Life in Outer Space

by Todd Maupin

Some time had passed since the encounter; she was not certain how long ago it had been. It was still difficult for her to believe that it had occurred but she had the tangible proof there in front of her, within reach. She was still trying to process her thoughts and reconcile them with the extraordinary event she had experienced.

Conveniently, the vistor had arrived when she was between tasks. She had finished what she wanted to do outside and was resting, entertaining thoughts of what she might eat. She had been living an unremarkable moment when the remarkable happened.

Suddenly, the visitor was there, in front of her. She was startled, of course, by the sudden appearance of such a strange being appearing in such close proximity to her. She had contemplated retreating but the being seemed to sense her apprehension and made a gesture that calmed her; she decided to stay.

The gesture was difficult to explain, and even visualizing it later, she was perplexed, but she knew that it was a sign of peace, an indication that the being was not a threat to her. The being had simply touched the middle of its body, and continued to repeat a circular motion that put her at ease.

It was then that she started to study the being more closely. More than hideous, it was just goofy-looking. She found herself trying to stifle her hilarity so as not to offend it. The being appeared to be studying her as well, so she assumed, uncertain as to the placement of the being's actual visage. Part of her scrutiny was attempting to discern how the being could even perceive her. She and the being vaguely shared the same form, and had she seen it from a distance, she may have thought it was just another member of her family.

However, up close, the being could not have passed for anything of her world. The calming gesture that had assuaged her concern was also unnerving. How could it function with so few limbs protruding from its body? While she had been reassured by the circular motion, she was perturbed by what the being's other

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appendages could do. How it even moved and remained upright was a mystery to her.

She attempted communication first, but it failed to understand. Its response made her wince. The pitch of its sounds made her nauseous. The being appeared to detect the effect it was having upon her and fell silent. It made another gesture that she interpreted as being apologetic. Even though the being had no need to explain how it had come to appear in front of her, it did so anyway, with another widespread sweeping gesture above the both of them. She acknowledged this with a gesture of her own to indicate that she understood, hoping that the being understood her understanding.Then they proceeded to have an awkward conversation. This was a different but somehow more pleasant feeling of awkwardness than when she had met her first prospective mate. In this interaction with the being she had nothing to lose, there were no stakes. It was just a bumbling pantomime between two beings who were nothing alike. Come to think of it, maybe this had not been so different from the initial conversation with that prospective mate whom she never encountered again either. A member of her same species could also be nothing like her.

Through a series of improvised gestures, she and the being had become somewhat acquainted and had managed to educate each other about their respective existences. It explained to her that it came from far away and that there were many more beings like itself, some larger, some smaller. She illustrated to it that others like her lived nearby.

She demonstrated how she ate and breathed. It seemed to understand and reciprocated, even consuming something in its possession before offering a piece of whatever it was to her. She tried to consume a small portion of it but found the being's nourishment so revolting that she expelled it almost immediately. Rather than being offended, the being appeared to be amused by her repugnance. She motioned for it to wait a moment and then found some of her own food to offer it. Not knowing to which appendage she should direct her offer, she placed it just in front of

the being, in the space between them. It consumed her food in a process that she found to be disgusting but the being seemed to have enjoyed ingesting it.

Even thinking about it now, she could not recall how long the interaction had lasted. It had gone quickly, but had also been fulfilling. At a certain point, the being indicated by gesturing above that it had to depart. Before leaving, it left her an object. This object was what she was holding and studying now, as proof that the encounter had truly happened.

And while she was holding the tangible evidence that confirmed that the visit had transpired, she was baffled by what this object was supposed to be. What was its purpose? Did it even have a purpose? Was there something inside of it, or was it its own self-contained highlight rather than be a container?

She shook it vigorously and discerned some vibrations from within. She held it up above her and examined it from other angles, in varying degrees of light. There were symbols on it, even images, but none of these had a meaning for her. One of the images looked vaguely similar to the being that had visited her. Scrutinizing this image, she decided that it was not the very same being she had met. Beyond that, she was still confused, but relatively certain that the object posed no harm to her.

Rather than become frustrated by its mystery, she turned away from the object. As soon as she started to move towards her home, she knew. She understood what the object was meant to be. No matter that nothing like it had ever existed on her world, nor ever should there be such a thing. None of that was important. It was not practical, and not even something she was capable of using, but no one else on her world had anything like it. She would keep it in her home, displayed proudly and only reveal its source to those she trusted.

She scooped it up with what the visitor would later describe as her third tentacle, and passed it deftly to her fourth arm, which he mislabeled incorrectly as a tail in his report. The report also mischaracterized her gender, but he could not be blamed for his

ignorance. No one on Earth had ever seen one of her kind before. Generally, everyone approved of the “gift” that he left for her, although there was some question as to why he had thought to bring a box of Life Cereal on an intergalactic mission.

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