

BY MICHAEL PERSHAN

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DEPROGRAMMED

Suddenly, the scales fell from my eyes...

Year Zero-Minus-One had been a good year. The mushroom crop was strong, and the majority of our yurts had withstood the harsh New Hampshire winter. Our leader, Dave, had received really encouraging messages from the Eternal Beings orbiting Neptune. “They think our preparations are *outstanding*,” he said. “Prepare for The Imminence.”

He’d said that before, but I wasn’t complaining: the dysentery was almost gone, just as Dave had predicted. And the Anti-Dave had been found in the woods, dead—he’d predicted that, too. And that January, the EB’s blessed my wives Dave, Dave, Dave and I with a beautiful baby girl, named “Dave.”

It was the middle of the naming ceremony when the Feds raided the compound. We were prepared; Dave had been warning us for years, and we all carried special Neptunian weapons. Well wouldn’t you know it, when we fired our lasers, not a single agent melted.

I suddenly realized: we’d all been duped. *The Feds had Neptunian tech too!*

Our only hope was to get to the Teleportation Circle. My wives and I dashed to the yurt and grabbed the kids, which wasn’t easy, since the kids spoke only Neptunese and I hadn’t paid for lessons yet. And when we got to the pods, things were even worse. From the edge of the woods, we saw the rest of the Exalted standing in the Circle, whispering to the mushrooms and doing the spinning...but nothing was happening. The agents just waited for them to get dizzy, then they’d walk over and slap on the cuffs.

The Feds were laughing too hard to notice us, so we ran for the hills, leaving behind our no worldly possessions.

Just as we got to the Hidden Glade, right near where the Anti-Dave had been found, wouldn’t you know it but Dave ran past! This surprised me on so many levels. First, was Dave trying to leave us, his people? Second, if he could run so good, why did he need us to carry him everywhere?

As if to answer, Dave tripped on a root and fell face-first into a pile of snow. Out of his backpack tumbled gold, lots of it—there were my mother’s gold bracelets! Dave had told us that Neptunian tech needed gold to work, but there it was.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place: *No wonder our weapons had failed.*

I needed answers; I needed the truth. “Dave, what’s really going on? Where are the Eternal Beings? Why didn’t our lasers work? Why is all our gold still in your backpack?” My wives looked at me in a new way; I was finally asking the tough questions. “Dave,” I barked, “tell me! Are the Eternal Beings trying to test our faith?”

Dave said I was absolutely correct, and that I always had been the smart one. The Eternal Beings had something very special waiting for me when they arrived. I thanked him and he ran off, quicker than before.

That’s when my oldest daughter Dave kicked me hard on the shin. “You idiot!” my wife Dave translated. “You goddam fool! Don’t you see? Dave is a liar. You are in a cult—we all are. Go catch him before he runs away with Nana’s bracelets!” But Dave was already at the top of the hill. He pointed at us and laughed, and called me stupid. Just then, a team of federal agents tased him, cuffed him and dragged him away.

Since that day last winter, I’ve been trying to rebuild my life. It hasn’t been easy. My wives left me. My children all changed their names from “Dave,” and now I can’t remember which one’s which. I’ve tried to reach out to Dave in prison, but he says his voice won’t work unless I give him gold.

Suddenly, it all became clear: *I needed help.* So I joined a support group for ex-cult members.

The group leader was a genius with a goatee named Doc Malcolm. The CIA hired him to create an anti-cult program, but got scared when Doc Malcolm’s techniques worked too well. He knows how to free your mind from all limitations. Doc Malcolm told me that I needed to really focus on healing. He ran a center out in Vermont, so I moved into a log cabin with Doc and eight other ex-cult members. I had reached the Ninth Level of Healing and was almost ready for training in Doc’s anti-cult methods. It was time to show that I was “in it” for good, so I went to Doc’s office to prepare the cash transfer...

You won’t guess who showed up just then: Federal agents! I was happy to see them again, and we had a good time catching up.

Once I got myself settled again, I had to admit it: I have a problem. I’m spiritually bereft. I long for meaning that I cannot find within myself. I compulsively seek charismatic leaders to do my thinking for me. I probably wouldn’t have figured any of this out if not for Doc Malcolm.

If anybody ever needed a great support group, it was me. That’s why I sought you guys out. You’re all such great listeners, particularly Brother Clement – your gaze is very intense, but I’m sure you’ve heard that before! Thank you for lending me a robe, I promise to bring my own next time. I can’t wait to connect more deeply with you guys at the compound next week. Who do I make the check out to again? **B**

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