

# A Sunday Visit with Great-grandfather

by Craig Strete

Great-grandfather stared at his gift with a sharply critical eye. Great-grandmother gnashed her teeth like she always did when great-grandfather was about to make a social error.

"This tobacco stinks!" said great-grandfather. He held the pouch away from his nose. "As usual, my cheap great-grandson has shown his respect by bringing me cheap tobacco."

Great-grandmother kicked great-grandfather in the shin, as she had been doing in such instances as long as she could remember. Not that it did any good. Great-grandfather had grown old and independent and it took something of the magnitude of an earthquake to change his ways.

Great-grandson sighed. He knew that no matter what kind of tobacco he brought or how much it cost, great-grandfather would always say it was cheap.

"You are looking well, Great-grandfather," he said.

"A fat lot you know!" said great-grandfather irritably.

"It's the vapors. It gets him in the back," said great-grandmother. "And he hasn't got enough sense to come in when the cold clouds are out. Not him. He stands out in bad vapors and rain looking for a demi-god or trying to remember where he's supposed to be, as if one rock didn't look like another, as if one burial rack didn't—"

"Some day your tongue will go crazy and beat you to death!" roared great-grandfather.

Great-grandmother gave her great-grandson a sympathetic look and shrugged.

"How are the white people treating you in away school?" asked great-grandfather. He shifted his position upon the hard rock so that the sun did not shine directly into his weak, old eyes.

"As badly as usual, revered one. Those white people are crazy."

"And what kind of things are they learning you? Healing arts? Better ways of hunting? Surely these white men are teaching you many things?" said great-grandfather.

"No, great-grandfather," answered great-grandson. "They are not teaching me any of those things. I am learning science. I am learning how lightning is made and what rocks are made of and what stars are and how fast light travels."

"Spells! Most excellent! These white people are smarter than I thought. But what was that you said about light traveling? I have never heard of such a thing! Of what use is it?"

great-grandfather asked.

"They are not spells," explained great-grandson patiently. "And the traveling of light is mathematics."

Great-grandfather nodded his head wisely. "Ah yes! Mathematics." A shadow darkened his face and he scowled. "What the hell is mathematics?" growled great-grandfather.

"Counting and measuring. Adding and subtracting the number of things one has," said great-grandson.

"Sending you to away school has turned you into a wise nose! Why didn't you say that the first time! Mathematics! Any fool knows how to count on his fingers! You went to away school to learn a four-dollar word for counting on your fingers? This is the kind of a thing you are learning?"

"You don't understand. We learn more than just how to count on our fingers. We've learned how to measure great distances. For instance, I know how far away the stars are."

Great-grandfather shook his head. He looked at his wife. They both shrugged. "That is very interesting," said great-grandfather. "And what is that used for?"

"I don't know," admitted great-grandson. "They only told me how far away it is."

"What other kinds of things have they told you?" asked great-grandmother. "These things sound as crazy as eating rocks."

"Well, I have learned that man was once an ape, that the earth flies in the air around the sun, and that when people die their bodies rot and their souls go to heaven. Also I learned that—"

Great-grandfather jumped off the rock. "What? What?" he shouted. "What is this craziness! Has my great-grandson fallen upon his head too many times?"

Great-grandmother tried to quiet great-grandfather down but he jumped around like a frightened horse. He paced back and forth, cursing loudly.

"They also told me the Great Spirit is superstition," said great-grandson.

"What is this superstition?" roared great-grandfather. "Is that another of those city funnies you picked up at away school? If I wasn't so old I'd flatten you with a rock! I never heard such foolishness!"

"But, great-grandfather," protested great-grandson, "I am only telling you what they are teaching me at away school. It isn't my fault that the white people are all crazy. They even told me that it was impossible to talk with people after they are dead."

"They have gone too far!" shrieked great-grandfather. "They have gone too far! There will be no more away school!"

Great-grandfather beat his scrawny chest with his fists in a defiant gesture which sent him into a fit of coughing.

Great-grandmother patted him on the back as his face swelled up and turned red.

She looked disgusted. "You shouldn't have told him all those terrible things," she said, pounding great-grandfather's back vigorously. "You know this happens every time he gets upset."

Great-grandson looked properly apologetic and helped great-grandmother sit him back on his favorite sitting rock. The coughing fit passed, leaving great-grandfather weak and gasping for breath.

"It's the vapors," said great-grandmother. "If he had enough sense to come in out of the—"

Great-grandfather scowled so ferociously that she stopped speaking. She knew when she was well off.

"No more!" gasped great-grandfather between gasps. "No more away school!"

"But, great-grandfather," the boy protested. "I will be arrested and thrown into the white man's jail if I do not go to away school."

The old man folded his arms across his chest. He raised his head, tilting it at a defiant angle. He sucked his scrawny stomach in and pushed his thin chest out. It was his warrior's stance, which had once put fear into the hearts of many a comely woman. When great-grandfather did this, it meant that his mind was made up. It meant that there would be no further discussion. It meant that there would be no more away school. It also meant another coughing spell for great-grandfather, who was always forgetting his condition.

Great-grandmother began whacking him on the back again with the practiced ease of one who has done it many hundreds of times. She sighed. "He never learns."

"Or else he never remembers," suggested great-grandson.

Great-grandmother shook her head wearily. "I think it is a little of both," she said.

The letter from away school came three weeks later. The boy carried the letter to his great-grandparents. "I told you they were going to throw me into the slammer if I didn't go to away school," he said after reading them the letter. The letter said they were going to throw him into the slammer.

Great-grandfather started to go into his warrior's stance, but the old woman had anticipated that very thing and she whacked him on the back before he could get a decent start at it. He was taken completely by surprise and fell forward off his favorite sitting rock. This saved him from another coughing spell.

"What happens is that they are going to come and get me and throw me in the slammer," said great-grandson, looking unhappy about the whole thing.

"Something will have to be done about this thing," said the old man solemnly from his seat upon the ground. "I will not take this thing lying down." He got up as if he meant it literally and started to sit back down on his favorite sitting rock. His dim eyes betrayed him and he almost sat down on great-grandmother.

"The rock is two feet to your left," said great-grandmother.

"I knew that all along," said great-grandfather indignantly. "I was only trying to get you to guess my weight."

He moved over to the rock, stared at it carefully, judging its exact location, and sat down. He missed the rock by three inches.

"It is good to sit upon the ground once in a while," reflected the old man as he rubbed his hip. "It gives a man a whole new perspective on things."

Great-grandmother snickered to herself. In an aside to the boy, she said, "Boy! He's in lousy shape, ain't he?"

It was but one day later that great-grandson rushed up to his great-grandparents. "They've come," he cried, gazing over his shoulder fearfully. There was a loud whining noise in the direction from which he had just come. Great-grandfather was asleep in the sun with his mouth open. He jumped awake, thinking he had been shot. He felt all over his chest, not that it would have made any difference in his condition.

"Who? What?" he said.

"The white men have come to throw your one and only great-grandson into the slammer!" shouted great-grandson.

Great-grandfather yawned and closed his eyes again. "That's nice," he said. "I always liked buffalo sou—" He was asleep again.

"Wake up, great-grandfather!" shouted great-grandson.

"Boy, he really is in lousy shape, ain't he?" said great-grandmother.

"Who? What?" said great-grandfather.

"We already covered that already!" groaned great-grandson.

Grudgingly, great-grandfather awoke. He rubbed his eyes. From a distance, there was a strange whooshing noise.

"Who's that whooshing around my place of business!" roared the old man.

"It's the white men come to throw me in the slammer!" yelled great-grandson for the third or fourth time.

"No kidding," said great-grandfather. He didn't seem particularly concerned. "By the way," asked the old man, "what the hell is a slammer?"

"That's a white man's jail," replied the boy.

"Well! Why the hell didn't you say so in the first place! You idiot! I thought a slammer was a—"

Great-grandson was never to know what the old man thought a slammer was because the white men arrived in a strange vehicle without wheels.

"It's the white men come to throw our one and only great-grandson into the slammer," said great-grandmother. But as she said it she had doubts. For one thing, they had tentacles and were blue. She'd seen some ugly white people in her day, but none quite as ugly as the two specimens who had just come into view.

Great-grandson threw his hands up in the air, screamed at least once, and ran like hell. He disappeared behind an outcropping of rock.

"What's wrong with him?" asked great-grandfather. "Did he sit on a cold worm? Where's he going?"

"It's the white men come to throw our one and only great-grandson into the slammer," repeated great-grandmother, and she motioned at the aliens embarking from the vehicle. He followed her arm with his weak eyes and saw them vaguely.

Great-grandfather snorted. "You think I don't know what they are? I got eyes, you know." He blinked his eyes uncertainly. For some reason the blurry forms in front of him seemed suspiciously blue. He attributed this to indigestion.

The aliens advanced on the seated couple. The aliens were six feet tall, covered with blue scaly armor. They had eyebulbs on each side of their face, thin slit mouths, red eye membranes across red pupiled eyes. They were clothed in a superior smirk.

"So you think you're going to throw my one and only great-grandson into the slammer, do you?" roared great-grandfather. He immediately went into a coughing fit.

Great-grandmother began pumping his back in the usual fashion.

"What's a slammer?" said the first alien. He eyed the old man, who was bent over double, gasping and coughing with his tongue hanging out. "Boy, he's really in lousy shape ain't he?" commented the first alien.

"Yeah," said the second alien. "This is going to be easier than making candy out of babies."

The first alien took a hand weapon out of a pouch strapped below his chin. He set the gauge on stun. "This is going to be the easiest one yet. No technology worth shaking a quantum at. No force fields, no personal power packs, no weapons. Clothes made out of animal skins. Primitive." He aimed the weapon at great-grandfather and shot him in the head, laughing to himself all the while.

It had absolutely no effect on the old man. He just kept coughing. The first alien turned and stared at the second alien. "Wow!" he said.

"Yeah," agreed the second alien. A good stun shot was strong enough to cripple a five-ton herbil.

Great-grandfather coughed, great-grandmother pounded his back, and great-grandson hid in the rocks viewing the whole proceedings with alarm.

"My stunner must be out of whack. Lemme use yours," grunted the first alien.

The second alien handed it over to him. The first alien set it on stun and shot the old man again. Nothing happened. The old man didn't even blink an eye. He was too busy trying to get his breath back.

"Hey!" said the first alien, whipping his tentacles in a confused circle around his shoulders. "Hey!"

The second alien nodded his head. "Yeah."

"Am I gonna get him now!" threatened the first alien, setting his tentacles determinedly around the hand weapon. He set the stunner on full charge, moved the power setting to overload, and blasted away at the old man again. The only thing that happened was that the weapon overheated and melted into a shapeless hunk of hot metal. It burned the alien's tentacle. He yelped and threw the useless weapon away. He waved his stinging tentacle in the air. He looked madder than hell. He looked at the second alien, who looked right back at him.

"We didn't get the wrong planet, did we? I mean, I've seen technology and I've seen technology, but this is beyond me. How come he ain't dead, is what I want to know?"

"I can't understand it either," said the second alien. "We flew over the missile base. They had atomic weapons. Real kid stuff. No force fields, no anti-matter weapons. Pre-pubescent technology. So how come this one is so hard to kill?"

"I'll nail him with my molecular disruption gun," said the first alien, as he took a small metal tube out of his neck pouch. "He won't know what hit him." He smirked, but his smirk lacked conviction.

Great-grandfather sat weakly on his favorite sitting rock. He'd got his breath back finally. Great-grandmother had her eyes on the ugly white men. She couldn't understand anything

they were saying. None of it made any sense. This helped convince her that they were indeed white people.

"Stop burping me!" growled great-grandfather. She stopped whacking his back.

The gun in the alien's tentacle erupted in a silvery-red flash and a brilliant beam of energy passed through great-grandfather and completely destroyed his favorite sitting rock. It disappeared in a shimmering cloud of vaporized molecules. Great-grandfather fell flat on his back. He was so shocked he almost went into another coughing fit.

"Hey!" shouted the first alien, whipping tentacles in all directions, entangling two of them in his confusion. "Hey!"

The second alien was too shocked to even say yeah.

"That does it!" shouted great-grandfather, struggling to get off the ground. "I'm going to teach you crazy white people to mess with me! Throw my one and only great-grandson into the slammer, will you?"

"What's a slammer?" said the first alien. "Are we talking the right language or what?"

"I'm going to hit you with the dreaded curse of Cheroboa! I'll knock your rooty-rooty eyes out!" exclaimed great-grandfather, dangerously close to another coughing fit.

Great-grandmother covered her eyes. "Oh no! Not that old song and dance again!"

"Maybe they put up that missile base to fool us," suggested the second alien. "Maybe those radio broadcasts we picked up twenty years ago, are true? Maybe this guy is Superman?"

"Hoogma nuba toot!" roared great-grandfather, and he made a mystic pass through the air with his hands. He looked around expectantly. Nothing happened.

"Nuts!" he said. "I was sure I had it right."

"Who is kidding who?" asked the first alien. He eyed the old man critically, studying him first with one eyebulb and then the other.

"Where's his cape? Superman got to have a cape," said the first alien. "How we gonna find out if he's Superman?"

"Hoogma toot nuba." It began raining in downtown Los Angeles. "Ah, come on now!" complained great-grandfather. "I know I had it right that time!" He stared at the sky expectantly.

The second alien pulled a handful of weapons out of his pouch, rummaging frantically for something at the bottom of the pouch. He pulled out a hunk of kryptonite and threw it at the old man. They had prepared for everything, even Superman. It passed right through him and fell to the ground.

"He must be the Green Hornet!" said the first alien, all his tentacles agog at the prospect. "Or Captain Marvel! Or all of them!"

"Well, toot hoogma nuba!" roared great-grandfather without much conviction. Suddenly the sky opened up and it began raining frogs.

"Nuts!" said great-grandfather, thoroughly disgusted with the whole business. Frogs pelted off the heads of the aliens. They were too stunned by this sudden turn of events to even duck.

"I give it one more try," said great-grandfather. Great-grandmother, who had been crouching behind her sitting rock, poked her head up from behind the rock and looked rather dubiously at the sky. "He never learns and he never remembers either," she muttered under her breath.

A frog bounced off great-grandfather's head, almost knocking him to the ground.

"And, boy, is he in lousy shape," she added.

"I heard that," roared great-grandfather, and he went into a violent coughing fit.

The second alien began packing up his weapons meekly. "I think we just better go home and forget about the whole invasion. I think we better leave before he notices we're here and does something to us we'll regret. Did we ever get the wrong planet!"

The first alien was staring at a frog resting on his shoulder. He was scared to death to touch it. He'd heard about warts. The frog returned his stare and then hopped off his shoulder. The alien almost collapsed with relief.

The sky stopped dropping frogs.

"This ain't no technology to be fooling with! Let's get the hell out of here! Man! Am I glad we decided to hit the sticks first!"

"I can't understand it. It should have worked. I can't figure out what went wrong. That curse always worked on chickens," said great-grandfather.

"It could have been worse," said the first alien. "We could have landed in Cleveland."

"Or met the Lone Ranger," added the other alien, a look of pure horror on his face.

The aliens turned in full flight and ran to their vehicle. They jumped in, dropping weapons carelessly in their haste to get away.

"Take a good look," said the first alien as he slammed the power bar into gear. "Sure doesn't look like a super-technology, does it? I'd swear there wasn't a weapon or self-defense mechanism on any of them. They'll never believe it back home." He stared at great-grandfather with absolute terror. Great-grandfather was looking up into the sky, still expecting the curse of Cheraboa to materialize. "You wouldn't think—" said the first alien,



thinking about the energy beams passing through the old man, without hurting him at all, thinking about the frogs. "No. No. You wouldn't think—" he paused. "He sure—"

"Is in lousy shape, ain't he?" finished the second alien.

"Yeah," said the first alien. "I should be in such lousy shape!"

They returned to their spaceship and left the Earth as fast as they could travel. They never came back.

"You can come out now!" yelled great-grandmother to great-grandson. "The crazy white men are gone."

"They are?" asked great-grandfather, looking disappointed. "Nuts! Just when I had the curse down pat, too."

Great-grandmother rolled her eyes.

Great-grandson came out from behind a rock. Great-grandfather stared at the rock. "He's putting on weight, ain't he? White man's school has made him fat and weak."

Great-grandmother sighed. It had been a long day. Every day was a long day that was spent with a rascal like great-grandfather.

"It's time we got some sleep," said great-grandmother.

Great-grandfather yawned.

Great-grandson came up to them and looped his arms in theirs. Lifting them to their feet, he walked them across the sacred ground to the burial rack. Tenderly, he helped them climb back onto the burial rack.

"You're a good great-grandson," said great-grandmother. "Will we see you next Sunday?"

"Same time as always," said great-grandson.

"He's such a good great-grandson," said great-grandmother.

"He brings me cheap tobacco," muttered great-grandfather.

Great-grandmother would have kicked him but he was already snoring.