

Dr. Frank Cutler

A short story from the universe of Cosmic Consciousness

by Mike Longmeadow

Dr. Frank Cutler

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The Cutler family reached the park for their monthly picnic in the early afternoon. Frank's wife had a stern face, her cheeks red from anger.

"Like I said, there's no space left." She grumbled.

Her rigid posture showed Frank he better not argue as her eyes bolted in every direction, searching for a spot in the sea of picnics strewn all over the park. Originally a garbage dump, the park spread over ten blocks in an almost perfect square. It was surrounded by residential housing and had been, since its inception about one hundred and fifty years ago, a popular picnic spot. The city had installed basic barbecues at regular intervals for people's use, and they were generally the first to be occupied when noontime rolled around, and even earlier on sunny days. The unwritten rule between the park users was to keep an acceptable distance from one and other to maintain a certain level of privacy. This is why Andrea, Frank's wife, was so furious. The clock on the tower in the middle of the park read almost one o'clock and the only spots left were in the blistering sun.

They had arrived late because of Frank's obsession with his work. He was locked in his study until noon, tweaking and refining his research. Squarely focused on what he thought would be a major breakthrough, he didn't even hear Andrea's calls to get going, that he could come back to his work after the picnic. But the magnitude of this discovery meant he had to be sure everything was on point. They finally left the house at twelve forty-five, Frank lagging behind the family, who were rushing to get there. Even when they reached the park, his mind was still firmly entrenched in his research, refusing to let it go. While Andrea was becoming frantic at the idea of having their picnic with no shade, she bumped into some picnickers who looked at her with a frown but said nothing when they saw her clenched jaw and furrowed brows. Frank followed his family one step behind, his gaze lost in the ground. He was turning the newfound information around in his head, wondering if what he found could be true.

His research had brought him back to the origins of life on earth. It revealed that at the moment life began on earth, when one cell became two, the presence of corrupted chemicals caused an infection. What Frank discovered is that the original organism didn't fight the infection, it integrated it into its burgeoning DNA system. This discovery alone would guarantee Frank a Nobel prize, but he was already thinking of pushing this further. Frank saw something in his research that could usher in a new era for humanity.

“Hello?” Andrea poked him in the ribs. “You made us late, you could at least help me set up.”

She said this while she whipped the table cloth in the air, spreading it evenly on the ground in one try. Frank looked at her his mind still in a daze, unable to pull himself from his musings. Then Andrea shot him a glare that snapped him back to the present moment, and he hastily started to unpack the lunch and plates. Frank could feel a twinge of desperation setting in, yearning to be back in his office. He found himself unable to focus on the task at hand, his mind reverting to his research as he mechanically placed the utensils before him in disorderly fashion. *Could humanity's destructive behavior be nothing more than an infection?* He thought to himself. That question had become his sole focus. While he silently placed the utensils and plates, his wife built the sandwiches, mumbling to herself she should have left without him, at least they would have some shade. The slices of ham she placed on the open sandwich were glistening in the sun's heat. As she put a slice of cheese in each sandwich, it had time to melt slightly before she closed them off and handed them to Frank and his son and daughter. The family ate in silence, which was how every meal had been consumed for the last month or so in the household. Frank pulled out a notebook.

“No! All you do is work, this is a family picnic, you put that away right now.”

Frank looked at his wife, stunned by her hard tone and sheepishly put his notebook away.

“You know, this research could make us rich enough to have our own picnic area.”

Frank was hoping this would speak to his wife's craving for comfort. He had no wish for money, his main aspiration was to find recognition as one of the great scientists in human history. In his opinion, he was a generational mind that had the capacity to usher in a new era for humanity. Lately, his research had hinted at the possibility of finding a new path for humanity, but now he felt he was closer than ever to attaining that goal. Except he knew that if his family was to follow him, they needed other kind of reassurances. Money was the easy one, so he pushed that avenue whenever his wife became irritated at his insistence to work all the time.

“This will bring me the Nobel prize, well-paid speaking engagements...” She cut him off.

“You know I don't care about that.” She turned to the children. “Why don't you guys go to the playground? We'll clean up here and come to join you.”

As the children walked away to the playground without saying a word, Andrea turned back to Frank, her face showing a combination of sadness and anger. As tears began to flow down her cheeks, she tried to speak.

“This can't work.” Her voice broke under the emotion.

Frank sensed she had reached the end of her rope. Every time he disappeared into his study he could feel her exasperation and today it reached a boiling point. He felt her calm down as she reached to touch his arm, like she always did. Was there still hope for the family to stay together? Frank killed that hope in one phrase.

"You're right. I need more time to solidify my research. But don't worry, I won't abandon you. You'll get a regular check in the mail," he said. The expression on his face was pure indifference, his gaze lost in the distance.

His comment floored her. She wavered and Frank became worried he would have to bring her to the hospital and lose precious time. But she stood her ground and gave him a harsh look.

"OK then," she said. "What do we do now?"

Frank pocketed his notebook and got up.

"You go join the kids, I'll go back home and pack my bags." Seeing his wife look so shocked at his comment gave Frank some pause. He placed his hand on her shoulder; "we both knew this was going to happen. I'm useless to the family you want. I would be happy if you accepted the magnitude of the research I'm doing and let me do my thing, but your needs don't line up with mine. I'll send you a letter you can read to the kids once I've found a new place."

Frank then leaned in, hoping for a goodbye hug, but his wife pulled back.

"Just go." As he began to walk away, she added; "You've never been a part of this family, I don't know how I didn't see it before."

He didn't even hear her last comment, his mind already back on the research as he walked away. He went home and gathered what he needed to continue his work and left.

Frank awoke in his hotel room the next day convinced his life would start to change for the better. The data he had accumulated left no place for doubt. Despite that, over the last couple of months, he had seen his demands for governmental funds to further his research be systematically refused. The different departments he dealt with all gave the same two answers, either the research was too politically charged, or the outcome was too uncertain. The explanation he was offered was that public funds were exclusively destined to projects that had a real chance of finding conclusive results that would be beneficial for both the population and the government. One bureaucrat also told him anything related to DNA research was systematically ignored by the current government. They were afraid of the backlash this kind of research could do to their approval rating. On the last point Frank had to agree, there were uninformed people in this debate, the data available to the public was too diluted for most to understand. But how could the government agencies not see the input his research could do? He believed he had the answer to humanity's troubled existence, but no one wanted to help him fix that.

Frank knew most people were inclined to stay away from him whenever possible. His demeanor was construed as mean and arrogant, but Frank felt he was nothing more than honest and direct. This made any collaboration difficult, so he had to resort to spying on other's research when he needed extra data. With a minimum of information, he was able to decipher if the research he was scrutinizing could add to his or not. When it did, he approached the researchers and tried to sell them on the idea that his findings would change humanity's existence. He would present his case by trying to appeal to the scientists' ego, offering vague promises of celebrity status. But Frank was careful to not make any guarantee about giving credit. Sometimes he was granted access to data, no questions asked. But when someone did ask for credit, Frank would argue that their contribution could be added to the bibliography at best, but that the main research was still his alone. This attitude had slowed down his progress over the years, but Frank was adamant at keeping the credit for himself.

Besides Dwight Como, an anthropologist Frank communicated with on a regular basis, no one wanted to collaborate with him. Over time, Frank lost patience and hired some thieves to steal the research he needed. But the results were disastrous because the thieves didn't know what to take. Even if Frank gave them a detailed plan, they rarely took the right documents. The thieves Frank had hired had minimal scholarly knowledge. They would almost always return with half of the data Frank demanded, which considerably complicated the situation. Following some close calls with the police, where Frank was a person of interest in a series of break-ins, he turned his attention to hypnosis. He had dabbled with the idea since the first robbers he sent out came back with the wrong documents. At first, his knowledge of proper technique was weak, and all he managed to do was scare away his potential thieves.

“You’re crazy, man!” was typically the last thing he heard from the person when they left.

Frank deepened his knowledge on the subject before trying again. He concentrated his study of hypnosis on two fronts. He learned how to heighten someone’s senses and merged that with CIA and KGB files on mind control he had a hacker pull out for him. With this, he now could program people to do his bidding. Although his newfound knowledge gave him a profound sense of superiority, he knew his DNA research would elevate him among the great scientists of history soon.

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His work was beginning to make some noise in certain scientific circles. The idea the human DNA can be infected, if laughed at when Frank came out with his theory, was now finding some supporters. He had traced the history of DNA evolution up to the beginning of life on earth. Some colleagues took parts of his work to try to debunk it, but their efforts only made the theory even more solid as they confirmed Frank's concepts one by one. His collaboration with anthropologist Dwight Como could give Frank the chance to add tons of circumstantial evidence on top of his theory, which would help propel his work into the public eye. As much as Frank wanted to get his hands on every part of Dwight's work, he found it difficult to get all the information he needed. They had collaborated at a distance for a time, and Frank found that Dwight was adept at giving parts of his research that were valid to the moment but always keeping some essential information confidential. Dwight kept his research notes and timeline analysis that go with the research close to his vest. What Dwight did release to Frank was spotty, making it hard to use the information properly. Over time, Frank realized this man was different from the people he usually dealt with. He needed to change his approach with him.

A knock on the door made Frank jump. When he was deep in thought, the surrounding environment disappeared, making it easy to surprise him. As he walked to the door to answer, Frank took the decision to hypnotize Dwight and order him to hand over his work. He opened the door to two men holding thick briefcases. They both had the look of security personnel; visible earpiece, black suit, strange bulge under the jacket at chest level. The man on the left spoke first.

"Are you Dr. Frank Cutler?" He asked bluntly.

Frank nodded, unsure of the consequence his nod could provoke.

"Can we see some ID?" Asked the man on the right.

"I could ask the same thing." Frank replied, trying to hide his nervousness.

The two men didn't budge, their briefcase hanging in front of them, their arms forming a triangle on their chest with both hands on the handle of the cargo they were carrying. They both looked at Frank intently, waiting for him to produce the requested ID. Seeing they wouldn't budge, Frank sighed and pulled out his wallet. His gesture to grab it caused one of the men to slip his fingers under his jacket, ready to pull out his gun. Frank put his free hand up to signify there was no danger, then showed the two men his driver's license.

“Thank you. In these briefcases is a proposal for you.”

“From whom?” Frank felt a twinge of excitement at the prospect of getting some new information to add to his theory.

“We have not been informed. The answer to your question is enclosed in here.” The man held out his briefcase for Frank to grab it.

Its weight was surprising, as Frank’s arm was pulled down when he grabbed the case. The other man deposited his on the ground and both left without another word. Frank closed the door behind them and hastily went to his desk and opened the briefcase he had in his hand. It was jam packed. On the top of the documents it enclosed was a hand-written note: *Dr. Cutler, your work has attracted our attention. We would be interested in learning more about it. Take the time to read the documents we’ve sent you and contact us with your decision. Keep in mind this offer is a one-time thing.*

What could they mean by a one-time thing? Frank thought. It didn’t take him long to realize that whoever sent this was trying to buy him off. After reading through a couple of folders, which contained nothing more than investment portfolios, he closed the briefcase, certain he wanted nothing to do with their offer. On the note was stapled a business card with nothing more than an email. Frank went to his computer and replied to the offer made by this mysterious entity.

First off, let me thank you for recognizing the potential my work has. Although your offer has much to give, I must politely decline. But I am curious about meeting with you. I sense your connections are deep, and by way of a collaborative effort, we could bring my theory to life. I insist that my name must stay at the forefront throughout the process, this discovery is too important. If you’re still enthusiastic to learn more, we can arrange a meeting, so I may expose more details and possibly move forward.

Frank read his message three times before clicking “send”, and sat back, somehow expecting a quick response. He was not disappointed. His email pop up window appeared with a response to his message in minutes.

Dr. Cutler, thank you for your quick response. We are disappointed about your refusal to accept our offer as is, but we understand your wish to stay close to the work you have created. To our organization, all that matters is that this exchange stays between us. Should we learn that you have alerted anyone about this, you can consider your time as a respected scientist as over, and we will take over your work.

But if you respect the covenant we have created, we are more than interested in meeting with you.

Dark Matter Initiative

Frank's heart was racing now. Whoever this group was, they had unambiguously tried to intimidate him, but instead of feeling fear, Frank was submerged by a wave of excitement. People that had the power to intimidate someone this directly had deep pockets. And their penchant for secretive exchanges fell directly into his wheelhouse. He grabbed his keyboard.

If you're as powerful as you make it seem, you know I've jealously kept my work secret. You also know you would be unable to decipher the data without me. The work I've put together is still in the theoretical phase, and it would take one of your scientists' years to understand the depth of my work. When we meet, I will expose how far we can go with this theory.

He almost clicked send, but then added;

Please understand I'm not challenging you, I'm making my case, nothing more. The research I've done is brand-new, and at the moment, I'm the only person who can keep it going in the right direction.

This time, he clicked send and went to his filing cabinet. His last message could be perceived as impertinent. They could decide to move him aside and steal his work. He pulled out essential elements of his research and hid them away in a secret safe he had installed in the floor. It was ensconced under a tile that even the most observant person couldn't detect. As Frank closed the safe and replaced the tile, his email dinged. He went to look.

We can meet at your convenience. The meeting will take place at one of our offices, the street address is below. We expect you to have all the information necessary to explain to us why your presence is so essential. We await your response to confirm the date.

Although Frank saw a barely veiled threat in the last message, he decided to accept the invitation. But if he went to the meeting with all his research, one of two things would happen. Either they like his presentation and kill him to take his work, or they don't like it and still eliminate him for the danger he might represent. Frank chose a third option. He would tell them he voluntarily omitted some information to protect himself, hoping that would be enough.

Frank rushed to speed up his hypnosis experiments. The results were better than he had anticipated, and he wanted to perfect his methods before meeting with the Initiative. He decided to delve deeper, thinking he could put together some sort of army to do his bidding soon. Scrambling for a concrete result, he concentrated on perfecting his technique, using homeless people to practice. He came to realize most of the homeless carried mental health issues that made it that much more difficult to hypnotize someone, but he pushed on nonetheless.

If the first subjects he attempted to hypnotize went back to their lives with little more than a headache, Frank's approach rapidly evolved to a point where he could dig into his subject's psyche. But he was still unable to make his orders clear to the hypnotized person, although he dug in deep enough that their mind was distressed after waking up. The hypnosis guinea pigs would generally awaken having lost time, feeling drained, but otherwise unaffected. Frank progressed over time. The commands he implanted into their minds worked with more and more precision, giving Frank a boost in confidence to face the group who had approached him.

Although he was proposing a change in human DNA, he knew he wasn't yet ready to move ahead with the transformation. Experiments still needed to be conducted, and that meant he needed access to laboratories with better equipment. He hoped he could make his presentation with a hypnotized soldier, so he could show the group the possibilities inherent to the DNA transformation.

Dwight Como then popped into Frank's mind. He still felt he needed to hypnotize the anthropologist and force him to hand over his work. It had become clear that Dwight wasn't going to graciously move aside, so something had to give. As an exercise, Frank went to known homeless spots and began to test his capacity to hypnotize someone in a second. He walked around the people who were laying about in disheveled fashion, some lying in their own filth, others in deep conversation with no one. Frank walked aimlessly for a while, seeking out the perfect target. His earlier experiments had shown an already broken mind cannot be affected, so he had to find fresh victims, people not yet broken by trauma. Because of the feral life they lead, homeless people become instinctual, which made it difficult to approach them without being noticed, they were much more alert to his presence than a person whose consciousness is obscured by their busy, civilised life. When he identified a target, Frank had to maneuver himself around without being spotted, so he could get close enough to try his instant hypnosis. He saw one woman who seemed a little out of place. Her hair was a mess, and she seemed profoundly discouraged, but her clothes, although dirty, still looked new. Frank sneaked behind a big man who was repairing his home with new cardboard. The man had an empty glaze and was oblivious to anything else than his renovation. The noise he was making meant Frank was able to get close to the woman without being noticed. Accidentally, he stepped on something

that broke under his foot, and the man stopped his home repair and looked straight at Frank. He froze for a second, but realized the man was looking through him, not at him. He shrugged his shoulders to signify to the man he didn't know where the sound came from which seemed to appease him as he returned to his renovation without uttering a word. Frank looked down to see what he stepped on and saw he had broken a porcelain heirloom, which gave him an idea. He picked up the broken object and adopted a prone position to approach the woman, who was reading something, leaning up against a bag that probably held her entire life. Frank leaned in and pricked her with a small needle that contained a hallucinogenic mixture. There wasn't enough for the person to freak out, but Frank saw a major difference in the depth of the hypnosis when this mixture was used. He was still perfecting his concoction, and Valerian root seemed to be the way to go.

The woman reached back to scratch where Frank had pricked her. She visibly thought a bug bit her and didn't even look back. This emboldened Frank. He got closer, waiting for the woman to show signs the mixture was taking. When she started laughing for no reason, Frank moved in.

"My voice is your master." He whispered.

He repeated this at least ten times. He started with a quiet whisper, letting his voice grow stronger with every incantation. The woman remained focused on her book, not paying attention to the voice she heard, seemingly seeing something other than the words in the pages as her eyes moved in ways that was not compatible with reading. Staring at book pages with intent was a defensive mechanism she had developed since landing here three weeks ago. If it saved her from disagreements and uncomfortable moments before, it would have helped her if she had paid attention this time.

On the tenth or eleventh incantation, her head popped up, her gaze staring into the distance. Frank grabbed the broken heirloom in his pocket and laid it down next to the woman.

"This is what's left of your last souvenir from home." Frank placed his hand on her shoulder as he said this.

She turned to look at him, a wave of sadness distorting her facial traits. But there were no tears, her eyes were filled with incomprehension.

"That man broke it." Frank said, pointing to the man renovating his cardboard home. "You must take something from him in exchange. If he refuses, kill him."

Frank felt his heart beating fast. The excitement he felt when gaining control of someone's psyche was difficult to subdue, but he managed to keep his cool and stay focused. The woman got up and headed straight for the man. Her demeanor was unflinching, mean, which gave Frank a surge of joy. He felt he had reached a new phase in his project. The woman confronted

the man with the broken pieces. Frank couldn't hear what they were saying, but the man became angry at the woman's words. Without hesitation, she struck him in the throat with a piece of broken porcelain she had kept in her hand. Blood began to pour out of him and for a moment, his gaze became vibrant, his mind clearing up for the last seconds of his life. He slumped to the ground in slow motion, letting go of his last breath as he laid his head on the makeshift headboard of his bed, the blood pooling around him. The woman looked around, then grabbed a reusable water bottle. She returned to her spot and sat back down. This time, she didn't pick up her book, she stared into the distance, as if waiting for her next orders. Frank, curious to see how far this could go, leaned in.

"Others have seen you. You must silence them."

The woman jumped to her feet, ready to go to battle. She grabbed a fork from her bag and looked around. Anyone who looked in her direction was automatically targeted by the woman, who went on a silent killing spree that lasted for at least two hours before the police finally arrived. Frank had moved around to stay out of her line of sight, flabbergasted by the effectiveness of his hypnosis. Excited to get going with this project, he returned home to contact Dwight Como.

The end