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The Saucer Man  
by Jeff Hecht  
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Science Fiction

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"You've got to give up the flying saucer business, Jack. It's history. That's why you're in Lawrence, Iowa complaining about motels from a pay phone."

I sighed. "Look, Angie, it's my only salable skill."

"Not very salable, Jack. You've got to change with the times. Even my channelling clients get bigger bookings than you. Alien abductions are hot now. Can't you get your alien friends to snatch you for a few experiments? Work a little sex into it, and I can get you plenty of gigs on the West Coast. You could pull in a couple thousand every night of the year, not four or five hundred a pop for a month or two."

Angie has hustled herself a long way from her start as a secretary back when I was in aerospace. An agency hired her before the first layoffs, and within three years she had her own agency. Six years ago, when I walked in her door with a crazy idea, the Ramirez Agency was a one-woman show over a Mexican restaurant on the seedy side of Hollywood. She landed me a book contract and a saucer speaking tour back then; now she has a fancy suite with a secretary and two assistants. "Let me think about it," I said.

"Okay," she answered, with audible annoyance. "Now let me get back..."

"What about the motel, Angie?" I needed an alternative to the Motel 6 across Main Street that was "closed for renovations." I didn't want to sleep in a cornfield.

"Stupid database thinks it's still open. Nothing else is listed in Lawrence, but there is a motel in Wilson's Crossing. That's supposed to be the nearest town, north on Route 117."

I thanked her and wrote the phone number in my pocket calendar, hoping I wouldn't need it. I was due at the American Legion Hall in half an hour. I looked into the gas station and asked the kid who sat inside chewing gum, "Do you know where there's another motel?"

"No motels left in town, Mister. You gotta go to Wilson's Crossing, and that's 20 miles." He pointed lazily up the road.

I sighed and headed back to the Rent-A-Wreck. The Legion Hall and the usual rubber chicken dinner were a few blocks the other way. The wide, white-painted hall sat between a parking lot and an aged brick building that once had been the local bank. Now a cash machine sat inside the wide double doors, and a faded "For Lease or Sale" sign was taped inside the windows. The town had fared as well as the aerospace industry.

A pickup and two big old Fords were already in the parking lot. Out front, a portable electric sign announced my visit; "OUR ALIEN VISITORS: Jack

Mills in Person, Friday, 7 p.m." I'd seen worse; oh, God, had I seen worse.

My pocket calendar gave the specifics. "Sponsor: Lawrence Ladies Club. Contact: Abigail Waverly, program chair. After-dinner talk: 1 hour, with slides, questions to follow. Books: publisher has shipped, CHECK before talk. Signing afterwards. Speaking fee prepaid. Lodging provided." I checked for the slide carousel and slipped out of the car. With luck, I could check about a room before the talk.

Luck, alas, was not with me. The publisher had shipped three boxes of books, and two were mine. However, the third was one of the publisher's seamier efforts to penetrate the sex-manual market. It took ten minutes to convince the grandmotherly fossil who headed the Ladies' Club that I had nothing to do with that publication. Then I had to go over the slides with the high-school girl running the projector. By the time I was introduced to Miss Abigail Waverly, it was time for her to introduce me to everyone else at the head table.

I dutifully shook hands. Angie was right that my audience had the wrong demographics, tired and aging. Miss Waverly looked about sixty, grey and bulky, with no discernible accent. You wouldn't notice her in a crowd of three.

"What happened to the motel?" I asked as we sat down.

"Don't worry," she assured me. "We have a place for you."

I was not reassured. I get some come-ons from lonely old women, and since Melinda left a few have been tempting. But most just want to talk my ear off.

The meal wasn't bad, with fresh corn on the cob, baked potatoes, tender pork chops, and apple pie. My tales of life near Los Angeles charmed the ladies. I told them about the Northridge quake, freeway traffic jams, and the craziness of the city, and they listened as if I came from another planet.

The talk was my usual spiel. I stand a podium in a dim room where people sit at folding tables with coffee cups and desert plates scattered before them, and tell them what they want to hear about flying saucers. In my aerospace days, I had flipped overheads telling Pentagon paper-shufflers what they wanted to hear about monster lasers supposed to shoot down nuclear warheads. We pretended the paper lasers were real until their money and my job were gone.

I told the Ladies Club that the Brysst are an ancient and gentle race, who spent millions of years developing the wisdom and caution we lack. "Their distant star is a dull fire compared to our brilliant sun, and their planet huddles close to it for warmth. Yet because the Brysst sun is so faint and red, it burns its fuel far, far slower than our sun, and it will live billions of years after our sun is gone. This gives the Brysst their patience, and their patience gives them their wisdom."

I can do the spiel for hours if I have to; Melinda taught me well. She had 638 pages of it down on paper when we met, although she didn't tell me about it for a few weeks. When she did, I suggested doing a book proposal and running it by Angie. It started as science fiction, but Angie said it would sell better as "fact." I didn't like the idea, but by then I hadn't worked in two and a half years, Melinda had just moved into my tiny apartment, and the rent was three months overdue.

Melinda and I spent eight wild and crazy months turning her "Meeting the Aliens" into "The Secret World of the Brysst." I cut and pasted Melinda's pages and rewrote them on an old PC the company had sold for \$50 after the layoffs.

The publisher loved it, but Melinda freaked when Angie mentioned a promo tour. She flat-out wouldn't do it, and insisted we take her name off the book. I figured the weirding out was a legacy of her checkered past. I knew she had lived in a commune; she knew about my ex-wife the lawyer and my former career as a merchant of death. We preferred to avoid the gory details.

The paid speaking tours came after that, as Angie hustled the market for all it was worth. Melinda wrote more, but she wasn't happy with the second

book, and started claiming that some of the acid hippies on the Oregon commune really were aliens. We fought over it before I left on the speaking tour; when I returned, she had moved out, leaving only a short note and a stack of bills.

The third book never came. "You have to have something new," Frances, my editor, had told me after she read the proposal. "Marketing says they can only sell two books on the same thing. Do a third and you cut into sales of the first two. Don't you have something new to say?" She suggested abductions and experiments, but after I hung up, I realized I could not make the Brysst snatch any human being who didn't want to go. They had too much of Melinda in them.

What I told the ladies of Lawrence was "the Brysst aren't ready for contact with all of humanity. But they gave me a message of hope for all intelligent beings in the universe: there can be peace, if we make it happen among ourselves." The spiel comes with pitches for toleration and racial harmony that I vary from place to place. Sometimes the whole thing sounds as outdated as the George Adamski book from the 50s that I picked up in a used bookstore, but it plays well in the American Heartland. My stories are more comforting than the supermarket tabloids. Angie summed it up as "You're safe weirdness."

They had questions, but the toughest one came from the high-school girl at the projector. "Do they have the same DNA and RNA genetic material we do?" I hedged, as I had learned to do when selling laser fantasies to colonels, then settled down to sign books.

The girl who had run the projector was first in line. If I had ever settled down, I could have had a kid her age. A couple dozen older ladies followed. I asked their names and signed each book, until only two were left in line.

The first was the president of the Ladies' Club. Her piercing blue eyes stared through me. "You certainly have had some interesting experiences, young man," she began. "I wish my Ralphie had grown up like you." She smiled as I signed her copy.

The second looked uncannily like Abigail Waverly, but wore a different dress. Before I could ask, she explained, "I'm Abigail's sister Hester." I signed her book, then glanced at the sales desk. Over half my books were gone, always nice even if I didn't make that much per copy. All I needed now was a place to unwind and sleep before driving 180 miles to my next gig.

I slipped my pen into my pocket, stood, and stretched as politely and obviously as I could. It was a few minutes after ten; I'd earned my pay, and it was time to move on. "Excuse me, Miss Waverly. You said you'd made reservations at a motel?"

Abigail Waverly looked blank briefly, then turned to face me fully. "Not exactly a motel, Mr. Mills. We operate a small guest house..."

"Er ... I really can't impose on you..." I could see myself trapped into talking all night. They didn't seem the sort who would want more.

"I'm afraid the local motel is closed."

"I can drive to the one in Wilson's Crossing."

"Good heavens!" the president of the Ladies' Club broke in. "You don't know anything about that place, do you?"

I shook my head.

"It's a house of ill repute, I'll have you know. Anything goes in that place. They rent rooms to unmarried couples! The Waverly sisters operate a proper guest hotel, and that's the only fit place for a respectable gentleman to stay."

I was stuck. I followed the Waverly sisters' big Ford to a big, well-preserved old house. The neatly painted sign, "Lawrence Hotel," was reassuring, but I would have felt better if I had seen lights inside.

The place was a model of mid-century midwestern gentility. Flowered wallpaper covered the parlor walls; neat but slightly faded slipcovers covered the furniture. Not a thing was out of place; no sloppy pile of newspapers, or even a magazine open on an end table. It was the sort of place you see only in

old pictures. I paused, looking for the stairs so I could plead tiredness and make a quick exit.

They didn't let me. "We're so pleased you could come, Mr. Mills," said Abigail. "We've wanted to talk with you for a long time, about things that we couldn't mention at the meeting."

I must have shown some trace of my internal dismay. "Don't be afraid," Hester said, "We believe in the Brysst way. We just want to meet them."

I used my standard explanation, that I had to protect the privacy of the Brysst until they were ready to reveal themselves.

"This is something very different, Mr. Mills," Abigail explained as if to a child. "We also come from another planet. We were sent here to investigate your culture, without revealing ourselves. We didn't know the Brysst were here."

They were not the first, but my heart still skipped a beat. That craziness reminded me of the bad times with Melinda, or the sad old man who had walked up to me last year and said that aliens had given him a very important message, but he had lost it. I ignore letters from people claiming they are aliens, but I had no place to hide in the little guest house.

Abigail seemed as bewildered as I must have looked. "What's the matter?" she asked.

I groped for words. "I ... I ... can't bring you to them. The Brysst have to be very careful, you know. They're not prepared for full human contact."

"Do you understand that we are not human?" Hester asked.

I stepped back, uneasy at their closeness. "Can you prove it? You look quite human." At the end, Melinda had claimed the alien hippies were bioengineered to appear human, and could do everything a man or woman could. She'd blown her top when I asked how she knew.

"We are supposed to look human, although we -- the entities you see before you -- are only semi-autonomous biological constructs customized to survive on your planet. You can think of us as remote operating nodes, if you want, for the real aliens. Our race cannot survive physically on your planet. Our metabolisms are different; some organic compounds common in your environment are deadly toxins to our natural bodies."

There was a pause before Abigail added, "Our real bodies are in a shielded spacecraft outside the atmosphere. We operate these biological constructs by remote control, although they have enough autonomy to function credibly while signals travel back and forth, or during a brief communication failure, so they don't attract attention."

I looked back and forth between them, wondering if they were nuts or just playing a game. "Why do you want to meet the Brysst?" I asked, stalling.

"The same curiosity that brought us here. We have investigated many cultures on isolated planets, but we have never met another race that could travel between the stars."

"Mr. Mills," Abigail began. "We've been here for over ten of your years, observing. We have collected many claims of alien visits, but only yours follows the pattern of truth. The claims of hostile aliens are bizarre, because no violent race can master interstellar flight. Your writings about the Brysst are different. You can contact them, can't you?"

"It takes time," I hedged, regretting that Melinda had ever convinced me to say that in the first book. Lies will always trap you, my mother had said every time she caught me, but I thought I had learned how to outsmart everyone else. "You are not the only people who claim to be aliens. You will have to convince me and then I will have to convince them." It was cruel, but I hoped it might stop them.

I had expected some hesitation, but there was none. "That is fair," said Abigail. "What kind of proof do you want?"

"Show me something non-human about you. Your mechanical insides, your spaceship, something like that."

"We are biological constructs, not mechanical. You would need very

sophisticated medical tests to tell we are not human. But we can show you our lander. We hid it in a barn outside of town."

I had not expected them to call my bluff. Numbly, I followed them to their big old Ford, wondering how they were planning to fake it. Abigail started the engine and drove quietly past dark houses into the country, crossing dark fields to a rutted dirt road that led to an old farmhouse and barn. The buildings sat in an overgrown patch in fields of soybeans; the moon and headlines tinted them ghostly pale. I doubted anyone had lived there in years.

"I'm sure you understand why we conceal this from the rest of the community, Mr. Mills," Hester said as we emerged from the car. She led us to the barn with a flashlight, unlocked the big, rusty padlock that held the two doors shut, and opened one. Old red stain flaked from the wood.

I saw nothing in the musty interior until her flashlight beam swept across a large mound in the middle, covered by a tarp. I followed the light to a side wall, where wires led to a large electrical switch. Abigail switched it on, and I heard a grinding noise above me. The roof cracked open along the middle, and began sliding open to show the sky.

My eyes followed the beam back to the tarp. A thin dust of hay covered the dark mound. "This is our landing craft, Mr. Mills. We bought this barn to keep it safely hidden, but ready if we need it. We can take you for a ride."

Mutely disbelieving, I nodded, and watched them pull the tarp off a genuine flying saucer at least 20 feet across. The outer surface was dull black, like the radar-suppressing Stealth coating I'd tested back in my laser days. A hatch popped open as we walked toward it.

Abigail climbed in first, then I, then Hester, whose flashlight gave the only illumination until Abigail touched something. A dim, even light diffused from overhead. Hester closed the hatch behind her. My eyes adapted slowly.

"This is only a simple lander," said one Waverly. "It takes us from the ground to our scout ship. We can do that tonight, but there is not enough time to see our interstellar explorer."

Neither NASA nor George Lucas had ever made anything as impressive as that lander. Multicolor displays covered the wall, like instruments in an airplane cockpit, but the flat panels were much bigger than anything I'd ever seen. I hadn't kept up with the state of the art, but this had to be beyond it. The patterns changed as the two busied themselves, then began flashing. They sat me in a chair, which clamped me in place, before sitting down themselves. I heard a low mechanical hum, and felt my seat vibrate lightly. Then the whole craft floated upward, as if someone had turned off the gravity.

It flew! With no wings or anything properly aerodynamic, it flew! I gasped, my heart raced, and I shivered in an awe that I could not admit. I was the Saucer Man; I was supposed to have been here and done this before. Trapped in the chair, I could only watch.

The saucer drifted upward, through the open roof of the barn, and hovered briefly while they checked the controls. Then we soared. I could feel the motion, and see it through windows that showed the moon and stars. We flew over the rectangular grid of dim street lights that was Lawrence. We flew higher, over patterns of lights that marked larger towns. "Des Moines," they announced over one; "Omaha," over a larger one we saw from higher in the sky. We zoomed upwards, higher than I had ever flown in a plane, high above the atmosphere itself. I saw vast areas of the rounded planet, like an astronaut in space shuttle.

We approached another black object that I could detect only when they showed me how it blocked part of the sky. I asked if anyone knew it was there, and they said that its black coating hid it from radar and visible observations. It was, I suppose, a kind of space station. The real aliens were inside, but we couldn't visit them. Each race gave off toxins that would kill the other, they said, and only the biological constructs that I called the sisters could speak human language. Our craft docked so we could see a small

part of the station. The rest was alien territory, hermetically sealed against both the Earth and the vacuum.

I asked what the real aliens looked like. They showed me pictures of creatures with two arms, two legs, and a head, though the face was deformed by human standards, devoid of hair, with conical ears that tilted in different directions, and without anything I recognized as nostrils. They showed me maps of their sky and pictures of their planet, earthlike yet not earth. I asked more questions, my brain racing in overdrive, but I can remember few of my questions and fewer of their answers.

We were back at the barn by 4 a.m., in time to close the roof and drive back to their house. "Are you convinced?" asked one Waverly as we drove through the early morning darkness. "Will the Brysst be convinced?"

"Yes," was the only answer I could give. My mind was foggy from lack of sleep, but I knew I would have say more. "The Brysst will have to council on it." Surely aliens would need time to decide how to deal with other aliens, whose presence they not suspected before. I needed time. "It may take weeks or months."

"We understand," Abigail said as the car pulled into the drive. "It took us time to decide to contact you. Will you stay with us while they decide?"

I shook my head automatically. "I can't. I have other talks scheduled, and other commitments."

They looked at each other and agreed, then let me go to bed, where the note Melinda had left fluttered in my brief uneasy dreams: "I have to leave, Jack. I think we made a mistake."

When morning came, the sisters greeted me with a big bowl of hearty home-cooked oatmeal and a glass of milk. It reminded me of my maiden aunt's house in Glens Falls, where as a child I would hide from the busy world for a few days each summer. As I ate, they asked what the Brysst had said when I them.

I swallowed the cereal and looked up at the sisters. The game was over. "I'm a fraud," I said flatly. "The Brysst are a hoax my ex cooked up. She took off and left me stuck with them. Without this con, I'd be flipping burgers somewhere."

The biological constructs stared immobile at me, not programmed to deal with such unwanted truths. Back on the space ship, the real aliens must have been upset. I felt suspended in time as the sisters stared blankly; when one finally spoke, I felt freed.

"She must have known them. Where is she?"

There was no threat in the words, but I shivered. Were the aliens deaf to my words? Or was it I who had been deaf? Deaf to Melinda and only opening my ears to hear when they had shown me a reality I could not deny? "Oregon," I said. Her note had said she was going back. She had shown me the town on a map, the once we had sat and traced the wanderings of our lives. It was in the Willamette Valley. She had said it was a beautiful place.

"Can you find her?"

"I don't know." Melinda could have wandered far in two years. I stopped before my mind could start down the well-worn path of excuses and lies. Only Melinda would know the truth, and I wanted to know it as much as the Waverlys did. "We'll have to try."

While the sisters brewed coffee for me, I left a message telling Angie to cancel the rest of the tour, and booked three seats on a flight to Oregon.

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