

GEORGE PINKERTON AND THE SPACE WAFFLES

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IT WAS A WARM spring day in Springfield, Indiana, and I'd been playing softball with some of the guys on the good field out at the community college. When the game ended—we lost, five to three—I didn't feel like going straight home, so I'd wandered on down the road a bit when a car pulled up beside me. George Pinkerton, one of the town's two librarians and a world-famous monster expert, was driving.

"Need a lift, Billy?"

I didn't really, but I like helping Mr. Pinkerton out with monsters—I'm sort of his sidekick—so I didn't mind, either.

"Sure," I said. "I wouldn't mind a ride."

"Hop in," he said. I climbed in, closed the door and buckled up, and off we went.

"Where are you headed?" I asked.

He grimaced, which made his beard all bristly on one side. "I got a call from some folks out this way who thought they saw a flying saucer. I said I'd come take a look."

"A flying saucer? Cool! Do you think it's really aliens from outer space?"

"Nope."

That was a disappointment. "Why not?"

"Billy, most UFO sightings are just ordinary things seen by people who misunderstood what they were seeing. I don't believe in flying saucers."

I was sort of surprised by that. I mean, this was a man who'd fought zombies and vampires and giant squids, but he didn't believe in flying saucers? I didn't really know what to say, so I just sat there and watched the road.

Then a shadow passed over us, the way it does when there's a small cloud or a low-flying airplane, and I looked up...

The next thing I knew I was waking up strapped onto a table, surrounded by weird, brightly colored machinery.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Pinkerton said. I turned my head, and there he was, strapped to a table a few feet away. “However, I do believe I’ll have to revise my views on flying saucers.”

“You mean we’ve been kidnapped by aliens?” I asked.

“So it would appear.”

“Where are they?” I looked around the room, but I didn’t see any little green men anywhere—just machines.

“I don’t know. I only woke up a few seconds before you did.”

I shuddered. “What do you think they look like?” I asked. “Little guys with big heads, like on TV?”

“While that would match most of the reports, I’ve never thought it made much sense,” he said. “Our own form is the result of millions of years of evolution, and that evolution was all to fit conditions on Earth. Creatures that evolved on another planet would need to fit a different environment, so they ought to be very different in appearance.”

“Well, what if they came from a planet just like Earth?” I asked.

Mr. Pinkerton shook his head. “That’s called parallel evolution. I don’t believe in it. Even if the environment is similar, a lot of evolution is the result of random mutations; different species will solve the same problems in different ways. Kangaroos and cows are both grazing mammals, but they don’t look very much alike.”

“So you think we might have been captured by aliens that look like kangaroos?”

“They might look like anything,” Mr. Pinkerton said.

I looked around at the machinery, trying to imagine what sort of creatures had built it. Then the far wall slid open, and I didn’t have to imagine anymore as the aliens humped into the room. I stared at them. They sure *weren’t* just little guys with big heads!

They stood about four feet high, and four feet wide, and eight or nine inches thick. They were brown, sort of flat, and almost square, with the bottom corners stretched down to make two feet. They moved by picking up one corner and folding in the middle to swing it forward, then putting it down again. And they had rows of...well, *pockets* all

over them, about four or five inches across, as if they'd been stamped out on a gigantic waffle iron. Things were plugged into some of the sockets: an eyeball here, an arm there, a thing like a spiral seashell somewhere else. They were the weirdest-looking things I'd ever seen, weirder than any of the creatures I'd just been imagining.

Four of them folded their way over to us and stood by the tables, one on each side of us. I watched as the ones standing over me popped out eyeballs and seashell things—which must have been ears—from various places, and plugged them all into the top row of sockets so they could look down at me.

The one on my left had four eyes and three ears and an arm with a seven-fingered hand, which left two empty sockets in the top row; the one on my right had five eyes and an ear and four empties along the top, with three arms in its second row.

I didn't like the look of them at all; I struggled against the straps, trying to get loose, and let out a yell.

The head creature reached out and touched a button on one of the machines. A pink light shone down on me from somewhere. Suddenly I couldn't move or talk.

"The young one is immobilized," the alien said.

"Hideous things, aren't they?" one of the others remarked.

If I'd still been able to talk, I'd have made a remark about their appearance—but I couldn't.

"Who are you?" Mr. Pinkerton demanded.

"Scouts," an alien replied. "We have come to decide whether your world would be suitable for colonization."

"It's already occupied," Mr. Pinkerton said.

"Oh, that's all right," the alien told him. "You people are so primitive that we can easily dominate you. We have studied your culture. We have listened to your radio programs. We are sure that our appearance will terrify you into obedience."

"The heck it will!" Mr. Pinkerton said.

The alien looked puzzled and turned to one of the others, who said, "A figure of speech—they have many curious figures of speech. It means, 'Assuredly not,' and indicates defiance."

“Ah.” The first alien turned back to Mr. Pinkerton, and said, “We do not believe you. Your radio reports have made plain that your people fear the unknown. You have never seen anything like us, and therefore you will fear us.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mr. Pinkerton said. “Of course we’ve seen creatures like you before, and you don’t frighten us at all.”

I wished I could say something. Was I hearing right? Had Mr. Pinkerton said we’d seen things like these before. They didn’t look like any sort of creatures I’d ever seen—they looked like giant waffles, with arms and stuff stuck in them.

The aliens backed away, startled, and then began whispering among themselves. Finally one of them announced, “Turn on the truth beam!”

A green light suddenly flashed on. It was pointed directly at Mr. Pinkerton.

“You have seen things that look like us before?” the alien leader demanded.

“Certainly,” Mr. Pinkerton said. “Once or twice a week, usually.”

The alien nervously rearranged itself, plugging all the ears on one side and the eye on the other.

“The Earth creature is telling the truth,” another alien said as it looked at one of the machines.

“And you don’t find our appearance frightening?”

“Not in the least.”

“Still the truth. Amazing!”

The aliens conferred for a moment, then one of them said, “Perhaps this large one is somehow special. Perhaps it is able to lie in such a way that the machine cannot detect it. Ask the young one.”

“Agreed,” another alien said.

They fumbled with machinery, and the pink light vanished—I could move again! I was still strapped to the table, so I couldn’t move much, but I could move. Then a green light shone on me, just like the one on Mr. Pinkerton, and one of the aliens came up and leaned over me; it had a big eyeball right in its corner socket.

“Tell us, Earth creature. Have you ever seen beings like us before?”

I glanced uneasily at Mr. Pinkerton. Of course I hadn’t seen beings like them before! I didn’t understand how he had fooled their truth machine.

“Go ahead, Billy. Tell them what they look like.”

I blinked, trying to figure out what Mr. Pinkerton was talking about. It was pretty obvious what they looked like—but it wasn't any sort of living creature I had ever seen before. They only looked like one thing.

"They look like waffles," I said.

Mr. Pinkerton smiled. "Good, Billy. And what do we do with waffles?" he asked me.

I suddenly understood what he was doing. These creatures didn't know what waffles were. They only knew what we told them.

"We eat 'em for breakfast!" I said.

The alien who had bent over me turned to look at the others. The one at the machines said, "It is not lying."

The linguist said, "Another figure of speech. 'Eat 'em for breakfast' means to defeat without significant effort."

"We have erred somehow," another alien said.

"Something is certainly wrong," the alien leader agreed, plugging in arms side by side so it could fold its fingers together thoughtfully. Then it spread its hands. "Well, there are millions of planets in the galaxy. We'll find another."

"What about us?" Mr. Pinkerton demanded.

"Oh, put them back in their vehicle," the alien leader ordered. "If they are as formidable as all that, we should not antagonize them unnecessarily." It turned to look at Mr. Pinkerton and said, "Our apologies for troubling you."

The machinist pushed a button...

And the next thing I knew we were back in Mr. Pinkerton's car, sitting by the side of the road. The motor had stalled.

I leaned forward and peered out through the windshield at the sky, but I couldn't see anything up there. Then I looked at Mr. Pinkerton.

"Did I just dream that?" I asked.

"Dream what?" he said warily.

"Being kidnapped by space waffles," I said.

"Well, if you did, we had the same dream," Mr. Pinkerton said. "I can't see how we could have thought up space waffles independently." He started the car.

“If it was real,” I said thoughtfully, “then you just saved the entire world.”

He shrugged. “It was nothing,” he said. “And we just saved the world, Billy—if you hadn’t verified what I said, it wouldn’t have worked.”

On the drive back to town, a thought struck me. “What if they hadn’t looked like waffles? Then what?”

“It would depend what they did look like.” he said. “I could probably have thought of something harmless to compare them to. After all, we’re at the top of the heap here on Earth.”

I considered for a moment, then said, “Well, suppose they were almost human-looking.”

“Dolls. Toys.”

“What about shapeless blobs, like giant amoebas?”

“Jell-O.”

“Or slimy, tentacled things?”

“Sushi,” he said. He grinned.

I didn’t argue any more after that.