

The Day The Aliens Came

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One day a man came to my door. He didn't quite look like a man, although he did walk on two feet. There was something wrong with his face. It looked as though it had been melted in an oven and then hastily frozen. I later learned that this expression was quite common among the group of aliens called Synesters, and was considered by them a look of especial beauty. The Melted Look, they called it, and it was often featured in their beauty contests. "I hear you're a writer," he said.

I said that was so. Why lie about a thing like that?

"Isn't that a bit of luck," he said. "I'm a story buyer."

"No kidding," I said.

"Have you got any stories you want to sell?" He was very direct. I decided to be similarly so.

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"OK," he said. "I'm sure glad of that. This is a strange city for me. Strange planet, too, come to think of it. But it's the city aspect that's most unsettling. Different customs, all that sort of thing. As soon as I got here, I said to myself, "Traveling's great, but where am I going to find someone to sell me stories?"

"It's a problem," I admitted.

"Well," he said, "let's get right to it because there's a lot to do. I'd like to begin with a ten thousand word novelette."

"You've as good as got it," I told him. "When do you want it?"

"I need it by then end of the week."

"What are we talking about in terms of money, if you'll excuse the expression?"

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars for a ten thousand word novelette. I was told that was standard pay for a writer in this part of Earth. This is Earth, isn't it?"

"It's Earth, and your thousand dollars is acceptable. Just tell me what I'm supposed to write about."

"I'll leave that up to you. After all, you're the writer."

"Damn right I am," I said. "so you don't care what it's about?"

"Not in the slightest. After all, I'm not going to read it."

"Makes sense," I said. "Why should you care?" I didn't want to pursue that line of inquiry any further. I assumed that someone was going to read it. That's what usually happens with novelettes.

"What rights are you buying?" I asked, since it's important to be professional about these matters.

"First and second Synestrian," he said. "And of course I retain Synestrian movie rights although I'll pay you fifty percent of the net if I get a film sale."

"Is that likely?" I asked.

"Hard to say," he said. "As far we're concerned, Earth is new literary territory."

"In that case, let's make my cut sixty-forty."

"I won't argue," he said. "Not this time. Later you may find me very tough.

Who knows what I'll be like? For me this is a whole new frankfurter." I let that pass. An occasional lapse in English doesn't make an alien an ignoramus.

I got my story done in a week and brought it in to the Synester's office in the old MGM building on Broadway. I handed him the story and he waved me to a seat while he read it.

"It's pretty good," he said after a while. "I like it pretty well."

"Oh, good," I said.

"But I want some changes."

"Oh," I said. "What specifically did you have in mind?"

"Well," the Synester said, "this character you have in here, Alice."

"Yes, Alice," I said, though I couldn't quite remember writing an Alice into the story. Could he be referring to Alsace, the province in France? I decided not to question him. No sense appearing dumb on my own story.

"Now, this Alice," he said, "she's the size of a small country, isn't she?" He was definitely referring to Alsace, the province in France, and I had lost the moment when I could correct him. "Yes," I said, "that's right, just about the size of a small country."

"Well, then," he said, "why don't you have Alice fall in love with a bigger country in the shape of a pretzel?"

"A what?" I said.

"Pretzel," he said. "It's a frequently used image in Synestrian popular literature. Synestrians like to read that sort of thing."

"Do they?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Synestrians like to imagine people in the shape of pretzels.

You stick that in, it'll make it more visual."

"Visual," I said, my mind a blank.

"Yes," he said, "Because we gotta consider the movie possibilities."

"Yes, of course," I said, remembering that I got sixty percent.

"Now for the film version of your story, I think we should set the action at a different time of day." I tried to remember what time of day I had set the story in. It didn't seem to me I had specified any particular time at all. I mentioned this.

"That's true," he said, "you didn't set any specific time. But you inferred twilight. It was the slurring sound of your words that convinced me you were talking about twilight."

"Yes, all right," I said. "Twilight mood."

"Makes a nice title," he said.

"Yes," I said, hating it.

"Twilight Mood," he said, rolling it around inside his mouth. "You could call it that, but I think you should actually write it in a daytime mode. For the irony."

"Yes, I see what you mean," I said.

"So why don't you run it through your computer once more and bring it back to me." When I got home, Rimb was washing dishes and looking subdued. I should mention that she was a medium-sized blond person with the harassed look that characterizes aliens of the Ghottich persuasion. And there were peculiar sounds coming from the living room. When I gave Rimb a quizzical look, she rolled her eyes toward the living room and shrugged. I went in and saw there were two people there. Without saying a word, I went back to the kitchen and said to Rimb, "Who are they?"

"They told me they're the Bayersons."

"Aliens?" She nodded. "But not my kind of aliens. They're as alien to me as they are to you." That was the first time I fully appreciated that aliens could be alien to one another.

"What are they doing here?" I asked.

"They didn't say," Rimb said.

I went back to the living room. Mr. Bayerson was sitting in my armchair reading an evening newspaper. He was about three or four feet tall and had orange hair.

Mrs. Bayerson was equally small and orange-haired and she was knitting something orange and green. Mr. Bayerson scrambled out of my chair as soon as I returned to the room.

"Aliens?" I said, sitting down.

"Yes," Bayerson said. "We're from Capella."

"And what are you doing in our place?"

"They said it would be all right."

"Who said?" Bayerson shrugged and looked vague. I was to get very accustomed to that look.

"But it's our place," I pointed out.

"Of course it's yours," Bayerson said. "Nobody's arguing that. But would you begrudge us a little space to live in? We're not very big."

"But why our place? Why not someone else's?"

"We just sort of drifted in here and liked it," Bayerson said. "We think of it as home now."

"Some other place could also feel like home."

"Maybe, maybe not. We want to stay here. Look, why don't you just consider us like barnacles, or brown spots on the wallpaper. We just sort of attach on here. It's what Capellans do. We won't be in the way." Rimb and I didn't much want them, but there seemed no overpowering reason to make them go. I mean, they were here, after all. And

they were right, they really weren't in the way. In some ways, they were a lot better than some other apartment-dwelling aliens we came to know later.

In fact, Rimb and I soon wished the Bayersons would be a little less unobtrusive and give a little help around the apartment. Or at least keep an eye on things.

Especially on the day the burglars came in.

Rimb and I were out. The way I understood it, the Bayersons didn't do a thing to stop them. Didn't call the police or anything, Just watched while the burglars poked around the place, moving slowly, because they were so overweight, fat alien thieves from Barnard's Star. They took all of Anna's old silver. They were Barnardean silver thieves and their traditions went back a long way. That's what they told the Bayersons, while they robbed us, and while Mr. Bayerson was going through his eyelid exercises just like nothing at all was happening.

The way it all started, I had met Rimb in Franco's Bar on MacDougal Street in New York. I had seen a few aliens before this, of course, shopping on Fifth Avenue or watching the ice skaters in Rockefeller Center. But this was the first time I'd ever actually ever talked with one. I inquired as to its sex and learned that Rimb was of the Ghottich Persuasion. It was an interesting-sounding sexual designation, especially for someone like me who was trying to get beyond the male-female dichotomy. I thought it might be fun to mate with someone of the Ghottich Persuasion after Rimb and I had agreed that she was basically a her.

Later I checked with Father Hanlin at the Big Red Church. He said it was OK in the eyes of the church, though he personally didn't hold much with it. Rimb and I were one of the first alien-human marriages.

We moved into my apartment in the West Village. You didn't see a lot of aliens around here at first. But soon other alien people showed up and quite a few of them moved into our neighborhood.

No matter where they were from, all aliens were supposed to register with the police and the local authorities in charge of cult control. Few bothered, however. And nothing was ever done about it. The police and municipal authorities were having too much trouble keeping track of their own people.

I wrote stories for the Synestrian market and Rimb and I lived quietly with our house guests. The Bayersons were quite people and helped pay the rent. They were easygoing aliens who didn't worry much; not like Rimb, who worried a lot about everything.

At first I liked the Bayerson's ways, I thought they were easygoing and cool.

But I changed my mind the day the burglars stole their youngest child, little Claude Bayerson.

I should have mentioned that the Bayersons had a baby soon after moving in with us. Or perhaps they had left the baby somewhere else and brought it in after they'd taken over our spare bedroom. We were never really clear on where the aliens came from, and their babies were a complete mystery to us.

The way the Bayersons told it, the kidnapping of little Claude was simple and straightforward. It was "Good-bye, Claude."

"Good-bye, Daddy." When we asked them how they could do that, they said, "Oh, it's perfectly all right. I mean, it's what we were hoping for. That's how we Bayersons get around. Someone steals our children." Well, I let it drop. What can you do with people like that? How could they stand to have little Claude raised as a Bernardean silver thief? One race one day, another race another. Some aliens have N°racial pride. I mean it was cuckoo.

There wasn't anything to do about it so we all sat down to watch the TV together. All of us wanted to see the Savannah Reed show, our favorite.

Savannah's main guest that evening was the first man ever to eat a Mungulu. He was quite open about it, even somewhat defiant. He said, "If you think about it, why should it be ethical to eat only stupid creatures, or deluded ones? It is only blind prejudice that keeps us from eating intelligent beings. This thought came to me one day recently while I was talking with a few glotch of Mungulu on a plate."

"How many Mungulu make up a glotch?" Savannah asked. She's N°dummy.

"Between fifteen and twenty, though there are exceptions."

"And what were they doing on a plate?"

"That's where Mungulu usually hang out. Accumulate, I should say. You see, Mungulu are plate-specific."

"I don't think I know this species," Savannah said.

"They're pretty much unique to my section of Yonkers."

"How did they get there?"

"They just pretty well showed up on my plate one night. First only one or two glotch of them. They looked like little oysters. Then more came so we had the half dozen or so it takes to generate a halfway decent conversation."

"Did they say where they were from?"

"A planet called Espadrille. I never did quite catch where it was, quadrantwise."

"Did they say how they got here?"

"Something about surfing the light-waves."

"What gave you the idea of eating the Mungulu?"

"Well, I didn't think about it at all at first. When a creature talks to you, you don't right away think of eating him. Or her. Not if you're civilized. But these Mungulu started showing up on my plate every night. They were pretty casual about it. All lined up on the edge of my good bone china, on the far side from me. Sometimes they'd just talk to each other, act like I wasn't even there. Then one of them would pretend to notice me — oh — it's the Earth guy — and we'd all start talking. This went on every night. I began to think there was something provocative about the way they were doing it. It seemed they were trying to tell me something."

"Do you think they wanted to be eaten?"

"Well, they never said so, not in so many words, no. But I was starting to get the idea. I mean, if they didn't want to be eaten, what were they doing on the edge of my plate?"

"What happened then?"

"To put it in a nutshell, one night I got sick of horsing around and just for the hell of it I speared one of them on the end of my fork and swallowed it."

"What did the others do?"

"They pretended not to notice. Just went right on with their conversation.

Only their talk was a little stupider with one of them missing. Those guys need all the brain power they can come up with."

"Let's get back to this Mungulu you swallowed. Did it protest as it was going down?"

"No, it didn't even blink. It was like it was expecting it. I got the feeling it was N^o cruel and unusual punishment for a Mungulu to be ingested."

"How did they taste?"

"A little like breaded oysters in hot sauce, only subtly different. Alien, you know." After the show was over, I noticed a bassinet in a corner of our living room.

Inside was a cute little fellow, looked a little like me. At first I thought it was little Claude Bayerson, somehow returned. But Rimb soon put me wise.

"That's little Manny," she said. "He's ours."

"Oh," I said. "I don't remember you having him."

"Technically, I haven't. I've delayed the actual delivery until a more convenient time," she told me.

"Can you do that?" She nodded. "We of the Ghottich persuasion are able to do that."

"What do you call him?" I asked.

"His name is Manny," Rimb said.

"Is 'Manny' a typical name from your planet?"

"Not at all," Rimb said. "I called him that in honor of your species."

"How do you figure?" I asked.

"The derivation is obvious. 'Manny' stands for 'Little Man'."

"That's not the way we generally do things around here," I told her. But she didn't understand what I was talking about. Nor did I understand her explanation of the birth process by which Manny came into being. DDs, Deferred Deliveries, aren't customary among Earth people. As far as I could understand it, Rimb would have to undergo the actual delivery at some later time when it was more convenient. But in fact we never got around to it. Sometimes it happens like that.

Manny lay in his crib and oed and aahed and acted like a human baby would, I suppose. I was a pretty proud poppa. Rimb and I were one of the first viable human-

alien intermatings. I later learned it was N°big deal. People all over the Earth were doing it. But it seemed important to us at the time.

Various neighbors came around to see the baby. The Bayersons came in from their new room which they had plastered on the side of apartment house after molting. Mrs. Bayerson had spun all the construction material out of her own mouth, and she was some kind of proud I want to tell you. They looked Manny up and down and said, "Looks like a good one." They offered to baby-sit, but we didn't like to leave Manny alone with them. We still didn't have a reliable report on their feeding habits. Fact is, it was taking a long time getting any hard facts about aliens, even though the federal government had decided to make all information available on the species that came to Earth.

The presence of aliens among us was responsible for the next step in human development, the new interest in composite living. You got tired of the same old individualism after a while. Rimb and I thought it could be interesting to be part of something else. We wanted to join a creature like a medusa or Portuguese man of war. But we weren't sure how to go about it. And so we didn't know whether to be pleased or alarmed when we received our notification by mail of our election to an alien composite life-form. Becoming part of a composite was still unusual in those days.

Rimb and I had quite a discussion about it. We finally decided to go to the first meeting, which was free, and see what it was like.

This meeting was held at our local Unitarian Church, and there were almost two hundred people and aliens present. There was a lot of good-natured bewilderment for a while as to just what we were supposed to do. We were all novices at this and just couldn't believe that we were expected to form up a two hundred person composite without prior training.

At last someone in a scarlet blazer and carrying a loose-leaf binder showed up and told us that we were supposed to be forming five unit composites first, and that as soon as we had a few dozen of these and had gotten the hang of morphing and melding, we could proceed to the second level of composite beinghood.

It was only then that we realized that there could be many levels to composite beings, each level being a discrete composite in its own right.

Luckily the Unitarian Church had a big open space in the basement, and here is where we and our chimaeric partners fit ourselves together.

There was good-natured bewilderment at first as we tried to perform this process. Most of us had had N°experience at fitting ourselves to other creatures, so we were unfamiliar with for example, the Englen, that organ of the Pseudontoics which fits securely into the human left ear.

Still, with help from our expert (the guy in the scarlet blazer) who had volunteered to assist us, we soon formed up our first composite. And even though not everything was entirely right, since some organs can fit into very different types of human holes, it was still a thrill to see ourselves turning into a new creature with an individuality and self-awareness all of its own.

The high point of my new association with the composite was the annual picnic.

We went to the Hanford ruins where the old atomic energy place used to be. It was overgrown with weeds, with some of them of very strange shapes and colors indeed. There were about two hundred of us in this group, and we deferred joining up until after lunch was served.

The Ladies' Auxiliary gave out the food, and they had a collection point just beyond, where everyone put in what they could. I dropped in a Synestrian bill that I had just been paid for the novelette. A lot of people came around to look at the bill and there was ooing and aahing, because Synestrian bills are really pretty, though they're so thick you can't fold them and they tend to make an unsightly bulge in your pocket. One of the men from the Big Red composite cruised over and looked at my Synestrian bill. He held it up to the light and watched the shapes and colors chase each other.

"That's mighty pretty," he said. "You ever think of framing it and hanging it on the wall?"

"I was just about to think about that," I said.

He decided he wanted the bill and asked me how much I wanted for it. I quoted him a price about three times its value in USA currency. He was delighted with the price. Holding the bill carefully by one corner, he sniffed it delicately.

"That's pretty good," he said.

Now that I thought about it, I realized the Synestrian money did have a good smell.

"These are prime bills," I assured him.

He sniffed again. "You ever eat one of these?" he asked me.

I shook my head. The notion had never occurred to me.

He nibbled at a corner. "Delicious!" Seeing him enjoying himself like that got me thinking. I wanted a taste myself.

But it was his bill now. I had sold it to him. All I had was bland old American currency.

I searched through my pockets. I was clean out of Synestrian bills. I didn't even have one left to hang on my wall back home, and I certainly didn't have one to eat.

And then I noticed Rimb. melding all by herself in a corner, and she looked so cute doing it that I went over to join her.