

The Visitor

It was the third time that morning Tony had walked to the end of the road and back. Still no sign.

And yet they had said they'd be here before midday.

Walking was no easy matter. Each time Tony stirred from the kitchen table, he had to take both his sticks, clattering down the hallway and out through the garden gate, then prowling past the hedges like a huge insect, in a way that frightened children. As a rule, he didn't like to be seen by the neighbours; now he'd revealed himself three times in one morning. To ensure nobody spoke to him, he'd affixed his darkest scowl, but it had still been a close call. One child, oblivious in the way some children are – no doubt destined for some insufferable career in primary education or the performing arts – had approached him with a beheaded daisy, and even reached for his sleeve, before its mother had snapped out of her phone trance and yanked it away.

Which was lucky, because he didn't want to draw attention to himself by screaming.

Now it was 12:01, and the sun was at its height, blazing down on the pitted tarmac of Weltwater Crescent. Grimly, from behind the curtain, Tony surveyed the road in front No 16 one more time. It was deserted except for a small bird turning over a crisp packet. No use. They were not coming. All his preparations had been in vain.

He manoeuvred his way backwards into the hallway, turned – and dropped his sticks. They hit the linoleum hilt-first, one after the other, like rifle fire: *bam bam*. Standing before him, no more than three feet tall, stocky, with a wide-brimmed hat that almost covered his darkened face, was a man. At least it looked like a man. For a moment, when the vision didn't move, Tony thought a raiding party of hooligans had penetrated the house via the kitchen door – historically a weak spot – and propped a doll in the corridor to frighten him. But then, as he stooped to collect his sticks, Tony passed beyond the brim of the hat and into the line of a fierce gaze.

‘We have come,’ said the visitor. Its voice was toneless, deadpan – like a cold wind whipping over rock in zero gravity, somewhere far from Earth.

Tony straightened. ‘You are welcome,’ he told the top of the creature’s head. His heart was beating. A vibrant electricity was passing through his tired limbs. Against all odds, it had happened. What was the best way to entertain a visitor from outer space?

‘Won’t you come through,’ he said.

An attempt had been made to tidy up, but the kitchen still looked what it was: the dining quarters of an intergalactic communicator whose attentions, and command station, were elsewhere. But still, it was the least obtrusive place. Tony drew the blinds, which left only two blades of sunshine slicing through the dust motes, one on each side of the sink. He offered the visitor a stool, and cleared his throat.

‘Would you like tea?’

The visitor said nothing. He was wearing what looked like a tiny cowboy outfit.

‘How about something to eat? You must have come far. I think I’ve got ham.’

Tony opened the fridge.

‘The window of opportunity is narrow, and we must act swiftly,’ boomed the visitor, in a deeper voice than seemed possible from such a small body. ‘Where is your command station?’

‘In the cellar.’

‘Let us proceed there at once.’

Navigating the narrow wooden staircase that led to the rig was tricky at the best of times. Under the implacably intense gaze of his guest, Tony found it almost impossible. He turned this way and that, manoeuvring his bulk around the corner, dropped and retrieved one stick, all to a series of clucks that sounded ominously like impatience. The Vetiri were not a race he intended to piss off, if he could help it. But coming in sight of the command station, positioned behind a

dummy wall, settled his nerves. Over the years, it had grown to something truly impressive. The noises from beneath the hat were appreciative this time. The faint scent of Febreze hung in the air.

‘This is the receiver known as Tatooine 2?’

‘This is it.’

The creature seated himself in Tony’s swivel chair and pulled himself closer to the controls. He took a moment to survey what was in front of him and then he began. His hands moved in a blur over the keyboards, like a virtuoso pianist. Tony watched him in wonderment, as his humble rig performed tricks he didn’t know it was capable of. And he’d programmed it.

The visitor turned. ‘I have identified a landing position for Verlagarhhh, our – what is your quaint phrase? – ‘mother ship’. The only space with the correct meridian energy is three residences along, the house of a Mrs’ – he frowned at the screen – ‘Bagstowe. I require you to eliminate the occupant in the next 0.5 hours. Landing will occur at precisely 12.57, and from there the operation will proceed as planned.’

‘Ah,’ said Tony. ‘Very good.’ He blinked. ‘It’s just, I thought you said that no one would be harmed in the operation.’

The creature swivelled to look at Tony.

‘Once the operation has commenced, we shall begin dispensing our society-improving wisdom as planned. But Verlagarhhh is a large ship and she needs a base. To allay your concerns, the elimination of Citizen Bagstowe will be as painless as possible – not only for her, but for all members of her bloodline and social circle.’ He removed a phaser-shaped object, the size of a child’s water pistol, from the pocket of his tiny waistcoat. ‘If you target Mrs Bagstowe with this weapon, not only will she cease to exist, she will never have existed. Nobody will remember her. Not even you. Any rips in the spacetime continuum will be repaired smoothly, and a few months will do the rest. Humans are forgetful creatures.’

Tony took the phaser. It barely covered his palm. It was a dark purple colour, smooth-surfaced and beautiful, without any sign of a join. He could not tell what material it was made from. It hinted at technological capabilities the likes of which he could only imagine. He stowed it in the pocket of his dressing gown.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Will you remain here?’

‘I will come upstairs,’ said the creature. ‘For some of your meat.’

No would-be assassin ever made much headway with two rattling sticks. And getting into Mrs Bagstowe’s house the rear way, over the fences, was out of the question. Tony decided the best approach would be front-on – to inveigle his way in through the front door, using his natural charm, before selecting an opportune moment to deliver the critical blow.

This represented a slight problem in that he and Mrs Bagstowe, when they saw each other at all – which was rarely – saw eye-to-eye on almost nothing. Though they had lived in the same street for fifteen years, they’d spoken to each other on just a handful of occasions. The most recent of which was that regrettable evening, two months previously, when the Residents’ Association had summoned Tony to answer the serious charges of allowing his front garden to fall into an overgrown state, of possessing a grubby house frontage and of generally, through a systematic campaign of neglect, allowing his property to fall into a state of disrepair. This, they failed to add, threatened the house prices of everyone in the street.

Tony had stood before them as if before a gathering of weasels. Little did they know, these paltry, petty humans, the might of the immense artificial brain that pulsed at the dread core of that deceptively dilapidated shell, No 16. Little did they suspect how their bleating was hastening the day of their re-education. Their cries for mercy would come too late.

At the head of the delegation stood the chief rodent, Mrs Bagstowe herself, gesturing fascistically, shrilly self-certain: he would clean up his act within a month, otherwise a notice would

be issued to the Council. Tony had no option but to hire an insolent, gum-chewing local teen to remove the protective foliage, the expense of which necessitated the cancellation of his Computer Weekly subscription. On top of that, he was sure the boy had leaked details of how, in possession of the right technique, one could bodge open the kitchen door with one's shoulder. Tony had not spoken to Mrs Bagstowe since that day, and resumed his practice of studiously refusing to think about her existence.

But the Vetiri were not a species you refused requests from. On top of their incredible technical ability, they were known for their sudden, unanswerable bursts of violence – committed always in service of the greatest possible cause: Universal Equilibrium. They were the police officers and presiding army of the universe, who kept things in check. And they felt humanity was getting out of line. Balance would need to be restored – at first by re-sculpting the minds of the Earth's inhabitants through a campaign of suggestive improvement. And if that didn't work, by force.

As soon as Tony swung in through Mrs Bagstowe's gate, he could feel eyes supervising him from the upper window. He wouldn't have been surprised if there were cameras in the flowers; perhaps that was why she was so protective of them. He made sure his crutches brushed the stems of the daffodils on his way through, but nothing fell out. The summer day was making him sweat. He rang the bell and stood melting on her front step in his dressing gown as the house gurgled to produce its occupant, like a toilet giving back a withered stool. His Casio said 12:36. Twenty-one minutes till showtime.

'Can I help you?'

The first discombobulation was that the voice came not from the front door or even the window above, but to his left. Tony swivelled and saw Mrs Bagstowe, roughly the size and shape of a schoolchild, peeking around the weathered bricks of the house from the side alley. Her eyes, through bottle-bottom glasses, blinked hugely in the sunlight.

His second thought was how relaxed she looked. She wore not her usual schoolteacherly blouse, but an old pin-striped men's shirt, unbuttoned at the top to reveal a mottled expanse of brown neck. She wore a floppy, dust-rimed hat, and gardening gloves decorated with fading flowers. She seemed calm. And the expression she turned on him was not one of disgust or ire, as he might have expected, but something quite benevolent.

'Can we have a chat?' said Tony. 'Ah, inside if possible.'

She looked him up and down. This beautiful day of all days, you choose for a showdown, she seemed to be saying.

'Fine. But can you come round the back? I'm just in the garden.'

Tony had never been in Mrs Bagstowe's back garden. It was a fine affair, with a lawn as plush as a carpet, draped with curtains of flowers on all sides. In the corner stood a summer house in a tasteful shade of mahogany, while off-centre in the lawn, reached by a pathway of stepping stones, grew a Japanese-looking tree crowded with light pink blossoms. Beside it were some chairs and a table, supporting a jug of pale-coloured liquid. A cat watched him, its tail winding in the air.

'Don't worry, Mr Miggy,' said Mrs Bagstowe, tickling the fleabag beneath the chin. 'It's nobody scary.' She straightened. 'I've made some lemonade. Would you like some?'

'No,' he said. 'Er, OK then.'

'I'll fetch another glass.'

Tony was half minded to follow her and dispatch the critical blow in the kitchen, but something stopped him. The garden's perfume was intense. He recognised some of the flowers – the easy ones, roses and tulips. The large ones with the girlish bobbing heads he thought might be chrysanthemums. Two butterflies tumbled lazily in a playful dance, or else a fight to the death. At least she would die, he thought, somewhere she loved.

He squinted at the sky. It was hard to believe that up there, beyond the reach of human detection, waited those who would change everything. Just now, they were observing, wondering

why he hadn't done away with Mrs Bagstowe when he had the chance. Time was of the essence.

Right there on the lawn would have been perfectly fine: the Vetiri could tie up any loose ends. Tony glanced at his watch: 12:40. He needed to get a move on. In his pocket, he fondled the phaser.

When the tray clinked loudly on the table behind him, he nearly removed his leg from the spacetime continuum.

Mrs Bagstowe fussed with the jug, then handed over a glass of lemonade with a napkin around the bottom.

'There,' she said. 'Biscuit?'

Bourbon Creams. Retro. Tony made a rapid calculation and took two.

'Now.' Mrs Bagstowe offered him a chair and settled herself opposite. 'Let's not beat around the bush. What have you come to tell me?'

'Pardon?'

'I don't much like you, Mr Rogers, and I know for certain that you don't like me. I will always entertain a guest, and anyone is welcome at my house, on the condition that they are honest. So what is it? You're filing a lawsuit? Staging a dirty protest?'

'Now hang on a minute,' said Tony. 'I just came because – because I wanted to –' Her ancient face bored towards him, skewering him with its insect eyes. Words fled. He hadn't planned on doing this much talking anyway. 'I guess I came because I wanted to bury the hatchet,' he said at last. 'Let bygones be bygones. All that.'

She ate a full biscuit before she replied, watching his face.

'Rubbish,' she said. 'There's something else.'

'There isn't,' he pleaded. 'Be reasonable. I just came because it was a neighbourly, it was a neighbourly...'

'Don't stammer. It's not a good look for a man. How's the lemonade?'

'Delicious,' Tony said, taking his first sip.

‘You know, people are a mystery to me,’ said Mrs Bagstowe, leaning back and gazing upwards, straight into the Vetiri’s gigoscopes, as she fanned herself with her hat. ‘You go around thinking somebody has a bit of backbone, you have a grudging kind of respect for them even though they might be a slovenly arsewipe, and then they come into your garden and lie through their *teeth*...’

‘Fine,’ Tony burst out. ‘I’m going to kill you.’

Mrs Bagstowe slapped the table. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere! At last!’ Once more the pale eyes measured him. ‘This time, I don’t think you’re lying. How interesting.’ She sat back. ‘And what would that be for?’

‘There’s a group of super-violent aliens poised to take over the Earth and they need to use your house as a landing pad. It’s not personal. Surprisingly.’

Her eyebrows went up. ‘Well, I’m not sure it’ll wash with the police. But, alright, I’ll play along. What do these aliens want?’

‘They want to re-educate us. They think our species is disgusting and is squandering the gift of life. Or, rather, they think we have the capacity to act with nobility and grace, but so far we haven’t exercised it. So they’re going to come down and with special frequencies... You could think of it as laser beams. Like brainwashing.’

‘And have they brainwashed you?’ asked Mrs Bagstowe, her voice quieter now.

‘I’m one of the few they won’t need to brainwash. I see humanity as it is. Plus, I accidentally stumbled on one of their communication frequencies on my rig. Rather than vaporising me, they decided to use me.’

‘So you’re, what, an assassin? Sent by them?’

‘Something like that.’

Her hand was gripping the arm of her chair. Tony relaxed. It was easier if she thought he was mad. There might be less reasoning then.

‘What would be beautiful,’ said Mrs Bagstowe, in a voice that seemed steadier than usual, as if it came from deeper inside, ‘is if you decided not to kill me. Perhaps that’s just the sign they’re waiting for so they can call off this whole endeavour. The sign that things are looking up.’

‘Why would they want to call it off? For the whole of human history, our world has been ripe for an overhaul. It’s always had the wrong guys in charge, the wrong people prospering. We don’t trust our neighbours. We look down on people who are weaker than us – who are supposedly weaker than us – and we sneer. If it were up to me, we’d vaporise everyone except for me and a select few others. Not many.’

‘Not me?’

‘I’m not here to choose who out of humanity lives or dies. I’m here to do a job.’ Tony checked his watch. ‘And I have nine minutes to do it.’

‘Can I call my sister?’ blurted Mrs Bagstowe.

‘Of course not.’

‘Write a note, then?’

‘There’s no time,’ he said. ‘No time for any of this. And no point.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It won’t do any good. You see, you’re not exactly going to die – you’re going to be cancelled.’

She took a deep breath. ‘Cancelled?’

‘You won’t ever have existed. Your sister won’t remember you.’

‘But that’s impossible. She has photographs!’

‘I think you underestimate the power of these guys.’ Tony took the phaser out of his pocket and prodded it towards the sky. ‘Come on, now. Last words. Sum it up.’

‘You don’t want to do this.’

‘You don’t know what I want.’

‘I know that in there lurks a good man. A man who put fairy lights in his garden this Christmas, and took us all by surprise.’

‘Somebody threw them there. That wasn’t me.’

‘Well, somebody who *left* them there. Everybody noticed it.’

‘Did they?’ said Tony. ‘Nobody told me.’ He brandished a crutch. ‘You try getting up into a tree when you’ve got mobility issues.’

‘Somebody could have done it for you, if only you’d asked.’

‘Somebody did. Stop patronising me, Mrs Bagstowe. You have about a minute of existence left. Make your peace.’

She pondered in silence for a few moments. Then she sat bolt upright, as if a new thought had occurred to her.

‘What right do you have to deprive me of life?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What right do you have? It’s my life. You’re a thief.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are. I like it and it’s mine. It was given to me.’

Tony sighed impatiently. ‘If I were a thief, I’d be stealing something to use for myself. But I can’t use your life.’

Mrs Bagstowe was silent. He thought that was the end of it and readied the phaser. But he couldn’t just leave it like that – unresolved somehow.

‘I’m not a thief,’ he said.

‘You are.’

‘Not.’ He took aim. ‘Be careful what you say.’

‘Or what, you’ll kill me?’ She subsided into a snigger that he saw, too late, was a cry. Mrs Bagstowe sat there weeping. Tony shook his head. He should never have started with the talking –

should have zapped her right there in the passageway. She looked pitiful. A tiny crumpled heap of fabric sprinkling tears on its lap, like a rag doll that had been granted life. This was no way to die. To cease. To whatever.

‘There, there,’ he said. ‘If–’

Without warning Mrs Bagstowe took off and sprinted towards the house. Tony cursed and stood. She moved quickly, with the speed of the desperate, all trace of her hip stiffness gone. She had cleverly put the Japanese tree between them. He took aim. The target was not large. He would get one shot – who knew how long the weapon took to recharge, or what its effects might be. He took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. The phaser kicked like a mule and sat him in the chair. When he looked up, he saw Mrs Bagstowe’s heels just disappearing around the corner of the passage. He could see no trace of the shot on the wall or the windows. The cat had vanished.

Tony grabbed his sticks and followed, the wings of his dressing gown spreading darkly behind him. The gate to the street was locked and undisturbed. Rather than running out and raising the alarm, the silly goose had gone indoors.

The back door was ajar. He had seven minutes to make the kill. Stealth was paramount. Tony propped his sticks against the counter and half-hopped, half-limped across the kitchen. Very soon, the fatigue would start to bite. If he failed, he might as well turn the gun on himself. The Vetiri did not take kindly to underperformers. Mrs Bagstowe’s entrance hall was crimson-carpeted and hung, to his surprise, with oriental prints. A large orchid loomed beside the front door, whose precautionary bolt was still driven across. Hoisted on her own petard.

Tony listened, panting, for the tiniest sound that might give him a clue. The seconds leaked irretrievably by. Finally, he heard it: a miniscule creak overhead that might have been a wicker basket, or the give in an aged shank. Wild-eyed, he went for the stairs, as soundlessly as he was able. The last thing he saw was a photograph displayed on a window ledge, at the turn in the landing, which showed Mrs Bagstowe herself, fabulously young, on her wedding day, beside a broad-smiling

cove in flared trousers, whom Tony guessed to be the fabled Mr Bagstowe, dragon-tamer, now twenty years in his grave.

Tony was flat on his back, his brain still rattling to a stop in his skull, before he realised what had happened. The culprit lay beside him: a huge red volume with gold lettering on the spine that read *Reader's Digest Annual 1998*. He hunted frantically in his dressing gown pocket; he'd lost the phaser in his fall.

Then the gun came into view, upside down, gripped by a trembling Mrs Bagstowe.

'I think you dropped something,' she said. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just pull this trigger right now.'

'You'd go to jail, that's why. First-degree murder,' he said. His voice had a giveaway tremble.

'Murder,' she said musingly. 'Of an intruder? Second-degree, at best. Besides, if what you told me is true, there'd be nothing of you to defend, no one to make any accusations. You would never have existed. *They*' – she poked the phaser at the ceiling – 'would see to that.'

'You didn't believe all that spiel, did you?' said Tony. 'It's just a water pistol. I thought we were playing a game. I was having you on, Mrs Bagstowe. It seems it gave you quite a fright, didn't I. I win.'

She was still creeping towards him down the stairs. A few more soothing words, a bit more stalling, and he'd be able to grab an ankle.

'It didn't sound like a water pistol when you shot my begonias.'

'That was your imagination playing tricks. Go out there and check the windows. I hit them dead-on, and they're fine.'

Mentioning the windows was a mistake. Mrs Bagstowe's eyes narrowed, and she gripped the phaser tighter.

'If it *is* a water pistol, you deserve a soaking.'

'All on your nice carpet?' said Tony. 'Ah.'

They froze. There was a sound like someone detuning a radio station, then tiny footsteps could be heard pattering across the kitchen floor. The brim of a cowboy hat appeared around the door frame at waist height. Then the dark, shrunken face followed. Mrs Bagstowe gasped.

‘You have failed in your duty,’ said the voice that seemed to come from nowhere.

‘I haven’t!’ Tony bleated. ‘I still have three minutes left.’

The Vetiri tilted up its head towards Mrs Bagstowe, who still held the phaser. It was wearing what was probably an ironic expression. Mrs Bagstowe herself seemed about to swoon, but she caught herself just in time.

‘What in the Lord?’ she said.

‘My good madam,’ purred the Vetiri. ‘I can see you require an explanation. I am a member of a race of what you might call aliens. We have come to your world because you need us, to rid you of destitution, ill will, hatred, exploitation – all of the things that make the Earth so miserable for so very many people.’

‘And you want to d-delete me,’ she said. ‘How is that ending ill will?’

His tiny plum-coloured hands behind his back, the Vetiri paced across the carpet. ‘We made our calculations and it transpires that, yes, in the name of the greater good, your sacrifice was necessary. But,’ and here he attempted a hideous smile, looking straight at Tony, ‘everything is open to revision.’

‘I haven’t finished yet!’ Tony cried.

‘Why do you think the people of this world need your input?’ said Mrs Bagstowe asked the creature. ‘Who elected you? Why can’t you sod off and let us look after ourselves? You’re worse than the Council.’

‘With all due respect, Mrs Bagstowe, you aren’t doing a very good job.’ He glanced at Tony. ‘Your community was not even able to neutralise its most toxic element.’

‘Hey,’ said Tony. ‘I’m on your side.’

‘You’re a miserable failure,’ said the Vetiri. ‘But now the time for talking is over. This was never a negotiation, Mrs Bagstowe. I have seen the future. What must be must be.’

He went for his imitation cowboy holster with incredible speed. As he brought out his own phaser, Mr Miggy – who had climbed upon the kitchen counter and was eyeing the creature with interest – made a leap. He landed on the Vetiri’s back just as it pulled the trigger.

A boom rocked the hallway, but when his vision cleared Tony was untouched. The Vetiri staggered across the crimson carpet, emitting a strange noise halfway between a gurgle and a growl, then a harsh clatter of consonants which Tony realised was a string of curses in his own language. As the alien grappled with the cat, the air was filling with a low thunderous hum, and the air took on a strange squeezed feeling, as if it was trying to cram itself together and in through your nose and ears. Something vast – something incomprehensible – was zeroing in overhead.

‘Shoot!’ Tony screamed at Mrs Bagstowe. ‘For the love of God, shoot!’

‘I don’t believe in killing!’

‘Just shoot!’

‘But Mr Miggy!’ she wailed.

With a final burst of expletives, the Vetiri broke the cat’s neck and hurled it to the carpet. With a snarl, he leapt towards the stairs, closing with terrible rapidity on Mrs Bagstowe, who was staring before her with undisguised horror, still holding out the phaser.

‘Mr Miggy,’ she cried.

The alien screamed.

Mrs Bagstowe screamed.

‘Just sh-’ said Tony.

He looked hard at the wall. For a good five minutes. He closed his eyes and opened them again. Something was nagging at his brain, something he needed to remember. Then it was gone. The wall was attached to the fireplace, and the window. But it was sideways. He sat up. Had he

fallen asleep? He must have. His crutches were propped neatly beside him against the sofa cushion, and he struggled to his feet and went haltingly along the corridor. A beautiful day was coming in through the windows, demanding attention, to be played with. It was the kind of day that almost made you want to get outside, no matter how much of an overgrown wreck the garden was, rather than sitting underground plotting the downfall of your enemies. Almost.

Without knowing quite what he was looking for, Tony climbed the stairs. It took a very long time. Everything was as he had left it, which is to say, a complete mess. He went to the back bedroom, where he pressed his face against the window. A cat crossed the jungle of his garden and disappeared. In her own back garden, a few fences along, Mrs Bagstowe was pouring lemonade from a jug. She replaced the jug on the table, then fingered the pink blossoms of a Japanese-looking tree that stood in the middle of her lawn. Then she seemed to go still. She glanced up at the sky – and then, quickly, before Tony had time to hide himself, over towards the window where he stood squinting. He dived backwards onto the bed. There was an easier way to watch her, of course – through the CCTV network he had hacked into on the rig downstairs, via which he could follow the movements of everyone on the street.

But for some reason that didn't appeal on a day like this. He would wait until the coast was clear, and then head out into the garden, get some sun on his face.

In the meantime, though, this bed was a fairly nice place to be. Tony adjusted himself so he was lying mostly on it, and then, without even drawing the curtains, he closed his eyes and slept the sleep of the innocent.