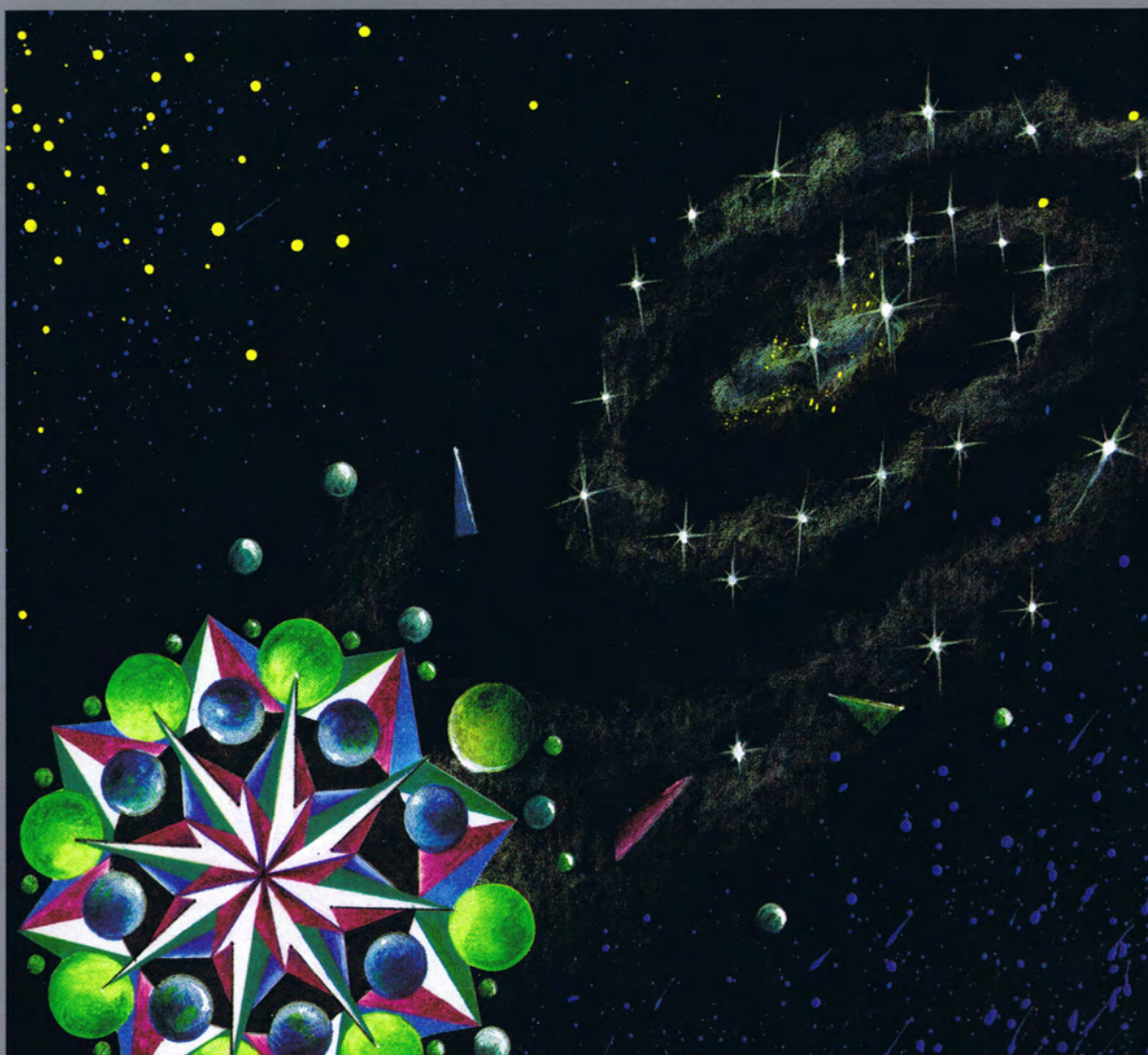


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A RAID ON DONAHUE'S BREAD

DALLAS DENNY

MacManus was staring straight ahead, pretending to be in an anticonvulsant-induced stupor, but all the while, he was actually engaged in plotting the best way to steal Donahue's slices of snow-white bread. He sat in the red contoured plastic chair, tongue thrust bluntly through his thick lips, looking every bit as unaware as his IQ of 17 would lead most people to believe him to be. Who (except those who knew his devious nature) would have guessed that thoughts of Donahue's dinner tray moved like sludge through MacManus' brain—that a plan both dastardly and daring had, ever since the bungled opportunity at the breakfast meal, been congealing like a fruit cup in his head. I watched him with interest.

You must understand that, of course, MacManus was slow; he could have been the poster child for the "Slow Children Playing" road signs that dot the residential streets of the nation. But MacManus, in addition to being "slow," was *slow*. He moved as if a blunt knife through a sea of chilled molasses. His thinking was almost a visible process, so lethargic was it. With MacManus, it was possible to watch Feedback in Action. MacManus was *slow*. But if he was slow, he was also steady. For several weeks now, his syrup-like mental processes had been singularly fixed on the tantalizing thoughts of Donahue's twin slices of bread.

Donahue, blissfully unaware of McManus' evil intent, was engaged in an arcane dance with himself. He rocked his body rapidly back and forth, in cadence with the staccato beat of his own heart. His thoughts were blank, as they always were during daylight hours. The rocking was accompanied by tooth gnashing. Donahue was, so far as he knew, the only living person who gnashed his teeth in a counterclockwise direction when he was above the equator, and in a clockwise direction when he was in the Southern Hemisphere. Had he been on the equator, he would not have gnashed them at all. If staff had been aware of this, there would doubtless have been a great deal of commotion, with ultimately a scientific paper being published in some obscure journal. Donahue would not have dreamed of telling staff. But he did often wonder, in his half-place of a mind, whether if he were in outer space he would gnash his teeth.

Donahue's bruxism had worn his teeth badly and into patterns like old Spanish treasure maps. In fact, they *were* treasure maps, and would have pointed the way to sunken galleons and pieces of eight, had anyone cared enough to examine them closely. His bite marks were unmistakable and widespread, and had led to his nickname, Molar. Donahue's bite marks were the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval of The Institute.

MacManus could have targeted any of the others: Saunders, Kinnon, Ayers, Britton, or Halvington. But Saunders was fleet of foot, with a vindictive nature; Kinnon was bread-wise and kept a close guard on his slices; Ayers was on a diet and got no bread at all, and so was on the prowl himself; and Britton and Halvington operated on the buddy system, and were mutual body and bread guards. That left only Donahue. It had to be Donahue.

Although for MacManus it was a singularly brilliant stratagem, his plan was not particularly complicated. It consisted simply of waiting until Donahue's bread was within his reach and then grabbing for it.

There were nonetheless a number of factors to consider. First, it was necessary to determine in three-dimensional space the precise coordinates of the bread in relation to MacManus, and particularly MacManus' hands, and to make a judgment about the quickest and least troublesome way of maneuvering those appendages to bring them into contact with those two leavened miracles. There were also MacManus variables to consider: one had to think about the length of the MacManus arm, the considerable lag in the MacManus nervous processes, the strength of the MacManus grip, the size of the MacManus mouth, and the complex mechanics of MacManus closing his fist around the bread. As if that wasn't enough, there were non-MacManus

variables. Donahue's attentional processes would have to be monitored so the time of stealing of the bread would be optimized and the chance of retaliation minimized. The location and attention of the two technicians would also require monitoring, taking into account their insane notion that MacManus should not have Donahue's bread and their extraordinary fleetness of thought and foot.

His tactical planning completed, his mathematics checked and rechecked, MacManus was ready to put the plan into operation.

MacManus spent most of the hour before lunch setting up the complex mathematics of the thing. He worked out in his head the complicated equations necessary to program the physical movements of his body through space. And MacManus' calculus was rusty. I read an article in *Byte* once about how nearly impossible it is to program a robot arm in space. It made me appreciate MacManus ability to get the bread two times out of three, and that after only hours of programming. MacManus would have been hell had he had a computer.

The planning phase in which MacManus now found himself had followed an equally lengthy observation phase. Could he have been able to talk, he could have confidently said that he

knew everything about Donahue: the way his brow twitched under the unhealthy 60 hertz stimulation of the fluorescent lights; the slight narrowing of his eyes when he was approached by the technician Coltrane, who tended to be a trifle rough with him; the direction of his tooth-gnashing; the name of the sunken treasure ship pinpointed by his right upper wisdom tooth. MacManus had developed complex theories about Donahue's patterns of behavior which, if they had been true, would have excited ethologists; but in actuality, most of them were false, as Donahue was well aware of MacManus' observation of him and had been feeding him misleading clues.

His tactical planning completed, his mathematics checked and rechecked, MacManus was ready to put the plan into operation. He decided to strike during the midday meal.

At twelve-thirty, I was wheeled as usual to the dining area. My wheelchair was locked in place, unfortunately not facing MacManus. I cannot move my chair, you see. Unlike MacManus and Donahue, I'm not mentally retarded. But I might as well be, for all I can do for myself. They have moved me to this unit as an experiment, for things were getting out of hand up in the chronic units where I have lived since The Accident. The theory was that putting me with people like MacManus and Donahue would make me feel smart, competent. But all I have learned is that although their thinking processes are slow, they are much brighter than I would ever hope to be. They have the vision and persistence that I have always lacked.

By turning my head sharply to the right, I will be able to catch the action. Just-Call-Me-Agnes, a blue-haired technician who persists in wearing whites even though they are no longer required, comes by now and again and admonishes me to feed myself, turning my head front and center, punishing me by forcing me to stare at my dinner tray. I can tell the meat from the vegetables only by the color, for everything has been blenderized into a semi-liquid form. It all looks like mashed potatoes: orange mashed potatoes, dirty-brown mashed potatoes, pea-green mashed potatoes. Only the Jello dares to look like itself. I love the Jello, always saving it for last. I would no doubt be MacManus' victim if my bread looked like bread, but in its present pulpy state, even I'm not sure of its presence until I taste it.

By listening, I can tell MacManus is working himself up for the raid. But he is foiled by his own body, and there is a terrible thump as he falls to the floor and goes into a seizure. That ends all hope of any action at the lunch meal. But that evening at supper, I can see that MacManus, his brow covered by a thick, white, bloodstained bandage, is ready to go into action. His tongue, which almost all of the time is outside his mouth, gives him away by its twitching, just like the tip of the tail of a pink housecat stalking a bird. Fortunately, this time I am by chance facing the scene of action. I prepare myself for the upcoming excitement.

Madelli, as usual, has finished his meal and has been shooed from the dining area. He lurks just outside the door, in case a bountiful God should grant him another opportunity to eat. With his big, brown, deep-set eyes, he looks rather like a vulture. Madelli is not a bread man, although he refuses noth-

ing, consuming cigarette butts, dust bunnies, and bits of human refuse with equal appreciation.

Just-Call-Me-Agnes is on his case, running him away from the door every few moments. I don't think he will give MacManus anything to worry about.

It is bread to die for. And it is all but MacManus'!

MacManus, in the meanwhile, is readying himself for action. He has the look B-17 pilots have in old movies before they fly without fighter escort to unload their deadly goodies over occupied France. He is jocular, relaxed, and dashingly good-looking, in a beetle-browed and toothless sort of way. An undercurrent of tension charges the air: Sanders, Kinnon, Ayers, Britton, Halvington—even the technicians—know something important is about to happen. Only Donahue is unaffected; he seems blissfully unaware of MacManus' mental calisthenics as the latter prepares himself for action.

The clock on the wall above the dishwashing machine shows we have left Real-time; we are now in the Dreamtime. The second hand moves slowly, perhaps once per minute. Gobbets of food drop from the ends of forks and drift, as if helium-filled, towards the floor. A housefly is frozen in midair, its wing beats all but visible. Eyes blink languidly, mouths chew in slow motion. All outside sounds have stopped.

We all know the time is here. Nobody breathes. MacManus, like the pro he is, goes smoothly into action. His eyes clench with the effort as he pushes his chair back from the table. The squeaking sound the runners must be making on the tiles is lost in the charged atmosphere. MacManus places both hands face-down on the table and levitates himself into his usually stooped standing position. All eyes are fixed on Donahue's bread.

The two slices sit, casually stacked atop one another, in a corner of the pink plastic tray. They are major works of art: virginal white, puffy, soft, the surface perfectly flat, with thousands of yeast-induced bubbles exposed by the cut, looking like a cross-section of so many one-celled animalcules. There are round holes, square ones, dodecahedral holes; holes sliced through their middle; small holes caused by a nip through the smallest corner of the air bubble. The bread between them forms an abstract pattern, running hither and yon like a crazy road map. And the crust! Brown, flaky, glistening with shortening, almost microscopically thin, encircling with topographical precision all those animalcules, all that whiteness. It is bread to die for. And it is all but MacManus'!

But Bobby Burns was right, and gang apley is here to stay. Just as MacManus has begun to put his complex plan into action, I become aware of a disturbance in the air; it comes from MacManus' left. From the corner of my eye, I see little Johnny Jones in motion. He is approaching like an F-14 on a hot date. Everyone else, by comparison, is stuck in place. He makes a low pass, swooping by the table, eyeing the bread. On his second run, he teasingly grabs for it, purposefully missing it. MacManus, frozen in mid-lunge, has seen Johnny by now, but can do nothing, not even check his advance as

Johnny, on his third and final pass, grabs the bread, crumbles it into a ball, and stuffs it into his mouth.

The world suddenly comes alive, erupting into motion. In quick succession, there are three sonic booms. I hear the technicians' shouts at Johnny, who is departing at Mach 2. I see the fly accelerate to light speed, watch in horror as MacManus, unable without even a hand calculator to replot his trajectory, careens into the table, falling across it, knocking trays and plastic flowers and Britton and Halvington helter-skelter, and reopening the wound on his damaged brow. All is pandemonium, and Madelli takes the opportunity to appear by my side. He bends over, his mouth to my tray, inhales, and my Jello, my fine red Jello, my delicious red Jello, is gone.

After supper, MacManus, his brow rebandaged, is in a blue funk. Johnny Jones sits in a corner, pleased with himself. He is ruminating. By bringing bits of the bread back into his mouth, he gets to consume it again and again. This strikes MacManus as a wonderful idea, and his mood visibly brightens as he begins studying Johnny. By the end of the evening, he has abandoned all thought of Donahue's bread and becomes a student of Johnny Jones. ♦

Dallas Denny resides in Georgia and is a behavior specialist. "A Raid on Donahue's Bread" was published in Issue No. 21—"Personal Encounters with Disability: The Health Professional's View."