CONSIDER THE UNKNOWN

It was New Year's Eve, December 31, 1942.

A few days earlier, three inches of snow had fallen on New York City, and the cold air in the concrete canyons was evidenced by the steaming, exhaled breaths of the scurrying crowds. The normally festive holiday atmosphere was quite tempered this year, however, because America was seriously engaged in fighting World War Two, both in Europe and the Pacific.

The Yellow Cab pulled up at 5:00 p.m. in front of 481 8th Avenue -- home of the art deco designed New Yorker Hotel. A tall, bearded man wearing dark glasses, a dark fedora, and a cocoa-brown leather aviator's trench coat exited the taxi after paying the fare, gingerly avoiding the slushy street puddles as he made his way to the hotel entrance. The smartly uniformed doorman opened the portal that led inside to the warmth of the spacious lobby.

The stranger went directly to the elevator bank, and took a lift up to the 33rd floor. Alone in the conveyance, he quickly removed his dark glasses and hat, and peeled off his false dark beard disguise, stuffing it into a pocket of his trench coat. Removing the coat, the man was wearing a dark charcoal suit with matching tie over a white shirt. The man smoothed his thick dark brown hair back with his hand and waited until the elevator doors opened on his chosen floor. He stepped out and quickly found Room 3327. The door had a discreet Do Not Disturb sign on it, but Howard Hughes knew that Nikola Tesla would agree to see him tonight. This modest suite was where Tesla had lived -- largely forgotten, poor, and in seclusion -- for the last ten years.

The world-famous billionaire, record-breaking aviator, inventor, and Hollywood movie-mogul gently knocked on the door.

After a few moments, a very thin and elderly man with gaunt, sunken cheeks cracked the door open and peered out. "Yes? What is it?" he asked. Nikola Tesla was eighty-six years old, his mustache long gone, his once jet-black hair now gray and white, thinning but still swept back. His eyes were light blue, "electric blue" as the press referred to them. He was wearing a light gray suit with a white shirt unbuttoned at the neck. He was 6'2" tall and weighed 120 lbs. His matinee-idol handsome, dark brown-eyed visitor was thirty-seven years old, almost fifty years younger than his host. Hughes was also two inches taller, and weighed a fit 194 lbs.

"I'm Howard Hughes, Mr. Tesla. Perhaps you've heard of me? Sorry to come unannounced, but I was hoping to see you for a few hours this evening while I was in town. I have an important, private proposal to make. I can only stay until 10 o'clock, then I have to fly one of my airplanes back to Los Angeles. Would you like to go and have dinner with me at Delmonico's? I understand that is one of your favorite restaurants."

"Of course, of course...do come in Mr. Hughes. I recognize you from the newspapers. And I remember the big ticker-tape parade that the city gave you in 1938 for breaking the round-the-world flying record...done in only 91 hours, you say? Quite remarkable. Please excuse me if I don't shake hands with you. Germs are omnipresent, you know. When I must go out for official functions -- rarely, nowadays, given my age and health -- I always wear gloves for protection."

"I find that we have much in common already, Mr. Tesla. I likewise avoid hand-shaking, for exactly the same reason you mentioned. And please, call me Howard." Hughes noticed Tesla's quite large hands with their prominent thumbs, the latter said to be a physical sign of superior intelligence.

Tesla smiled and invited Hughes in. "Please call me Nikola then, Howard. You can hang your coat and hat on that coat tree. But I must insist that we call up the hotel kitchen and have our meal brought up and then dine here in my apartment. That way, we can avoid being recognized and interrupted by the ever-curious and demanding public."

The modest suite had a hallway, a bedroom, a main living room with a couch and two comfortable easy chairs, a study with a large desk stacked with documents -- flanked by assorted file cabinets and bookshelves -- and a small bathroom. The study and bedroom had windows looking south over the vast city, which was completely lit up with the alternating current electricity which Tesla himself had invented. Several indoor plants decorated the main room, and three paintings depicting landscape scenes of Croatia and Serbia were hung on the pale ivory-colored walls. Hughes also noted a framed copy of TIME magazine, celebrating Tesla's 75th birthday eleven years ago. A radio console was playing a Chopin piece softly in the background. Tesla went over and turned the radio off.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Howard," Nikola motioned to an easy chair in the living room. "Do you know that it was me and not Marconi that invented radio technology? My lawyers are still fighting for my rights in the courts. That is why the little money I still possess is always disappearing. Well...we can order our meal and talk while we wait for its delivery. But first we should wash our hands. I must do this many times throughout the day. It helps to kill germs."

"I was just about to suggest the same thing, Nikola. I wash my hands constantly. I even have a special bar of soap that I carry in a tin container in my pocket, and an extra-large handkerchief to dry myself with. So if you can direct me to your bathroom..."

When both of the eccentric geniuses' hands were clean, Hughes offered to order their room service dinner. He used a Kleenex tissue to lift the room's black telephone receiver to his face.

"Hotel kitchen? This is Room 3327. Now listen very carefully. I want an 8 oz. New York strip steak, medium rare, a dinner salad, and peas. I also want six fresh Florida oranges and a juice squeezer. Just a moment...Nikola? What can I order for you?"

"They know my regular habits, Howard. I'm a vegetarian now, my meat-eating days at Delmonico's are over. Tell them I want a large glass of warm milk, a small jar of pure honey, three soft bread rolls, and a large glass of room-temperature tomato juice. And my usual eighteen folded linen napkins."

Hughes added Tesla's order over the phone. "Now...I want the food cart placed outside the door. Knock four times when it's here. I will slip a $50 bill under the door. You can keep the change. When we're finished eating, I'll return the empty cart to the hallway. Under no circumstances are we to be disturbed. Got it?" Howard hung up, then placed the tissue he used to hold the telephone into his trouser pocket.

The men relaxed and sat down on easy chairs across from each other. "Is it true that you have over 300 patents, and that you can speak eight languages, Nikola?"

"Yes."

"Is it also true that you sleep only two hours a night, and have a photographic memory?"

"Yes, although I occasionally take short naps during the day to 'recharge my mental batteries,' as I have told the press. Once I worked on a project for 83 hours continuously without eating or sleeping. And, yes, I can read an entire book and remember every page, or look at a new diagram and later recreate every detail. My invention concepts also appear in my mind in their entirety."

"And you were good friends with Mark Twain?"

"A fine man, very bright behind his popular persona of joke-telling and writing. He was fascinated by my scientific experiments. He died thirty-two years ago. I miss his company."

"You also worked for a time under Thomas Edison, until the legal wrangling pitting his direct current model over your alternating electric current discovery made you rivals. What was he like?"

"Edison was a true genius, an innovator in many areas, but he was a vain man. He wanted his name on everything connected with his various business ventures and inventions. His hygiene habits were abominable. He had chronic bad breath and persistent dandruff. He wore the same clothes for days on end, even sleeping in them, and as a result smelled. Edison was very stubborn. He couldn't admit that my alternating current was superior to his direct current. But he was also dishonest. He once offered me $50,000 if I could solve a particularly difficult electricity problem that had stymied him. When I did, he laughed and said he was only joking, although he quickly adopted my idea. I resigned from his employ shortly afterwards. George Westinghouse came to my rescue. He helped get my alternating current accepted around the world. We built the first hydroelectric power plant together, at Niagara Falls. Our friendship and mutual support lasted until his death in 1914. As stipulated in his will, his corporation continues to pay me a monthly stipend of $125, plus my room and board at this hotel, for as long as I live."

"Is it true that you tore up a kilowatt royalty agreement with Westinghouse worth $10 million, when he was in severe financial crisis and couldn't pay you?"

"Yes, Howard. That money meant less to me than his friendship. Besides, I believe that major scientific discoveries should be given away freely for the betterment of humanity. I consider money as a necessary means to further my research, nothing more."

The pair were interrupted by four clear knocks at the door. Hughes rose and slipped the $50 bill under the door, then listened for the server to leave. When he was sure the hall was empty, he opened the door and wheeled in the dinner cart. Two folding chairs were included, so the men retired to Tesla's study and Hughes set up the service. Before they began to eat, Howard washed his oranges in some of the sterilized, boiled water that Nikola had delivered daily to his room in an aluminum one-gallon container. Hughes then sliced the oranges into halves and carefully juiced them, using the juice squeezer, into a glass after wiping it down with one of Nikola's pro-offered linen napkins. Hughes explained that orange juice had to be freshly squeezed and consumed within a half-hour so as to retain its healthful nutritional benefits. The men then began to eat their meal, after both wiping their cutlery with yet more clean napkins.

Tesla explained how he once examined ordinary tap water under a microscope, and was appalled at all the swimming microbes and bacteria he observed. He only drank sterilized water ever since. He also mentioned that he had exactly eighteen fresh white towels delivered to his room each day.

"Why eighteen, Nikola, just like the number of napkins you use?" Howard asked, intrigued.

"Eighteen is divisible by the number three. Everything I do is related to that fact. My hotel room number is divisible by three. I must always walk around a building three times before I can enter too. And to keep my brain sharp, I flex my toes back and forth on each foot 99 times before I go to bed."

Hughes kept asking questions as they ate. "I understand you have never married, Nikola? I'm divorced myself, but I really enjoy dating and then bedding as much as I can all the top Hollywood starlets. The thrill of conquest and victory is the game, of course, then I move on. I rarely keep the same woman around very long."

Tesla replied, "I always felt that my work was the most important thing in my life, and that marriage would be a distraction from my mental energies. I find many women attractive, and several have told me that I attracted them. But marriage to me would be unfair to any woman. Plus, I have a phobia of earrings on women, as well as pearls. In fact, Howard, anything round tends to give me nausea and headaches. Would you mind eating your peas quickly? I am beginning to feel unwell just seeing them."

Hughes, who meanwhile had unconsciously yet compulsively arranged the peas on his dinner plate from small to large while intensely listening, immediately complied and ate them, and apologized. Tesla was instantly relieved, and said no apology was necessary. He sipped his warm milk and gently applied honey to his bread rolls while Howard worked on his steak and salad.

Howard talked about the early days of Hughes Tool Company and his upbringing. He went on to speak of his love of aviation and aircraft design, the joy of being a test pilot and breaking speed records, and the fun he had directing and producing movies. He also explained how the U.S. government had just agreed to purchase 600 of Hughes' latest troop transport 'flying boat' planes, the largest ever developed, said to be crucial to the war effort. Howard named his airplane the H-4 Hercules. Because of the national shortage of aluminum, the flying behemoths would be made entirely out of birch wood instead of metal. Each 300,000 lb. plane to be built by Hughes Aircraft would be powered by eight enormous engines, and had an incredible 320-foot wingspan. The Hercules was also as tall as a five-story building.

Tesla, in turn, related the July 8th visit to his very apartment by King Peter II of Yugoslavia and his entourage. "If I live long enough and this awful war ends, I wish to revisit my homeland one more time," Nikola vowed, even though he had been granted American citizenship many years ago.

Their meal finished, Tesla glanced at his pocket watch. "I see it is almost 8 o'clock, Howard. Time to feed my special pigeon. She comes to my bedroom windowsill every evening about this time. Please join me."

Hughes and Tesla retired to the bedroom and Nikola retrieved a small pink china plate of birdseed from his closet. He opened the window part-way, allowing a brief gust of frigid air to push its way into the room. There, on the snowy windowsill, sat a single gray pigeon, cooing. Tesla lovingly spoke back to her while stroking her feathers, as she hungrily pecked off the plate.

"I learned to love pigeons many years ago, Howard. For exercise, I would walk nine miles every day around New York City and stop at various parks to feed the pigeons. They calmed and soothed me. Once, I found one with a broken wing. I took it back to my hotel at the time -- The St. Regis -- and made a splint and tended to the bird until it could fly again. After I released it, I noticed that it came back to my window sill every evening. I regularly fed her and we became friends. This was in 1922. I grew to love that bird as I would have loved a woman. I called her my "little dove." She was all-white with light gray on her wing tips. Her feathers were as soft as silk. One night she came as usual, but this time she looked at me with her most beautiful eyes a final time, then closed them and she died right in front of me. I wept, realizing that something had gone out of my life. I felt that as long as she was alive, I too had work to accomplish and ideas to fulfill. But after she died, something went out of me, Howard. I was no longer than man I had been. I buried her in the dead of night at the park where we first met. The last time I visited her grave was in 1937, five years ago. While crossing the street, I was struck by a taxicab and suffered a concussion and three broken ribs. I refused to go to the hospital, but it took me several months to recover. Now I can no longer make my long outdoor walks to feed pigeons in the parks. I have a Western Union messenger boy paid to do that every day with a bag of birdseed. Luckily, my special pigeon here comes to me every evening around 8 o'clock. Maybe it is the spirit of my beloved little dove, only in another pigeon's body..."

Howard Hughes was surprisingly touched by Nikola Tesla's sad tale. Unfortunately, time was moving and a proposal needed to be made before he had to ride back to an airport in New Jersey and return to Los Angeles.

"Nikola, I want to buy the so-called Death Ray that the newspapers say you invented. Now, I have a blank check here made out to you, with only the amount missing. You can write in $1 million, $10 million, $100 million...it doesn't matter. I have plenty of money. But if this weapon can help end the war, then I can finance it and build it and let our government have it at cost. What do you say?"

"Ah, you are referring to my Teleforce device. I prefer to call it my Peace Ray, for it can bring an ultimate end to all wars forever. But I am still working out the details, and it is not yet ready for production. However, given your fascination with all things related to aviation, I have another invention which I have kept secret from the public which might interest you. I call it my Universal Levitron. It is an anti-gravity device. It can lift any object off the ground, regardless of weight, up to an altitude of our planet's mesosphere -- fifty miles high. In regards to war, I mean airplanes, battleships, submarines, tanks, even troops. Lift them here and move them there, at a speed just under that of sound. It operates on the principal of reverse geomagnetism and focused optics using polarized light beams beyond the visible spectrum. You see, Howard, everything we need to use in our lives is already here on Earth. Unlimited free energy. Power to control the weather. Teleportation. Wireless communications. Even travel to distant planets. All we have to do is uncover, then utilize, the elemental forces of our natural world. Consider the unknown, Howard. All of life's answers lie there."

Hughes was stunned. "And you have tried this? Does it actually work??"

"Yes, all was done and proven in secret forty years ago, while I was working on my Wardenclyffe Tower project on Long Island, and doing later research and testing in Colorado Springs. But the one remaining problem is residual radiation. The process can harm human life if people are not wearing some kind of protective clothing during the levitating and transporting action."

"The savings in time and fuel would be amazing. Moving entire fighting forces and equipment anywhere across the globe in mere hours! I'm sure the radiation problem can be solved too, Nikola, with your help. I am interested in paying you any amount you need to further develop this astounding technology."

"I thought it might interest you, Howard." Tesla smiled. "If you can come back and see me in a week, I will have all the details and diagrams of my invention assembled for you, as well as the necessary legal documents. We can discuss a price at that point too. Agreed?"

Hughes agree to return and was thrilled. The pair talked about other topics until Howard had to leave at 10 p.m. Nikola mentioned without malice the irony that history had remembered and revered Thomas Edison, but that he himself was largely forgotten. Hughes then wanted to hear more about Tesla's Wardenclyffe world-wide wireless communication system, and about its financier, the legendary banker J.P. Morgan, and why his funding was rescinded and the project had to be abandoned.

"It was on track to work perfectly, but Morgan grew fearful of losing his investment and withdrew his support. As usual, it was all about money. The concept would have greatly benefited humanity, and someday, I know it will come to pass. People will have a pocket-sized device which will allow them to access information and communications from anywhere on the globe, instantly and freely," Tesla predicted.

When the hour for him to leave approached, Howard pushed the finished dinner cart with its two folding chairs back outside the apartment door, after checking that the hallway was clear. Then he excused himself to use the toilet, washing his hands thoroughly afterwards and drying them with his extra-large pocket handkerchief.

The eccentric pair of geniuses then said their goodbyes, nodding in respect while naturally not shaking hands. In two hours, the New Year of 1943 would be ushered in.

"Happy New Year, Nikola! I will see you again in a week. We will keep our meetings confidential, of course. Nobody even knows that I visited you this evening. Thank you for seeing me. I wish you a Good Night." Tesla wished his new friend and kindred spirit the same as Hughes left. Nikola went back to his study desk contented, and resumed his regular organized readings and diagram-making.

Seven days later, Nikola Tesla was found dead in his apartment by a hotel maid on January 7, 1943. Coronary thrombosis. That evening, a lone gray pigeon was also found dead on the outside bedroom windowsill of the same apartment.

Howard Hughes was devastated, especially when he learned that the U.S. government had immediately swept in and seized all of Tesla's papers and files from his modest suite at the New Yorker Hotel. The inventor's documents were sealed and then shipped to the newly built Top Secret facility dubbed Area 51, located in the remote deserts of Nevada. The rationale given to the press? "National Security."

Six months after Tesla died, the United States Supreme Court ruled that all of Marconi's radio patents (he had already died in 1937) were invalid, and awarded the patents for the invention of radio technology instead to Nikola Tesla...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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