

Alien Fantasies

by Paul Melko

I keep practicing what I'm going to say when one of the aliens picks me. I know I said "when" but that's how I feel about it. I have a rapport, you know. Sooner or later, I'll look up from my desk at the bank, and see a leonine mane bobbing over the edges of the cubicles, weaving its way toward me. I just know it.

I think I'll play it cool, like aliens come by my desk everyday and ask me to gallivant across the galaxy. I'll tip my glasses forward on my nose and ask in my best bureaucratic voice, "May I help you?" And he'll recognize and appreciate my coyness, since we'll both know why he's there. He'll smile with his large canines, toss his mane to the left, and ask, "Care to join me aboard the Mother Ship, Jennifer?" And I'll say, "Not tonight, I have to pick Gabrielle up from her ballet lessons."

No, that wasn't quite right.

#

I guess I always assumed Gabrielle would come along. The aliens must have some facilities for students: playgrounds and schools and such. Readjustment is always difficult on a teenager, with meeting new friends and getting used to no sun. But children are resilient. My parents moved seven times before I was out of high school.

Or I could leave her with Nick. But learning to live on the Mother Ship would be better than living with her father. I mean, he threw a glass of Coke in my face the last time we spoke. What would he do to Gabby? He ran out on us, after all. He's untrustworthy.

#

I have two bags packed: a smaller one I keep with me at all times, and a bigger one in the hall closet at home. I could make do with either, but the one at home has a summer and winter wardrobe in it. The aliens have been unusually reticent about their home world, so I have no idea how to pack.

In each bag I have a few of my old Heinlein juveniles. I don't know why I bother with that; the aliens have spent the most time, other than on talk shows, in libraries transcribing all the books to archives on the Mother Ship. I figure I won't need those books then, if they have the entire libraries of Earth in a boxed set. But I'd miss the smell of the binding and the yellowed pages. Gabrielle will appreciate that.

Not that I can get her to read or anything. Kids these days have different priorities. I remember that before I met Nick, I could spend all day with my nose in a book.

#

The day ends without incident, without Sylvia forcing me to account for all the time I spent day-dreaming, I mean. I'm efficient when I work, I just don't like to work. The bus ride from downtown is the best part of the day. No demands, no customers, no boss, and no screaming teenager trying to find her tights.

As we pass over the Monongahela, I see the excursion vehicle hovering over the Incline. It is a smaller one -- not like the one in Washington -- but still the size of a small skyscraper. They're actually renting the airspace over the houses.

Maybe coy isn't the best way to play it. Maybe a subdued surprise, followed by tentative, then full-fledged acceptance. "The Mother Ship? Well, I don't know. Am I fit to be an emissary of my race? I am? Then, of course, take me! I'm yours!"

I smile innocently at the man I accidentally jostled.

"Sorry."

Oops. I think I need a bigger pause between tentative and full-fledged.

#

When I get home, the dog is chewing on a pair of Gabrielle's tights, and it doesn't realize until I kick it that I am not playing tug of war.

"Gabby! Gabby! Get down here!" I yell up the stairs.

She appears, fists on hips, purposefully insolent, and I want to smack the smirk off her face. I wave the tights.

"Cosmo is eating your tights."

"So?"

"These are expensive. I can't afford to keep buying them."

"I don't want to take ballet, Mother," she says.
"I can save a lot more money by not going."

"Gabby."

"Mother."

I sigh, suddenly not angry, just tired. "You remind me of me when I was your age."

"Well, I'm not pregnant," she says, and I am stunned.

"To your room," I hiss, but she has already disappeared through her door.

We do not talk for the rest of the evening.

#

The planet-side commander, Labintine Os-Moss-Chor, is on Letterman tonight. Most people say they can't tell the aliens apart. I can. It all goes back to that rapport I have. Labintine is even more regal than the typical alien, with strands of silver running through his mane, his bulging musculature apparent even under his robes. For a race that averages four feet high, they are quite impressive.

"So, I hear humans and aliens can mate." Letterman gives Labintine a gap-toothed smile, full of innuendo. I feel a moment's embarrassment for the alien.

"Yes. Our races can interbreed."

"So, tell me how you know this."

Labintine cocks his head, then deadpans the camera with, "Trust me, I know."

Silence, followed by female tittering and then a roar of laughter.

Letterman grins again, waves his audience silent.

"I guess it isn't height that's important, huh?"

"Height? No," says Labintine, a slight smile creasing his features. Is it a smile? I don't know. "It's the size of the mane that matters. And not a single male on this planet has a decent one." He stands and twirls. The camera follows hesitantly, then quickly. He shows his full mane, running the length of his back, to curl prettily at his calves. The audience applauds in appreciation.

"Now, wait a minute, Labby. Even I know aliens and humans shouldn't be able to produce offspring."

"Your question is not well-defined," he replies.

"The fallacy in your statement is the definition of 'alien.' As is supposed by several of your premiere scientific fiction writers, we have a common ancestor."

"I think it was my Aunt Violet."

"A little farther back. About seven hundred thousand years ago. Stock was taken from the gene pool at that time by another passing race that is also related to us, but much farther back. We have since been modified to include other genetic characteristics."

"Have you talked to the Vatican about this?"

"The Vatican is a geo-political entity that would probably not understand what I was saying to it."

Letterman gives the camera a cocked smile.

"Ha ha. Give an alien a straight line...," Paul chimes in.

"So," continues Letterman, "an alien of your race and an Earthling could conceive a child. What would he look like?"

"Well, a female of my species could not birth such a child naturally. The head would not fit through the birth canal. If the child was surgically removed, there would be no problem. All the female offspring of such a union would be sterile. The male hybrids would be able to produce viable sperm for either species."

"That's better than bisexuality: two whole races of females."

Labintine smiles softly as the rimshot plays. His dignity is as unscathed as ever. I had been worried for nothing.

"When we come back, a bonus top ten list! Top ten things to do the morning after you bring home an alien from Club Xenon."

I fall asleep before the commercial is over.

#

The morning is hectic, and I find myself hoping that an alien will come in the next few minutes. But he doesn't and I am forced to deal with Gabby's frantic search for clean jeans and missing my bus, so that I have to stand on the next one that comes.

The males of my race are so stupid, dumb, and ignorant. I glare at each one who refuses to give me his seat, until finally my eye catches the ship hovering over the Incline. It is abuzz with the little jet scooters each of the aliens drives, like gnats around a decayed apple.

A woman standing next to me is watching as well. "Awful busy now that they are about to leave."

My expression must speak volumes.

"Yeah, you didn't hear the news? The aliens are leaving, say they might be back in a few thou-

sand years. Good riddance, I say. Take all our knowledge, give nothing in return 'cause it's against 'Human super-species' tradition -- whatever that is -- and then motor off again. A true family race would stay a little longer, and not be so rude. It's like when my sister-in-law...."

"When are they leaving?"

"Tonight. Now my sister-in-law, for instance,...."

My mind has run through a thousand possibilities by the time I get to work, and I am firmly in denial. The woman obviously got the story all screwed up. The aliens are probably just leaving Pittsburgh, which is bad enough for me. How could they take me with them, when they have left the city I live in. But my Walkman confirms the news, and I begin to get nauseous like when I learned I was pregnant with Gabby at seventeen.

I am so broken up that my radar doesn't pick up Sylvia until she is standing in front of my desk, asking me why I was staring off into space instead of entering the customer service response card into the database.

"I'm, uh, not feeling so well," I say, hoping my disheveled look adds some credibility to the statement.

"You let Nick back in the house?" Sylvia asks. "He leeching of you again, 'cause...."

I cut her off, embarrassed by her sympathy. "No, no, stomach flu."

Sylvia nods and picks up the stack of questionnaires. "I'm light today. You can take the day off and I'll finish these up."

I try to nod in the disappointed relief of an employee who was willing to risk death to make it to work, but now realizes she should spend the day recuperating.

"Okay, Sylvia, thanks," I say, grabbing my coat. I am running by the time I reach the door.

#

I realize that it's time for the direct approach. No more waiting for the aliens to come get me. I'll show up there, and an alien will be leaning against the steel orifice into their ship. "It's about time," he'll say.

"You've been waiting for me?"

"Move your ass, lady!"

I am bumped by some guy running down the street. I stumble as he disappears into the bank, and I am left to pull the shoe off my foot. The heel is broken.

"Fuck," I say, leaning against the cool stone of the building. The morning crowd is beginning to thin.

The shoe is ruined so I take the other off. I step gingerly to the corner, to the newsstand there.

"Hey, where do I catch a bus over to the South Side."

The withered old man looks up from an issue of Esquire. "Over there. The thirty-seven."

"Thanks."

"But, lady, it don't run but till nine-o-five."

I glance at my watch. I've missed it. "Damn."

I am suddenly exhausted, and I sit on the curb. The departure time was ten o'clock. Labintine had announced that the advance craft would converge on the Mother Ship over Washington and then leave the solar system. Gone for a thousand years.

Pity rolls off my body and collects in the gutter. I'm an idiot. I live in fantasy. What a fool I've been acting, ranting on about the aliens and going with them. I wish that I had the last six weeks to live over again. I wish that I had my whole life to live over again.

My wallowing is disturbed by an approaching chirp, and I finally recognize it as the sound of the alien single-person scooters. I glance up and see the thing drift by, driven by a small grey alien. He is scanning the opposite side of the road, and I jump up, ready to wave my arm, telling him that I'm over here.

But I stop, stand and turn toward the bus stop that will take me back home. I've been a fool, but I'll not be a hypocrite as well.

"Hey! Human lady!"

I turn to see the alien trotting towards me, and I am giddy with joy.

"I'm ready," I say. "Well, I have to grab my travel bag. I left it next to my desk. But all I have to do is go get it. Then I'm ready to go. Just give me a second. Hold on, okay?"

The alien, a short one, but still cute, furrows his brow and shakes his head. "No need to prepare for request. Just need sample."

"Huh?"

"Need sample of yellow-haired human lady."

"Oh. You don't need a live sample?"

"No. No authority to take live sample. Need fluid." He reaches into his pack and pulls out a small clear cylinder.

I finally notice the ratty clothing of the alien, the unkempt look, the yellow symbol on his sleeve indicating his student status. He's a geek alien. Just my luck. The aliens were leaving and he was on a

last-minute quest to finish a homework assignment.

"Fuck you," I say, spinning on my heel. Tears begin to flow and I am mad, so mad at everything. I start running.

But he's faster than me in my stockings, and he catches me within a block, jumping in front of me. "Stop!"

"What? I gave at the office!" I yell.

"Seen leaving syndrome on other planets. Common among us. On every planet."

"Leaving syndrome?"

The alien shrugs. "Escapist syndrome. Wanderlust." He smiles slightly, pats my arm. "No better out there. No more hope than here. Less even."

I shrug, turn away, start walking down the street.

"No sample?" he calls. "Need to get back."

I pause, then I finally nod. "Fine. Pick an arm."

The alien places the plastic cylinder against my skin. I feel a warmth, and the cylinder begins to fill with my blood, bubbling red.

I wipe my tears away with my other hand. "I guess a part of me is going into space."

"Small part."

"You could clone me, maybe. Then it would be like I was there after all. I would grow up in your society, and it would...."

"No." He shakes his head slowly. His eyes are sad. "Still don't understand. You live on this planet, nowhere else."

I sigh. "I know."

He reaches into his pack and pulls out a small clipper set. "I take something of you, and you keep something of me." He snips a length of his grey-blue mane and hands it to me.

It is stiff and coarse and I am suddenly happy, and I hug him before he can react.

"Thank you." I have to bend over, but I manage to bury my face in his shoulder. I hear the murmur of a purr deep inside him. He pats my head.

"Got to go, human lady." Pushing away, he turns up the street trotting back to his scooter.

"Good luck," he calls, and I wave.

In a daze, I wander to the bus stop, still clutching the small bale of hair. I brush the end against my cheek, feeling the prickly coarseness. I see that there is enough for me to braid a necklace, maybe two, and I decide I will make one for Gabrielle and I will make one for me.

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