

FO

by Steven L. Schiff

Jack Howard sped along the Interstate, his mind lost in thought. The solitary week at his company's mountain retreat had been good for his soul. But now, as the reality of going back to work the next morning wiggled its way into his consciousness, he could feel those old familiar tensions returning.

Jack was president and CEO of a think-tank, a company whose entire reason for being was to come up with new ideas and inventions. With no advanced degrees or spectacular talents of his own, Jack had made a fortune by putting together groups of talented individuals, thinkers who, working together, devised ingenious advances in electronics, computer hardware, software, and electronic communications. But it had been almost a year since any of his geniuses had developed a product or service that appealed to the needs of the general population.

It seemed that Jack's company had finally outsmarted itself. Jack's current employees were coming up with ideas of interest only to other think-tank employees, university intellectuals, Internet players, and old-moned corporation heads.

It's this cursed economy, he thought. Even though technology had been zooming through the roof over the last ten years, the typical citizen couldn't afford to enjoy it. So, while a privileged few purchased his company's new super-fast CPUs and high-powered satellite transmitters, the average Joe had begun abandoning Jack's electronic marvels for the simpler and cheaper tools of the past. As the public's old 486 computers breathed their last gasp, they were being replaced with inexpensive word-processor units and crude typewriters. High-tech video services, charging up to \$150 per month, were being replaced by old televisions with foil-covered, rabbit-ear antennas.

I need new staff, it's that simple, Jack thought. _I need people who can relate to the lives of everyday workers and develop products that they can afford._

As Jack drove, he could feel a tightness growing in his chest. _I'm going to have a heart attack before I'm fifty_, Jack thought. _This week of fishing and hiking was supposed to relax me. My shrink said total isolation from chattering people and difficult decisions would make me feel ten years younger. But I've only been away from the cabin for an hour — I've just been thinking about work for a few minutes, and already I feel like I never went on vacation at all._

Jack tried to completely blank his mind — empty it of thoughts. He concentrated solely on the isolated road and the lights of the highway. And that's when he first saw the spherical craft coming down out of the sky.

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What exactly is that? he wondered, as the object suddenly stopped its descent and hovered in the air a few feet above the road directly in the path of Jack's car.

Jack pulled his vehicle to the side of the road and got out to observe this strange phenomenon. The object hung freely in space, less than half a mile down the Interstate. It looked like a solid ball, with no apparent windows or openings. Jack could see exhaust or steam of some sort pouring out of the bottom of the globe-shaped craft. _It's a real live UFO. It's got to be. What else could it be? Where's my camera?_

Jack opened the trunk of his car, and pulled out his new, high-resolution digital video camera, one of the recent devices his company had developed which only Jack and a few others could afford. _Plenty of tape's left. I should be able to record this image and send it to one of my labs for analysis. If there's a pilot inside that UFO thing, and he thought I was just a dumb hayseed who'd be laughed out of the sheriff's office when I reported an unidentified flying object, he's made a serious miscalculation._

Jack pointed his camera at the object and started his recording.

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Ezra and his pretty wife, Rynly, were an ordinary young couple. They had two children just starting grade school. Both had good jobs paying top-notch wages. Ezra enjoyed sports and played on his company's Sunday "flagball" team. And they had plenty of friends who'd often come over to play dominoes, or watch programs on the video receiver. But they were pretty lousy gods. And, like most of their society, they were tired of being gods. Tired of the hordes of primitive men and women in the outlying areas who, for centuries, had expected miracles — expected the citizens of the city to somehow change the weather to help with crop growth, or cure Aunt Mary's painful arthritis.

And it had been bad enough when the primitives simply built crude temples and made ghastly sacrifices to garner the favor of the city-dwellers. That simple-minded worship had been a constant source of embarrassment. But now, with the new "one god" religions that the primitives had invented, all citizens had to stay "on guard" almost constantly. Isolated

individuals who (by some perverse miracle) penetrated the electrical barrier surrounding the city, were acting violently, shouting curses at the "false gods," throwing stones at innocent pedestrians, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

"In my day," Ezra's dad delighted in telling his son and daughter-in-law, "the primitives treated us with respect. My friends and I used to go to their villages just for the tribute they'd give us. We'd flash a simple holographic image in the sky, and the little buggers would run for their huts, only to return an hour later with bags of fresh nuts and berries. And sometimes even a few young girls to use as house servants or laborers."

"Try that today and you'll end up dead," Ezra told his father, time and again.

And Rynly always added her own thoughts to the conversation. "We never should have executed that eccentric prophet. In their eyes, we made him into a martyr and ourselves into devils."

In recent days, things had been worse than ever before. Groups of primitives were now throwing themselves into the electric barrier, leaving piles of burnt bodies at the outskirts of the city.

"What do they hope to achieve?"

"They're trying to break down the barrier, Rynly."

"Don't they know that you can't just 'break down' an electric fence that way?" Rynly asked.

"You'd think they'd learn, but they never do. They're primitives."

Ezra's Uncle Saul was a member of a vocal (and wealthy) minority who suggested various drastic solutions to the "primitive" problem. One afternoon, he called and excitedly informed them to expect him for dinner. He had big news that they simply had to hear, right away.

"I like the way Saul just invites himself over, any time he feels like it," said Rynly, reluctantly preparing a roast dodo and some of her famous avocado dip for their uncle's dining pleasure.

"Aw babe, he's just a harmless old man. And he's quite fond of you, you know."

"Well, I guess I like him too, but he's such a pest, Ezra."

"Hey, this time I really want to hear what he has to say. That group of his is growing more powerful every day. They now have literally dozens of supporters in the Senate."

Uncle Saul arrived promptly at 7 P.M., ornate cane in hand, with a gift of flowers for Rynly.

"Thank you, Saul. I'll go put these in some water," she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Have a seat, Unc. Take a load off those old feet," Ezra suggested.

And Uncle Saul plopped himself onto their sofa, then grabbed a handful of rice chips and dunked them into Rynly's avocado mixture.

"No one makes an avocado dip like your Rynly," he said.

"Well, she's one in a million, Unc. One in a million."

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Jack studied a close-up view of his UFO through the lens of his camera. He could see markings on the upper half of the globe, presumably the ship's name written in a language Jack didn't know. _There could be ships like this one, hovering over roads throughout the world, right this second_, he thought. _This could be "it" — the "War of the Worlds," the ultimate alien invasion._

Exhaust continued to stream out of the underside of the craft. _I wonder what they use for power? It has to be some very efficient energy source. I sure would like to take this thing home and let my boys take a look at it._

Suddenly, the ship appeared to be growing larger, expanding in the camera lens. _Now what's happening?_ Jack took a look at it with his naked eye. No, it wasn't growing larger, it was slowly moving toward him. _OK, this is getting serious. I'd better move my corporate butt out of here, fast!_ Jack tossed his camera in the back seat of his car, then got in the driver's seat, started the engine, and pulled the car in a crazy U-turn, across the highway meridian. He stamped his foot on the accelerator and soon was moving at speeds in excess of 90 mph, away from the craft.

Jack looked in his rear-view mirror. The craft was keeping pace with his car, a few hundred feet behind him. Then, it appeared to be gaining on him. Jack pushed the accelerator pedal to the metal, and increased his speed to over 120 mph. _This is one time I don't have to worry about speeding tickets. If a cop shows up, I'll be very glad to see him._

Again, Jack glanced into his rear-view mirror. The craft was still gaining on him. Without a doubt, it was going to overtake him soon.

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Uncle Saul patted his prodigious belly and pushed himself away from the table after he'd finished eating dinner.

"OK, Saul. What does your group want to do about our problem with the primitives?" Rynly asked.

"I hope this isn't another one of those genocide proposals, Unc."

"I agree. We can't just kill all the primitives. They're people, too, you know."

"They're people?" Uncle Saul asked. "Not in my book."

"Hundreds of years ago, they were part of our society," Ezra reminded his uncle.

"Yeah, I know the story, better than you do. The primitives were poor members of our culture who couldn't afford technology. So, while the rest of us became more and more advanced, they degenerated into the illiterate, superstitious hut creatures we know and love today. Ezra, that theory is little more than legend. This supposed schism in our society conveniently occurred so long ago, no substantiating records remain." Uncle Saul puffed on a pipe filled with processed hemp as he spoke, breathing out great plumes of aromatic smoke. "I find it hard to believe that those — those people, were ever anything more than smart animals. Maybe, given enough time and patience, they can change and grow. But I, for one, don't have that kind of patience."

"Except for the color of their skin and eyes, they look exactly like us, Unc."

"Speak for yourself, Ezra," his uncle retorted.

"We can't just kill them. It's immoral. Besides, the Senate won't allow it," Rynly replied.

"Back in my grandfather's day, people thought nothing of exterminating a primitive village or two to restore order."

"Those days are long gone, Unc."

"Pity. But anyway, our current plan has nothing to do with killing the primitives. In fact, we're thinking more in terms of letting the primitives have exactly what they want."

"Which is what?" Ezra asked.

"Well, they want us gone, don't they? My group proposes that we leave. Of course, some would have to stay. But not everybody feels as we do."

"Leave? Leave for where?"

"My group has about a dozen faster-than-light ships at its disposal. Each ship could carry about one-hundred citizens. We propose using those ships to..."

"To colonize another world? That's ridiculous," said Rynly.

"Unc. Everyone knows that we don't have the technology to colonize another world. Sure we can fly to another star system, but due to the time-distortion effects, we'd lose all contact with the citizens that are still here in the city."

"And how would we survive on another planet? How would we build enough homes and factories to live like civilized beings?"

"And suppose the planet we find has a toxic atmosphere? Then, what would we do?"

Uncle Saul puffed quietly on his pipe for a moment, saying nothing. Then he looked his niece and nephew straight in the eye. "You're both missing an obvious solution," he said. "Hear me out."

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Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Jack's engine cut out on him. The car began to decelerate. A beam shot out from the UFO, speeding the car's deceleration. Then, the car came to a dead halt, with the alien craft directly over top of it. Jack got out of his car and stared at the hovering globe. "What do you want from me? Huh? Why are you bothering me? I'm Jack Howard. I'm an important man!"

Another beam shot out of the bottom of the craft, engulfing Jack. And then he felt himself being pulled upward. He looked at the craft as he rose in the air and saw an opening appear — a metal mouth that was prepared to swallow him whole. Jack was scared, terrified, in fact. He felt blood pounding in his ears, and a queasy light-headedness. Then, he lost consciousness.

When Jack awoke, he found himself face to face with an ordinary looking man. But this alien's ethnic origins were a mystery to Jack. His skin was jet black, his hair was white and his eyes were light gray in color.

"Who are you and what do you want? Do you want me to take you to our leader? Huh? Speak to me! Tell me what I can do for you, but please, don't kill me."

The alien quietly listened to Jack, then pushed a few buttons on a nearby ship console. Jack could hear his own words, repeated over and over again, for nearly five minutes. Then, Jack's voice was replaced by a mechanical voice, speaking in English.

"We want to learn about your culture," said the voice. "For now, we need nothing more from you." Meanwhile, the alien just looked at Jack and smiled.

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"Ezra, Rynly, we don't plan on colonizing another world," said Uncle Saul.

"Then why do we need your faster-than-light ships?"

"We need them purely for the time-distortion effects they provide. We'll take off from Earth, travel a few light-years out and a few light-years back. When we get home again, thousands and thousands of years will have elapsed. And our primitives will either have died out or developed a decent culture of their own. Then, we'll just recolonize the planet, using natural resources to rebuild our society."

"But suppose the primitives HAVE developed a civilization of their own by that time?" Rynly asked. "Then what will we do?"

"That's simple. We'll learn their language, find a friend or two who'll teach us about their economic structure — and then we'll just join their society. Taking our rightful place as rulers, of course."

Ezra scooped out the last of the avocado dip onto a rice chip and thought about what his uncle had just told them. The plan wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. •

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