And sometimes without benefit of an advanced education. Or, as in Max's case, their superior. For Max and those few like him, it made being an enlisted man even more fun.

If you were an officer, it was unsettling to say the least. It was something they never warned you about at the Academy. High school dropouts were just not supposed to be that smart, that obviously intelligent. Particularly when in the company of someone who was educated at The Naval Academy, one of the best universities on the planet.

So the officers always tried to recruit people like Max to become officers like themselves.

They wanted to continually improve the mental ranks of the officer class, certainly.

They also wanted those people to stop having so much fun.

Fortunately for all of us, Max's common sense overpowered his basic greed. He said no. A multitude of times. Until he made Chief - and became in essence if not in fact equal to any officer - he was approached several times a year. The offers were always different in small ways. This college. That university. Maybe the Academy. How about flight school? You seem pretty good with Math, Bralin. What would you think about becoming an engineer of some kind? Any interest in working for some other parts of the government, Max? One of the spook organizations, perhaps? Maybe you could become a (fill in the blank)?

But the offers were always basically the same: let us send you to college and become an officer. And start using that sterling intellect on something beside potato salad, Bralin.

To Max it sounded more like this: "Stop having fun. And start at the bottom again, just like you did seven years ago when you were a seaman deuce."

Max had become very good at having fun. He didn't want to stop.

And he certainly didn't want to start at the bottom again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now at this point Max was a Chief Petty Officer. A god or as near to one in that complex culture so that the difference didn't count. He had worked his way up one step at a time through six levels of responsibility, authority and pay. He knew his job cold and could do it very well. Even with a chainsaw/kitty litter hangover. But it had been years since Max had had another one of those.

The gold stripes on his left arm under his Chief Petty Officer insignia told everyone who saw them that Chief Max Bralin had never, ever, had a formal disciplinary action taken against him. Given the rather playful nature of sailors just back from months at sea, it was often difficult to avoid some trouble that would show up on your record.

But Max always did. And those gold stripes on his arm delivered respect and admiration. And – perhaps most importantly - time for himself.

Now let's briefly take a look at what Max would have left behind had he succumbed to the officer offers. He would have started at the bottom again. A different ladder, to be sure. But the bottom rung nonetheless: an Ensign.

Ensigns were the lowest rung of the officer ladder. Beginners. For the most part, raw recruits just out of the Naval Academy or Officer Candidate School at some university. Many were hardly old enough to rent a car. Protocol said that if you were an enlisted man you had to salute them, pay attention to them, obey them. Real respect, however, was a different story altogether. Except for the Ensigns who became Ensigns by coming up through the ranks – which is what Max would have done – Ensigns were not particularly well respected. Oh, they were liked well enough. Most of them were pretty decent kids. But respect? No. You had to earn that. And most of the Ensigns just hadn't been around long enough to do that.

Max didn't want to put himself in the position where he had to hobnob with the kids, just because they and he were all officers.

And he would probably have had to spend 30 years in the Navy, not the 26 that he actually served. And that would have meant that he wouldn't have been around when we needed him.

And that would have been really bad news for all of us.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max didn't want to become a beginner again. He had already done that once, years earlier when he enlisted and started on the lowest rung of the lowest ladder, Seaman Recruit, E-1 for all you folks who understand military pay grades. And discovered, to no one's surprise, that it interfered with his sense of fun. He had quickly learned to shut up and listen – the military was quite accomplished at taking bratty young punks and quickly turning most of them into responsible young adults. And Max was happy with where he was and what he was accomplishing as an enlisted man.

And so Max never had to put on a different version of the US Naval uniform. He kept the one he had as a Chief. And added, over the years, the rest of the steps on the enlisted ladder: he earned a single star above his Chief's insignia – the sign of a Senior Chief, then the two stars that said Master Chief.

If a Chief Petty Officer was like an archangel, Senior and Master Chiefs were more like the Archangels to the immediate right and left of God, Gabriel or Michael: in charge except when She was actively doing Her thing.

There were only a few hundred Senior and Master Chiefs in the Navy at that time. Fewer still wore the gold hash marks under their insignia, the signs that said: "This is a near-perfect sailor."

Max had those gold stripes, one for every four years. Six of them by the time he retired with 26 years in. Admirals have been known to salute gold hash mark Senior and Master Chiefs out of sheer respect. Officers had power granted to them by the US Congress when they received their commissions. Super Chiefs – Navy slang for the Senior and Master Chiefs - had that power bestowed on them by the men they served with.

Guess which group really had the most power and the most respect?

Because Max did his job so well, for so long, few ever questioned his judgment. Virtually no one ever hassled him, or tried to waste his time. A few short exposures to Max's searing wit usually did the job. Max got used to having that time for himself. And using it. To the point where he was close to a legend in the Pacific Fleet.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here.

When Max made Chief, he had already seen all of the Pacific, and had spent occasional short tours of duty with the Atlantic Fleet, showing the lads there how it was done in the west. He had always been on surface ships...several carriers, innumerable cruisers and tin cans, even the recommissioned battleship New Jersey.

Max didn't particularly care for shore duty. Although that's where they kept the women - and Max liked girls a lot - there were too many distractions. There were too many things Max wanted to accomplish, too many things to learn. The learning paradigm that was high school was a complete failure for Max and the many like him, and Max was quick to understand that

in the more structured and predictable culture that was the Navy.

And it didn't take him long to figure out that if you kept your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut you could do pretty well in this man's Navy. So he volunteered to go to sea a lot. And since extended trips at sea were not really all that favored by the older, married sailors, the Navy was usually happy to oblige Max's desire to go to sea.

And even though that was not where they kept the girls, for Max, that was where they kept something even more important: knowledge. Even at 17, with a hard on that seemed permanent, Max understood at some level that education and learning would be his ticket to an increasingly better life, both in, and eventually, out of the Navy. There would always be women available. Max was quickly becoming a kind, cheerful, self-assured, trustworthy soul that women naturally gravitated to. But he knew that this chance to just soak up knowledge on someone else's nickel was an opportunity that probably wouldn't repeat itself.

So he went to sea a lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the first things Max discovered was that anyone could get a college education - gratis - through the Navy branch of the US Armed Forces Institute, a real college headquartered at a large Midwestern Big 10 school. It was all done by mail, TV courses or through the internet. Which meant that you didn't have to operate on anyone's schedule except your own.

That suited Max just fine. He burned through courses while at sea, and by the time he made Chief, he had a generic class BBA in Business, an MBA in Finance and was most of the way through a BS in Physics. None of these things had anything to do with cooking, of course. But Max had learned how to do that many years earlier. He wanted to learn to do other things.

By then the Navy just left him alone. There was no incentive for either the Navy or Max in offering to send him to college in exchange for making him a commissioned officer. He was already better educated than nearly any officer on his ship, better educated, in fact, than most officers anywhere.

If nothing else, Max was always a sucker for a new idea. It is said that he was personally responsible for inventing three new positions, but that can't be confirmed. Given Max's demonstrated interest in the opposite sex, we can probably award him at least one just by default.

Eventually, Max would pick up a litany of initials after his name, including four undergrad and two master's degrees. And he needed only a bit of on-campus work to have his PhD in Physics. His dissertation topic was *The Socio-Economic and Technological Implications of the Accelerating Rate of Technology Transfer to Consumer-Marketed Goods and Services: Why Basic Physics Is At the Heart of the Reasons Why We Buy More and More Stuff and Why It Costs Less and Less*. It was – as so many dissertations are – full of \$20 words and long, hopelessly complex sentences.

The somewhat obscure title has nothing to do with our story. It only demonstrates that even Max, with his common sense and craving to cut through the bullshit of life, could

occasionally succumb to the need for a little political maneuvering. In this case his doctoral adviser's known fondness for long, profound titles for dissertations.

His doctoral adviser, Janet Shimberg, PhD, would soon discover something else of Max's that was also long and profound, but we needn't concern ourselves with that here.

In his early twenties, Max discovered another love in addition to education: Music. He grew up with rock and roll, and as educated and sophisticated as he was becoming, he never lost that love. Like everything else he became interested in, Max was a quick study.

And he had all that time at sea to practice. And play in all the many bands that were always forming on large ships like carriers and cruisers.

Which is exactly what he did. By the time he was thirty-five, Super Chief Max Bralin was easily one of the best backup guitarists between San Diego and Yokosuka. He was also one superb classical guitarist.

Since his schedule didn't allow participation in a regular group, he did mostly session work, recording with virtually every major group around. If you knew where to look you'd find his name on a number of CD jackets.

And if you knew where else to look you'd find a hefty six figure bank account and a standing offer of full-time work with four of the top ten super groups in the world. Any number of agents begging him to tour as a classical guitarist. And schools of music on two continents trying to give him faculty status.

So by the time Max retired from the Navy with 26 years in, he had by any standards done pretty well for a snarly, confused,



pimpily-faced high school drop-out. He was very well educated, widely traveled, skilled in any number of fields, and had more than enough money to do whatever he wished.

When he walked off the brow of his last ship in San Diego, Master Chief Bralin was set. He was on his way to his going away/retirement party, at a restaurant a couple of blocks from the front gate of the San Diego Naval Base where his carrier was tied up. He wouldn't get falling down, gutter-rolling, moon-howling drunk but he would have enough to drink to sensibly make the decision to take a cab home and retrieve his Vette the next morning from the Chiefs-only parking lot on the sprawling base. He was 43, still dashingly handsome, physically fit, financially very comfortable.

And, as always, hornier than a 9-peckered goat.

He stopped at USC Santa Barbara long enough to defend his PhD, skipped the ceremonies, poked yet another graduate assistant one last time, and pointed his elderly but mint 1965 fuel-injected Corvette roadster east. It would go into his garage along with his small but growing collection when he got there. He had a new one waiting.

He was, of course, on his way back to Monroe Avenue, in his birthplace city of Rochester, New York. To Mom's Texas Hots Cafe. Which he had bought, in absentia, two years earlier from the proceeds of his guitar work on that mega-album, *Tales of Tails by the Otherworldly Pleasures*.

It was a cryptic foreshadowing that Max Bralin, civilian, wouldn't fully appreciate until later.

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"Mamie!", Max stage whispered again, "Bend over more." He tried to skootch his six foot three frame down a bit more on the little tri-leg stool and stroked his bushy beard with one hand. There was a very big grin on his craggy, handsome face and his blue eyes sparkled in the brightly lit 24-hour diner.

Mamie wiggled her charmingly ample rump just enough to show Max that she had heard, reached behind her and flipped her knee-length skirt up just briefly, turned and smiled that trademark smile that turned her cute round face into a beacon, and went back to work. The smile was a combination of the current remark and still-fresh memories of yesterday's rendezvous at Max's home just a few doors down the street from Mom's.

Mamie was the current favorite. Had been for more than two years now. She knew it. The other waitresses knew it. Max knew it. This was a serious relationship, the first that Max had had in a long time. It was working well, evolving slowly, which was the way the two key players wanted it. Even though on the surface – if you judged solely by Max's verbal behavior at the restaurant – it would seem that Max really didn't want a serious relationship. Certainly not with a waitress twelve years his junior, and, even with a bachelor's degree, greatly undereducated by the standards Max had set for himself over the years.

And you would have been very wrong.

In the several years since Max had been discharged and taken active control of Mom's, he had exercised his considerable personnel selection and management skills -

honed at taxpayer expense in the Navy - to staff Mom's with willing females who understood the world as he understood it.

By contemporary standards it was an unusual view, to say the least. Perhaps in a past incarnation Max had been an Arab sheik or an early Mormon leader, used to surrounding himself with as varied a collection of the opposite sex as he could afford. Whatever the cause, Max exhibited an apparent single-minded dedication to lechery that astounded those who didn't know him.

But it wasn't the crude, street corner lechery that you might think of. It wasn't the ass-pinching, no-class lewd remark from a total stranger.

No, no. Never. Absolutely not.

It was something far more sophisticated, far more soft and understanding of the gentler sex. Max was, if you will, a humanistic hedonist...a guileless, playful over-tall leprechaun who promised not a pot of gold, but a wonderful time in the sack. And in the stimulating conversation that would both precede and follow that humping.

Now it could be said - and sometimes was by those who didn't know him - that Max - the pre-Mamie Max - had been nothing more than an opportunist who thought of women as disposables. The Kleenex of the sexual world. That was absolutely not the case as far as Max was concerned. And the overwhelming majority of the overwhelming number of women Max had been involved with would agree completely.

Take a poll of all the women Max had known in a biblical sense. You would need more than one poll taker because of the

sheer volume involved, but never mind that. Ask each of them this simple question: "Did Max Bralin ever hurt you?"

The number of "Yeses" you got would be vanishingly small, statistically insignificant, very nearly non-existent. Max was very careful about the kind of women he consorted with. Fortunately for Max, even after he ran his mental sort program to weed out the ones with undesirable attitudes and characteristics, there were still millions of willing females who met his unwaveringly high standards.

About 43 of them worked at Mom's.

They, like Max, had arrived at a personal definition of the difference between lust and love. One that would have horrified much of the Western world, based as it was on an almost unrelenting dedication to ever-greater quantities of good sex.

While you're waiting for love, a little lust can help you pass the time.

Not that these people didn't find love. They did. With great regularity. Seven of Max's waitresses - four of them ex-lovers - had already found true love and gotten married, two of them to people they had met at Mom's. Max had been invited to all of the weddings. They had been personally catered by Max using his considerable culinary skills. As a gift to the new bride and groom.

These ex-lovers hadn't felt jilted, or mad, or enraged when they had broken off with Max. A little sad, perhaps.

But they were all still friends. And sometimes - just sometimes - when some of the waitresses got together after their shifts, a few of the more adventuresome would get a little high on something and start to trade Max stories. And maybe

someday, when this Snoodle thing is finally resolved, we can sit them down in front of a recorder and capture some of those stories.

They would make a wonderful book.

\* \* \* \* \*

For all the women at Mom's, and a lot more, Max was fundamentally a good friend of the opposite sex. He didn't play with their heads or emotions. He was as straight and honest with them as he was with everyone. Which, using almost any standards, was very honest indeed. He had learned reciprocal trustworthiness in the military, where your very life was often in the hands of someone who was virtually a stranger.

But if he didn't have the inclination to play with their minds, he did have the inclination to play in their pants. And he was never particularly bashful about telling them that.

And so he did. And did.

And, it can be truthfully said, when he did dive into their drawers, both parties had a wonderful time. Max had the stamina of a world-class marathon runner half his age. And the deep-founded understanding of people - women in particular - that made him an absolutely spectacular lover.

One of Max's favorite lines went "I'll put a smile on your face and a song in your pants."

Like a lot of things Max said, it was couched in humor. But contained a fact. He did just that for the women he went with. He knew it. They knew it.

We can all be very glad that Max enjoyed that sort of relationship with his women. They - Mamie in particular - were

the first ones to notice the subtle changes occurring in Max. The warning signs were there. But only someone who knew Max in a carnal sense would ever see them.

Fortunately they did.

\* \* \* \* \*

About a giga-mega-zillion light years from the sometimes-forlorn little planet we call Earth was another planet. It came to be called Snoodle. That wasn't its real name. Its real name was thoroughly unpronounceable by anyone born on Earth.

On Snoodle lived an ancient race of beings, called, not surprisingly, Snoodles. Also not their real name but close enough for us. The Snoodles were fairly typical of all sentient lifeforms. That is to say, they tried really hard, but they were screwed up in many ways.

It was much like Earth.

The Snoodles. It's hard to define them using our relatively backward verbal communications techniques. Although they had many characteristics and were complex creatures, Mamie summed them up in a single word as well as anyone could have.

She said: "They're Missionaries."

Notice the capital M.

Some of the more aggressive religions here on Earth have missionaries. With a small m. They spend large amounts of money and time spreading the faith as they see it: peace, love, harmony, friendship, understanding, a higher authority and so forth. They proselytize, cajole, reason, beg, rave, rant, threaten, entreaty and all those other verbs we find in Roget's or the Dictionary app on your iMac.

But they will always, always have a small m.

Some are better than others at what they do. And they are all armed with the unshakable knowledge that their personal god is better-faster-more wonderful than yours. They firmly believe that they have access to the one and only true god. And an in-depth understanding of what it takes to keep said god fat, dumb and happy and off your ass. Both in this world and the next. Certainly the next.

That's not exactly how they'd describe it, but that's the core idea behind every religion. You can count on it.

One of these different flavors of religion might even be right.

Who could tell?

But in the intergalactic scheme of things, on the universal scale by which true zealots for belief systems are measured, our Earth-bound versions all have a single characteristic in common.

They are lightweights. With a small l.

For a true measure of effectiveness, we must turn to the Snoodles. They, and they alone, are the absolute standard that gauge all efforts in this regard.

The Snoodle belief system was true and wonderful and holy and forgiving and loving and kind and...

You get the idea. It promised every positive virtue that can be described.

And here's the really scary part: it delivered!

It was all those things. And much more. Every Snoodle-converted person was completely, totally wonderful to everyone. The desire to hurt others in various awful ways like

murder and rape and assault and theft and arson and so forth disappeared entirely. The greed and avarice and meanness and pettiness and jealousy and hate found in varying degrees in all of us were completely washed away, eliminated forever without a trace.

Creatures converted by the Snoodles were unabashedly wonderful. They were everything every religion ever wanted in a being.

Many of them were also something else.

Boring.

Incredibly, marvelously, wondrously, breath-takingly boring.

Now, disregarding them for just a moment, we can all probably agree that there is no such thing as a perfect human being. Max Bralin was probably as near to perfect a person as anyone could find. He was intelligent, warm, witty, trustworthy, brave, clean, irreverent, honest and on and on. He was a grown-up Boy Scout in most ways. And almost everyone loved him.

Max was also something else.

He was not boring. Engaged in bed-breaking lust activities or just chatting quietly, no one would ever accuse Max of being boring.

So when he started to become boring, Mamie wondered.

When he stopped saying things like: "Sit on my face," or "This isn't a banana in my pocket, I'm just glad to see you," Mamie became concerned.

And when his delightfully honest lust for females in general and Mamie in particular disappeared, Mamie and her



fellow waitresses at Mom's Texas Hots Cafe became genuinely alarmed.

Thank God. And for the moment you can still pick your own. In most places anyway.

## CHAPTER 2

When the first Snoodle made the transfer at 2:24 PM on April 1<sup>st</sup> in Mom's Texas Hots Cafe, on Monroe Avenue, in Rochester, NY, Max didn't see it. He was looking up Mamie Van Pelt's skirt. He was becoming, as he often did while cooking, lost in lust. Or at least a remembrance of it. Or a future fantasy version of it.

Or both. Usually both.

So when another white hot materialized on the grill behind him, Max didn't notice.

When what materialized? A what? A white hot?

What the hell is a white hot? And why would we care?

A very good question. Here's the answer.

The white hot. Unless you've spent time in upstate New York, in Rochester, or Buffalo, or maybe Syracuse, you don't have any reason to know what a white hot is. Frankly, many of the people who actually live in that area aren't real sure themselves.

Those who are sure recognize the white hot for what it is: an example of the sheer quirkiness of human nature. Like going to mass and finding naked dancing sumo wrestlers in place of the altar boys, your first exposure to white hots is probably something you'll remember for awhile.

For the white hot is the bastard child of hot dogs. It struggles to hang on as an acceptable food in this one tiny piece of geography, centered on Rochester in the northwestern part of upper New York State, on the southern shore of Lake Ontario.

Go east to that state's capital, Albany, and you will be hard-pressed to find the white hot. Travel west, just over the New York-Pennsylvania border to Erie, PA: no one knows the flavor. Go north, visit our good friends in Toronto and environs: the white hot will not have made the trip across Lake Ontario with you.

But in Rochester, there you will find the white hot. A purely local culinary curiosity, its heritage now only dimly recalled. Slightly fatter than its distant cousin, the widely-traveled and universally-admired red hot dog, the white hot has an anemic, speckled look about it that says to the uninitiated: "Whoa! This ain't a hot dog!"

And you can count on that: it's not.

More like a sausage. Probably Germanic or Middle-European in origin if we cared to search for its roots. But we don't. We - and the others like us who grew up with the illegitimate offspring of real hot dogs - just accept the white hot for what it is.

And what it is is difficult to describe.

It has a pungent, highly spiced flavor unlike any red hot dog ever had. The first bite warns your taste buds with a low, animal growl that in seconds metamorphoses into a full-scale, jump-at-your-throat and tear-your-esophagus-out attack. One bite is usually all it takes.

Like golf, gin, country music, convertibles, calamari and conservative Republican Presidents, you either like the white hot or you don't.

A lot of people in this region of New York State do. Enough, at least, to make it a marginally profitable food product

in this little area of our world. A purely localized rainbow-flavored anomaly in a universe of gray-scale burgers and mono-flavored hot dogs.

Bless the white hot.

Or curse it. For the lowly white hot was molecularly indistinguishable from the Snoodle Transfer Vehicle Mark 203 Mod 9 Alt 46. That was later demonstrated conclusively just a few miles away from Mom's at the justly-famous Physics department of the University of Rochester, where fortunately for us Max taught part-time.

This sameness was no accident, at least not in the grand scheme of things as seen through the eyes of the Snoodles.

No. No. It had been carefully thought out over eons by those marvels of used-religion salesmen, the Snoodles. The Snoodles, you see, had been at this religion game a very, very long time. They had transferred their particular flavor of god and righteousness to - how to describe it to a planet-bound civilization? We'll do it this way: one entire end of the universe was now under the thrall of the Snoodles and their way of doing things.

This was a lot of planets. And even more folks.

The first few tens of thousands of civilizations that received their brand of goodness were merely a period of refinement to their technique. All cultures are different, after all. Yet even in the vastness of infinite space some things remain constant.

So they thought then.

By the time the Snoodles had offered - some would say inflicted - their belief system on hundreds of thousands of

planets, they were convinced of these samenesses. So much so that they were taken for granted. When you went to a new planet, you just did certain things in certain ways. Automatically. Without thinking. Without checking. Without really paying attention. The bureaucracy created over eons was running on autopilot. It would do what it had always done, in the ways it had always operated. Guided only by its self-confidence that it knew what it was doing since it had always done that in these same, immutable ways. That is to say that it was a very typical giant bureaucracy.

That turned out to be very good news for us. But initially, very bad news for Max and those around him.

One of the things that the Snoodles did when putting together an expedition to a new planet was this: they turned their Missionaries into an object that would be eaten by the local populace. In many cases this object was – talk about major coincidences! - white hots. Or something molecularly indistinguishable from a white hot.

The Snoodles did that because white hots were very nearly a constant in the universe. It turned out that nearly every civilization they had ever visited had a white hot analog in very widespread use. There were a couple of variants, but they were so rare as to not be deserving of much discussion. One of the variants was kitty poop. But since the only creatures who ever consistently ate kitty poop were dogs, and dogs generally were already pretty pure and much closer to god than most sentient beings on most planets, the Snoodles seldom converted their missionaries into kitty poop lookalikes. Probably just as well.

Now frankly, the Snoodles almost missed the mark completely when they came to Earth disguised as white hots.

Almost.

If they had materialized in Baton Rouge or Bent Fork, or Moscow or Tokyo, or Sidney or Byrd Station in the Snoodle Transfer Vehicle Mark 203 Mod 9 Alt 46, the white hot-looking transfer vehicle would have been summarily pitched as the droppings of a terminally anemic bear.

People would have started running around crazy-like, looking for a bear with a medically impossible low red blood cell count. Not finding it - there are few bears left inside the boundaries of major metropolitan areas of our planet - they would have eventually forgotten all about it. The story would have appeared in the next issue of Fortean Times, embellished in a couple of issues of the Star Reporter or some other whacked-out rag, complete with visuals that had been Photoshopped within an inch of their digital lives, maybe make a late-night appearance on a Fox TV show, and that would have been that.

But the Snoodle Transfer Vehicles would have been destroyed and quickly forgotten. And it would have been pretty much all over for the Snoodles and their personal brand of religious fervor.

As it turned out, they picked - through sheer good luck and serendipity - the only part of the planet Earth where the strange looking Snoodle Transfer Vehicle would be a natural part of the environment: northwestern New York State, USA, North America. Where the white hot was, if not king, then at least the official jester in the court. And definitely not out of place.

Now a few other items have to be noted here in the interest of clarity.

One, when the Snoodle ne white hot dropped through the transfer point onto Max's grill, Max had his back turned. He never saw it. What he did see, when Mamie briefly flipped her skirt up, was her more or less edible chocolate skivvies, the last pair in a set of three that Max, in a typically lustful frenzy, had bought down the street in a rather kinky place called Gay Blades. They had been hanging over Max's desk downstairs in his office, and Mamie had put them on as a joke, a slight tease. She would take them off shortly: it was not the sort of garment designed to do real work in. At least not the kind of work you'd do standing up. Chocolate skivvies were built for pleasure, not for speed.

Gay Blades. It had been called, in print, "a hardware store for the perverted." It was owned by two of the sweetest, nicest, most incredibly in love people who ever graced Mom's Texas Hots Cafe for breakfast.

Fred and Pete. We'll meet them later.

Two, we have to remember that the Snoodle empire was basically a religious bureaucracy. Like the Catholic Church, the Mormons and the Southern Baptists multiplied to a galactic scale, it was populated – yea and verily, bursting at the seams - with the Snoodle equivalent of paper pushers, professional information shufflers whose prime objective was to stay employed and feeding at the corporate trough.

We have more than a few of those right here on Earth.

In any event, like any giant organization - and the Snoodles had one of the most giant in existence - it was cursed with

inefficiency. No, not just an occasional little error, an inconsequential mistake in judgment. It was riddled, plagued with Snoodles who - there is just no kind way to say this - who just didn't give a shit.

There were basically two kinds of people in this huge organization. The clerks and the Missionaries.

The millions upon millions of clerks and file movers and records keepers knew that the Missionaries were the ones who were having all the fun. They got to go into the field. They got to visit new and exciting planets and meet yet still more representatives of wonderful and unusual races. While the bureaucrats got to stay home and move yet more reams of information.

Dull, dull, dull.

Yet there were still possibilities for a little fun back in the trenches. A lot of it was personal fun, of course. The Snoodles, for all their zeal to convert the entire universe to their way of thinking, still had personal lives to attend to...mates, progeny, the usual chores of trying to make ends meet and so forth.

But since most Snoodles, like most humans, identified themselves to a large extent through their work, much of the Snoodles' fun was had while on the job. And since the Snoodles' primary product in the universe was enlightenment, most Snoodles worked for that mammoth organization, the religious bureaucracy.

As we have mentioned, the Snoodles had already converted a huge section of the universe to their way of thinking. By the time they got around to sending a team out to our lonely little



corner of the universe, they had already done this many, many hundreds of thousands of times.

Like the doings of all large-scale enterprises, some attempts were more successful than others, of course. But after awhile it became pretty predictable, routine in the extreme. And utterly boring to the people who ran the system.

The bureaucrats came to work in the morning, reached for their mental on-off switch, clicked it to the "off" position, and went about their chores.

Just like our very own bureaucrats.

So it's not too surprising that their transfer point on Earth was misplaced. Not out of place. No. It was exactly, precisely where they had set it. And when they had set it, some years before when Earth had started to come up on their religious radar, it was exactly, precisely where they wanted it.

Then.

When Max had bought Mom's Texas Hots Cafe, the kitchen was in the front of the building, facing the street. The short order grill where the hamburgers and red hots and white hots were cooked was right behind one of the big front windows. Passerby could look in and see the cook at work.

And the cook could look out and see the passerby at play. And if nothing else, Monroe Avenue had a lot of people at play.

Gay Blades was in sight, just down the street. Directly across from Mom's was a theatre. In the past it had been the neighborhood's dirty movie, but the internet and its access to millions of hours of free porn had brought that business model to its knees, no pun intended. It had reconstituted itself into an Art Theatre, showing classics from the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s

and so forth, artsy movies that would never get a full showing in any large commercial chain, collections of shorts, even cartoons and strings of WWII news reels. Management had torn out several rows of seats in the very back of the hall and installed tables. Now the theatre served cold sandwiches – tuna, PB&J, cold cuts, salads like macaroni, potato, green salads. The food was catered by Mom's and brought over every afternoon. Business was very good.

There was a biker bar two doors away. A six-story co-op apartment building full of aging yuppies, Millennials, Gen Xers and recent Gen-Zers was on the next corner. The local gay bar was a block away in the other direction, immediately adjacent to one of the most wildly successful heterosexual pick-up saloons in this end of the state. A large apartment building favored by the students at one of the girl's colleges in town was on the side street next to the theatre.

And on and on. Tattoo and piercing parlors. Ethnic restaurants. A food co-op. Two independent bookstores. Antique stores. Bars. Clubs. Delis. Convenience stores. Jewelry shops. Barbers. Hair stylists. Gas stations. Sandwich shops. There was something for everyone. And Mom's Texas Hots Café was smack dab in the middle of it all.

So there was always a lot of action on Monroe Avenue, 24 hours a day.

When Max took over Mom's, his years of running dozens of kitchens in the Navy told him that there was something wrong with having the kitchen looking out over the Avenue. Just for starters, it took valuable space away from the dining room – the place where people gave you money. Even though

Max's cooking experience in the Navy was never done to generate profit, he always had a budget to adhere to, and it seemed reasonable to him – and his MBA - to believe that you wanted to maximize that profit opportunity in the civilian sector.

And with that big window looking out over Monroe Avenue right in front of them, it was too easy for the folks in the kitchen to get distracted. Regardless of what your personal definition of distracting things was - old Harleys, sweet young boys, college girls, BMWs, recent examples of the pierced/poked/ penetrated/tattooed crowd or whatever - there were always plenty of distractions on the Avenue.

And since Mom's was the only 24-hour diner in this end of town, and the Avenue ran 24/7, there was always a lot of action in this part of the neighborhood.

All those interesting sights out in front of the big kitchen window made for a certain amount of inefficiency and outright error in the kitchen. Max knew that was hurting business. Customers - even the last call crowd - would only wait so long for a correct version of what they ordered. Once. After that they'd find somewhere else to eat. Mom's was the only 24-hour diner around here. But it certainly wasn't the only one in town.

So when Max bought Mom's Texas Hots Cafe while serving his last two years in the Navy, he vowed to move the kitchen when he took over personally. Back out of sight where it belonged. The short order grill could comfortably live right behind the front counter, that was fine. But the kitchen, where all the real work was done, that would have to be out of sight. The cooks would always be distracted to some extent by the

waitresses and the customers. Cooks were like that. Max was certainly like that. But there was no point in encouraging it by giving them even more distractions.

And move the kitchen he did. His first week as owner. Back to where it belonged. Back to where the old walk-in cooler used to be. The old reefer was an original equipment relic held together by little more than good luck and duct tape anyway, and would have had to be replaced. And Max did. But the big new reefer was now many feet away from where it had been.

Where it had been when the Snoodles did their scouting survey to set up the transfer point.

So when it came time to activate the transfer point, it was still in exactly the place the Snoodle bureaucracy had put it years before. It was just not where they wanted it, which was directly over the shelf full of white hots in the walk-in cooler.

It was now directly over the grill.

Some of the bureaucrats back on Snoodle were supposed to check that before the Missionaries made the transfer. There was a documented procedure for that. There were hoards of Snoodles assigned to that task. They were even armed with the Snoodle analog of that mightiest of weapons: the Form.

And most of the time that procedure was followed, if not carefully then at least given some cursory attention, some semblance of thought.

But this day was different. One of the lower-ranking Snoodles in the department dedicated to that last minute check of the functional location of the transfer point had been fired. Like enlisted men in Max's Navy, he was simply having too

much fun. His supervisor - a pompous, old-line bureaucrat with no sense of humor at all - just couldn't take it any longer.

The younger Snoodle was summarily dispatched to the street.

Well, that didn't rest easy with the rest of the lower ranked Snoodles in that particular department. The Snoodle who was fired was the life of the party. He often said things to the more elevated bureaucrats that the rest of the Snoodles wanted to say but didn't have the guts to say. Observations on the relative merit of having certain Snoodles in certain positions of power, say. Insightful commentaries on overall management styles or recent decisions. Mentions that he had personally observed one boss Snoodle in the cozy company of another boss Snoodle's primary mate.

And almost-lewd remarks like: "Kargle my farg" or "Swinge my nates."

Things like that.

So when the word came down from the top to cut the admin budget a little bit, the department head Snoodle didn't have to do much agonizing over who would get the ax. He knew exactly where to go. And did.

The happy, horny, humorous Snoodle was out on the bricks. And morale in the rest of the department – never particularly high on the best of days - dropped like a brick.

And consequently, the Snoodles who were supposed to re-check the Earth transfer point never did. They were down the street in the Snoodle equivalent of a saloon. Throwing an impromptu going-away party for the fired Snoodle. All of them.

Carrying on like trash.

It would be quite a while before other Snoodles in other parts of the unimaginably vast bureaucracy noticed the absence of the requisite paper work. A long time before they got around to doing anything about those missing forms. Much longer still before morale had been regained in the department that was supposed to check the transfer point in the first place. And a very, very, very long time until it was actually checked.

And by then, of course, it was much too late.

It was, in all important respects, a very typical bureaucracy.

So when the first Missionary/white hot came through the transfer point, he wasn't in the walk-in cooler. He was on the grill.

And that, too, turned out to be very good news for us.

But not for awhile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Snoodle Missionaries were transferred frozen for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which was the fact that during the miniscule fraction of a picosecond they would spend in quantum space-time, it would happen anyway. Space-time was passing chilly. It was the original freeze-dry machine. It worked really well. Most of the time. Sometimes – not very often but often enough to be worrisome - the results were not quite as expected. Quantum effects no doubt. Which is why the Snoodles performed the freeze-dry function themselves instead of relying on space-time to do it.

The Snoodles only tried to convert certain types of civilizations. Planets that had reached a given level of group thought and technology and had sunk to some pre-defined low

point of morality and personal goodness, as defined by the Snoodles. They looked for things like wars and violence and theft and indiscriminate coupling. They analyzed the sales of birth control devices. X-rated movies. The existence of food processors and pasta makers. High heels. Chocolate underpants. Corrupt politicians. Leaders who had a fondness for illicit sexual relations in their offices or bribery or influence peddling or the desire to use aggression or revenge to solve political problems. Weapons that could be used to harm others and a propensity to use those weapons. Vehicles that polluted the landscape and corporations that put profit over service to the planet and its people. Policies that put the planet on a course that would eventually cause its climate to change substantially and jeopardize its inhabitants.

Things like that.

They had no trouble, of course, finding all those things on millions of inhabited planets.

Including Earth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Snoodle Missionaries sent to some distant planet were often assigned indiscriminately. Some didn't really want to go, at least not so soon after their last assignment.

But the god business was a higher calling, and there was little room for personal opinion. There were always many more planets that needed conversion than there were Missionaries to lead the teams. So as the Missionaries' names just came up on the list, they were trundled off to the conversion room once again, changed into white hots or in rare cases kitty poop,

merquwains, trillilokarnofranosnargs, or one of the other foodstuffs common on millions of planets and flash-frozen down to absolute zero.

Then shipped off to who knows where.

Some of them were not totally delighted with this rather impersonal procedure. Like the one who headed up the contingent to Earth. His last several performance reviews had been less than sterling. Like so many of his overworked, underpaid compatriots, he was starting to get toasted. Burned out. Cooked. Probably ready for some serious R&R. Maybe combined with some focused counseling and a reconsideration of his long-term occupational goals.

But it took time for those negative personnel reports to filter up the chain of command to the people who could do something about it. So he was reassigned - once again - this time to a funny little planet near enough to the end of the known universe.

Frozen, of course.

Disenchanted, absolutely.

And less than likely to do a good job. Count on that.

Frozen Snoodle Missionaries, like the white hots that they so successfully imitated, had an unusual molecular structure. One that required a gradual thawing out if the Snoodle Missionary zeal was to stay fully intact. That's why their transfer points were always inside something like a walk-in cooler. A temperature a few degrees above zero in the cooler was like an equatorial beach compared to the absolute zero in space-time. It gave them time to come up to speed gradually.



Even really experienced Snoodle missionaries found the transfer procedure a bit unsettling. It took a little while - several minutes at least - to regain one's composure. To recall that your job was converting another pack of mangy heathens on some backwater planet to the True Word.

All this took time.

The head of the Snoodle Missionary Expedition to Earth didn't have that time. He went from absolute zero to the several hundred degree heat on the grill in fractions of a second.

He lost it. Well, part of it, anyway. And he fractured. Physically.

Broke in half, right around the center.

That had never happened before. At least the powers that be in the Design and Implementation Section of the Snoodle Transfer Vehicle Engineering Department of the unimaginably vast Snoodle bureaucracy didn't know about it.

Something similar had happened. Several times. But the cover your ass mentality of the Snoodle bureaucracy was at least as perfected there as it was on our Earth, and those unfortunate little occurrences had never been officially documented.

So when the Snoodle Transfer Vehicle Mark 203 Mod 9 Alt 46 came through the transfer point and hit that grill at Mom's Texas Hots Cafe, it was destined to fail. The engineering was not quite good enough.

It was well outside the Normally Established Environmental Operating Conditions as put forth in various documents.

And of course, fail it did.

## *Snoodles*

The Lead Missionary had not been given adequate time to come up to full mental operating temperature. He was running on maybe five of eight cylinders. It affected his performance - already suspect - in some unusual ways.

When he was eaten minutes later by a somewhat puzzled Max who didn't recall putting a third white hot on the grill and who in any event would never serve a broken white hot to a customer, he was, by Snoodle Missionary standards at least, a few bricks shy of a full load. An elevator that didn't go all the way to the top. A galactic guitar with a broken D string in the middle of a gig.

He was, in a word, not running well.

No. Not well at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Snoodles are a lot of things: zealous, dedicated, convinced that their Ultimate Word is the last word in Words. As Mamie said, they are Missionaries. Very good Missionaries. Missionaries with a capital M. And they can be described in a lot of different ways.

But no one could ever really call them bad. They weren't fundamentally evil. Or terminally nasty. Or any of those things.

They were basically just plain folks who had a Higher Calling. That was what they did. That was their business in the universe. Snoodlism was what kept their intergalactic balance of trade in the black: they were the universe's prime exporters of religion.

They were business people. Plain, ordinary, hardworking business people.

Hard-nosed, to be sure. Absolutely convinced that their product was the best of its kind anywhere. Given the rather startling results, few could argue convincingly with that.

And totally dedicated to their calling. Missionaries - even our lightweight, Earthbound lowercase m types - are nothing more or less than salespeople. They don't sell a product, they peddle a service: eternal salvation. As services go, that one is perhaps a bit easier to become enamored with.

And the Snoodles made it real easy to bite on the offer, as it were. The white hots they came packaged in were mildly addictive. And you just had to have another Snoodle white hot. And another. And in a day or two, when your bung had cooled off a bit, maybe some more.

And pretty soon – when you had enough Snoodle Missionaries running around inside your head relieving you of all your bad characteristics - you were just like the Snoodles. Docile and good-hearted and pleasant and easy-going. And wonderful.

And, in many cases, boring. Oh my Snoodle! Could they ever be boring.

## CHAPTER 3

Now although the Snoodles were the universe's major exporters of religion, that alone was not enough to keep them in business. No organization of any size - and the Snoodles' was easily the largest imaginable - can run very long on good, clean thoughts and pureness of purpose.

And no civilization anywhere is going to pay to have its act cleaned up. Not voluntarily anyway.

Our Earth bureaucrats seem to have to keep relearning that truth.

No. Good thoughts alone are just not enough. We need look no further than Earthbound television and internet to verify this. Check out our very own video preachers. Do we see sackcloth and ashes? Abject poverty? A humbleness of surroundings to match the humbleness of spirit being communicated through the ether?

Not so you'd notice.

What we see if we look critically beneath the slickly varnished surface of the Earth version of the god business is a basic, common characteristic, an operating tenet that doesn't change from one to the next. From the largest, oldest, 'established' religions to the latest streetfront version camped on folding chairs, there is a common thread to them all.

Give up? Come on: you can do this! It's Bread! Moola! Dinero! AKA Lettuce. Pesos, Colones, Euros, Dollars. Coin of the realm. And in the more visible religions, vast sums of it, washing over the screen preachers' yachts and mansions and

\$4000 suits. It takes big bucks to convert the unwashed masses. 800-numbers. Visa cards. Legions of telemarketing phone answerers. Web sites. Data base marketers. Direct mail campaigns. Targeted email messages. Pop-ups. Click-throughs. Conversion rates.

Make no mistake: this is a business. Salvation does not come cheap. God doesn't work for minimum wage.

In exchange for "the word", the Earthbound small-screen big-time video proselytizers want something in return. Some concrete act that will demonstrate your commitment to their flavor of god. Something - uh -measurable. Something they can use efficiently to spread the word even further.

Something, say, like money.

Oh, no! Our god is not for sale! What a crass thought!

But a little donation might be in order. A big donation will probably get you a personally-signed letter. A really big donation will get you....well, you can probably figure that one out without help.

And so it was with the Snoodles.

But since the Snoodles had been at this for mega-eons longer than the Earth had entertained beings with intelligence, they had refined the technique somewhat. Money was useless to them. Earthlings have difficulty figuring out the exchange rate between the Japanese Yen and the American Dollar, even though a quick visit to the local Honda dealer will provide a close approximation. It was enormously harder to convert the exchange medium of a given planet directly into something the ordinary Snoodle could spend in his neighborhood version of a saloon.

There was a way to do that, of course. There had to be. No bored Snoodle clerk could get through the week without a little pop with his friends.

But it wasn't done directly. The Snoodle situation was infinitely slicker than that.

The Snoodles gave goodness and fairness and pureness of heart, by simply removing the behavior patterns for bad behavior. Of that there can be no doubt. And since there is no universally accepted scale for those things, those qualities are very hard to measure. Our TV and internet missionaries try to equate their good works with money, of course.

But as mentioned before, they are lightweights. With a lowercase l.

The Snoodles knew better. They never said: "If we make you this much better a person, we'd like \$47.22." They never asked for money. Not directly. Even if they had, their charge-card scanners wouldn't work with our size cards.

No. No money. What they wanted was something more valuable. Something where the rate of exchange was fixed by the Snoodles, not some faceless trader on a commodities board in Chicago or a three-piece suit guy at the Fed. Something that didn't have to be mined or refined or grown or manufactured or trucked or stored in big warehouses.

Something that everyone in the universe would want and could use. And since all planets and civilizations were different, the things that were important in one place were unimportant in another.

The Snoodles knew, for example, that light beer was a deadly poison to the inhabitants of Brin-Brin. The Brin-Brins

drank liquid mercury as their drug of choice. And since mercury is heavy and hard to store and just generally very slippery stuff – to say nothing of toxic to many creatures - the Snoodles never tried to export mercury from one corner of the universe and ship it light years to the Brin-Brins. Given the Brin-Brins' ability to ingest staggering quantities of liquid mercury, the Snoodles knew that the inventory control problems alone would completely baffle legions of Snoodle CPAs and their systems people and linear programming experts.

The Snoodles' plan was much more elegant. More refined. More universally exchangeable.

More profitable.

What the Snoodles wanted in return for bestowing goodness of heart and mind was knowledge. Information. Data. The tiny bits and pieces of accumulated experience of the peoples of a planet that are the mortar of all civilizations.

Someone on every planet has said: "There is nothing new in the universe." If they had actually been to every planet - and the Snoodles had many hundreds of thousands of them under their collective belt - they would have known that this was utterly untrue.

There was something new in the universe. Lots of somethings. Zillions upon zillions of somethings new. On every planet. In every culture and civilization.

And like a galactic-size knowledge sponge, the Snoodles absorbed it all. The alphabet of the little-known Slurn tribe on Pendix. The molecular make-up of the hair on the Philbs of Dlip. The reproductive cycle of the beautiful crystal plants on

Lern. The elegantly advanced theories of quantum gravity developed by the Lendels.

And more mundane things too. Foods. Cooking. Dress habits or lack thereof. Transportation systems. Educational systems. Poetry. Flora and fauna. Literature. Songs. Cultural taboos. How to spot an unmarked police car or look for mismarked cans of soup in the grocery store.

The Snoodles collected it all. Quality was absolutely not a consideration, at least not at the collection stage. It was strictly a quantitative measure, and a very simple one at that: more information is better. Much more is much better. Huge quantities are hugely better. And so on.

So so far, it seems like a good trade. You make me a better person by removing the behavior patterns that might make me inclined to rape, murder, steal etc. and I'll tell you what I know.

There was just one tiny detail in this perfect barter system that we didn't mention. And here it is: none of this goodness-for-knowledge exchange was voluntary.

When you ate a white hot/Snoodle Missionary, and that Missionary went to work, you actually did become a somewhat better person. Eat enough of them and you'd be nearly perfect.

But oh - by the way, heh, heh :) :) - while we're here inside your mind, we're going to do a little rummaging around. Just sort of window shopping. To see what you might have available in the way of ideas, knowledge, data, info, stuff like that. Not to worry. You won't even know we're here.

And no one ever did. Until much, much later in the process.

And when we find something we like, we're going to take it. Well, actually, we're going to just duplicate it. Like copying



a file out of computer memory onto a new drive. The original will still be there. We're just going to run it through our intergalactic Xerox machine.

Then we're going to ship these new pieces of information to our information-storage galaxy. Categorize these. Index those. Match this piece from Earth with something we learned a few thousand planets ago on the other side of the universe. Combine them. Manipulate them. Sort...edit... red pencil this hunk...circle that one.

In no time at all your knowledge of how to market power tools on Earth (This Week Only! Our Best Radial Arm Saw on Sale for only \$299.00 including \$70 worth of FREE accessories!) is going to be combined with the Escarget's research and development work on perfect frictionless bearing systems. Bearings that would make radial arm saw motors much more reliable. Bearings that would make all motors much more efficient. Bearings that a lot of people in a lot of places would really like to have.

And then...and Then! we're going to sell this information to the Frandel's of Glorck, who are that galaxy's primo maker and exporter of power tools. In exchange for that we'll get a nice, fat letter of credit that we can use with the Urnig's, who not coincidentally are only three solar systems away from the Blin-Blins. Now guess what the Urnig's have lots of that the Blin-Blins would really like to have?

If you guessed ingestible-grade liquid mercury, you win the trip for three to the barren desert planet NinNoc. If you happen to be a bonded trio of scaly, cold-blooded Drics, two weeks on NinNoc is the dream vacation of a lifetime.

All travel arrangements and accommodations are handled by – what a surprise! - a subsidiary of the Snoodle empire.

You see how the system works.

It only has that one tiny little flaw. Well, actually, two tiny little flaws. Neither of which are really tiny. Or really little. Particularly to a person like Max.

Flaw Number One: you might be willing to share your knowledge with someone else...if they asked real nice. It's just a little courtesy, you know. Some people have trouble dealing with the idea that there's another being traipsing through their mind, riffling their mental filing cabinets without permission.

And Flaw Number Two: maybe you don't want to be a better person. Maybe, just maybe, you're happy with yourself the way you are.

The Snoodles, of course, had long since come to grips with this seeming inconsistency in their logic train. It tracked perfectly as far as they were concerned. There was nothing unfair or illogical about it at all.

They made individuals - whole civilizations in fact - better. More kind and loving and tolerant and etc. They systematically removed everyone's baser urges, until the creatures on that planet could be trusted to behave in a civilized fashion.

And that was really the bottom line in the whole deal.

You can't trade with people you can't trust. It was that simple.

Eventually the Snoodles would make their presence known, and a trading consortium would be arranged that would benefit both parties. But before that could happen, the new trading partner-to-be had to be trustworthy, reliable, incapable

of violent acts. Murder, rape, theft and on and on – all of it would simply disappear, because the Snoodle Missionaries removed the behavior patterns that made those despicable acts possible in the first place.

It was only right that they get something in return. This was, after all, quite a service if you thought about it. And they never asked for money. Not directly anyway.

All they really wanted in exchange was knowledge. And it wasn't like they were actually stealing it. Just copying it. The original was still there, unharmed and fully usable.

And almost any little tidbit would do. They'd find a use for it somewhere, sometime, in some context. That was their problem. Just let them have it.

So when Max turned away from that quick glance at Mamie's cocoa skivvies and saw the broken white hot/Missionary on the grill and decided to eat it, he was involuntarily giving up some of his knowledge almost with the first bite. Since he was planning on doing a little jamming that night with some of his friends from the Eastman School of Music, he was thinking and humming some guitar chord changes. The fingers of his left hand were doing some almost unnoticeable movements, running around the frets of an imaginary guitar. Creating chords. E major. C minor 7.

Stuff like that.

After many hundreds of thousands of planets, you would expect the Snoodles to have stored away many thousands of musical systems, complete with instrument designs, playing techniques, annotation systems, sound pressure levels and so forth. And they had.

But there was always plenty of room for another one. So when the more than slightly befuddled Snoodle missionary traveled in pieces to Max's stomach, reconstituted himself, made the trip to Max's psyche and ran into several million pieces of information on how to play a guitar, he looked at it briefly, decided that it was knowledge and therefore of eventual value. He had no idea of what it was, or how it might be used, either by this being or some others, or whether it was important or not. That was not his job. It was knowledge. Close enough for government work. So he just gathered it up, duped it and shipped it off.

Zap!

A bit less than two Earth hours later, a prototype Nanashima hand-built classical acoustic guitar had been constructed on the Snoodles' musical instrument prototype planet. It was a fine piece of work. It was actually an extraordinary piece of work, since it duplicated Max's own \$9200 instrument right down to the scratches.

Its construction details would be sold only minutes later to a representative from Melodion, the music solar system. They would barter off three new visible light symphonies. They weren't willing to part with the five older but unperformed operettas that one of their suppliers had composed for the microwave region, so they weren't given the knowledge necessary to immediately duplicate Jimi Hendrix's playing style, which Max had been mentally tinkering with.

The Melodion's would eventually figure that out. The Snoodle rep had thrown in basic fingering and playing techniques, of course. Just a simple business courtesy. And a

couple of interpretations of a Fernando Sor piece that Max would be performing later in the month at a benefit to fund scholarships to the local community college for inner city high school dropouts.

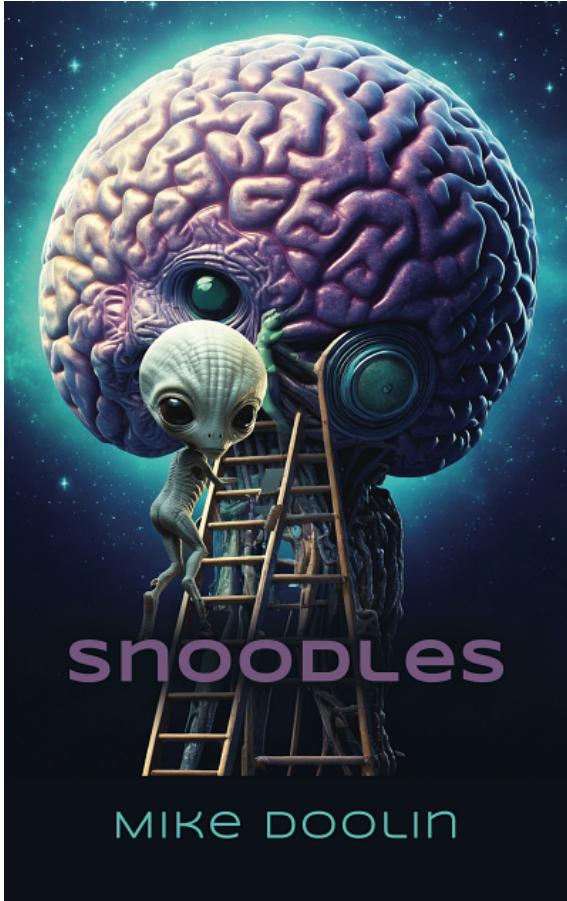
Fair is fair.

So that was what Max gave up in terms of knowledge. In exchange he was made a slightly better person. At least by Snoodle standards.

While the confused Snoodle missionary was wandering around in Max's enormous psyche, trying to get oriented completely, he made a wrong turn and entered that part of Max's mind labeled Libido. Still befuddled from his too-rapid warm up on the grill, and even on a good day not running all that well to begin with, he grabbed the first thing inside the door, inspected it briefly, retched, found it unfit to be owned by a person who was on the way to eternal salvation, and pitched it. Into the Intergalactic Dipsey Dumpster that Maintenance had thoughtfully positioned earlier there in the back of the huge room. Eventually – it was hard to tell when – the cleaning crew would be along to pick it up. But they – unlike the Missionaries – were unionized, so it could be awhile before they got around to it.

Max turned away from the grill, just in time to see Mamie leaning over Table #1 again. His lust started to rise again. And just as quickly subsided.

Max had lost his taste for chocolate skivvies. Both literally and figuratively.



*When alien missionaries come to tidy up your mind in prep for doing business with you, but start the cleaning process in the wrong place, how do you react?*

## **Snoodles**

By Mike Doolin

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