

# VISITING BOB

*Life insurance.*

BY JOHN GILBEY

One of the great advantages of being a writer is the fascinating folk you meet. Take Bob, for example. I first talked to him in Palo Alto about eight years ago. We chatted, got on, shared some bizarre and unlikely anecdotes — but like so many chance encounters, I didn't think much more about it. Then, out of the blue, I was invited to write Bob's biography. He'd read my published stuff, liked it, and asked me to document his career in the Valley. To say I was pleased would be a major understatement.

A week later I was ensconced in a wood-panelled corner office at Bob's host institute, overlooking the coffee shops of University Avenue, with an expenses-paid contract to extract from Bob all his tales of the old days that were fit to print — a constraint that probably reduced the size of the book by half. It was one of the most enjoyable and intriguing jobs I've ever had.

Bob and I hadn't talked for several months when the call came, and I felt a sinking feeling when I realized that the caller wasn't Bob but Emily, one of the cloud of crazily bright postdocs that he employs as assistants. Like all of us, Bob wasn't getting any younger.

"Hi John, I thought I'd better call you about Bob..." Here it comes, I thought. "He's got some fairly serious health problems, and he's been asking for you."

I thought about this. "Can't you put him on the line?" There was a regretful, apologetic pause. "I'm afraid not, he can't interpret low-bandwidth AV now. Would you be able to visit him?" I was still pondering when she added: "Just one thing, don't leave it too long..."

After the ten-hour flight, what I really wanted was beer, food and sleep. At a pinch, I'd skip the food. Emily, however, was insistent that I talk to Bob first. Looking into his room from an observation window, it seemed more chaotic than I remembered, but it was the primal waft of organic decay — nauseating even from the next room — that shocked me. I glanced across at Emily, who gave a slow nod of the head.

"Hi, Bob, how are you doing?" The response was slow, like someone waking

from an anaesthetic. "John? Is that you?" The voice was stretched and blurred, but the sensory unit rotated and waddled towards the window like an inebriated desk lamp.

"I really appreciate you coming over," muttered Bob. "As you can see, things aren't going too well... I don't know how much Emily has told you, but it looks like I only



have a month or so left. I've already lost some peripheral stuff — that's why I can't use remote comms — but it is creeping into my long-term memory and... heck, I'm scared.

"I need you to buy me a few more years... Just a few..." His voice faded. "Sorry, I'm going to have to rest for a while now — just follow the money..." When I looked round, I found that Emily had tears in her eyes — which made two of us.

"What does he need?" I asked Emily. She sighed and referred to an internal list — a long one. Many of Bob's systems were well beyond their technical 'end of life': the organic wet-ware circuits that formed most of his unique design were literally rotting, and had only ever been made as research tools, not production systems. No one seemed to know whether the technology could be replicated with the skills now available — or even

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if it would be legal — but there seemed no way that Bob's consciousness could be ported to another infrastructure.

We found a bar, drank several beers, and tried to sketch out a budget for a rebuild. The numbers were astronomical, and it was clear from Emily's terse analysis that all attempts to gather funding through the usual channels had failed.

Sleep wasn't an option. As headlights panned across the ceiling of my motel room I fought to find a solution. "Follow the money," Bob had said. Bob — the 'Bucket of Brains' they used to call him, much to his annoyance. There were no physical brains in the system. Instead, the reasoning power of 20 top scientists of the day had been distilled into a semi-organic structure that — to everyone's surprise — had fought schizophrenia and paranoia to emerge as the composite personality of Bob. The first, and last, of his kind. "Follow the money." Easy to say, but why me?

The coffee was so strong that my vision took on the character of a shaky film noir — but it fought the jet lag. Emily toyed with her green tea and tried not to look concerned. I asked the critical question: "When I was here last, I left a set of notebook files — stuff that Bob wouldn't let me use in the book, or even have copies of. Are they still here?"

Emily shrugged slightly. "We never throw anything away, that's part of our culture."

I smiled with relief, thinking of all the doors — and bank accounts — that were about to open.

Emily looked puzzled. "I'll have to check," I qualified carefully, "but from memory, those notes cover every major scandal — personal, corporate and political — in the Valley between 2015 and 2035. Bob's component consciousnesses were deeply involved — more to the point, the other folk implicated are now in very senior posts and definitely won't want this stuff made public... 'Follow the money...'"

The mug of tea dropped to the table top. "You mean, he wants to blackmail people to raise the money?" Emily exclaimed in shock.

"It certainly looks like it," I replied with a smile. "I'm just beginning to realize how human Bob is." ■

**John Gilbey** ([gilbey@bcs.org.uk](mailto:gilbey@bcs.org.uk)) is a writer who knows a thing or two about mysterious inner rottings — but not blackmail, honest...

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