

No Flying Saucers

By Jack English

“First, I want you to know I don’t believe in flying saucers, or little green men, or alien invasion or any of that horse hockey,” I said.

“Yeah, but where have you been for the last eight months?” Don asked.

I took another swig of my Flying Fish Extra Pale Ale, *Damn! It was good to taste a cold brew again.* I was sitting across from my best friends, and they were all knocking back Flying Fish brews and chowing down on pizza. I invited them over to let them know I was back and to tell them my story. But would they believe it?

Paul, Don, Dave, Harry, Rich and Jerry were the jury who would decide whether I should tell the truth about where I had been or make up some plausible lie. The group included a doctor, historian, nurse anesthetist, accountant, scientist and lawyer. If they could be convinced, anyone could be convinced. If they weren’t convinced, I would just keep my mouth shut.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said. “I hadn’t been able to sleep for two or three nights in a row, and I was exhausted. Rather watching television and having that lull me to sleep; I just sat in a den chair and tried to sleep. Sitting there, I had a great view of the woods behind my house. And since it was mid-December and most of the leaves were gone, I could see the starry night between the tree branches.

“Sometimes, I can look out and see commercial jets in a holding pattern waiting for clearance to land in Philadelphia. Sometimes, I can see a small private plane fly by. I was just sitting there waiting for sleep to come when I saw a big shadow block out the stars. At first, I thought it was a cloud, but it was moving too fast and too systematically.

“You’ve all been here before. You know that if you go out my back door a quarter mile through the woods, and over the little hill, you come to a closed landfill. Just as the shadow sank below the crest of the hill, three or four spots on the underside of the shadow seemed to take on a fierce orange glow. For a split second, I thought there must be a fire back in the woods, but then I wondered whether it could be the glow of jet engines or something. The glow vanished

as the shadow sank behind the hill. Whatever it was, I had to see it.”

“I grabbed my jacket, and for whatever reason, I also grabbed my camera. I looked at the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. I headed out the back door and picked my way through the woods. There was no moon, but as my eyes adjusted, I could see the path by starlight. I reached the top of the hill and then walked to the edge of the old landfill. That’s where I saw this enormous dark object. If I had to guess, I would say it was a hundred yards long, forty yards wide and twenty yards tall. Its shape was roughly like that of an alligator with its tail cut off. I was eye to eye with its belly.”

“It was standing maybe ten feet in the air, on thick legs. The footpads at the base of the legs were the size of dining room tables. I turned on my camera and tried to get a shot, but there just wasn’t enough light. I sat quietly between two mountain laurel bushes and waited. A cold breeze cut through the air, and I wished I had thought to bring gloves. I snugged my coat collar up around my neck and stuffed my hands in my pockets.”

“By and by, a wide ramp was lowered beneath the whatever-it-was. Two trash trucks could have pulled up it side by side. A vehicle came rolling out. It was as big as a pickup truck. It had six oversized wheels and was low to the ground. The wheels were hollow, just a rim and spokes. There was no cab, just an open top. And someone was driving it.”

“The ramp was lit, and apart from starlight, it was the only light around. I could scarcely believe what I was seeing.”

“What did you see?” Paul asked.

“I’m coming to that,” I said. “The vehicle, or power wagon or whatever was followed by ten or twelve people wearing construction helmets with those little lights on them. You know the kind of lights caver’s use.”

“They spread out along the edge of the woods, and I eased back into the tree line so I wouldn’t be spotted. They seemed to be examining the plants. They dug up two or three mountain laurel bushes and half a dozen small pine trees. They picked up a few oak seedlings that were just breaking out of acorns.

They also dug up a couple of wild blueberry bushes, put tags on them and put them in the vehicle. They talked among themselves, but I wasn't close enough to hear anything."

"The vehicle drove back up the ramp and everyone followed it inside. I expected the whole thing to disappear in a puff of smoke, but it didn't. Nothing happened for a long time so I decided to see whether I could get close enough to take a picture by the light from the ramp. I looked at my phone. It was 5:00 a.m. In a little while the sun would fill the sky with predawn light and I was sure this whatever-it-was would vanish before anyone got a good look at it. I crept closer."

"Before I knew it, I was under the craft standing at the foot of the ramp. I looked up inside. It was clean and brightly lit. I took a few tentative steps up the ramp, my camera at the ready. I got to the top of the ramp and found a corridor, big enough for a couple of trash trucks, leading off to the left. To the right the corridor was only a few dozen yards long. The six-wheeled vehicle was parked there."

"Ahead of me there was an opening, ten or twelve feet wide, and just as high, into what appeared to be a control room. I crossed the corridor and peeked in. It was a circular room, maybe fifty or sixty feet across, with displays and controls spread around the perimeter. That's when I got my first good look at them."

"There were ten or twelve of them. They were tallish, I'd say six feet, and very thin. They were all wearing metallic gold, sleeveless tunics that covered them from shoulder to midhigh."

"I was torn. Part of me said run. Part of me said, the guys will never believe me unless I bring them pictures."

"Can we see the pictures?" Rich asked.

"I'm coming to that. Just hear me out first," I said.

"Is this a two-beer story? Or a three-beer story?" Dave asked.

"It's probably a four-beer story. And I can order more pizza if you want."

Dave retrieved another six pack of Flying Fish Ale from the fridge and the guys helped themselves.

"So, one part of me said run. And another part of me said, stay and see what happens. And I knew from watching the Nature Channel that when you run from a predator you provoke an attack. So, I stood

there for a second before taking a small step into the control room."

"They didn't seem alarmed by my presence. They just looked at each other and made soft clicking noises. Every few seconds someone would wave an arm in my direction. The control room was empty in the middle. All the controls were on the walls, so that gave them plenty of space to walk around. I took a tentative step into the room. They gathered around in a semicircle, but no one got closer than about twenty feet. I took another step into the room to get a better view of what was going on and they moved back a step maintaining that twenty-foot semicircle. By the time I was in the center of the room, another eight to ten people had come in behind me, each lined up twenty feet away."

"You keep calling them people. Were they people as we understand it?" Jerry asked.

I paused for a long moment, dreading the reaction I might get to this next statement. "No. They were not people. They were... let me describe them. Their heads were about the size of ours, but their bodies, arms and legs were much thinner. There was just a slight bump where our nose would be and three small slits along the bottom of the bump. Their eyes were maybe twice as large as ours. And they tended to blink when they were nervous or upset."

"Were they blinking a lot?" Don asked.

"Some of them were. The heavy blinkers were standing at the back of the semicircle. Everybody else just seemed curious. Then I thought, *Oh, crap! This is probably a first contact situation. What if they're judging the human race by what I do?*"

"One of them was pointing to the camera and blinking furiously. So, I slowly laid it on the ground. That seemed to slow the blinking considerably. The next thing I did was really a boneheaded move."

"What did you do?" Harry asked.

"I said, take me to your leader."

"And did they?" Harry asked.

"Apparently they had no clue what I was talking about. A couple of them went back to tending the controls. The rest of them jabbered among themselves and pointed in various directions."

"Do you expect us to believe you went aboard a spaceship and met little green men?" Dave asked.

"They weren't little, they were all about six feet tall, and they weren't green. They were blue. I did mention they were blue, didn't I?"

“Can you pass over another beer?” Rich asked, then said, “Well if they were blue that changes everything.” He laughed.

“I glanced back toward the control room entrance and I saw they had closed the ramp back up into the body of the ship. The floor tipped slightly and we were airborne. For better or worse I was going with them.”

“Where?” Harry asked.

“I didn’t have a clue. One of them stepped a little closer and wiggled his arm in the direction of a display. It was a picture of earth from thousands of miles in space. The creature tapped a point on the display that I recognized as South Jersey. Then he pointed down toward the floor. I assumed he meant that’s where we were now. Then he or she or it tapped a point further up in North America. It looked like the Hudson Bay. I assumed that was where we were headed. Honestly, I was vaguely relieved that he didn’t point to Alpha Ceti Three or someplace in space.”

“Where’s Alpha Ceti Three?” Jerry asked.

“No clue. Anyway, at least I could walk home from the Hudson Bay if I had to. So, we were off.”

“I walked slowly around the perimeter of the room trying to figure out what the displays were telling me and guessing what the controls did. For the most part, everyone backed away as soon as I got within their twenty-foot comfort zone, and when I passed they went back to working. I eventually reached a pair of seats, only one of which was occupied. The creature in that seat seemed to be flying the craft. When I got closer, two of the other creatures stood between me and the pilot furiously clucking, clicking and wiggling their arms at me. I took the hint and made a wide berth around the pilot.”

“Having seen all I could see in the control room, I pointed to the corridor outside. No one seemed alarmed so I stepped into it. To my right, a huge corridor curved off into the distance. To my left, the corridor ended abruptly just beyond where their six-wheeled vehicle was parked. A blue creature was standing behind the vehicle peeking out at me. He, she or it was blinking about once a second. This one seemed to have a couple of purple freckles across the middle of its neck. I thought about calling it Neck but settled on Nick. Three creatures followed me into the corridor but kept a respectful distance.

“Just then, the craft hit an air pocket and bounced. A mooring clamp snapped open and the vehicle rolled into the end wall, crushing the creature hiding behind it. It let out a terrible series of clicking moans. I grabbed the front of the vehicle and pulled it away from the wall. The three creatures detailed to follow me helped, and they retrieved their trapped man. One creature fastened the clamps on the vehicle again and the other two carried their comrade away.”

“I wasn’t sure whether they were going to blame me for the accident, so I slowly walked back into the control room and sat on the floor to await their judgment.”

“What did they do?” Rich asked.

“They didn’t do anything right away. So, I thought, I better figure out how to communicate with these... they weren’t exactly people..., but I couldn’t bring myself to think of them as creatures either. When I first saw them, they were collecting plants, so I decided to call them Botanists.”

“That doesn’t quite track.” Jerry said.

I waved my hands in the air. “I know! I know! But I had to call them something and Botanists was something I could remember. Anyway, I figured I needed to start communicating with them and I always heard that mathematics was a universal language so I used my finger to write on the floor. This is the most pristine ship... place I have ever been. There wasn’t a speck of dirt or dust anywhere so all I could do was slide my finger along and hoped they noticed. I made two lines, a plus sign, two more lines, and an equal sign and then four lines. Then I made two lines, a plus sign, one line, and an equal sign and three lines. I did this a half a dozen times before anyone noticed. When they did, three or four of them lined up on the twenty-foot perimeter around me, I suspect they thought of it as their safe zone. They started pointing at me and clucking and pointing to each other.”

“Finally, one of them went over to the wall; popped open a small door; and retrieved a cylinder maybe six inches across and two feet long. He unrolled it and it became a white square, two feet by two feet, with a couple of red spots in the upper left-hand corner. One of the Botanists held it across his chest. The one that retrieved and unrolled it touched a couple of the red dots. Then he drew his finger across the square. It left a line. Then he drew his finger across the square in a different direction and it left

another line. After drawing a third line, he hit a couple of the red dots again and the image disappeared.”

“I got it right away. It was a whiteboard; something to help me communicate with. By this time, I was beginning to notice subtle differences in the Botanists. They were all about the same height, and about the same shade of blue, but some of them had what I can only describe as burgundy freckles on their cheeks and forehead. The one operating the whiteboard rolled it up and pushed it toward me. He had four prominent freckles on each cheek. To my eye, they looked like check marks. I decided to call him Mark. I got up to retrieve the whiteboard and the line of Botanists backed up. I grabbed it and sat down again, placing it on the floor in front of me.”

“Again, I made two lines, a plus sign, two more lines, and an equal sign and four lines. Then I made two lines, a plus sign, one line, and an equal sign and three lines. It was then I noticed that everything on my whiteboard was being replicated on four large monitors placed around the room. Groups of Botanists gathered under each monitor gesturing and clicking away at each other. I think they were trying to figure out what I was saying.”

“Mark retrieved another whiteboard and linked it to mine. Then he wrote three lines, a plus sign and two lines and an equal sign and waited for me to respond. I responded with five lines. Mark drew four small triangles, a plus sign, two triangles and an equal sign and waited. I drew six triangles.”

“After working with Mark for a couple of hours, I found that their math was amazingly similar to ours. In their math, a plus sign was a line that rose from left to right and abruptly dropped off. A minus sign was a line that rose abruptly on the left and slanted down to the right. The multiplication sign was two of their plus signs in a row. The division sign was two of their subtraction signs in a row.

“What was the equal sign?” Dave asked.

“The equal sign was a circle. Their number one was represented by a single line, their number two was represented by two crossed lines, three was three crossed lines, four was a square, five was a square with a single line in it and so forth. They had no symbol for an eight or nine. Eventually, I figured out that they were using an octal numbering system which counts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20. Our eight is octal ten and nine is octal

eleven. Octal was in vogue at the very beginning of the computer age but has since fallen out of favor. But, since the Botanists had four fingers on each hand, a base eight numbering system seemed as natural to them as base ten does to us with five fingers on each hand. Anyway, once I understood their numbering system, the control room displays started making more sense.”

“I’ve got to tell you about their hands. We have four fingers plus an opposable thumb. To get a good grip on things we need to use our thumbs. All four of the Botanists’ fingers were opposable like they were thumbs. They could grab and hold something with any two fingers. They were very dexterous. Being all thumbs didn’t seem like a problem for them.”

“The ship began to descend. Mark pointed to a display of the earth seen from a couple of thousand miles out in space. He tapped the display near Hudson Bay again. We landed minutes later and a group of Botanists gathered around their vehicle. The ramp was lowered and a biting cold wind immediately blew through the corridor into the control room. They drove their vehicle down the ramp and into the snow. Mark wiggled his arm toward the ramp. Apparently, he wanted me to accompany the landing party.”

“I walked halfway down the ramp. There was snow in every direction. Some of it was piled nearly as high as the underbelly of the craft. The Botanists were very efficient. They used a gadget attached to their vehicle to blow away the snow over a thirty by thirty-foot area. What they found was a few small berry bushes and a lot of grass and moss. They sampled it all, cutting nice squares in the sod and moss and easing the squares onto little trays. I watched for about ten minutes, but my face was beginning to freeze so I eased back up into the ship.”

“A few minutes later they drove the vehicle back up into the body of the ship and closed the ramp. The temperature inside the control room instantly returned to normal.”

“Mark and the pilot conferred and then Mark seemed to have a heated discussion with three or four other Botanists. There was a lot of arm wiggling, pointing and blinking all of which was lost on me.”

“Mark drew a figure on his whiteboard. The same figure appeared on my whiteboard. It was a circle with short lines emanating in all directions.

Then he drew three circles around the first one. On each of the circles he drew a big dot. He pointed to the dot on the third circle and wiggled his arm toward the floor. It was pretty obvious he was drawing the sun and the three closest planets to it. We were on the third planet. Then he shrank the drawing down, down, down until the entire drawing was barely a speck in one corner of the whiteboard. On the opposite corner, he drew two small circles with lines coming out of them and indicated they were circling a common center. I took them to be Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B. Then he shrank the distance between our Sun and Alpha Centauri to about two inches and drew another small circle with short lines coming out of it in the opposite corner of the whiteboard. Since it was ten times the distance between our Sun and Alpha Centauri A and B, I assumed this new star was ten times further from earth. He drew two circles around it and placed a dot on the outer circle. He wiggled his arm at the dot. He was asking if I wanted to go with them to a planet around another star.”

One thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want them to drop me off at the Hudson Bay in mid-December. I pointed to the dot he indicated and wiggled my arm. Apparently arm wiggling could mean 'look at that' or 'sure' or 'OK.' Of course, I was just guessing.”

“Mark clicked and clucked away at the other Botanists and waved his arms furiously. They clicked and clucked back. They were just as vigorous in their arm waving and there was considerable amount of blinking too. Mark clucked and clicked at the pilot who maneuvered the controls. The deck shifted under my feet as the craft gained altitude. A camera on the underside of the ship showed the impression it had made in the snow. The impression shrank as larger features came into view; the outline of Hudson Bay, Greenland; the planet earth and then earth began to shrink and we were in space.”

“The pilot clucked something. The displays around the room projected a diagram of a thick vertical red line. There was a red dot just to the left of the line, and a series of symbols flashed in the upper right-hand corner about once a second. All of a sudden, I felt the floor sway under my feet. When I looked up at the diagram again the thick red line had been split. The red dot was between the lines. An hour later the flashing symbols appeared in the upper

right-hand corner of the display again. The floor swayed under my feet and when I looked up at the display, the red dot was to the right of the thick red line.”

“What did it mean?” Dave asked.

“My guess is the first diagram, the one with the dot to the left of the line, warned the Botanists the ship was about to go into hyperspace or warp drive or slipstream or whatever they call it. The diagram of the dot between the two lines meant they were in hyperspace, and the dot to the right of the red line meant they were back in normal space again.”

“So, we landed on another planet.”

“How did you know it was another planet?” Harry asked.

“For one thing, everything was lighter. You've seen movies of astronauts bouncing on the moon? Well it wasn't quite like that, but everything seemed lighter. I tried jumping. I hit a good two feet. On earth, I never jumped more than a foot in my best basketball game on my best day. So, I guessed the gravity on this planet was sixty to seventy percent of earth's normal.”

“A group of Botanists gathered up their equipment and stood by as the ramp was let down. The instant the ramp opened hot moist air flooded in. The air was thick with smells. You know what it smells like just after somebody cuts their lawn? It was like that, but much stronger. There was also an earthy smell. The air was so hot and moist that a film of water began condensing in the ship. They drove the vehicle down the ramp and a cadre of Botanists followed. I followed them at a respectful twenty-foot distance. As soon as we were clear, the ramp folded up into the body of the ship. Whatever was in the air, they didn't want it inside the ship.”

“They had landed in a swampy clearing at the edge of a jungle. The Botanists spread out to collect samples. I stood back at a distance that wouldn't alarm them and watched. It was hazy and even though this planet's star was almost directly overhead, not enough light penetrated to throw a shadow.”

“I looked around making mental notes on the differences between this planet's vegetation and earth's vegetation. At a macro level, it looked a lot like pictures of the Amazon. Though I'm sure there were zillions of differences at a micro level. Ten or twenty yards to my right, a lone Botanist was

carefully digging up plants and putting them in containers. I watched for a few minutes when I heard something rustle in the bushes. A half-dozen creatures, the size of pigs, came flying out of the jungle running right at the lone Botanist. They weren't pigs exactly. They had fur, and they had vaguely bear-like snouts. As soon as they saw the ship, they split up, half going left, half going right. And, something big was chasing them."

"What was it?" Rich asked.

I paused for a long time before answering. *Should I tell them the truth? Or should I make up something they will believe?* I brought them here specifically to see whether anyone would believe my story, so I opted for the truth.

"It was a dragon," I said.

"A dragon?" Don raised his voice. "How do you know it was a dragon? Was it breathing fire?"

"If you saw this thing, you would have thought dragon, not dinosaur, but dragon. It had green scales, and a big head with big eyes, big nostrils, and big ears and thick whiskers coming down from its snout. Its teeth were big too. And I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it wasn't breathing flames."

"When it emerged from the woods, it was on all fours. But when it saw the ship and the lone Botanist standing there, it reared up on his hind legs and let out a deafening roar. The Botanist screamed and clucked and backed up against one of the footpads. The other Botanists clucked away furiously too but didn't do anything."

"One of them had dropped a shovel when the dragon appeared. I picked up the shovel and ran toward the dragon swinging the shovel over my head."

"Are you mad?" Paul asked.

"Not entirely. For one thing, these shovels had a sharp, narrow, square blade. I know because I saw them cut plants out of the frozen tundra at Hudson Bay. For another thing, I figured since I grew up on earth, a relatively high gravity planet compared to the one the dragon grew up on, my body should be denser and my muscles stronger. And, did I mention the dragon was only about eight feet high?"

"Men and gorillas both grow up on earth," Don said, "but gorillas are five times stronger than men. Did you think of that?"

"Not at the time." I took another swig of beer. "Do you want to hear where I've been or not?" I asked. They grumbled, but all said I should get on with the story."

"So, I came at the dragon swinging the shovel and yelling and for a split second the dragon-thing seemed taken aback. But then it turned and roared in my direction and raised one of its front legs to swat me. I swung the shovel and sliced the tip off one of its fingers. It threw back its head and screamed. Then it took a step in my direction and lowered its head as though it was going to bite me across the waist. When it did, I smacked it on the top of its nose as hard as I could with the shovel. I remember hearing that people have fought off sharks by hitting them on the nose. It pulled back and touched its nose with its damaged fingers and as it did, I swung the shovel and cut a slice along its side, just below its raised arm. A brown fluid leaked out. I took another step toward the creature and continued swinging the shovel. The creature bellowed and loped back into the jungle."

"I approached the Botanist that I had rescued, though I respected his twenty-foot personal space. I looked at him carefully. He had a series of purple freckles around his left eye. They sort of formed a 'C.' I decided to call this one Chuck. He was holding onto the spaceship's footpad with both arms, quietly clucking away to himself. He must have been blinking ten times a second."

"After that, I got a lot more respect from the Botanists. Now when they wanted to observe me or communicate with me, they formed a semicircle with a radius of only twelve feet. It wasn't much but it was progress."

"Chuck, the Botanist I saved from the dragon, brought me a just sprouting acorn, the future father of a might oak. I guess it was his way of saying thanks."

"They brought me six containers of assorted things to eat, three kinds of things to drink, and two types of pills. The food was all processed into cylinders about the size of finger link sausages. I tried them all. There was something dark green. It seemed to have all the worst qualities of spinach and seaweed. I didn't like that one. One of them was pale brown in color and tasted like a flaky pastry. I ate all of them. Another one was dark brown and tasted like a granola bar. I ate all of them too. The other food cylinders fell in the category of not great, but they won't kill you."

“One of the drinks was very sweet. It was OK in small doses. One of the drinks was very bitter. I didn’t like that one and of course they brought water. Mostly I drank water. I tried each of the pills. They didn’t seem to hurt me, so I had one per day when offered.”

“The one I called Nick, the one that was almost crushed when their vehicle broke loose, showed up one day with what looked like a half of a black baseball. It projected a red laser that he used to scan one of the other Botanists from his feet to his neck. Nick motioned for the Botanist to turn sideways, and he scanned him again. Then he wiggled his arm at me. I stood and Nick scanned me. I turned sideways as directed and he scanned me again. He bobbed his head side to side a little then walked away. I wondered if this was some ritual or whether he wanted to make a 3-D printer image of me.”

“A couple of hours later Nick returned. He was carrying a tunic like the metallic gold tunics each of the Botanists wore. But, of course mine was much larger. Their waist size was probably about eighteen inches around, and mine was... well let’s just say much, much larger. He laid the tunic at the edge of the twelve-foot distance they were keeping from me and backed away. He wiggled his arm at the tunic.”

“I walked over and picked it up. It was light, but the material was not thin. If I had to guess I would say it was probably a half inch thick. I snugged it on like a jacket and it seemed to close itself. Now, at least I was dressing like a Botanist. It helped them accept me a little more. Their standoff distance dropped to ten feet.”

“It was more than a uniform or piece of clothing. When we went someplace cold, it kept me warm, and when we went someplace hot, it kept me cool. Within certain limits, it even acted like an environmental suit. One place we landed, the air was very thin. It was like standing on a mountain at eighteen thousand feet. As we started down the ramp, I was having trouble catching my breath. Then the suit started shooting little oxygen jets toward my nose and as I relaxed into it, I was able to breath rather well. Another planet had a thick atmosphere, but low oxygen. Again, the suit kicked in and shot oxygen jets toward my nose.”

“One day when Mark brought me food, I pointed to the flakey pastry cylinders and asked, what

do you call them? He puzzled for a minute. I pointed to them again and said, pastry. Then I pointed to the granola-like cylinders and said, granola. Then I pointed to the water and said, water. I did this three or four times and attracted a small crowd. They were all standing around pointing, clucking, clicking and trying to figure out what I was trying to say.”

“Finally, Mark put up his hand and they grew silent. He pointed to the pastry and clucked, *thuuuk.*”

“I did my best to imitate the sound he made by clucking with my tongue, *thuuuu.*”

“He stepped back, shocked that I should be able to make such a sound. That started another round of clicking and clucking among the assembled Botanists.”

“I pointed to the pastry again. Mark said *thuuuk.*”

“I repeated *thuuuk.*”

“Then I pointed to the granola. Mark said, *ththk.*”

“I repeated *ththk.*”

“This went on for a couple of hours until I’d mastered the names of the food, drink and pills they were offering me. Then we started walking around the ship. I pointed. Mark clucked. I repeated until I got it more or less right and we moved on. We didn’t get into verbs, but I counted getting a few nouns under my belt a major victory. Nick started following us around and taught me more clicks and clucks. Little by little, I explored more of the ship and every day learned a couple more words.”

“We visited several planets orbiting red dwarfs. Very weird. On some of them, midday looked like a sunset on a summer day. Everything was kind of orange and glowy. On planets around other red dwarfs, midday was like standing under a red lightbulb.”

“One of the most beautiful planets we visited was also one of the deadliest. The ship landed on a wide, sandy beach. Palm trees ran along one side of the ship. A sandy spit of land curved out in front of us toward an island crowned by a small hill. The palm trees could have been plucked from Miami or the Caribbean. The water was clear and blue and sloshed up on the beach with a soothing regularity.”

“The Botanists did as the always did. They spread out along the length of the ship looking for samples of the flora. A couple of them surrounded a palm tree looking up at the coconuts. Some were

digging up seagrass. And further down the beach, a couple of them were trying to dig up a palmetto. Those looking up at the palm tree gestured toward the coconuts, and then gestured to the coconuts lying on the ground. One or two of the beached coconuts was sprouting leaves. They collected coconuts, each carrying two at a time and placed them in their six-wheeled vehicle.”

“I took off my shoes and waded into the water. Since I was only wearing a Botanist tunic and it came to just above the knees, I didn’t need to roll up my pant legs. The water was warm and the sand was soft under my feet.”

“I heard a clucking, clicking sound that I recognized as annoyance. I glanced down the beach toward the sound. A black bird seemed to be hovering around them. It was flapping its wings so fast, they were a blur. The bird, or whatever it was, moved like a mosquito. The Botanists were trying to dig up the palmetto with one hand and shoo away the bird with the other. A few seconds later, I noticed birds or mosquitos or whatever were hovering around all the Botanists. Then they began to lunge at the Botanists, hitting them. I heard more annoyed clucking and clicking. When I glanced back down toward the palmetto crew, I saw half a dozen mosquitos trying to take a bite out of them. I slipped on my shoes and ran down the beach toward them and by the time I got there, the Botanists were laying on the ground covering their heads as the mosquitos pecked at their bodies. Remember, I’m just calling these things mosquitos because of the way they moved, but they were huge, a foot or more long.”

“One of the Botanists had dropped his shovel. I picked it up and swung at the mosquitos knocking them clear of the guys. When the shovel hit them, I heard a clank sound like metal hitting metal. The other Botanists were also fighting off mosquitos and retreating to the ship. Up to this point, none of the Botanists had ever touched me or let me touch them. They never even got within ten feet of me. I grabbed an arm of each of them and dragged them back to the ship. It was the longest fifty yards I’d ever traveled. With my hands full of Botanists, the mosquitos were free to hit, harass and bite me. But, I knew that if I stopped to fight them off, they would win. I would die right then and there. Everyone else had made it back to the ramp, but these guys had been the furthest away. I was afraid the Botanists would simply raise

the ramp and leave us die. Instead, Mark, Nick and Chuck saw what was happening, grabbed a couple of shovels and came running toward us. Remember, Mark was the first one to try to communicate with me. Nick was the one I kept from being crushed by their vehicle and Chuck was the one I rescued from the dragon.”

“They swung their shovels furiously, knocking the mosquitos out of the air, and each contact made a satisfying clank. But as I got closer to the ramp, I saw a cloud on the horizon moving swiftly in our direction. The cloud moved and swerved and I realized it was a huge flock of mosquitos, thousands of them.”

“We got to the ramp and I dragged the two semiconscious Botanists aboard. At that point, I thought we were safe, but by the time we got up the ramp, dozens of mosquitos had flown into the ship and were attacking everyone in the control room. But, fighting a couple dozen mosquitos were better than fighting tens of thousands.”

“I grabbed a shovel to begin the process of hunting down and killing the mosquitos, if killing them was even possible. As I did, the ramp fully closed. When it did, something happened to the mosquitos. Whatever direction they were flying in, they kept flying in that direction until they hit something, a wall, control panel, or a Botanist. Once they hit it, they dropped to the ground. I walked over and poked one with the sharp blade of the shovel. It didn’t move. I bent down to get a closer look. It seemed to be some kind of machine creature. The delicate pistons and rods that powered its wings were clearly visible. It had a cylindrical body about the size of a small banana. There were four small lenses on the front. I guessed they were for cameras to give it stereoscopic vision. There was also a proboscis, a short pointy nose it used to prick us with. If these were remote controlled drones of some sort, closing the ramp probably cut off communications with the central... I don’t know... brain, making them inert.”

“I had welts all over my head, neck, arms and legs. The Botanist’s tunic had only protected my body. The welts were beginning to itch. I thought the worst was behind us. The worst was yet to come.”

“I put my hand over my mouth signaling for the Botanists to be quiet. We listened and as we did we heard a loud, continuous, insistent, tapping sound. The mosquitos were trying to get into the ship. I

wiggled my arm in the direction of the pilot and clucked my best imitation of their word *go!* And I pointed to the ceiling, hoping he would realize I wanted him to take off.”

“The pilot clucked something to the Botanist nearest him which was usual when they didn’t understand what I wanted. They clucked back and forth and also pointed to the ceiling. The pilot nodded, and I felt the deck shift a little under my feet as we rose into the air.”

“Mark walked over to the control panel and tapped a few controls. The big screens showed what was going on outside the ship. The camera pointing down showed a stream of mosquitos coming up under the ship attacking it from below. The side cameras showed mosquitos ramming into the side of the ship so hard that they were knocking themselves unconscious and falling to the ground.”

“Over the months I had been aboard, I figured out that one of the displays measured altitude. I never knew what units they measured altitude in. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t feet, or meters or kilometers. But, I knew enough about their numbering system to see that the altitude was decreasing rather than increasing.”

“The deck kept shifting under my feet as thrusters pushed us up, and something else held us down. The external view showed that there were thousands, maybe millions, of mosquitos on top of the ship weighing it down.”

“A group of Botanists was standing around the pilot clicking and clucking and gesturing wildly, but the altitude kept dropping. Finally, I ran over to the pilot’s workstation. Several of the Botanists tried to stop me, but I pushed them aside. I had watched the pilot fly for a long time and his controls looked astonishingly like a video game. The main control was a shift lever sticking up out of a console between the pilot’s and the co-pilot’s seat. I jumped into the co-pilot’s seat and grabbed the control lever. I slammed it hard right, which tilted the ship right and threw everyone off their feet. That spawned a loud chorus of their annoyance clucks. Then I jammed the controls hard left. The ship tilted the other way. The Botanists slid to the other side of the control room making more annoyance sounds. They were really getting angry with me until Mark pointed to the display of the top of the ship. Each time I tilted the ship left or right, thousands of mosquitos fell off. I

tilted the ship right and left two more times, and then pushed the shift lever fully forward which accelerated us straight ahead. That left the mosquitos attacking the sides and underbelly of the ship behind. I pointed up, wiggling my arm as I did, and the pilot got it. He fired the thrusters taking us up into space. Once there, I pushed the shift lever hard right executing a barrel roll, knocking everyone off their feet again, and shaking the last of the mosquitos off the ship.”

“By the time we were well and truly clear of the planet, I was feeling sick. The welts from the mosquito bites were growing larger. And, I noticed several Botanists lying on the deck moaning and making a slow, low, sad kind of clucking noise. The mosquito bites were raising welts on them too. They were getting sick from the effects of the bites too.”

“This next part I’m not too sure about because I was on the edge of passing out. From the monitors, it looked like we were ten or twenty thousand miles in space. I saw a series of bright flashes on the planet. I mean explosions, big ones. And over the course of the next few minutes, the bright blue planet turned red with fire and ash. I was never sure whether the Botanists nuked them, or something else was happening or I was just delirious.”

“In the first few days aboard the ship, before my cell phone ran out of juice, I timed their day-night cycle. It seemed like they were on a twenty-hour day, instead of our twenty-four-hour day. I had insomnia for the first couple of weeks, but after that I adjusted. Having insomnia and shifting to a shorter day, I lost track of time. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been on the ship, or how long I’d been sick from the mosquito bites.”

“One thing, they were no longer afraid to touch me. Maybe because I rescued two of their buddies, maybe because I was sick and couldn’t hurt them, maybe it was because neither of the Botanists I dragged to safety died.”

“When I regained consciousness, I found myself sitting in a reclining chair. Mark was holding out a container of water and a tray with a pill on it. I swallowed the pill down. By and by I got better as did the other Botanists who had been bitten by the mosquitos.”

“I found my whiteboard rolled up and stuffed in a corner near where I slept. I spread it out and paged back through the different diagrams and things I used to communicate with until I got back to the

first page. It showed our solar system in the upper left-hand corner and Alpha Centauri A and B in the lower right-hand corner. I got Mark's attention and he came over. He put his four-fingered blue hand on my shoulder and clucked a sound. I enlarged the diagram of our solar system and pointed to the dot in the third orbit. I said, *Home*."

"Mark called Chuck and Nick over."

"I pointed to the dot in the third orbit again and said, *Home*."

"They clucked and clicked at each other and there was a considerable amount of arm wiggling as they tried to figure out what I was saying."

"Mark couldn't pronounce the word *home*, but he pointed to the dot representing earth."

"I nodded yes".

"Then Mark, Chuck and Nick walked over to the pilot and clucked at him. Pretty soon there was a crowd around the pilot's seat and with it the usual clucking and arm wiggling. Funny thing about the Botanists, nobody seemed to be in charge. If somebody wanted to do something they would discuss it and argue about it until they reached a consensus. It seemed to work for them. I don't know if it would work for us."

"Mark came back and pointed to the dot representing earth and clucked something. A thick red line was displayed on all the monitors around the control room and a large red dot to its left. In the upper right-hand corner symbols counted down. The floor swayed underfoot, and when I looked up at the display again, the thick red line was split. The red dot was between the two red lines. My guess was that meant we were in hyperspace or whatever they call it."

"By this time, I was feeling better. I got up and ate and walked a little. If they were taking me home, this would be my last chance to look at the ship. Mark and Chuck and Nick walked with me. We walked through the crew quarters and into the arboretum. Two thirds of the ship were dedicated to the arboretum. There were rows and rows of plant filled containers. The arboretum had three levels with a central atrium in the middle. Some plants needed special environmental conditions. Those plucked from planets around red dwarfs needed various shades of red lighting. They were tucked away where the ship's bright lights wouldn't affect them. Some needed special atmospheric conditions so they were

kept behind glass. Most of the other plants were out in the open."

"On the way back to the control room, I saw a door I had never seen before. A thick red line was painted on the door. The line was split. There was a dot between the upper and lower portions of the line. I took it that their warp drive or hyperdrive engine was in there. I wiggled my arm at the door, and Mark opened it."

"The room was maybe twenty yards by twenty yards. Several large silvery domes were mounted on the floor. I could see the faint glow of ionized particles near the domes. The hairs on my arms stood from the static electricity. It all seemed very intense and made me jumpy, so I cut my first look at a warp drive short. By the time we returned to the control room, the monitors were counting down the time until we left hyperspace. The deck shifted under my feet and when I looked up, the red bar was solid again and the red ball was on the right side of the line."

"One of the monitors was attached to the downward looking camera. It was night, but street and house lights outlined the coast of New Jersey hard against the inky blackness of the Atlantic Ocean. Dropping lower, I could see the bright lights of Philadelphia and the strings of lights that represented highways streaming out of town. I spotted the intersection of Route 70 and 73 in New Jersey. Then we came down just north of Route 73 back to the same closed landfill a quarter mile behind my house."

"They lowered the ramp and I set foot on earth for the first time in... well I wasn't quite sure. At the bottom of the ramp I turned and looked at the Botanists. There must have been fifty of them crowded around to see me off. Mark, Chuck and Nick walked down the ramp to say good-bye. One by one they took their four-fingered hand and squeezed my shoulder. My guess was that was their equivalent of a handshake or pat on the back or a hug. Chuck handed me a shovel as a souvenir or going-away present."

"Mark, Chuck and Nick walked back up the ramp and wiggled an arm at me. I wiggled my arm back at them. Then all the Botanists wiggled their arms at me and they closed the ramp. They cranked up their engines and silently lifted off. The ship created a black silhouette against a starry sky. I watched as the silhouette got smaller and smaller and disappeared."

“I keep a spare key under a flower-pot and let myself in. After I showered, I ordered pizza, beer and called you guys. What do you think?”

“I don’t suppose you have any pictures of these Botanists?” Don asked.

“Well, like I said, my camera was making them nervous so I put it down. When I went back to look for it, it was gone. After the dragon incident, Mark brought me tray of camera parts. Apparently, they took it apart to see what it was and couldn’t figure out how to put it back together again.”

“Take any pictures with your cell phone?” Rich asked.

“I seem to have lost it somewhere.”

“If you were really gone,” Harry said, “how did you keep all this going?” He pointed to the house.”

“My publisher direct deposits my royalties and withholds taxes. The mortgage company automatically debits my account each month and pays the insurance and property taxes. Electricity, gas, even lawn care is automatically debited from my account. It’s like they don’t need me.”

The pizza boxes were empty. The beer was gone. It was four o’clock in the morning.

Don stood and said, “Good story, but I’ve got to be at work in a couple of hours.”

“Me too,” Dave, Harry, and Rich said as they threw their beer bottles in the recycle bin.

“When you’re ready to tell us where you’ve really been,” Jerry said, “we’ll come back and drink some more of your beer.”

Paul lagged behind.

“What’s your beef?” I asked him.

“We all love you. We’re all your friends. But...” Paul said, “I wouldn’t tell anybody you met little green men. I wouldn’t tell people you went aboard a flying saucer.” He stood with the door half open, his hand on the door knob. “Trust me, no one will believe you and you’ll end up the butt of a joke. So, no word to anyone, right?”

I was exhausted. I just nodded yes and Paul left.

As I cleaned up, I wondered whether I could have explained it differently. They listened, but they didn’t hear me. I wondered what I could have said that would have made them really listen. They weren’t little green men. They were big and blue. And there was no flying saucer.

I wonder if I should have shown them the shovel?

THE END

More Jack English novels and short stories are available at:

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