

A Simple Misunderstanding

by Harris Tobias

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Jerome Quinth didn't believe in much. A practical man from the "show me" state of Missouri, he grew up believing in himself and what he could accomplish with his own sweat and hard work. He respected religion but couldn't say he "believed". As for things like fairies, elves, gnomes, trolls and demons, he considered them ignorant superstitions from the past. Believing in such stuff was for chidden and gullible savages.

Once, at a party, he was asked about UFO's. He surprised even himself with his vehement opposition to the subject. "If there really are intelligent aliens flying around out there, they should land in Washington and make proper contact with the president. Why are they playing hide and seek like a bunch of nutty children?"

When someone pointed out that maybe aliens would be hard pressed figuring out whom to contact, Jerome snapped, "If they can't figure out where Washington DC is, well then I don't suppose they're all that intelligent after all."

With such an attitude, it is remarkable that Jerome Quinth would be the one to make first contact with the beings from Lepton Six. As near as authorities could piece together from the charred remains, the historic event happened innocently enough on one of Jerome's daily walks through the park near his home. This under-used

municipal park, a short walk from his suburban house, offered a small nature trail that meandered through a few acres of woods. The trail was broad and well maintained sporting a few benches and labeled trees.

Jerome liked the trail and knew its every hill and shrub. He also knew all the little side paths that led off of the well marked loop into the brush. These smaller paths, no more than deer trails, led to what Jerome thought of as his secret places, little clearings and places in the woods only he knew.

It was on one of these little used paths that he first saw them. At first glance the Leptons looked like a cross between a garden gnome and a land crab. They had a large human like head on a multi legged body giving them the appearance of scuttling when they walked. They stood about two feet tall on six sturdy legs and wore colorful tunics criss crossed with belts. From these belts dangled strange pieces of apparatus to which the aliens were continually referring. The Leptons seemed to have just recently landed. There was a saucer shaped craft of some sort which the aliens were busy covering with brush. Jerome couldn't help but make a small gasp when he first spotted them and that noise alerted the aliens to his presence.

After drawing what Jerome assumed might be weapons, Jerome raised his hands and stood still in what he thought was a non-threatening manner. What Jerome didn't realize was that on Lepton Six, cattle stood on two legs and often put their arms over their heads. Jerome was immediately regarded as a lower life form but since the Leptons had traveled many quadrillions of miles to get here, the correlation with Lepton cattle wasn't certain. So the Lepton leader decided to give the strange cattle-like creature the intelligence test of communication.

One of the aliens scuttled forward and fiddled with one of its

gadgets, finally producing an audible series of grunts, whistles, and squeaks which to Jerome's untutored ears sounded exactly like the sounds of dolphins. Jerome had a CD at home with whale and dolphin noises and he was willing to bet money that these aliens were attempting to speak to him in dolphinese. The speech went on and on for some twenty minutes while the aliens and Jerome stood in bored but respectful silence. When the speech was done, Jerome did his best to say something in dolphin back to the aliens. However, not being as fluent in dolphin as he wished, he could only reproduce a few random clicks and whistles of his own. He soon quit as he felt silly and had no idea what he was saying.

The aliens, who had erroneously assumed that dolphins were the intelligent life form on this planet, had come prepared with a pre-recorded speech of welcome expressing such lofty sentiments as universal peace and harmony between the races, shared cultural exchanges, and trade opportunities. Jerome's feeble squeaking and whistling response were translated into Lepton as mostly gibberish interspersed with the one annoying phrase of "fuck you, banana" which the aliens quite rightly found insulting.

Unaware of his faux pas, Jerome switched to English and offered up a little speech of his own which went something like this: "Hold on there little fellow. I can't make out a word you're saying. We speak English here in Missouri, ENGLISH. You speak the English?" He said this slowly and loudly as if speaking to deaf children instead of beings who had just traversed the stars. The aliens fiddled with their translators and tried communication again this time producing something Slavic or Russian as far as Jerome could tell.

"Don't you guys have English on that gadget?" Jerome tried to say something in his rudimentary High School French and pidgin Spanish. He even tried a few half remembered words in Latin picked up as an altar boy when he was ten, "Pax vobiscom. Espiritu sancti. E pluribus unum?" Having exhausted his fund of real languages he

tried imaginary ones saying in pig latin, "Elcomeway to Earthay."

The alien device wasn't quite up to the task and the Leptons were convinced that they had encountered either a moron or a semi-intelligent beast at best. It was getting late. Jerome was loath to leave the aliens but he was already late and Mrs. Quinth would have supper ready and give him an earful if he was late. Besides, both parties were frustrated by the encounter. Jerome motioned that he would return soon but had to go. "I will return with food and drink," he gestured. The aliens remained curious about this big beast. They weren't sure what it was but it looked harmless enough. All its frantic gesturing meant nothing to them. When Jerome left the Leptons returned to their chores.

Back at home, Jerome kept his discovery of the aliens to himself fearing that Irma, his wife of 32 years, would think him delusional. After doing the dishes, he put some rice, beans, and chicken in a left-over container, filled a gallon jug with water and called out to Irma that he was going for a walk. Irma was just settling herself in front of the TV didn't bother to reply.

Back at the landing site, the Leptons had completely camouflaged their space ship and were busy trying to communicate with a squirrel. Jerome felt slightly annoyed that the aliens didn't recognize him as the crown of creation, but he did his best to hide his injured feelings and announced his arrival in the clearing with a hearty, "Hey, I'm back like I promised." His voice scared away the squirrel which annoyed the aliens who thought they were getting somewhere with the creature. "I brought you all some food and water."

Jerome laid out the victuals—rice, beans, some salad and a chicken thigh. The Leptons approached the food warily. At first the Leptons reacted with horror at what they saw. The red beans looked exactly like their larval young and they were mortified to see them cooked as food. The chicken thigh likewise offended their cultural

aversion to consuming flesh. Jerome wondered why the aliens didn't fall to and eat the meal he so generously offered. He pantomimed picking up food and putting it to his mouth. He made "mmm" sounds of enjoyment. Finally one of the aliens removed a gadget from its belt and scanned the food. The reading on the screen caused a great amount of chittering. The aliens were relieved to see that the suspected larva were vegetable but nauseated by the dead chicken. In the end they refused to touch any of it. Jerome insisted and offered the chicken to the nearest alien who smacked it out of his hand and staggered back revolted. The result was hurt feelings all around.

Jerome next poured the water into a small bowl and offered it to the nearest alien. In his ignorance Jerome had chosen a non-living electro/mechanical Lepton android. Contact with water was a danger to this hybrid life form and could dissolve the creature's delicate hydrophobic clone-bonds causing it to require costly repairs. A quick acting Lepton knocked the water from Jerome's hand averting disaster. The ceramic bowl shattered but still managed to splash some water on the android causing it to run screaming toward the woods. A yellow ray from a Lepton gadget froze the creature in mid scuttle and several members of the crew carried it into the ship.

Jerome was saddened by the out right rejection of his hospitality, but was distracted from dwelling on it by his fascination with the yellow ray. He tried to induce a Lepton to take a shot at one of the many squirrels running around the clearing. The Lepton misinterpreted Jerome's gestures as either hostile or rude. Mistrust was clearly developing on both sides.

Jerome, to his credit, made one last attempt to show his good intentions. Once again he excused himself and hurried home. "Where have you been?" asked Irma. This time Jerome ignored her and called Jingles, the Quinth's miniature poodle. "I'm taking Jingles

for a walk," he called.

"You're going out again? you're going to miss Jeopardy," Irma cautioned.

"I'll be right back. I'm taking Jingles for a walk."

He clipped the leash onto Jingles' harness and the little dog pranced alongside Jerome back to the clearing. When Jingles saw the aliens he began barking continuously unnerved by the strange sight and smell of Leptons.

The Leptons were puzzled seeing an intelligent four legged creature in obvious thrall to a two legged bovine. They turned their translators on Jingles trying to understand the poodle's yapping to no avail. One thing was certain, a four legged creature should not be constrained and the Leptons demanded Jingles be set free using a variety of gestures which left no doubt in Jerome's mind that he best comply. He reached down and unhooked the leash. The result was immediate and explosive. Jingles ran around barking until he stumbled upon the discarded chicken thigh at which point he stopped barking and began eating. The Leptons approached. Jingles, who thought his chicken dinner was being threatened, curled back his lip and snarled menacingly. The Lepton, taking this new vocalization for communication, turned on its pre-recorded dolphin speech and approached closer than Jingles thought prudent. The dog attacked and would have done the alien a grievous injury had it not been brought down by a blue ray that reduced the poodle to a pile of charred fur.

Jerome was horrified at the sight of Jingles getting vaporized and reacted with a cry of anguish that the Leptons misinterpreted as hostility. They assumed defensive postures, ray guns at the ready. Jerome ran over to the smoking scraps and cried, "Now look what you've done. You're going to be sorry when Irma finds out."

Actually it was Irma who turned out to be sorry when in her grief she charged the bewildered aliens. They were forced to defend themselves and unfortunately vaporized her. Later, if for no other reason than to shut him up, they vaporized Jerome too.

Two days later, the Leptons realized their mistake. The cattle-like creatures were the dominant life forms and there were several billions of them. They had severely botched the whole first contact thing and would have to explain their murderous behavior to the authorities who were bound to come looking for the Quinths. After a hurried consultation with their home world, the Leptons re-boarded their saucer and returned to space. They would try again on another planet in the vicinity.

The police discovered the charred remains of the Quinths and were mystified as to the cause of death or the motive. The case remained unsolved for several years until scientists could finally understand how to get a forgotten Lepton recording device to play back the incident and the whole sad story fell into place.

It is hoped that the lessons learned from this unfortunate encounter will help the next one go a little smoother.

