

# FLYING PAN

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Marianne Summers worked in a frying-pan factory. For eight hours every day and for five days every week she stood by a production-line conveyor and every time a frying pan went by she put a handle on it. And all the while she stood by one conveyor she rode along on another—a big conveyor with days and nights over it instead of fluorescent tubes, and months standing along it instead of people. And every time she passed a month it added something to her or took something away, and as time went by she became increasingly aware of the ultimate month—the one standing far down the line, waiting to put a handle on her soul.

Sometimes Marianne sat down and wondered how she could possibly have gotten into such a rut, but all the while she wondered she knew that she was only kidding herself, that she knew perfectly well why. Ruts were made for untalented people, and if you were untalented you ended up in one; moreover if you were untalented and were too stubborn to go home and admit you were untalented, you stayed in one.

There was a great deal of difference between dancing on TV and putting handles on frying pans: the difference between being graceful and gawky, lucky and unlucky, or—to get right back to the basic truth again—the difference between being talented and untalented. No matter how hard you practiced or how hard you tried, if your legs were too fat, no one wanted you and you ended up in a rut or in a frying-pan factory, which was the same thing, and you went to work every morning and performed the same tasks and you came home every night and thought the same thoughts, and all the while you rode down the big conveyor between the merciless months and came closer and closer to the ultimate month that would put the final touches on you and make you just like everybody else. . . .

Mornings were getting up and cooking breakfasts in her small apartment and taking the bus to work. Evenings were going home and cooking lonely suppers and afterward TV. Weekends were writing letters and walking in the park. Nothing ever changed and Marianne had begun to think that nothing ever would.

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And then one night when she came home, she found a flying frying pan on her window ledge.

It had been a day like all days, replete with frying pans, superintendents, boredom and tired feet. Around ten o'clock the maintenance man stopped by and asked her to go to the Halloween Dance with him. The Halloween Dance was a yearly event sponsored by the company and was scheduled for that night. So far, Marianne had turned down fifteen would-be escorts.

A frying pan went by and she put a handle on it. "No, I don't think so," she said.

"Why?" the maintenance man asked bluntly.

It was a good question, one that Marianne couldn't answer honestly because she wasn't being honest with herself. So she told the same little white lie she had told all the others: "I—I don't like dances."

"Oh." The maintenance man gave her the same look his fifteen predecessors had given her, and moved on. Marianne shrugged her shoulders. I don't care *what* they think, she told herself. Another frying pan went by, and another and another.

After a while, noon came, and Marianne and all the other employees ate frankfurters and sauerkraut in the company cafeteria. The parade of frying pans recommenced promptly at 12:30.

During the afternoon she was approached twice more by would-be escorts. You'd have thought she was the only girl in the factory. Sometimes she hated her blue eyes and round pink face, and sometimes she even hated her bright yellow hair, which had some of the properties of a magnet. But hating the way she looked didn't solve her problems—it only aggravated them—and by the time 4:30 came she had a headache and she heartily despised the whole world.

Diminutive trick-or-treaters were already making the rounds when she got off the bus at the corner. Witches walked and goblins leered, and pumpkin candles sputtered in the dusk. But Marianne hardly

noticed.

Halloween was for children, not for an embittered old woman of twenty-two who worked in a frying-pan factory. She walked down the street to the apartment building and picked up her mail at the desk. There were two letters, one from her mother, one from—

Marianne's heart pounded all the way up in the elevator and all the way down the sixth-floor corridor to her apartment. But she forced herself to open her mother's letter first. It was a typical letter, not essentially different from the last one. The grape crop had been good, but what with the trimming and the tying and the disking and the horse-hoeing, and paying off the pickers, there wasn't going to be much left of the check—if and when it came; the hens were laying better, but then they always did whenever egg prices dropped; Ed Olmstead was putting a new addition on his general store (it was high time!); Doris Hickett had just given birth to a 7 lb. baby boy; Pa sent his love, and please forget your foolish pride and come home. P.S.—Marianne should see the wonderful remodeling job Howard King was doing on his house. It was going to be a regular palace when he got done.

Marianne swallowed the lump in her throat. She opened the other letter with trembling fingers:

DEAR MARIANNE,

*I said I wasn't going to write you any more, that I'd already written you too many times asking you to come home and marry me and you never gave me an answer one way or the other. But sometimes a fellow's pride don't amount to much.*

*I guess you know I'm remodeling the house and I guess you know the reason why. In case you don't it's the same reason I bought the house in the first place, because of you. I only got one picture window and I don't know whether I should put it in the parlor or in the kitchen. The kitchen would be fine, but all you can see from there is the barn and you know how the barn looks, but if I put it in the parlor the northwest wind would be sure to crack it the first winter though you'd get a good view of the road and the willows along the creek. I don't know what to do.*

*The hills behind the south meadow are all red and gold the way you used to like them. The willows look like they're on fire. Nights I sit on the steps and picture you coming walking down the road and stopping by the gate and then I get up and walk down the path and I say, "I'm glad you've come back, Marianne. I guess you know I still love you." I guess if anybody ever heard me they'd think I was crazy because the road is always empty when I get there, and there's no one ever standing by the gate.*

HOWARD

There had been that crisp December night with the sound of song and laughter intermingling with the crackling of the ice beneath the runners and the chug-chugging of the tractor as it pulled the hay-filled sleigh, and the stars so bright and close they touched the topmost branches of the silhouetted trees, and the snow, pale and clean in the starlight, stretching away over the hills, up and up, into the first dark fringe of the forest; and herself, sitting on the tractor with Howard instead of in the hay with the rest of the party, and the tractor lurching and bumping, its headbeams lighting the way over the rutted country road

Howard's arm was around her and their frosty breaths blended as they kissed. "I love you, Marianne," Howard said, and she could see the words issuing from his lips in little silvery puffs and drifting away into the darkness, and suddenly she saw her own words, silver too, hovering tenuously in the air before her, and presently she heard them in wondrous astonishment: "I love you, too; Howie. I love you, too. . . ."

She didn't know how long she'd been sitting there crying before she first became aware of the ticking sound. A long time, she guessed, judging by the stiffness of her limbs. The sound was coming from her bedroom window and what it made her think of most was the common pins she and the other kids used to tie on strings and rig up so they'd keep swinging against the windowpanes of lonely old people sitting alone on Halloween.

She had lit the table lamp when she came in, and its beams splashed reassuringly on the living-room rug. But beyond the aura of the light, shadows lay along the walls, coalesced in the bedroom doorway. Marianne stood up, concentrating on the sound. The more she listened the more she doubted that she was being victimized by the neighborhood small fry: the ticks came too regularly to be ascribed to a pin dangling at the end of a string. First there would be a staccato series of them, then silence, then another series. Moreover, her bedroom window was six stories above the street and nowhere near a fire escape.

But if the small fry weren't responsible for the sound, who was? There was an excellent way to find out. Marianne forced her legs into motion, walked slowly to the bedroom doorway, switched on the ceiling light and entered the room. A few short steps brought her to the window by her bed.

She peered through the glass. Something gleamed on the window ledge but she couldn't make out what it was. The ticking noise had ceased and traffic sounds drifted up from below. Across the way, the warm rectangles of windows made precise patterns in the darkness, and down the street a huge sign said in big blue letters: SPRUCK'S CORN PADS ARE THE BEST.

Some of Marianne's confidence returned. She released the catch and slowly raised the window. At first she didn't recognize the gleaming object as a flying saucer; she took it for an upside-down frying pan without a handle. And so ingrained was the habit by now that she reached for it instinctively, with the unconscious intention of putting a handle on it.

"Don't touch my ship!"

That was when Marianne saw the spaceman. He was standing off to one side, his diminutive helmet glimmering in the radiance of SPRUCK'S CORN PADS. He wore a gray, formfitting space suit replete with ray guns, shoulder tanks, and boots with turned-up toes, and he was every bit of five inches tall. He had drawn one of the ray guns (Marianne didn't know for sure they were ray guns, but judging from the rest of his paraphernalia, what else could they be?) and was holding it by the barrel. It was clear to Marianne that he had been tapping on the window with it.

It was also clear to Marianne that she was going, or had gone, out of her mind. She started to close the window—"Stop, or I'll burn you!"

Her hands fell away from the sash. The voice had seemed real enough, a little on the thin side, perhaps, but certainly audible enough. Was it possible? Could this tiny creature be something more than a figment?

He had changed his gun to his other hand, she noticed, and its minute muzzle pointed directly at her forehead. When she made no further move, he permitted the barrel to drop slightly and said, "That's better. Now if you'll behave yourself and do as I say, maybe I can spare your life."

"Who are you?" Marianne asked. It was as though he had been awaiting the question. He stepped dramatically into the full radiance of the light streaming through the window and sheathed his gun. He bowed almost imperceptibly, and his helmet flashed like the tinsel on a gum wrapper. "Prince Moy Trehano," he said majestically, though the majesty was marred by the thinness of his voice, "Emperor of 10,000 suns, Commander of the vast space fleet which is at this very moment in orbit around this insignificant planet you call `Earth!'"

"Wh—why?"

"Because we're going to bomb you, that's why!"

"But why do you want to bomb us?"

"Because you're a menace to galactic civilization! Why else?"

"Oh," Marianne said.

"We're going to blow your cities to smithereens. There'll be so much death and destruction in our wake that you'll never recover from it. . . . Do you have any batteries?"

For a moment Marianne thought she had misunderstood. "Batteries?"

"Flashlight batteries will do." Prince Moy Trehano seemed embarrassed, though it was impossible to tell for sure because his helmet completely hid his face. There was a small horizontal slit where, presumably, his eyes were, but that was the only opening. "My atomic drive's been acting up," he went on. "In fact, this was a forced landing. Fortunately, however, I know a secret formula whereby I can

convert the energy in a dry-cell battery into a controlled chain reaction. Do you have any?"

"I'll see," Marianne said.

"Remember now, no tricks. I'll burn you right through the walls with my atomic ray gun if you try to call anyone!"

"I—I think there's a flashlight in my bed-table drawer."

There was. She unscrewed the base, shook out the batteries and set them on the window sill. Prince Moy Trehano went into action. He opened a little door on the side of his ship and rolled the batteries through. Then he turned to Marianne. "Don't you move an inch from where you are!" he said. "I'll be watching you through the viewports." He stepped inside and closed the door.

Marianne held her terror at bay and peered at the spaceship more closely. They aren't really flying saucers at all, she thought; they're just like frying pans . . . flying frying pans. It even had a little bracket that could have been the place where the handle was supposed to go. Not only that, its ventral regions strongly suggested a frying-pan cover.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. First thing you knew, everything she saw would look like a frying pan. She remembered the viewports Prince Moy Trehano had mentioned, and presently she made them out—a series of tiny crinkly windows encircling the upper part of the saucer. She leaned closer, trying to see into the interior.

"Stand back!"

Marianne straightened up abruptly, so abruptly that she nearly lost her kneeling position before the window and toppled back into the room. Prince Moy Trehano had reemerged from his vessel and was standing imperiously in the combined radiance of the bedroom light and SPRUCK'S CORN PADS.

"The technical secrets of my stellar empire are not for the likes of you," he said. "But as a recompense for your assistance in the repairing of my atomic drive I am going to divulge my space fleet's target areas.

"We do not contemplate the complete destruction of humanity. We wish merely to destroy the present civilization, and to accomplish this it is our intention to wipe out every city on Earth. Villages will be exempt, as will small towns with populations of less than 20,000 humans. The bombings will begin as soon as I get back to my fleet—a matter of four or five hours—and if I do not return, they will begin in four or five hours anyway. So if you value your life, go ho—I mean, leave the city at once. I, Prince Moy Trehano, have spoken!"

Once again the bow, and the iridescing of the tinselly helmet, and then Prince Moy Trehano stepped into the spaceship and slammed the door. A whirring sound ensued, and the vessel began to shake. Colored lights went on in the viewports—a red one here, a blue one there, then a green one—creating a Christmas-tree effect.

Marianne watched, entranced. Suddenly the door flew open and Prince Moy Trehano's head popped out. "Get back!" he shouted. "Get back! You don't want to get burned by the jets, do you?" His head disappeared and the door slammed again.

Jets? Were flying saucers jet-propelled? Even as she instinctively shrank back into her bedroom, Marianne pondered the question. Then, as the saucer rose from the window ledge and into the night, she saw the little streams of fire issuing from its base. They were far more suggestive of sparks from a Zippo lighter than they were of jets, but if Prince Moy Trehano had said they were jets, then jets they were. Marianne was not inclined to argue the point.

When she thought about the incident afterward she remembered a lot of points that she could have argued—if she'd wanted to. Prince Moy Trehano's knowledge of the English language, for one, and his slip of the tongue when he started to tell her to go home, for another. And then there was the matter of his atomic drive. Certainly, Marianne reflected later, if the bombs his fleet was supposed to have carried were as technically naive as his atomic drive, the world had never had much to worry about.

But at the moment she didn't feel like arguing any points. Anyway, she was too busy to argue. Busy packing. Under ordinary circumstances Prince Moy Trehano's threatened destruction of the cities of Earth would never have been reason enough to send her scurrying to the sticks. But Lord, when you were so sick of the pinched little channels of blue that city dwellers called a sky, of the disciplined little

plots of grass that took the place of fields, of bored agents who sneered at you just because you had fat legs; when, deep in your heart, you wanted an excuse to go home—then it was reason enough.

More than enough.

At the terminal she paused long enough to send a telegram:

DEAR HOWIE: PUT THE PICTURE WINDOW IN THE KITCHEN, I DON'T MIND THE BARN. WILL BE HOME ON THE FIRST TRAIN. MARIANNE

When the lights of the city faded into the dark line of the horizon, Prince Moy Trehano relaxed at the controls. His mission, he reflected, had come off reasonably well.

Of course there had been the inevitable unforeseen complication. But he couldn't blame anyone for it besides himself. He should have checked the flashlight batteries before he swiped them. He knew well enough that half the stock in Olmstead's general store had been gathering dust for years, that Ed Olmstead would rather die than throw away anything that some unwary customer might buy. But he'd been so busy rigging up his ship that he just hadn't thought.

In a way, though, his having to ask Marianne's help in the repairing of his improvised motor had lent his story a conviction it might otherwise have lacked. If he'd said right out of a clear blue sky that his "fleet" was going to bomb the cities and spare the villages, it wouldn't have sounded right. Her giving him the batteries had supplied him with a motivation. And his impromptu explanation about converting their energy into a controlled chain reaction had been a perfect cover-up. Marianne, he was sure, didn't know any more about atomic drives than he did.

Prince Moy Trehano shifted to a more comfortable position on his matchbox pilot's seat. He took off his tinfoil helmet and let his beard fall free. He switched off the Christmas-tree lights beneath the Saran Wrap viewports and looked out at the village-bejeweled countryside.

By morning he'd be home, snug and secure in his miniature mansion in the willows. First, though, he'd hide the frying pan in the same rabbit hole where he'd hidden the handle, so no one would ever find it. Then he could sit back and take it easy, comforted by the knowledge of a good deed well done—and by the happy prospect of his household chores being cut in half.

A witch went by on a broom. Prince Moy Trehano shook his head in disgust. Such an outmoded means of locomotion! It was no wonder humans didn't believe in witches any more. You had to keep up with the times if you expected to stay in the race. Why, if he were as old-fashioned and as antiquated as his contemporaries he might have been stuck with a bachelor for the rest of his life, and a shiftless bachelor—when it came to housework, anyway—at that. Not that Howard King wasn't a fine human being; he was as fine as they came. But you never got your dusting and your sweeping done mooning on the front steps like a sick calf, talking to yourself and waiting for your girl to come home from the city. When you came right down to it, you *had* to be modern. Why, Marianne wouldn't even have *seen* him, to say nothing of hearing what he'd had to say, if he'd worn his traditional clothing, used his own name and employed his normal means of locomotion. Twentieth-century humans were just as imaginative as eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century humans: they believed in creatures from black lagoons and monsters from 20,000 fathoms and flying saucers and beings from outer space

But they didn't believe in brownies. . . .