NIGHT DRIVE

 He always figured that he had been born fifty years too late.

 Robert "Reb" Hannon was obsessed with the 1970's. He loved the music, the cars, the clothes, the hairstyles, the video clips on YouTube of young people eagerly dancing to pulsating disco tunes and having fun. Compared to the always aggrieved, computerized modern world, that era seemed full of optimism and happy opportunities. Plus, the women then -- he assumed -- were probably less demanding and more carefree.

 Reb sported a retro 'mullet' hairdo -- shorter on the top, long in the back -- that friends and coworkers teased him about. People said that he resembled the comedienne David Spade in the movie "Joe Dirt," only without the facial hair. But Reb didn't mind too much. His distinctive brown locks were a badge of honor to himself.

 Hannon was twenty-four, single, and lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Grand Junction, Colorado. He was 5' 7'' and lean. He worked non-Union construction (mostly roofing, drywall, and masonry), and was also a kind of 'odd jobs' handyman on the side. Although he was only a high school graduate, Reb was friendly, energetic and adaptable, and was quick to learn new skills. His bosses always liked his attitude.

 Reb had recently watched the 1968 movie "Bullitt," starring Steve McQueen. The film showcased an awesome car chase scene through the up and down streets of San Francisco. McQueen drove a modified black Mustang GT, and the bad guys drove a 375 horsepower, 440 cu.in. "Big Block" Dodge Challenger. Hannon wanted that bad ass Dodge so much!

 Instead, he saved his money and traded in his battered Ford F-150 for the next best thing in his mind -- a vintage and restored 1969 Dodge Challenger 2-door that he discovered on Craigslist. It was painted a cool reddish-orange color, and was powered by a 225 cu.in., "Slant 6" engine. The seller claimed that these wheels were a guaranteed 'chick magnet,' and that bonus was fine with Reb too.

 Unfortunately, the construction boom was petering out in Grand Junction, so Hannon had to go where the jobs were. Word got out that Reno was hiring and doing well with lots of new homes going up, so Reb closed up his life in Colorado, packed everything he owned in his car, and headed west. He would use U.S. Route 50 -- a straight shot across Utah, then onto Nevada's modest capital, Carson City. From there, it was a short hop north to Reno and hopefully, a better life.

 For Hannon, few things were finer than the peace and relaxation of driving alone at night. With only his low dashboard lights glowing softly amid the surrounding outside darkness, he felt like he was piloting a spaceship through outer space. His routine would be to eat dinner around 4 p.m., sleep from 6 p.m. until midnight, then shower, grab something fast to eat, and drive all night. Grand Junction to Reno was just under 800 miles, a twelve-hour jet if going straight through. But Reb would do it over two days and one night, to take full advantage of a thoughtful, late- night motoring experience.

 Because he had fitted out his car's sound system with a vintage audio-cassette tape deck, Hannon had previously made his own music tapes to enjoy while cruising. He thought that the current rap and hip-hop music on the radio was nothing but crap, and refused to listen to it.

 Here were some of his top tune choices:

 Riders on the Storm -- The Doors

 The Hustle -- Van McCoy

 You Should Be Dancing -- The Bee Gees

 Rainy Night in Georgia -- Brook Benton

 American Pie -- Don McLean

 Twenty-Four Hours to Tulsa -- Gene Pitney

 House of the Rising Sun -- The Animals

 Born on the Bayou -- Creedence Clearwater Revival

 Ventura Highway -- America

 Down by the River -- Neil Young

 MacArthur Park -- Donna Summer

 But mostly, when he drove long-distances at night (like the time he did part of classic Route 66 from Oklahoma to Arizona), Reb liked to listen to "Coast-to-Coast AM," a late night call-in radio show, currently hosted by George Noory, who had replaced the legendary, late Art Bell. Millions of graveyard-shift workers, lonely insomniacs, and other assorted night owls tuned in seven nights a week for four hours of no-holds talk of such topics as conspiracy theories, time travel, psychic predictions and phenomena, alien beings already here among us, the secrets of Area 51, and other weird but fascinating discussions.

 Hannon had packed a large bag of Cool Ranch Doritos, a 2-liter bottle of Mountain Dew, and a box of generic chocolate chip cookies by way of driving snacks. When he needed to pee, he would simply pull over and let it out near the side of the road, which he figured to be mostly deserted in the wee hours. After gassing up his Challenger, he took off around 9 a.m. He would drive the 374 miles to Baker, NV, just across the Utah border near Garrison. That run would take about six hours, and he would be half-way then to Reno. He would stay at the Border Inn and Casino in Baker ($56/night), have an early dinner, then go to bed. Reb would then rise as planned at midnight for the long night drive across Nevada on U.S. Route 50, which had been dubbed "The Loneliest Highway in America" because of its emptiness and remoteness. Plus, rumors of strange events were said to occur there at night. Reb was already getting excited!

 The run across Utah was easy, as Hannon enjoyed his home-made music tapes, and often sang along with his tunes. The weather on this early August day was sunny and hot, but the Challenger had bitchin' air-conditioning. Its robust motor hummed as Reb happily cruised. Several other motorists waved and honked at seeing this beautifully-restored 1969 vehicle as he sailed by. He stopped for gas and a mega-burger with fries in Salina. Crossing the border into Nevada six hours later, Hannon remembered to turn his watch back an hour as he slipped from Mountain Time into Pacific Time.

 Reb had a buffet dinner with salad bar at Kerouac's in Baker, after checking into his motel. Later, after a nice sleep, he rose as planned at midnight, showered, checked out of the Border Inn, and went back to Kerouac's (open 24/7) to grab a big breakfast burrito to go with a large coffee and a cinnamon donut.

 The stars were brilliantly out , and a crescent moon had risen. The wind was calm and the desert heat of the day was rapidly cooling off due to the clear skies. Reb Hannon was content. The world around him was 99.9% asleep, which suited the young man just fine.

 While he drove west down empty Route 50, past the lights of Ely at the 64-mile mark, he thought of many things: his several old girlfriends (going back to his freshman year in high school); his parent's divorce and his younger sister running away from home; whether he should join the military to learn more job skills; and of course, the future -- what would it bring?

 When Reb later pulled over and stopped to pee after finishing all that coffee, he noticed the absolute silence of the desert. Not even a distant coyote howl. Of course, the usual nocturnal critters were out and about, but he didn't see any. The isolation was strangely peaceful. He inhaled the tangy scents of creosote bushes and mesquite. He imagined the brave, hardy pioneers of old in covered wagons, crossing these wastes on their long journey towards a better life. Back in his car, Reb tuned into the Coast-to-Coast AM radio program. Tonight's call-in topic was: life-after-death experiences.

 78 miles past Ely was the town of Eureka. Under a streetlamp on an otherwise deserted main drag was a lone hitchhiker dressed in matching camouflage fatigues, with a backpack. As Hannon drove closer, he was surprised that the stranger was a young woman. He pulled over.

 "Where you headed?" Reb had leaned over and rolled down the window, and asked, smiling.

 "Austin. It's about 70 miles down the road," the young woman replied. "You're not some psycho-murderer-pervert or anything like that, are you? I've got a large can of Bear Spray on me if you try anything funny." She frowned and looked serious with her dark eyes. Her black hair was pulled back into a long braid. She could be any age between 20-30, Reb guessed. And she looked to be Asian.

 Hannon laughed and said, "No, I'm harmless. Hop in. I'm headed to Reno to look for work. I can drop you off in Austin. My name is Reb, short for 'Rebel.' You can toss your pack in the back. You can hold your can of pepper-spray on your lap while we drive if you still don't trust me. Hungry? I've got some Doritos and some cookies if you are. Help yourself," he pointed back to his snack stash.

 "O.K., thanks. You look safe. A girl can't be too cautious nowadays. Did you ever read about Ted Bundy?" She slid into the passenger seat. "Say, this is an awesome set of wheels you got! Love the color. Hey, did anyone ever tell you that you look a lot like that guy in the Joe Dirt movie? By the way, my name's Abacus." She offered her hand to shake, and Reb complied. "Once we get to Austin, I'm going north to Battle Mountain. I've got some friends there, and they'll let me couch-surf for a few nights. I'm trying to work my way up to Boise and look for work. It's hard because I hated school and dropped out. Never got a diploma. I've got to study hard and pass the GED someday and get my credential. It's the minimum most folks doing the hiring look for."

 "Abacus? That's an interesting name. How did you get it?" Hannon wanted to know as they drove west out of Eureka and back into the desert darkness.

 "Well, it kinda represents my life, you know, counting down the days like the beads on an abacus. Waiting for something -- anything -- better to happen to me. I'm off the booze and weed now, and I'm trying to get my shit together, but it's tough," she allowed. Hannon noticed as she spoke that one of her top front teeth was chipped. Other than that, she had a smooth-skinned face and was sort of pretty, in a rugged way. "Mind if I hit your snacks now? I've got the munchies," she declared. Reb told her to go for it.

 The pair chatted some more, then listened to George Noory ask a listener on Coast-to-Coast AM: "So you actually saw yourself dead on the hospital gurney, when your spirit rose up and floated away from your body? And the next instant you were surrounded by a bright light and angels?"

 Abacus said, "Yeah, I believe in all that stuff. Don't you? Life is this big, mysterious puzzle on so many levels. Sometimes it scares me, but other times, it strangely comforts me. My father was a Navajo Indian and my mother was from Vietnam. I grew up on a reservation near the Four Corners area by Shiprock. Do you know it? Powerful ancestor 'spirit medicine' shit out there, believe me. Anyway, my folks basically drank themselves to death. We lived off the usual monthly government checks. Dad never could find any work. So sad. That left me and my older brother to look after ourselves. But he went his way and I went mine two years ago. I don't even know where he is anymore."

 The hour drive to Austin went by too quickly, as Reb was really enjoying talking with his road guest. Once in a while, they saw a big 18-wheeled truck or two go roaring past in either direction, but seldom any other passenger cars. When they arrived, he let Abacus out at the street intersection of the road (# 305) leading north to Battle Mountain. "Hey...do you need a few dollars to get you by?" Hannon offered, as the young Asian-American Indian woman grabbed her backpack and slid out of the leather bucket seat.

 "No, Reb...I'm good...but thanks. And thanks again for the ride and the snacks. You take care of yourself now, and good luck in Reno, O.K.? And who knows? Maybe we'll see each other again someday." Hannon said goodbye and likewise wished Abacus good luck in Boise. "You'll get your GED soon, so keep at it, Abacus!" he waved and smiled. Driving away a few blocks west, he stopped for gas at Champs and topped off his car's tank.

 Alone again now on the empty highway, Reb saw the looming Shoshone Mountains to the south. He guzzled some Mountain Dew from the bottle, and put in another music tape. He was listening to Us and Them by Pink Floyd when nature called, so he pulled over to take a piss.

 While he was hosing, Reb noticed how bright the heavens were out here in the middle nowhere. The Milky Way displayed countless stars. The temperature was still cooling down from the heat of the day, and the slight breeze actually felt a bit chilly to the T-shirted driver.

 Suddenly, Hannon heard a strange sound like faint humming. When he turned in the direction of the sound and looked up, he saw a large, disk-shaped, dull black craft floating overhead, with small red lights flashing around its perimeter. Its diameter appeared to be about 100' across.

 Holy Shit! Reb thought.

 The mystery craft quickly moved away, and seemed to vanish behind a series of rocky hills about a mile away. Hannon recovered from his initial shock and got back into his car. He had to check this out! He drove the Challenger in the direction of where the craft dropped out of sight. Using only his running lights (after turning off his headlights), he found an area off-road where he could safely drive the Dodge past desert bushes and large rocks. Then he turned off the engine when he arrived at the base of the hills.

 Grabbing his cell phone and a flashlight from his car's glove box, Reb slowly walked, then scrambled up the closest rocky hill in the dim light of his torch. The steep, rubble-strewn climb took about ten minutes.

 When he got to the top and looked downward, Hannon was relieved to see that the craft was still there, and appeared to have neatly landed in a compact valley behind the hills. He clicked off his flashlight. The red lights were still regularly rotating around the craft's perimeter, but the humming sound had stopped. It was absolutely quiet. Hannon noticed a single shooting star streaking through the sky.

 What happened next both amazed and freaked out the young man.

 The strange craft soundlessly opened what appeared to be some sort of doorway hatch. Reb saw a faint, purplish light in the background of the craft's interior. Then he saw several dark shadow figures moving about inside, near the doorway... Something was alive in there!

 Hannon couldn't believe his eyes. He switched on the camera on his cell phone and took a few hurried pictures. But his left shoe accidentally dislodged a bowling ball-sized stone from his hidden perch, and the runaway rock went noisily tumbling down the hill. Dammit!

 Immediately, the black craft closed its hatchway and began humming. In the next instant, it rose, then zoomed away to the west at terrific speed, until it was out of Reb's sight. The vehicle was gone in less than ten seconds.

 Hannon quickly checked his cell phone camera. The evidence of the mysterious landing craft and its probable occupants was still there. Thank God! Proof that I am not just another UFO 'wacko' who imagined everything, he thought. The date and time stamp on his photos said: August 8th, 3:36 a.m.

 Returning to his car, Reb got back on Route 50 and drove fast to Fallon, the next major town on the Loneliest Highway in America, about 110 miles away. Because he was still somewhat shaky from his unusual experience, he turned off his taped music cassette and drove in silence. No more spooky Coast-to-Coast AM call-ins either tonight, he decided!

 When he got to Fallon, he parked at a busy, all-night trucker's diner -- The Outpost -- and went in. He had to tell somebody what he just saw! At the counter, he ordered coffee and a slice of banana cream pie, even though he was not very hungry. The assembled crowd of truckers were talking about how the country was going to hell faster and faster every year, while digging into their chicken-fried steaks, chili with cornbread, and slabs of greasy meatloaf with mashed potatoes. Wanda, 40-something-old brunette waitress, was listening in between serving the food and clearing the dishes.

 "Hey, guys!" Hannon suddenly interuppted. "No shit, but I just saw a real UFO land outside of Austin about 90 minutes ago. I even took some pictures -- look!" Reb walked down the counter row and let each trucker see for himself.

 Even Wanda had a careful look at the pics, her face soon showing a puzzled expression. "Well, I'll be damned," she remarked. "I bet the Government knows about all of this stuff, but they're keeping it secret so as not to panic the public."

 Then she called the black fry cook, LeVar, over from the kitchen to have a look. "Hmm...you know, there ain't no mention of any flying saucers in the Bible, so I just can't believe in those things," he proclaimed.

 "Great stunt, kid. How did you fake these photos?" said one big-bellied trucker. "Pretty good job."

 "E.T. -- phone home!" quipped another, showing some missing bottom teeth, and everyone but Hannon laughed. "Beam me up, Scotty!" the clowning trucker added, bug-eyed.

 "We get this UFO bullshit about once a month around here, so it's no big deal to us anymore," offered another grizzled trucker. He was wearing a stained cowboy hat and a denim motorcycle vest with a Harley-Davidson logo and an American flag on the back. "People seeing things, or making stuff up. Drunks, druggies, crazies. Just want the attention, I suppose."

 But an older, bearded trucker with arm tattoos ('Jesus Saves' and 'He Died for Your Sins on the Cross') and a white-haired ponytail solemnly said, "Son, don't worry. I believe you. So if you are serious, report what you saw to the police in the next town west, which is Dayton. Sun'll be up soon. Tell them and show them. Folks need to know that sometimes, these flying saucer sightings are for real." The old-timer kindly patted Reb on his shoulder, then walked out the door to his waiting 18-wheeler, hauling supplies for Wal-Mart.

 The sky was gradually lightening in the desert east as Reb finished his coffee and pie. He left Wanda a nice tip, and thanked her.

 When he got to Dayton, he went right to the small police station. A grey-haired, uniformed Hispanic woman was finishing her last hour of the night-shift, because the 7 a.m. day-shift had yet to begin. Hannon told her his story and showed her the dramatic photos. "I'm afraid that we don't have the staff to handle claims like this, young man, so I can't type up any kind of detailed report about what you saw. But I'll pass your info along to the day officer. When you get to Carson City, report to the police there. It's only twelve miles away. They will contact the military and the F.B.I., and those guys will take down your complete eyewitness account. You aren't the first, you know, to report such a strange sighting. Weird things happen a lot at night in the Silver State. I guess you found that out for yourself."

 When he parked his Dodge Challenger at the police station in Nevada's capital city -- after stopping again for gas -- Reb was curious to see how the Feds would react to his story. The less-than-curious desk clerk told him to have a seat, and that representatives of both the U.S. military and the F.B.I. would arrive shortly. The clerk had been through this routine many times.

 Within a half-hour, Hannon was introduced to Air Force First Lieutenant Casey Wright and F.B.I. Agent Thomas Symson. He gave them the full account of his strange UFO encounter while they took notes. They next asked to see his wallet i.d.'s, and marked down some of that information in their pads. When Reb finally passed around his cell phone to share his photos of the startling event, both men seemed convinced and impressed.

 "It's rare that we get photographic evidence, Mr. Hannon," the lieutenant remarked. "This bolsters your claim significantly. Agent Symson, can I have a word with you in private for a minute? Mr. Hannon, we'll be right back. Can I get you some coffee or a bottle of water?" Reb said he was good, but thanks.

 About five minutes later, the two interviewers returned. "If you don't mind, we need to keep your cell phone for a few days and analyze your photos. We need this original source, so as not to be suspected of having any altering or manipulation of the evidence. I'm sure you understand and want to fully cooperate," the agent outlined. "Are you staying in Carson City, Mr. Hannon?"

 Reb explained how he was moving to Reno and hoped to find regular, long-term construction work.

 "That's fine then. Give me a call at this number -- the lieutenant produced an embossed business card -- once you find an apartment and we'll have someone bring your phone back to you at your new address. We only need it for a few days. Your phone won't be harmed or erased in any way, and naturally, your personal information is guaranteed safe with us. O.K.?"

 The young man from Colorado agreed to the arrangement. He figured he could survive without his phone for a little while. Plus, he wanted to be a good citizen

 After shaking hands with Wright and Symson and leaving the police station, Reb was hungry for some breakfast, so he went to a McDonald's drive-through for pancakes, scrambled eggs, hash browns, a biscuit with grape jelly, and a sausage patty, with a large orange juice to drink.

 The drive to Reno was short, and Hannon saw lots of new construction going up as he approached this booming town. He quickly got a job at the second site he inquired at, and was offered $22/hr. to start as soon as possible. He found a one-bedroom apartment near the downtown area, but the rent was surprisingly high compared to Grand Junction. Still, it was nicely furnished, and it was not too far from his new job off a nearby freeway. Reb paid the security deposit and two month's rent in advance in cash, then went shopping to stock up on groceries.

 His job the next day began bright and early, installing roofing tiles. It was hot and sweaty work, but he enjoyed it, and he also liked the camaraderie of his fellow coworkers, the usual mix of white, black, and brown skins.

 Meanwhile, three days went by, but Hannon still hadn't heard back from Lieutenant Wright, despite calling him (using the desk phone in his apartment manager's office) and leaving both that contact number and his new address on Wright's answering machine.

 On the fourth day, Reb surprised his new boss by not showing up for work. The maintenance man at the apartment complex Hannon was living at came by to check on each unit's air-conditioner in the August heat, but he found Hannon's rooms deserted. Even Reb's beloved car was gone from the parking lot. The maintenance man informed the apartment manager, who later reported the tenant's unusual disappearance to the police. But the official police report was 'misplaced' after only a week, and nothing more was done.

 A month later, a beautifully restored, reddish-orange, 1969 Dodge Challenger was sold at a government surplus property auction in Phoenix to a collectable car dealer...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 March 12, 2021