

Based on a True Story

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I remember it like it was yesterday except it *wasn't* yesterday, it was actually two days ago but for me to say I remember something *like it was two days ago* - while being more accurate - really doesn't sound all that poetic.

The reason I recall it so vividly is because it was a Tuesday and, like all the other Tuesdays in my recent memory, I was waiting for the bus which, in itself is pretty extraordinary, since I live in rural area and there's no bus service of any kind. Still, I was determined that if this particular Tuesday was the day we suddenly, and finally, received unexplained - and frankly unnecessary - public transportation, I would be ready.

I took my position next to the remnants of an old oak tree that I believe was partially destroyed through some natural occurrence like a lightning bolt, torrential rainstorm or bullfrog infestation. To be quite honest I'm not actually very good at recognizing the exact species of a tree in the first place so, for all I know, this may very well have been a bamboo tree but peppering a story with an *old oak* sounds much grander than the alternative bamboo.

My reason for standing next to this decrepit, broken-down oak is simply that if I was a bus driver and this was my maiden voyage into an area historically not-served by bus service and if, inexplicably, there happened to at least one person on the same wavelength of somehow knowing - again inexplicably - that *this particular Tuesday* was the first - and perhaps last - day of our new bus service, standing and waiting beside something as naturally dramatic as a weather-ravaged oak tree would be as good a place as any to wait for the bus.

I believe I was well into my third hour of waiting when it happened. It's possible it might have happened sooner had I been at another - and arguably, better - location but, being the inaugural day of our town's previously non-existent bus service, the bus route and official stops were neither accurately-marked nor efficiently laid out, or even *invented* at this point.

It's important to note I had no accurate way of knowing the actual time at this particular point since I wore no watch and had no idea how to properly read the (approximately) seventy-four pound sundial I was carrying around from bus stop to bus stop (it's not a good thing to miss the first bus on the first day of bus service).

I guess I would estimate the time to be a few minutes after 1 pm since I distinctly remember eating lunch within - I figure - one to two hours before setting out to wait for the bus. I usually eat lunch around ten so that calculation would likely be accurate, assuming of course, it *was* actually ten on this particular Tuesday. In all honesty this was more of an estimation than a calculation since I didn't use a calculator, abacus or any of my toes or fingers to properly "calibrate" the time.

Furthermore – in all honesty – the *precise time* has absolutely no bearing on the effect, context or the overall comprehension and enjoyment of this story, so let's not concern ourselves with the trivial issue of what time it was. All you really need to know is that it was a Tuesday, I think.

II

Have you ever seen an alien spacecraft? Do you even have any idea what one of them looks like? Neither did I. That's why, to this day, I'm not sure what I saw, and what landed in front of me *was*, in fact, an alien spacecraft.

All I know is it tasted like cheese. Not the kind of smelly, oddly European cheese with the holes and the mould and all that wax wrapping. More the sweet, creamy processed cheese that non-traditional, uncultured cheese-lovers like me would readily nominate as their favorite cheese of all time. At least it would be in the top three.

I suppose I was too absorbed in taking bite after bite from the delicious spacecraft to notice that three creatures had exited the ship and were standing directly behind me but off to the side a little - about three feet away I figure. Frankly there is nothing more embarrassing than standing with your mouth full of cheese, in front of three aliens, whose spacecraft you are devouring mouthful by mouthful. I mean, what do you say in a situation like this?

I figured it would be best to simply extend my hand as a sign of friendliness and good faith. This would also give me enough time – I hoped – to digest whatever was in my mouth (except my tongue – it would stay put – which I figured to be vital) and preventing my verbal communication with the inquisitive, possibly puzzled, aliens.

*Has it ever been explained why Napoleon Bonaparte always tucked his hand into his jacket? Was it his right hand or his left? I'm not sure if that's even actually important. Maybe his hand was just cold. Maybe there's something in nature that physiologically makes sure your right hand is always slightly colder than your left. This is a good theory and would explain that Napoleon hand-in-jacket thing as long as it was indeed the right hand he was tucking in. If it was his left hand, and *left hands are naturally cooler than right ones* then this theory makes no sense whatsoever.*

But I digress.

Aliens – if they were indeed aliens – evidently aren't big on people extending their hands towards them. I'm not sure if extending legs would also qualify as “offensive” (my word, not theirs) since I don't remember extending my leg out any further than normal. I guess I'm assuming a lot by assuming they were actually offended (again, *my word*) but one of them happened to explode when I was just about to touch him (or her). The other two, I

assume sensing imminent danger from me, backed away while making strange, and loud, gurgling noises.

Initially this startled me. I began thinking one, if not both of them, were choking. While I'm not schooled in the fine arts of what to do when someone's choking, I assume it has something to do with grabbing the afflicted being and squeezing him (or her) in an attempt to dislodge whatever may have become lodged in his (or her) throat to cause the choking in the first place.

Of course, this particular course of action is based on what little I know about the choking phenomenon in human beings. Naturally I figured the same would apply to aliens, if indeed these *were* aliens.

At this point, the quandary I was faced with was how to ably assist an alien, who appears to be choking, without having another one (or two) of them explode. I would think that, as bad as it is for *any* living creature to be choking, it's preferable to exploding.

The thing about standing in front of choking aliens while waiting for a bus on a day you're not even sure a bus is scheduled to drive by, in a location you only deem to be an actual bus stop, is that absolutely no one's around – who at least speaks your language - to confer with and possibly assist in any alien life-saving procedures.

That's when I realized raccoons could talk, well speak *English*, at least.

III

In all honesty I can't really be sure that raccoons *can't actually communicate in English* since this is the first one I've ever had the pleasure of conversing with. Perhaps raccoons are simply very polite and are not likely to initiate conversation with a human being. Maybe raccoons *can talk*, it's just that they choose not to out of either decorum or frankly, a lack of interesting subjects. I do know I had never previously engaged one so maybe it's just our rote unfriendliness that prevents we human from carrying on a meaningful conversation with raccoons.

Of course, if you happen to be reading this and are *indeed* a raccoon, maybe you can shed some light on this perplexing subject for me. This, of course, is assuming that raccoons can both speak *and read*. You would tend to think it would seem pointless to have an educational system that encourages verbal communication without an equal emphasis on that of reading as well. Then again, who am I to pontificate on the so-called failings of what raccoons learn in raccoon schools (assuming there *are* actual raccoon schools)?

I guess I should inform you that one of the aliens' names is Mort. The reason I know this is because of the *Hi, My Name is MORT* nametag he was wearing. I suppose it's also fairly presumptuous of me to assume that MORT is actually a He. While Mort – often a shortform for Morton or possibly, Mortadella - on this planet is generally accepted as a

man's (or boy's) name, it's entirely possible that Mort, on their planet, is a woman's (or girl's) name. Then again there are no rules or laws that I'm aware of prohibiting someone from calling their daughter Mort (or their son, *Gladys*, for that matter).

The interesting thing about Mort's nametag is that it's *not* interesting at all. It's exactly the same as the ones we humans would use if we were at a convention or around people who just weren't good at remembering names. I would have thought their advanced society would have improved the standard nametag beyond what we meager humans would use. Then again, if they were indeed as advanced as I think they are they'd probably spend much more time perfecting space travel or moving matter around the galaxy than tweaking the benefits of a nametag. I suppose that also means that any future advances in nametag technology would subsequently have to come from us, in the human race.

The other alien – in case you were wondering - wore no name tag at all so I assume he either had no name or Mort had stolen his identification.

The exploded alien's name? Who knows, and frankly at this point, it's really not pertinent to the story.

Through all of this, the gurgling - and the perceived choking - continued. This was actually a mixed blessing. While I was terribly uneasy in knowing that something was perhaps still stuck in both of the aliens' throats, I was also comforted in the fact that aliens apparently have an incredible ability to withstand choking for minutes at a time. I only estimate that it's been a couple minutes since I'm not a very fast at telling this story and also because I had subsequently discarded the sundial – which I found to be both useless and very heavy at this point.

IV

Were you aware that an ant can lift something like one hundred times its own body weight? Or is it a thousand times? That'd be like me being able to lift a jumbo jet.

In all honesty, me being able to lift a huge airliner seems much more impressive than an ant that can lift a tennis ball but I suppose even ants need to have something to brag about.

I mention this simply because in all the commotion created while waiting for this non-existent bus; that Napoleon tangent; those curious nametags; the choking and exploding aliens and the raccoons who could talk (but couldn't read), I was greeted by a disgruntled group of ants. I didn't get their names but had no real desire to either.

That day I learned that ants are incessant complainers. I guess when you spend every waking moment heaving pebbles or bringing food back to the queen, you can get a little

belligerent, but still, that's not my problem. If your life as an ant consists of a work week longer than you find acceptable, take a rest or form a union. Simply complaining about it amounts to nothing – even for an ant.

Still, I couldn't help but feel slightly for their plight. Ants, in all reality, live to work and I'm sure have never even imagined the concept of a *vacation* or a *weekend* - none of them reacted when asked, at least. Of course, I can't assume they understood me, since I have no idea whether they even understood English. According to the English-speaking (but not reading) raccoon, ants *did* understand the language but often chose not to react simply out of fear of being given yet another command to lift yet another heavy object for their queen - who I figure, at this point, to be morbidly-obese due mainly to her sedentary lifestyle.

I also felt for them – literally – since they're *so small* and I'm sure I squished at least a dozen before I even noticed their presence. Of course I felt very bad for having involuntarily-murdered a small horde of them, one of which apparently was only three credits shy of completing a Masters in Macro Economics but, as a group, they seemed to take it all in stride. I'd imagine losing friends and family members under the weight of a deer hoof or a steel-belted radial is quite the common occurrence in the societal world of ants.

As a consolation and as a sign of empathy, I offered to send a nice bouquet of flowers to the recently departed(s). They adamantly refused. Just another thing to carry.

And, as strong as ants are, they (a) cannot carry sundials (b) are no help in dealing with choking aliens. Add to that their constant nattering about work conditions, the dangers of torrential rainstorms and the inequalities in Worker-Ant Society and you might appreciate my decision to squash eleven of the (estimated) remaining twelve. The last one I spared simply to act as an informant to the rest of the colony to explain what had happened to the twenty five or so members they had started with.

The last one didn't seem especially touched or overly emotional about being the sole survivor of this sole massacre.

Evidently ants *do* have a certain mastery of the English language – the profanity at least.

Which brings us to those traveling appliances.

V

Normally I wouldn't get overly excited about seeing an oven and a washing machine plodding noisily – *only waffle irons travel "stealthily", by the way* - down a semi-deserted rural road but this was turning into one-of-those-days you only read about in comic books or really odd short stories.

Where I come from, appliances tend to stick together in small packs, in much the same way gazelles do in Africa, and likely for the exact same reasons (cheetah attacks and the imminent droughts that occur). But here was this oven in the very unnatural company of, by what little I know about automaton hierarchy, *its natural sworn enemy* - a washing machine! I don't hesitate to tell you I was a little unnerved.

How would you feel, given that you were alone on a rural road with nothing more surrounding you than a talking raccoon, two choking aliens, an irate ant with a very dirty vocabulary and a spacecraft made of cheese? Something about this just didn't feel right.

Sure, they were moving slow – toasters, now *there's* a speedy appliance - but they were definitely getting closer. And they looked angry. Not ant-angry, more angry at the thought of technological obsolescence or, at least excessive, relentless rust.

And one of them appeared to be carrying a loaded weapon – which could have actually been an old dryer house, but since neither of them *were* dryers it seemed totally implausible.

I inherently sensed Big Trouble.

Then the fire started.

VI

I'm no chemist but I saw nothing wrong with the way I had packed my box lunch (not a box but encased in one). I know – I *said* I had already eaten my lunch but didn't say I had finished.

I'm one of those guys you read about all the time who doesn't heed the dire warnings from all the health organizations and the advocacy groups and I don't read the warning labels on the cigarettes I smoke and the colas I drink and the excessive alcohol I consume. I have no idea what cholesterol is and how high – or *low* – mine happens to be.

Fat content, to me, simply means it tastes really good and if the numbers and the percentages printed on those warning labels aren't really high, I figure it *isn't* worth buying and it certainly isn't worth *eating*.

I smoke four packs of cigarettes a day. I drink – *I've lost count on that one*. I eat trays and trays and plates and plates of food. Most of what I consume is delivered daily on a big flat-bed truck.

I live in the country because *I have to live in the country*. I tried living in the city but because my neighbors are so close I have no room for my food, my cigarettes, my alcohol and the delivery trucks that arrive each day at 8 am (9:30 on Thursdays).

You can only imagine how big I am and how much I weigh. Which is why I need to take the bus, assuming they ever feel the need to have one, and to have one servicing my rural road and to have one stopping at that old oak tree (possibly bamboo) I deemed to be a natural spot for a bus shelter.

This is also the reason I feel the need to pack a lunch to supplement the lunch I had roughly one or two hours before. This is why I packed tapioca pudding and granola squares and chocolate cupcakes and the strawberry jelly.

I think the fire started when the strawberry jelly fell into the tapioca pudding but again, I'm not a chemist. It really doesn't matter much at this point.

Suffice it to say the flames are getting a lot higher; the talking raccoon is starting to freak out; the ant is pretty much useless as a firefighter on his own; the armed appliances are now within twenty feet (and angrier) and the aliens are *still* choking (honestly, that must be some sort of record – regardless of what planet you're on).

And then It happened, the most incredible thing of all!

VII

So I get back home. As always Thadius is on the front porch waiting for me. Thadius, being a cat and all, is naturally lazy and likes to stick close to me partially because I think he really loves me and partially because he knows little nuggets of food tend to fall from the crevasses in my clothing.

Maybe he just loves that I rain food.

“That’s the last time I’m doing that.” I tell the cat.

He just stares at me, waiting for a soup bone to dislodge itself from my armpit or something, I’m thinking.

“I’m not waiting for that bus *any more*. It’s just not worth it.”

More staring.

“Three bucks for a simple ride to town. *Can you believe that?*”

A piece of chicken falls to the ground. No wait, it’s *pork*.

It’s been that kind of day.

END