

by

David Brin

“... So you want to talk about flying saucers? I was afraid of that.

“This happens every damn time I’m blackmailed into babysitting you insomniacs, while Talkback Larry escapes to Bimini for a badly needed rest. I’m *supposed* to field call-in questions about astronomy and outer space for two weeks. You know, black holes and comets? But it seems we always have to spend the first night wrangling over *puta* UFOs.

“... Now, don’t get excited, sir ... Yeah, I’m just a typical ivory tower scientist, out to repress unconventional thought. Whatever you say, buddy.

“Truth is, I’ve also dreamed of contact with alien life. In fact, I’m involved in research now ... That’s right, SETI ... the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence ... And no, it’s not at all like chasing UFOs! I don’t believe the Earth has ever been visited by anything remotely resembling intelligent ...

“Yes, sir, I bet you’ve got crates full of case histories, and a personal encounter or two? Thought so. I got an earful when some of us tried studying these ‘phenomena’ a few years back. Spent weeks on each case, only to find it was just a weather balloon, or an airplane, or ball lightning ...

“... Oh, yeah? Well, I’ve *seen* ball lightning, fella. Got a scar on my nose and a pair of melted binoculars to show just how close. So don’t tell *me* it’s a myth like your *chingaso* flying saucers!”

We commence our labours this night in England, near Avebury, braiding strands of yellow wheat in tidy, flattened rings. It is happy work, playing lassos of light upon the sea of grain. These will be fine circles. Humans will see pictures in their morning papers, and wonder.

Our bright ether-boat hovers, bathed in the approving glow of Mother Moon. The sleek craft wears a lambent gloss to make it slippery to mortal eyes.

To be seen is desirable. But never too *well* .

Fyrfalcon proclaims, “Keep the edges sharp! Make each ring perfect! Let men of science jabber about *natural phenomena* . We’ll have new believers after this night’s work!”

Once, he might have been called ‘King’. But we adapt to changing times. “Yes, Captain!” we shout, and hurry to our tasks.

Our Listener calls from her perch. “We are being discussed on a human radio programme! Would all like to hear?”

We cry cheerful assent. Although we loathe Mankind’s technology, it often serves our ends.

“Let’s cover your second question, caller. Are UFO enthusiasts so different from we astronomers, probing with our telescopes for signs of life somewhere? Both groups long to discover other minds, other viewpoints, something strange and wonderful.

“We part company, though, over the question of *evidence* . Science teaches us to expect – demand – more than just eerie mysteries. What use is a puzzle that can’t be solved?

“Patience is fine, but I’m not going to stop asking the universe to make sense!”

The boy drives faster than he wants to, taking hairpin turns recklessly to impress the girl next to him.

He needn’t get in such a lather; she is ready. She had already decided when the night was young. Now she laughs, feigning nonchalance as road posts streak by and her heart races.

The convertible climbs under opal moonlight. Her bare knee brushes his hand, making him muff the gears. He coughs, fighting impulses more ancient than his race, swerving just in time to keep from roaring over the edge.

I sense their excitement. He is half-blind with desire. She by anticipation.

They are unaware of our approach.

At a secluded Cliffside, he sets the brake and turns to her. She teases him playfully, in ways meant to inflame. There is no ambiguity.

We circle behind, enjoying such simple, honest lusts. Backing away, we dip over the cliff, then cruise along its face until directly below them.

We turn on all our pulsing glows to make our craft its gaudiest!

We start to rise.

No one will believe their story. But more than one kind of seed will have been sown tonight.

“There’s a saying that applies here. “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” While Project SETI hasn’t logged any verified signals from the few stars we’ve looked at, that doesn’t prove nobody’s

out there!

“... Yeah, sure. The same could apply to UFOs, if you insist.

“But while SETI has to sift a vast cosmos for radio sources – a real case of hunting needles in haystacks – it’s harder to explain the absence of decent evidence for flying saucers on Earth. It’s a small planet, after all. If ETs have been mucking around here for as long as some folks say, isn’t it funny they never dropped any clear-cut alien artefacts for us to examine? Say, the Martian equivalent of a coke bottle?”

We are flying over eastern Canada on key-patrol ... creating temporary, microscopic singularities in random houses to swallow wallets, car keys, homework assignments. Meanwhile some of us reach out to invade the dreams of sleeping men and women, those most susceptible.

Gryffinloch plays the radio show in the background as we work. We laugh as this idiotic scientist talks of ‘alien artefacts’.

Such stupid assumptions! We do not make things of hard, unyielding matter! I have never held a coke bottle. Even those human babes we steal, to raise as our own, find painful the latent heat in glass and metal, which were forged in flame.

Men have built their proud new civilisation around such things. But why, when they had us? Can iron nourish as we do? We deal in a different heat. Ours inflames the heart.

“Yes, yes ... For those of you who don’t read the *Enquirer*, this caller’s asking my opinion of one of the most famous UFO tales – about a ship that supposedly crashed in New Mexico, right after World War II. ‘They’ have been clandestinely studying the wreckage in a hangar at an Air Force Base in Dayton for forty years, right?

“Now, isn’t that news to just boil the blood of honest citizens? There goes the big bad government, keeping secrets from us again!

“But wait, suppose we do have remnants of some super-duper, alien warp-drive scout ship from Algerdeberon Eleventeen. Do *you* see any technologies pouring out of Ohio that look like they came from outer space? I mean, besides supermarket checkout scanners – I’ll grant you those.

“Come on, would our balance of payments be in the shape it’s in if ...

“... Oh yes? It’s just being kept top secret? Okay, here’s a second question. Just who do you suppose has been discreetly studying the wreckage all this time?

“... Government engineers. Uh-huh. Have you ever *met* an engineer, pal? They’re not faceless drones like in some stupid secret agent movie. At least most aren’t. They’re intelligent Americans like you and me, with wives and husbands and kids.

“How many thousands of people would’ve worked on that alien ship since ’48? Picture these retired coots, playing golf, pottering in the garage, running Rotary fundraisers ... and all this time repressing an urge to blab the story of the century?

“All of ‘em? In *today’s* America? Come on, friend. Let’s put aside this Hangar 18 crap and get back to UFOs, where at least there’s something worth arguing about!”

I yearn to swoop down and give this talk-show scientist a taste of ‘proof’. I will curdle the milk on his doorstep and give him nightmares. I’ll play havoc with his utilities. I will ...

I’ll do nothing. I don’t wish to see this golden ship evaporate like dew on a summer’s morn. Our numbers are too small and Fyrfalcon has decreed – we must show ourselves only to receptive ones, whose minds can still be moulded in the old ways.

I look up at the moon’s stark, cratered landscape. Our home of refuge, of exile. Even there, they followed us, these New Men. An ectoplasmic vapour is all that remains where some of our kind once tried putting fright to their explorers. We learned a hard lesson then – that astronauts are not like argonauts of old.

Their eyes were filled with that mad, *sceptical* glow, and none can stand before it.

“This is Professor Joe Perez, sitting in for Talkback Larry. You’re on the air.

“Yes? Uh huh? ... Well folks, seems our next caller wants to talk about so-called Ancient Visitors. I’m game. Let’s pick apart those ‘gods’ and their fabulous chariots.

“Ooh, they taught ancient Egyptians to build pyramids! And golly, they had some of my own ancestors scratch stick figures on a stony plateau in Peru! To help spaceships find landing pads, right? I guess the notion’s barely plausible, till you ask ... why?

“Why would anyone want such ridiculous ‘landing pads’, when they could’ve had much better? Why not open a small trade college and teach our ancestors to pour *cement*? A few electronics classes and we could’ve made arc lamps and radar to guide their saucers through anything from rain to locusts!

“... What? They were here to help us? Well thanks a lot, you alien gods you! Thanks for neglecting to mention flush toilets, printing presses, democracy, or the germ theory of disease! Or ecology, leaving us to ruin half the planet before finally catching on! Hell, if someone had just shown us how to make simple glass *lenses*, we could’ve done the rest. How much ignorance and misery we’d have escaped!

“You’d credit human innovations like architecture and poetry, physics and empathy, to aliens? ... Really? ... Well I say you insult our poor foremothers and dads, who crawled from the muck, battling superstition and ignorance every step of the way, until we may at last be ready to clean up our act and look the universe in the eye. No, friend. If there were ancient astronauts, we owe them nada, zip, nothing!

“... What’s that? ... Well the same to you, pal! ... No, forget it. I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Go worship silly, meddling star-gods if you want to. Next caller, please.”

Although we barely understand its principles, we approve of this innovation, radio. It is like the ancient campfire, friendly to gossip and tall tales.

But tonight this fellow vexes me. His voice plucks the air-streams, sharper than glass, more searing than iron. He asks why we did not teach *useful* things, back when humans were as children in our hands? Ungrateful wretch! What are baubles such as lenses, compared to what we once gave men? Vividness! Mystery! Terror! Make one night seem to last a hundred years, and what cared some poor pheasant about mere plagues or pestilence?

We must fight this madness before the new thinking takes humans beyond our reach.

Before they learn to do without us entirely.

Our captain is too cautious. I slip away in a smaller boat to find a lonely traveller on a deserted road. My light dazzles him as I weave hallucinated voyages to distant worlds. He eagerly studies the 'star map' I show him, and memorises certain trite expressions, convinced they are secrets of the universe. No need for originality. We've fed believers similar platitudes since long before there was a New Age media to help spread them.

Worship fills his eyes as I pull away. It is a good night, filled with the old magic. As in other days, I scurry on, seeding the green world with badly needed mysteries.

We'll fight this plague which robs men of their birthright. We shall satisfy their inmost hunger.

And ours.

"... No, it's all right, ma'am. We can stay with UFOs. The evening's a washout anyway.

"Still, let me surprise you and say that, as a scientist, I can't claim UFOs are absolutely disproved. I accept the unlikely possibility something weird is going on. Maybe there *are* queer beasties out there who swoop down to rattle signposts and cause power blackouts. Maybe they do kidnap people and take them on joyrides through the cosmos.

"But then, out of all those who claim to have met star beings, why has no one ever announced anything they learned from the encounter that was simultaneously true and unambiguous and that science didn't already know?"

I rejoin our great skyboat as it skims a silvery trail over this place we once called home. Now the planet throngs with bustling, earnest, *craving* humanity. Craving, if they just knew, what we used to give their ancestors. What we'd give again, if they allowed it.

"*Allowed it?*" My thoughts shame me. What right have worms to 'allow' anything?

There was a time when men averted their eyes and shivered in fear. Now the planet's night face spreads a glow of city lights. Forests swarm with campers and explorers armed with cameras. It seems ages since we heard from our cousins, in Earth's hidden places, the mountains and deep lochs. Long ago they fled before men's modern eyes, or were annihilated.

It makes me wonder – could it be that humans are angry with us for some reason?

“But there’s a second, even better answer to this whole UFO business.

“Let’s admit a slim chance some of these case histories might actually be sightings of little silvery guys riding spaceships. My reply? We can still rule out contact with Intelligent Life!

“*Look at their behaviour!* Buzzing truck drivers, mutilating farm animals, trampling corn fields, kidnapping people to stick needles in their brains ... Is this any way for intelligent beings to act?”

I never heard it put quite that way before.

Perhaps some of you, subconsciously, *are* a bit upset with us.

But we do it for your own good.

“Worst of all, if these UFO guys really do exist – they’re refusing to make contact!

“... What? You say they’re afraid of us? We, who barely made it to our measly little moon, and couldn’t go back now if we tried? *We* frighten star aliens? Right. And I’m terrified of turtles in the zoo!”

But we do fear you, sage of science. Your premises are skewed. I would teach you. But if I tried, you’d burn me where I stand.

“Tell you what, caller. Let’s try an experiment. You assume these ET fellows are pretty smart, yes? ... In fact, they’re probably picking up my voice at this moment. After all this time, guys that clever must have a handle on our language, right?

“Great. Then I’ll quit talking to my human audience for a minute, and turn instead to those eavesdroppers in the sky.

“Hello, you little green guys, listening to my voice in your fancy ships! I’m gonna lay a challenge on you now. Get out your space pencils, ‘cause I’m about to tell you how to get in touch with the most qualified people on the planet for making first contact with star visitors. People who have all the right qualifications, reputations and government connections, and who also have been dreaming all their lives of holding conversations with other life forms.

“Ready? Good. Now first off, I want you to dial up the World Space Foundation in Pasadena,

California. You can get their number by dialling directory assistance through any of our communication satellites ... surely you're smart enough to handle that? Our technology's child's play, right? Here's a hint – the area code is 1-818, and directory information is 555-1212. The foundation helps fund SETI research, now that a few senators have cut off all federal money. They search the heavens for beacons from distant extraterrestrial civilisations. They usually don't like having their name associated with UFOs, but I'm sure they'll drop everything if you prove you really are visitors from some faraway star.

“Now *proof* is an important part of this. So for you humans listening in right now, please don't bother these good folks ... unless you want to join as members of the foundation, and help them in their fine work. Still, I guess there'll be a few jerks out there who will phone in anyway, thinking it's really clever and original to dial up and pretend they're ET. So here's part two of the plan. I want you silver guys to briefly describe to the foundation staff a demonstration you'll perform in the sky, the following night!

“Your demo should be visible from Pasadena, California, at ten p.m. on a clear night, and be of clearly extraterrestrial origin. You might turn one of the Moon's craters purple, or something likewise gaudy. My pal Mike promises to check for messages daily, and have someone watching at the appointed hour.

“If you do pull off something impressively ‘alien’, you can bet we'll be waiting by the phone the next day for your follow-up call!”

Such effrontery! Never has one of these mad, new-style humans taunted us so brazenly. Out of wrath, we get carried away in our work. Half the cattle are destroyed and the rest driven to frothing panic before Fyrfalcon calls a halt. We stare down at no typical mutilation. The rancher who owns this herd won't be awed or frightened by our visit, but furious.

Curse you, man of logic, man of science! Were it in our power, we'd topple the towers carrying your voice. Your satellites would rain like falling stars! Certainly we'd shut out your yammerings.

But it is our nature to hear, when we are spoken of. So it always was. So it shall be while our kind lasts.

“That's my challenge, you platinum-plated guys out there. Perform some convincing demonstration in the sky, and the WSF will do the rest! Mike will arrange landing sites, rent-a-cops, press coverage, visas ... of both types ... and yes, gigs on *The Tonight Show*. Anything you like. Anything to make First Contact a pleasant, comfortable experience for you and your crews.

“We want to be gracious hosts. Make friends. Show you the town. That's as generous an offer as any honest guest could ask for.

“But what if nobody answers my challenge? What would that mean, caller? ... Uh, huh. It might mean UFOs are myths!

“On the other hand, maybe they do exist, and are sitting back, spurning this sincere offer.

“In which case at least we've settled what they are ... nasty sons-of-bitches who love messing with our heads. And all I have to say is – get out of our sky, assholes! Leave us alone, so we can get on with looking for someone out there worth talking to!

“... Ahem. And on that note, Engineer Ted signals it’s time for station I.D. Sorry, Ted. Guess I got carried away there. But at three a.m., I don’t figure the FCC is any likelier to be listening than creeps on flying saucers ...

Our Dream Master, Sylphshank, has been meddling with sleep-fogged minds. He tells of one woman who has been dozing while listening to the radio show. While she is susceptible, Sylphshank projects into her mind dream-images of his own face! She awakens now with a startled idea, and excitedly dials the station.

Delightful! This should irritate that upstart scientist. Perhaps when she is finished we’ll do it again, and again until he finally gives up.

We move on to California, home of some of our best friends and fiercest foes. One of our changelings – human born – uses a stolen acetylene torch to burn marks of ‘rocket exhaust’ and ‘landing jacks’ on to a plateau near San Diego. A cult of the faithful has sanctified this ground with their belief. We often reward them with such signs.

Our great, long-prowed boat floats above the chaparral, insubstantial as thought. Where once its burnished hull would have been invincible, now we must protect it from those eyes.

“Okay, we’re back. This is Professor Joe Perez, filling in for Talkback Larry while he takes a much-needed break from you manic insomniacs. Want to talk astronomy? Black holes? The universe? I’m your man. Let’s take another call.

“Yes, ma’am? ... Oh hell, I thought we used up that topic ...

“What? ... Hmm. Now that you mention it, that puts a new spin on things. It does seem strange that saucer folk are so often depicted in certain ways. Smooth, arching foreheads. Big eyes. Long, meddling fingers.

“It should’ve sounded familiar. Look at their supposed behaviour – playing tricks, offering mystic half-truths, never meeting honest folk in the eyes ...

“Yes ma’am, I think you’ve hit on something. Saucer people are elves!”

Our boat-of-ether rocks. The voice is stronger than ever, shaking our concentration.

Four teenagers blink, captivated by the light shining on their upturned faces. We had them snared, but the distraction of that cursed voice weakens our grip. Gryffinloch murmurs alarm.

“We shouldn’t have tried so many at once!”

“The voice has us confused,” Fyrfalcon answers. “Take care –”

I cry out, “One awakens!”

Three of those young faces still exhibit rapture as they stand uncritical, accepting. But the fourth – a gangling child-woman – casts another kind of glow. As she rouses, her eyes narrow and her mouth forms words. Tapped into her mind, I sense her effort to see. To really see!

What am I staring at? Why ... it looks transparent, as if it isn't really there at ...

“Flee!” Fyrfalcon screams as we are blinded by that deadly gaze!

“It’s late, but let’s go with this caller’s notion and see where it leads.

“Once upon a time, legends say elves and dwarves and trolls shared our world ... all those colourful spirit creatures our ancestors warned their children about, so they’d shun the forest.

“My wife’s an anthropologist, and we read our kids stories she’s collected all over the world, many of them amusing, moving, even inspiring. But after a while you start to notice something – very few of those old magical characters, the pixies and sprites and spirits, were people you’d want as neighbours! Sometimes beautiful and exciting, creatures in fairy tales also act petty, tyrannical, and awfully stingy about sharing their knowledge with poor human beings. Always they were portrayed as living apart, on the edge of the unknown. In olden times that meant just beyond the firelight.

“Then something changed. Humankind started pushing the circle outward, and all those fancy beasts of legend faded back as well. Yetis and Bigfoots. Elves and lake monsters. They were always said to be just beyond the reach of torchlight, then lanterns, then sonar and aerial photography ...

“Now maybe that’s because they were never more than figments of our over-fertile imaginations. Maybe they were distractions, that kept us from properly appreciating the other species of very real animals sharing our world.

“Still, I can entertain another possibility.

“Imagine, such creatures really did exist, once upon a time, behaving like spirit folk in legend. But at some point we started shucking free of them, conquering our ignorance, driving them off to let us get about our lives ...

Scattered, riding fragments of our broken boat, we call to one another across space.

We survivors.

By now those teenagers are rubbing their eyes, already convinced we were hallucinations. That is what happens when humans see us with *scepticism*. Now we blow away like leaves, like wisps of shredded dreams.

Perhaps the world’s winds will bring some of us together to begin anew. Meanwhile, I can only drift and remember.

Some years back we plotted to end this plague of reason. We stole human babies and took them to a

southern isle. Then, back in the world of humans, we caused ‘incidents’ and false alarms on radar screens, trying to set off that final war. Let their mad genius consume itself in its own fire, we thought. It used to be so easy to provoke war among men.

But this time things were different. Perhaps it was the new thinking, or maybe they sensed the precipice. There was no war. We grew depressed.

So depressed we forgot our charges on the island. When at last we checked, all the infants had died.

Such frail things, humans.

How did frail things ever grow so strong?

“It’s dark out and the wind’s picked up. Let’s push this ghost story as far as it’ll go.

“We were talking about how fairy folk always seemed to flit just beyond the light, beyond our gaze. Since Earth is pretty well explored now, the few remaining legends speak of Arctic wastes, the deepest depths ... and outer space. It’s as if they are both drawn to us and terrified.

“I can’t imagine it’s our weapons such creatures would fear ... ever see a hunter come home with an elf pelt on his fender?

“Now here’s a thought ... what if it’s because of a change in *us* ? What if modern humans destroy fairy creatures just by getting close?

“... You laugh? Good. Still, imagine today’s cub scouts, running, peering into forest corners their ancestors would have superstitiously left alone. Ever wonder why the change?

“It could be just curiosity.

“Or else ... maybe they’re *chasing our species’ natural foe*. Perhaps that’s really why we seek Nessie and Yeti, hounding them to the far corners of the Earth. Or why we’re pushing into space, for that matter!

“Maybe something inside us recalls how we were treated by our fairy friends. Subconsciously what we’re after is revenge!”

Monsters. Driven off our own cursed planet by these flat-eyed monsters.

The experiment got out of hand.

How I wish we never created them!

“Time’s up, boys and girls. Whatever you call them – elves or UFO aliens – whether they exist or were just another fancy dream we invented – I see no point in giving them any more of our time.

“Tomorrow night we’ll move on to more interesting stuff . . . the Big Bang, neutron stars, and our hopeful search for some *real* intelligent life out there.

“Until then, people, good night. And good morning.”