

Take us to  
Your chief

Drew  
Hayden  
Taylor

The men sitting on the couches in the middle of Old Man's Point didn't need the screeching of the cicadas to tell them how hot it was. The sweat on their foreheads and on the beer bottles gave them ample evidence. The sweat was cyclical: the more sweat on their foreheads, the more need for cold beer, which in turn became sweat in the humidity of the summer woods.

Old Man's Point was located near the eastern shore of Otter Lake, named for an old man who used to stand on the bank and point at all the boats going by. A deserted stretch of shoreline running parallel to a rarely used dirt road, it housed a group of cedar trees that grew skyward in a sort of amphitheatre configuration. Over the years, several worn and tattered couches had found their way to the cedars, which circled an ancient firepit. Weathered by many years of rain, snow, sun and sweaty Aboriginal behinds, the sofas looked as beaten down, as lived in and as much a part of the landscape as the men. The constant breeze from the lake kept the more persistent mosquitos and other bugs of July away, and all in all, it was a comfortable and picturesque place to pass the summer months.

Today, like most lazy days, there sat three Ojibway men. Tarzan, Cheemo and Teddy had been there since ten that morning, enjoying a cooler stocked with beer that was chilling in the shallow waters near the shore. They had no place to go and nothing much to do, a happy coincidence for all. Most of their relations agreed the trio were men of few words and fewer ambitions. And the three saw little need to argue. They did what they did, and they were very good at it.

Although they spent long hours in each other's company—they had been best buddies since their early school days—they said remarkably little. Several seasons back, a cousin had joined them for the day and had come away utterly bewildered.

"They didn't say anything. Not one word!" the cousin had exclaimed. "I tried to talk with them about something, anything, but I got nothing back. They would just sit there, look around occasionally, smile and drink beer. That's all." He never went back.

The men had spent so much time together over the years, they practically knew each other's thoughts; thus, nothing needed to be said. Besides, nothing much happened to them that needed to be discussed anyway.

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Until the spaceship landed.

It was a Tuesday. Tarzan, so called because as a kid he loved running around the village and climbing trees in his underwear, was pulling three more beers out of the cooler when he heard it. Years sitting at Old Man's Point with his cousins had made him far more aural than oral. The buzzing of insects, the calls of birds, the lapping of water on the shore, the distant drone of motorboats constituted pretty much the only auditory landscape in the area. So when the insects and birds suddenly went quiet and the relative silence was filled by a growing humming sound—no, humming wasn't quite the right word, but it would have to do—Tarzan's curiosity was piqued. He looked to his right and then left. Not seeing anything out of the ordinary, he finally looked up, over the lake, and almost dropped his beer. Almost.

Cheemo, whose name tragically translates from Ojibway into English roughly as "Big Shit," heard the unfamiliar sound next. At first, Cheemo thought the noise was coming from a passing boat, but then it occurred to him boats don't usually pass overhead.

Puzzled, he looked over to his brother, Teddy, who since childhood had given off the vague aroma of puppy breath. As a result, children loved him. But Teddy's eyes were closed, as the wind had increased and he was enjoying the caresses of the midsummer breeze, for alas, those were the only caresses in his life. It took his baseball cap flying across the firepit and into the goldenrods near the edge of the clearing to make him open his eyes. What was fast approaching filled his eyes, but the rest of him refused to comprehend the large flashing, multicoloured object making a clear path to their couches. He closed his eyes for a second, thinking maybe it would disappear. No such luck, for he could see the flashing lights through his eyelids. Additionally, it was still there when he reopened them. Teddy shrugged and took a sip of beer.

By now the hum was constant and unmistakable. Cheemo could tell it was close, and judging from Tarzan's pose, head pointed ninety degrees straight up, it was directly overhead. Finally, putting two and two together, Cheemo looked up through the branches of the cedars to see what had caught his brother's and cousin's attention.

Although its shape seemed somewhat amorphous because it was glowing, the object was definitely round, and quite sizable. Perhaps as wide as four or five eighteen-wheelers lined up side by side, thought Cheemo, trying to render an unfamiliar and unexpected occurrence familiar and concrete. The other two expressed their earnest opinion by dropping their jaws, though oddly enough, neither was surprised enough to drop the beer bottle clutched in his hands.

Whatever it was grew closer, eventually descending onto the sandy beach adjacent to the nearby road. It landed not with a thud but with a soft whoosh as the air was pushed aside. A small cloud of road dust briefly surrounded the thing. The men's faces and bodies were bathed in the broad spectrum of colours emitted by the craft, a dozen different hues reflecting the spectrum of visible light, and possibly a few as yet undiscovered by the human race. Birds, insects, frogs and other animals local to Old Man's Point suddenly remembered they had plans elsewhere and evacuated. In a remarkably short period of time, it was just the strange object, the cedar trees and the three men left in the immediate area. It should be pointed out that in the forty or so seconds since they had spotted the approach of the mysterious craft, the men had not moved a centimetre.

A few more seconds passed as the humming seemed to lessen and the flashing of the lights diminished. Tarzan, somehow realizing this wasn't exactly a normal occurrence, glanced at Teddy, who in turn glanced at Cheemo. Finally, Cheemo managed to force his eyes off the craft and looked to Tarzan for any suggestion of what to do. Unfortunately, expert recommendations for handling such a unique situation were a rare commodity that morning in Otter Lake, and even scarcer in that little nook of the reserve. The only comment on the situation was a loud, nervous gulp by Teddy. The other two quickly followed suit.

Suddenly, the humming shifted, and the whirring lights froze. A new sound emerged from somewhere beneath the pulsating luminosity—a higher-pitched buzzing reminiscent of a thousand mosquitos filtered through a blown guitar amp. Then a rectangular patch of obsidian light erupted along one side of the craft, near the bottom. It flared briefly, then dissipated, revealing what appeared to the three men to be an opaque stairway of sorts. And more distressing, something seemed to be... the only word Tarzan could come up with was... flowing... down the mysterious ramp.

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By now it had occurred to the Old Man's Point trio that perhaps this would be a good time to relocate to a less historic location and ponder their next course of action. However, before they could move, they heard a new sound. It was a watery, thick voice, one that seemed to be trying to find the correct boundaries of vocal expression. The sound was fuzzy for a few seconds before it solidified into something understandable.

"Greetings, people of Earth."

It had spoken to them. Cheemo looked to Teddy, unsure whether the voice was referring to them, for he was fairly sure they were people from Earth, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions. White people were always changing the names of things: countries, people and a bunch of other things. He wouldn't put it past them to change the name of the planet. He had seen on the news some time ago that Pluto was no longer considered a planet. It had been downgraded to the celestial equivalent of a non-status planet.

For obvious reasons, Teddy's attention was not on his brother. He was too busy wondering why it felt as if all his hair was standing on end, like when he forgot to put fabric softener sheets in the dryer.

Tarzan realized his beer was empty, and this was definitely a time for extra beer.

For a brief period, the only sound other than the peculiar humming was the casual lapping of water on the shore. Then more words came from the very strange stranger.

"We are the Kaaw Wiyaa. We come in peace."

That's good, thought Tarzan. Peace is always good.

More cognizant of the history-making implications of the event developing around them, Cheemo tried hard to focus and memorize all that was happening. He knew that, should they survive this encounter, there could be good money and a future of free beer on the horizon. But at the moment, it was difficult to make out who or what was actually talking. Much like the craft, the defining boundaries around the individual seemed to be disobeying the rule that light travels in a straight line. Occasionally, he glimpsed what he thought were tentacles.

Calamari, thought Cheemo, I haven't had calamari in a long time.

There was a constant shimmering, and intermittently what appeared to be dark or smoky blobs emerged in the general vicinity of the strange being.

Must be a bitch taking a family photo, thought Teddy.

Tarzan couldn't help thinking what a cool effect this was. Must freak the girls out.

"You are citizens of this planet?"

All three took a reasonable guess and nodded. Remembering his mother's frequent comments about hospitality and politeness, Cheemo wondered if he should offer... it... a beer... then thought better of the idea. They only had three left. And he wasn't sure that thing had a mouth. Or a liver. Or a bladder.

"Excellent. We wish to open diplomatic negotiations with your planet.

That is why we wish to see your leader."

Mentally, Cheemo was kicking himself. He should have watched more Star Trek as a kid. Star Wars doesn't really prepare you for a situation like this. This was definitely a Star Trek moment.

Meanwhile, Tarzan was wondering if they'd let him drive their... spaceship. There was this ex-girlfriend's house he'd like to hover over, maybe dump some interstellar garbage on. "Will you take us to your leader, then?"

Grabbing the initiative, Cheemo nodded. This was not their problem. This is what people get elected for and why they enjoy those luxurious band office salaries. In those few short seconds, Cheemo had decided a life of fortune and fame just wasn't for him. He preferred the under-the-radar, low-stress approach. And he was fairly confident the other two would agree. Almost as if reading his mind, Teddy was nodding his head, agreeing with

Cheemo via a lifelong cultural practice of not contradicting family when you have nothing better to say.

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In reality, Teddy was wondering if that thing with calamari arms had farted. He was fairly sure he could smell a fart, but not one he had ever smelled before. And the nature of the breeze indicated it was coming from the direction of the newcomer. Unfortunately, Teddy's Grade 10 chemistry class twenty years ago had neglected to teach him about the prevalence of methane in the universe, and that many planets, including several in his own solar system, contained large quantities of methane. Some scientists have even theorized that alien life would breathe it the same way the ecosystem on Earth uses oxygen. Methane has the same approximate chemical makeup of certain gastrointestinal by-products in Earth animals. Through its unique physiology and the atmosphere it breathed, the Kaaw Wiyaa smelled constantly of a fart.

As for the "take me to your leader" part, Cheemo glanced at Tarzan who glanced at Teddy who glanced back at Cheemo. They all knew where to take him.

It was 3:36 on a hot, gorgeous Tuesday and, luckily, the chief of the Otter Lake First Nation was in his office, not whacking huge divots in the piece of Mother Earth his community had sold to a golf course two decades ago. It took some manoeuvring to get the sizable and abundantly limbed Kaaw Wiyaa through the band office door. It had recently been remodelled to be wheelchair accessible, but not quite alien accessible. And as they'd passed him in the hall, the janitor had looked worriedly at the trail of slime it was leaving on his newly cleaned carpets. For this he got a degree in Indigenous Studies?

Chief Angus Benojee, a man expanding at the belly but thinning on top, sat in his leather chair staring at the creature his nephews had brought into his office. His skinny little moustache quivered in a combination of confusion and irritation. There was barely enough room in the small office for the three men and... it. Tarzan, the smallest of the three, had to climb up on a table and sit cross-legged—Indian-style, some would say—so that the others could comfortably fit. To make things worse, the chief was certain somebody had farted.

"I am honoured to meet the leader of this great planet."

The chief's brow furrowed. This was his third term in office and this took the cake for most unusual meeting of the year, beating out by far his lunch with the acting regional director for Governmental

Interdepartmental Subsidies and Regional Financial Accessibility (ARD-GISRFA). The poor government official had actually thought he had scored a trip to India to meet the Indians. Chief Angus looked at one nephew who looked at his other nephew who looked at the remaining cousin who shrugged. The only comment the chief could make was a weary sigh.

The Kaaw Wiyaa seemed to be doing the Kaaw Wiyaa equivalent of a bow. "We come from 734 light-years away. We have travelled far to bring greetings to your people. You are not alone in the universe."

Chief Angus wasn't sure how to respond to that. This particular situation had not been part of any of his briefings at the Assembly of First Nations. He knew light-years were a good-sized distance to travel because he had watched a lot of Star Trek as a kid. Unlike Cheemo, he had always appreciated it more than Star Wars. He marvelled at the kind of travel allowance and per diem a trip in light-years must pull in. Seeing the gills on the Kaaw Wiyaa quiver as it spoke reminded the chief that he had a fairly large and tasty muskie fish back home in his freezer. He'd have to run home to defrost it in time for dinner.

Teddy, who was standing closest to the creature, could feel the alien's body heat coming off it in waves. Evidently, wherever it came from was a lot hotter than here. Add that to the smell of the Kaaw Wiyaa, the tightness of the room, and the fact they'd forgotten to bring the rest of the beer with them, and Teddy was feeling a bit woozy.

Tarzan had never been in the chief's office before. Surreptitiously, he pocketed two pens from his desk.

"We would like to open diplomatic relations with the people and government of Earth. That is why I am here."

The chief wondered if this was how the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq chiefs felt five hundred years ago. Wow, life is truly cyclical, he thought. The remnants of his activist youth (he'd gone to a protest once) resurfaced, and he restrained the urge to tell the large glowing, quivering, slimy thing in front of him to go home and leave his people alone. The reserve and the planet were all full up. But the pragmatic and diplomatic politician quickly reasserted

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itself. You don't get to be the former vice-chief for Central Ontario for the Assembly of First Nations without knowing a few things.

Still, the man was at a loss as to how to proceed.

Outside his office door, the chief thought he heard Laurie, head of membership and lands, slip and fall with a loud and painful thud, probably on the trail of slime left by the problem standing in front of him. He'd better do something to get this thing out of the building before it triggered any lawsuits.

"As is protocol, our Grand Council has instructed me to request that you, as leader of this great planet, designate an ambassador to return with us to Kaaw Wiyaa to facilitate a cultural exchange and begin negotiations. As a goodwill gesture, we would be willing to construct sizable stone pyramids, or assist in the erection of enormous rock heads, or create giant stone circular calendars, as per your customs. We humbly await your decision."

Chief Angus was in a pickle, and he hated being in a pickle. None of those things would be of any use to Otter Lake. A decent water filtration system would be welcome, but he doubted this traveller from Kaaw Wiyaa would have the patience or the know-how to tackle the necessary forms and applications to navigate all the bureaucratic levels. Just the smell of the creature would probably fail the environmental assessment.

Ambassador... hmmm, thought the chief. In the corner, on the table, Tarzan sneezed. In the closed room, the smell was beginning to get to him. He smiled sheepishly. The chief had an idea—three of them, in fact.

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Passing the orbit of Earth's moon, the Kaaw Wiyaa craft picked up speed as the quantum drive became fully operational. Soon, the Kaaw Wiyaa equivalent of a computer, buried somewhere deep in the ship, would calculate the best opportunity to open a space-time portal, taking the vessel back to its home. Behind the ship, the planet Earth was already fading into the distance, rapidly becoming just another speck of light in the spectacular backdrop of the universe. Tarzan, Cheemo and Teddy watched their home get smaller and smaller. Needless to say, they had mixed emotions about their recent appointment as ambassadors from Earth to the

Kaaw Wiyaa Galactic Confederation. This was not how they had expected their day to end.

From the beginning, all three had doubts about Chief Angus's so-called "brilliant solution." Cheemo had never been out of the county or country, let alone the planet. Teddy got seasick, which is embarrassing enough when you come from a family of fishermen. There was no telling how space travel would affect him. And Tarzan needed the sound of purring from at least one of his three cats in order to fall asleep. They'd been on the ship for a little more than an hour, and there didn't seem to be any cats. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, he thought. The other two were thinking the same thing, but ever since they were young, Chief Angus had been able to talk them into anything. Case in point.

As Otter Lake and Earth seemed to wink out in the distance, Tarzan had an afterthought. They should have brought some beer.

There were now four other members of the ship's crew standing—or whatever the Kaaw Wiyaa equivalent was—in the large pale-green room. There seemed to be more area on the inside of the ship than the three men had thought possible, based on what they saw of the exterior as they entered. Oh well, they decided to add this to the list of mysteries. Tricks like this would sure help with the housing shortage in their community. "We are very honoured that you have accepted our offer to join us as representatives of your people. The citizens of Planet Earth must be very proud of you."

Teddy gave them his best 'ah shucks' shrug. Tarzan was barely conscious of the conversation. He was still looking out the window, wondering if it was too late to... literally... jump ship.

"If I may speak freely, what truly impressed us were your methods of communication. Metacommunication. Your ability to communicate without interacting verbally. Almost a form of telepathy. It was that ability that convinced us of your planet's sophistication."

All three men smiled, looking down at the mauve floor shyly, not really understanding what they were being complimented on.

"Please forgive us, we have misplaced our manners. Perhaps you would like something to drink?"

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Tarzan nodded enthusiastically.

"We have something from our planet that you might find mildly intoxicating, based on what we know about human physiology. Would that be acceptable?"

The head Kaaw Wiyaa turned to one of the subordinate crew members and flopped a tentacle.

Once again, Tarzan nodded enthusiastically.

The crew member produced three two-foot tall containers that it delicately handed over to the beings from Earth. Each took one, noting how heavy it was. Tarzan examined his closely for any type of opening while Cheemo sniffed at his. The aroma was not unpleasant, a cross between freshly cut grass and new-car smell.

Suddenly, Teddy's container jerked rather dramatically, as if something inside was trying to escape. Almost immediately, the same happened with the other two—a violent and agitated shift of weight. It reminded Tarzan of one of his cats trying to get out of its carrier. Teddy was just about to drop his when their host quickly cautioned them.

"Do not let it out. If it escapes, that will ruin the taste. Just hold it firmly, like this." Then the Kaaw Wiyaa lifted his up and quickly thudded it against the wall. The container stopped moving. "This stuns the main ingredient and enhances the flavour."

Cheemo, feeling almost adventurous in his new environment, gripped it fiercely and rammed his surprisingly sturdy container against the bulkhead. Not wanting to be outdone, the other two quickly copied. Now, all of them had ceased their frantic tremoring.

"Now drink," their host said, and raised its container to what all three Ojibway earthlings assumed was its mouth. At the top of the container, they noticed, was a small pyramid-shaped aperture. Then it tilted the drink back and seemed to swallow.

Encouraged, Teddy decided it would be rude not to at least sample their host's beverage. Conscious something was alive inside it, he tentatively tipped it back. The other two followed suit.

It was hard to describe the taste—peanut butter mixed with apple pie mixed with moose—but each felt he could definitely get used to it. It certainly wasn't beer, but there was an agreeable... what could only be described as twinkling in their nerve endings that came a few seconds after ingestion. All silently agreed they'd drunk worse.

Once more, whatever was inside Teddy's container gave a violent reaction, but by now, the experienced Teddy just held his drink firmly, thwacked it against the wall and the forceful shaking subsided.

Tarzan had already drained his and was holding it up, indicating he wouldn't mind a second. Before he could speak, he was presented with another one, already quivering with flavour. I could get used to this, he thought.

"We hope you will feel at home here."

Suddenly, the familiar couches they had been so comfortably ensconced on that morning were waiting behind them. They were sure they could smell the familiar breeze coming off the lake. The sound of the cicadas was back. And, by golly, there were even a few bushes scattered around the couches, with the old firepit in the middle. It was like they were back at Old Man's Point. "We have tried to replicate the environment we originally approached you in. We hope it is satisfactory, ambassadors from Earth."

Tarzan, Cheemo and Teddy each took another sip as they sat in their familiar seats. Getting comfortable on their favourite couches, all three nodded their heads in contentment. This ambassador thing might actually turn out okay. After all, they'd had worse jobs.

"We should have done this years ago," said Cheemo.