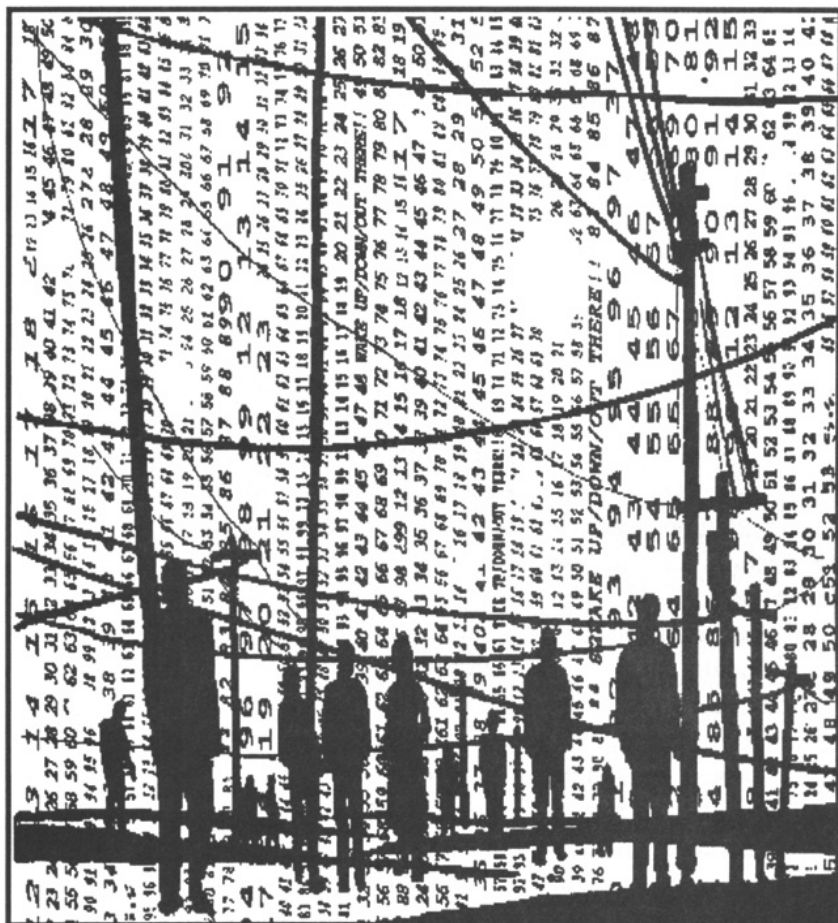


The Numbers Game

by Martin Cannon



Illustrated by Sal Amendola

Occasionally, I write about UFOs.

Occasionally, I speak to folks who claim to have seen them or met their pilots. And occasionally, I get the chance to relate what I've heard before a radio or lecture-hall audience.

Which means, of course, that occasionally someone will ask me: "Has anything weird ever happened to you?"

I always reply "No." But that's not quite true. I can bear witness to one minor but maddening enigma—one which veteran outer-limits researcher John Keel (and a very few other authors) connect to the UFO controversy.

In *The Mothman Prophecies*, Keel writes of a United Nations public relations officer named Don Estrella, who survived a head-on automotive encounter with an invisible, impenetrable something-or-other that accorded the front end of his car. Shortly after this bizarre accident, a friend of Estrella's in Long Island received an odd phone call. The U.N. officer reported that "A voice that sounded very distant said 'Hello, Don.' My friend told him that I hadn't arrived yet. The voice then began to recite a series of numbers meaninglessly."

Keel knew of many similar incidents. In 1961, a telephone conversation between two women in Oregon was rudely interrupted by the voice of a mysterious man who shouted "Wake up down there!" According to Keel, "The voice started to rattle on in a rapid-fire language that sounded like Spanish." After this odd locution ceased, the women could speak together normally once more. At the same time next day, the women spoke on the phone again, only to earwitness a repeat performance by the oddball voice. After the audio interloper speed-shouted something in a foreign tongue, it began reciting the numbers forty and twenty-five continually.

Stranger still: Keel claims to have investigated many instances of numbers mysteriously read out over television sets during UFO flaps. These interruptions could not be explained away as shortwave or CB interference. Keel even collected a number of stories from individuals who claimed to hear these numbers in their heads.

In 1967, during West Virginia's great "Mothman" wave of UFO-oriented oddities, Keel encountered the phenomenon again. Every night, a young lady in the area was called by a strange man who

would speak to her in an accelerated speech that sounded "something like Spanish...yet I don't think it is Spanish."

Brad Steiger's *Mysteries of Time and Space* refers to an exactly similar incident. A female informant was speaking to a friend on the telephone, when their conversation was interrupted by an unusual male voice repeating meaningless two-digit numbers. Thinking quickly, one of the women identified herself to the voice as one of the numbers whereupon the intruder plunged into the rapid-fire pseudo-Spanish noted by Keel's sources. Like Keel, Steiger connects such incidents with UFOs and similar other-worldly phenomena.

Now, to paraphrase an old Bill Cosby line, I told you those stories to tell you this one.

Because, you see, it happened to me.

* * *

The story begins sometime in the early Reagan era, when the homeless multiplied like cancer and I came parlously close to joining their ranks. Those were the days when I faced that queasy interregnum between exiting college and finding a niche within one's chosen profession, and since I had chosen the field of art and illustration, the interregnum threatened to last a lifetime. As it happened, this transition period lingered for nearly three astonishingly miserable years, which I spent sequestered in a dank "bachelor pad" roughly the size of a Maytag appliance. I sustained myself with a succession of stultifying employments, punctuated by the occasional art assignment.

Generally, I worked the graveyard shift. It fit my mood.

One thing you have to understand about graveyard: The worst aspect of working those hours is not working those hours. What do you do during those nights when the job's not there but caffeine and a chronic insomnia still keep you alert at three, four, five in the morning?

My brother suggested loop lines.

He had learned of these from a computer bulletin board. I spent an evening at his house (he was prosperous, having opted for fast-food management instead of higher education), and received a



guided tour of the board's data base—which, for some reason, contained an introductory course in "phone phreaking." Phreaks, as they like to call themselves, are techno-pranksters who enjoy tweaking the nose of "Bitch Bell," and loop lines are a major weapon in the phreak armory.

The telephone company invented loops to serve some arcane testing purpose which need not concern us here. The important point is that 99.9999% of the time the lines lie dormant—officially. Unofficially, they're a phreak phantasia. Imagine phone lines connected to no telephone, lines that "float" somewhere in the central office of the Telco (if you'll forgive the lapse into phreak-speak). Loops come in matched pairs, and the numbers usually occur in the upper strata of an exchange. Thus, if you dial (212) XXX-9977, you'll speak to whoever might be waiting on (212) XXX-9978.

Why do this? Basically, it's networking for nerds: The loops serve as a sort of lonely-heart's club, whereby individuals in widely-separated cities can compare notes in the safety of telephonic anonymity. Occasionally, opposite-sex phreaks loop into each other, resulting in long-distance romances.

What's the advantage of linking on the loops, as opposed to direct dialing? According to my pseudonymous bulletin board informant, by using loops one could "avoid long distance charges." In other words: free calls. Phreak samsara.

Well, I considered all this info interesting, but not compelling. One had to be a very lonely guy indeed to dial dolts in far-off locales just to hear human vocalizations. And, hey, I wasn't that far gone.

Cut to: Three weeks later.

2:30 A.M. I had finished the night's assignment. My eyes remained wide open, my ancient and rather persnickety television set suddenly became obsessed with snowscapes, my car refused to budge and there was nowhere to drive to anyway because the town was pretty thoroughly shut. The only unread book in the apartment was Samuelson's *Economics*. I considered mugging someone—not for the profit motive, but as a conversation-starter.

Nights like this can drive the best of us to "loopy" behavior.

I got out my list of numbers, and started dialing.

* * *

I had numbers for New York, Chicago, and other points east. Most of these connected me to silence. Occasionally, I got odd, repetitive electronic tones—curious, but (since I had not yet acquired a taste for Philip Glass) unsatisfactory.

The Montreal lines were livelier. Here, I encountered actual people, or the closest approximations thereof Canada had to offer. Alas, most of these phreaks made me wonder why I was ignoring Samuelson.

Then I heard The Voice.

Actually, The Voice was preceded by The Tone, a subtle electric buzz somewhat akin to the sound you hear when you hold a seashell to your ear. This faded away, gradually replaced by a young, male Voice reading numbers.

"27...28...29...27...28...29...27..."

During the next few weeks, I heard The Voice many times; after awhile, it seemed to take over the entire loop universe. Roughly every second or third call would connect me to the same tenor orator, constantly repeating a series of two-digit numbers. As I recall, the numbers never dipped below 20 or above 60. The Voice did not acknowledge anything I said to it. Was it a machine? Perhaps—although

this was no simple tape loop. Every so often, the voice would interrupt its strange soliloquy and shout:

"Wake up out there!"

Then more numbers. (Keel's informants recall the statement as "Wake up down there!" Since I never achieved a clear-as-a-bell connection, I suppose either reading is possible.)

More rarely, I heard gibberish sessions—the odd, sped-up instructions in a strangely familiar foreign language. Imagine Alvin the Chipmunk on amphetamines delivering a lecture in Spanish. At least, it sounded like Spanish. While I've never studied this language, I am a native of Los Angeles, which has the largest Mexican population outside of Mexico City; anyone raised under these circumstances should instantly recognize such a commonly heard tongue. I felt no such recognition here: "Spanish" is not an identification, merely the best available analogy. (Portuguese, perhaps?)

Part of the problem resulted from the rapid-fire delivery—during the "Spanish" lessons, my telephonic narrator never paused for punctuation. Even if you play a dialogue tape at faster-than-normal speed, you'll usually hear some conversational caesura. Why none here?

I had to know what was going on.

Thereafter, whenever the gods of loopdom connected me with a seasoned phone phreak, I would inquire about the "Number-Man." After all, the Telco used loops to test new exchanges; wasn't it possible that these strange monologues constituted some part of the test?

Negative, the experts told me. The Bell brigade came online during only normal working hours, and my loop activity occurred earlier (even accounting for the difference in time zones between Montreal and L.A.). Moreover, Telco employees had pretty much stopped using those particular lines. And when official phone folk did use loop lines, they most assuredly did not spout meaningless numbers or jazzed-up quasi-Spanish.

Had other phreaks also heard these strange messages? A few had. They were just as puzzled as I. Moreover, the telephone company couldn't provide any official explanation—it doesn't even like to

admit that loop lines exist. So if anyone was going to solve the enigma, it had to be me.

Fortunately, my brother had loaned me a creaky, barely-functional telephone answering machine, which, when used not-quite-properly, could also record conversations. The solution was obvious: Preserve on oxide the lightning-fast snatches of psuedo-Spanish--and try to have it translated, examined, and explained.

I became a furious looper. Whereas once I regarded the Number-Man as an annoyance, now I demanded an audience. He wasn't hard to reach, and I actually got a bit of his routine on tape. It was Number-Man's greatest hit: "35...37...35...37..." (Unfortunately, I no longer have the cassette.) But nothing I could do or say goaded him into delivering his gibberish arias en ersatz espagnol--like the stereotypical trained dog, Number-Man wouldn't perform his best trick for others. Brad Steiger's informant seems to have hit upon a method of "cuing" the performance, but, alas, I never managed to do so.

O ne morning I was awakened by a telephone call. I blearily said "Hello."

And Number-Man answered: "Wake up out there!" Followed by numbers. He may even have slipped me a bit of the Speedy Gonzales material; I can't recall at this date. But, as you can imagine, the situation struck me as tres freaky. Apparently, Number-Man had my number.

One night shortly thereafter, following a few unsuccessful encounters with my numerically-obsessed nemesis, I looped into someone even more interesting—who, I now suspect, may also have played a role in this enigmatic drama. Her name was Joanne, and her voice was so agonizingly sexy I felt tempted to propose to her the moment she whispered my name.

Dig it: Joanne told me she worked as a stripper in Montreal. She enjoyed her work, sashaying her voluptuous assets for all and sundry to goggle. Still, most of the guys she met annoyed her; they assumed she was all body and no mind. Joanne could tell that I was of a higher caliber than her lumpenprole clientele: She just knew that I was

intelligent, articulate, and possessed of a rare sensitivity. How she knew this I knew not, since I had Porky-pigged fewer than ten words to her. Nevertheless, she informed me that she was considering flying out to L.A. to meet me! First, though, I had to write her a long letter, describing myself, detailing my history, interests, aspirations...

She gave me an address. I kept it for years. But I never responded, fearing that her invitation contained the seeds of a nightmarish embarrassment. Suppose I composed a message of de Bergerac-ian eloquence, and cajoled her to make the trek westward: What kind of date could I offer? A chance to make out in the rusting corpse of my '72 Torino? No. In this case, wimpitude was wisdom.

* * *

Nearly a decade later, Joanne's (admittedly delightful) intrusion strikes me as deeply mystifying. Was she really just a lonely ec-dysiast? Perhaps—but there was something oddly theatrical about the episode, which seemed designed to fulfill every aspect of a lonely-guy's most outlandish fantasy. Joanne was too good. Was I really so charming a fellow that this pretty young thing felt compelled to meet me after I had burped out no more than a hazy half-sentence or two?

One thing's for sure: She almost received a great deal of information about me. Maybe that was the point.

At any rate, my experiments with loop lines ended soon thereafter. I got the bill.

Seems I had misunderstood my original instructions on matters phreakish: Loop lines do not come free. (Later, I discovered where I went wrong. Using loops to beat the system requires strategy: You arrange with a friend in a distant city to use a loop that's local for him at a certain time, then you ask the operator to place a collect call to the other side of the loop. The operator will ring up the number and talk to your comrade, who will happily accept the charges—after all, he's not going to pay a cent. Fiendishly clever, no?)

Paying Bitch Bell her ton of flesh proved crushing; I considered it a penance for the sin of phreakery, and resolved never to

commit such error again. Nevertheless, a year later I again briefly experimented with the loops. Number-Man, as far as I could tell, had taken his act elsewhere.

* * *

Years passed; I segued from being a starving artist to being a lower-middle-class artist. Eventually, I rationalized Number-Man as "one of those things," although no one I met who was learned in the telecommunicative arts could ever explain to me just what kind of thing I had encountered. Then I read Keel and Steiger.

They knew of Number-Man, and they tied him in with UFOs.

Indeed, UFO abduction lore contains a few examples of cog-nate incidents. For example, Budd Hopkins's *Intruders* notes that well-known abductee "Kathie Davis" received a series of odd telephone calls in 1980. Repeatedly, a voice spoke to her in an indecipherable language, and when she changed to an unlisted number, the voice continued to ring her up.

An abductee of my acquaintance once received a series of "empty" telephone calls during which she heard nothing but the fuzzy, seashell-like electronic tone that preceded all of my encounters with Number-Man. Like some of Keel's contactees, she also heard numbers in her head. Somehow, she even got the impression that she was to perform certain actions in conjunction with certain numbers. She also heard (both "telepathically" and during abduction episodes) rapid-fire instructions which she felt she would comprehend, and act out, at a later date.

And yet: I don't think the answer lies with UFOs. I think we're dealing with spies.

My encounters with Number-Man call to mind the mysterious "number readers" which afflict the shortwave band. For many years, on various frequencies, female and male announcers have broadcast four- and five-digit numbers in several different languages. In his 1983 book *Big Secrets*, William Poundstone speculated that these transmissions involve codes used by drug-runners, or perhaps by the Cubans. But a few years later, appearing on a local tabloid-TV

program called "Eye on L.A.," Poundstone revealed that shortwave enthusiasts had triangulated the broadcasts to their most probable origin point: The state of Virginia.

Which pretty much gives the game away.

In his book *Without Cloak or Dagger*, ex-spook Miles Copeland reveals that clandestine shortwave messages sometimes take the form of "screech" broadcasts: The information is sped up, making it incomprehensible to outsiders. One can retrieve the data only by recording the message and replaying the tape slowly.

Consider the loop line as an espionage tool. You can check the telephone records of anyone calling the lines and you'll never learn who his contact is. A trace will turn up nothing: Even the telephone company will be forever mystified. Loops are the last bastion of telephone privacy, and would therefore prove enormously helpful to an operative seeking secure communications.

Consider, in this light, my contact with the sweet striptease Joarne: Was she a ploy, designed to ferret out background information from someone who had stumbled onto the operation?

Finally, consider an even stranger possibility indeed, a possibility so thoroughly bizarre that I raise the issue with some trepidation: The telephonic induction of hypnosis.

Many researchers in hypnosis will tell you that there ain't no such animal as telephone trance. But I have examined the released CIA documents on ARTICHOKE, BLUEBIRD, MK-ULTRA and similar "mind control" programs, and one document unequivocally asserts that telephonic induction of a deep hypnotic trance was successfully tested in the early 1950s. (If you doubt that the government's efforts to create a "Manchurian Candidate" met with greater success than has ever been officially admitted, consult Walter Bowart's excellent—albeit difficult-to-find *Operation Mind Control*.)

Some years ago, I began annoying/intriguing the UFO community with a research paper, entitled "The Controllers," exploring the possibility that some "UFO abductions" may actually be disguised continuances of the clandestine mind control projects referenced above. Although I doubt that John Keel would endorse this explanation, he does strongly affirm (in *The Mothman Prophecies*, in

Operation Trojan Horse, and elsewhere) that some form of post-hypnotic suggestion seems to affect selected UFO percipients.

Is it possible that the rapid-fire "Spanish" actually constitutes some form of hypnotic suggestion, incomprehensible to the normal listener but subconsciously understandable by a properly "trained" individual? If so, we may discover here some explanation as to why number readers, and similar telephonic annoyances, crop up in UFO flap areas, and why these calls seem to herald odd phenomena and odd behavior. The Tone itself may also act as a hypnotic cue (provided the listener has been previously conditioned).

Now, I freely admit that the above suggestions are highly speculative. But this minor-key mystery must have some sort of solution. Granted, this conundrum can hardly be considered an earth-shaking matter; still, it has haunted me for years, rather like one of those stray pups that won't stop trailing you. I invite other suggestions and comments. (Of course, I also invite Joanne of Montreal to offer her side of the story: If you're a spook, all is forgiven; if not, forgive me. Whatever the circumstances, you gave a lonely lad something mighty interesting to ponder during one sleepless night.) Additional examples and alternative explanations would be most welcome.

If anyone has alternative explanations...

Does anyone?

Wake up out there!