

Decaf and Spaceship, To Go

by Katherine Sanger

I always knew the world would end while I was trapped in the Starbucks drive-through. With as much time as I spent there, the odds were definitely in its favor. But it still surprised me that afternoon to see the silver, egg-shaped craft materialize in the parking lot next to me.

I placed my order at the little voice-destroying speaker box and pulled forward. The woman in front of me was already at the window. She had her door open (poor depth perception, I guessed), and I heard her complaining.

"No, no, it was an *iced* vanilla chai soy latte and a *hot* vanilla white mocha chai soy latte." She was still shaking her blond bouffant head when her Suburban vanished, taking her with it. Before I could exhale the gulp of air I had taken when the SUV had popped out of existence, something appeared in the line ahead of me.

The first word that came into my head was "alien." The second, third, and fourth were "oh my God."

I stared out my windshield, fighting the urge to rub my eyes like I'd seen people do in all the science fiction movies I'd grown up watching. The dull silver flying object sat in the brown-grey cement parking lot, not ten feet from me, taking up three and a half spots, including the handicap slot. It made a soft humming sound, kind of like one of those little vacuum cleaners that zooms around on the ground and cleans by itself.

Right in front of me stood what had to be an occupant of the craft, her head even with the top of the drive-up window. Her four legs looked like they'd come off a deer, and her two arms were longer than they should have been, giving her the appearance of one of those stick insects, a look that was further enhanced by her skin coloring.

She was the color of an iced nonfat mocha, the very drink I had ordered before the ship and the alien had appeared. What convinced me she was a woman was the fact that, over her shoulder (or the closest approximation of one that she had) was slung one of those fashionable new Tootsie Roll-looking purses. Even from my distance, I could see the little Gucci symbols all over it. Wherever this alien was from, she knew how to shop.

I fought the urge to press the button and roll my window up. Who knew if this alien woman would take that as a sign of aggression? Shopping habits aside, we might have nothing in common.

Her pencil-thin fingers opened the purse, and she dug through it. A piece of what looked like the foil that Wrigley's was wrapped in fell to the ground. Do aliens chew gum? She shook her triangular head and kept peering into the bag with those weird bug eyes. Finally, she withdrew a small booklet and flipped to one of the last pages.

Through the open window, I could hear her speaking. Her voice sounded like one of those automated machines that I heard whenever I called my bank to beg them to refund the bounce-check fees. "I would like an iced triple grande cinnamon soy no-whip mocha. I would like an iced decaf venti sugar-free vanilla chai latte. I would like a tall almond Americano—" She paused and her head whipped from side to side for a moment. I swore I heard guitar feedback, even though my radio was off. "No. I would like a grande decaf almond Americano with half and half. I would like a venti peppermint mocha frappuccino. With whip."

I couldn't hear the response of whoever was inside the window. The alien woman stood without moving. Was she breathing? Did she breathe? I could feel and hear my own breathing now. It was the only sound I heard. I couldn't tell if the outside world existed anymore. All my attention was focused on the figure in the line ahead of me.

I don't know how long I sat there. I figured this was it. After she got the drinks, I thought, the entire planet would suddenly be destroyed. It was all over. I couldn't tell if that upset me. My entire head—brain included—felt numb.

A pale, shaking hand appeared in the window, holding an iced grande drink. The alien shook her head. I waited for the planet to explode. It didn't.

"I am sorry," the alien said. "I require a cup holder. The x-Generated JVR5 does not come standard with cup holders."

The hand was withdrawn. A minute later, it reappeared, holding a brown cardboard cup holder with four cups perched in it.

I didn't see the alien move, but one second the tray sat in the disembodied hand, and the next it was floating in the air, a few inches away from the alien's purse. The alien dug through the purse, retrieved some crumpled bills, and handed them to the hand. The hand withdrew quickly.

"Please keep the change for excellent service," the alien said. She turned her head to me without moving her body. The volume of her voice increased as she addressed me. "I do apologize for cutting in your line," she said. I realized that her mouth—or the slash that I assumed was her mouth—didn't move when she spoke. "With the current atmosphere, I cannot observe proper manners. I did not mean to inconvenience you."

I nodded and smiled dumbly. Was I supposed to respond? What did she mean, anyway? The political atmosphere? Were we not alien-friendly? Or did she mean the actual physical atmosphere, the stratosphere and all that science stuff?

She turned away from me, then she disappeared, along with the drinks. The ship blinked once before it vanished. I waited, again, for the planet to explode. It still didn't. But the car in front of me did reappear, the woman still complaining.

"And when I say hot, I don't mean burn my lip and give me a blister hot." She paused and shook her head. "Never mind. Make them both iced."

I closed my eyes, giving in to the temptation to rub them. My breathing was returning to normal, and I heard ordinary noises around me again—birds chirping, cars revving on the road, tires squealing.

The hand appeared from the window again, and drinks and money were exchanged. The SUV pulled out. I exhaled and moved forward, taking my place in front of the window. The woman working the window refused to look at me while she served me my drink and took my money. I didn't know how to broach the subject of aliens ordering coffee. "So, do you get much intergalactic coffee traffic?" sounded like something you'd see written in a police report on COPS after they'd finally managed to arrest the guy who was drunk, driving on the wrong side of the road, and naked. I didn't feel like being on TV.

I lingered at the window a moment. Were they up there, sipping their coffee? I heard a honk behind me and pulled forward and out of the black BMW's way. The road before me was bumper-to-bumper, and as I waited for an opening to appear, I glanced back to the drive through and almost choked on my mocha.

In the same three and a half parking spots that the silver egg had been sitting in not three minutes ago, a blue-tinted, round craft materialized. It had orange lights encircling the bottom, and they flashed slowly, reminding me of a roadwork sign that was losing power. Before I could blink, the BMW was gone, replaced by another alien.

This alien was more humanoid than the last. It stood on what I assumed were two legs—I could see brown workboots protruding from under its satin-looking striped pants—and those were definitely hands protruding from the end of the orange and pink pineapple-covered shirt. I couldn't see how many fingers there were at this distance, but I would have bet the rest of my drink that there were a few more than five on each. The alien's octagonal head stuck out of the neckline of the shirt at a weird angle, and it was the same color as the ship.

Staring at the gaudiness on display in my rearview mirror, I tried to figure out if the alien was pure

Prada or pure Wal-Mart.

Through my open window I heard it begin to order. "We wants us a solo ristretto with whip . . ."

The rest of the order—if there was one—was drowned out by the scream that escaped through the window, followed by a very loud and forceful, "I quit!"

I couldn't say I blamed her. The customers always were the worst part of working retail.