

THE MIRROR MEN

An Original Story by Stuart Clark

It started when the Mongolians got their bomb. When I say their bomb, I mean *the* bomb. You know, the kind of weapon with enough destructive firepower to obliterate small countries and afflict those left alive in the surrounding environs with genetic disease for generations.

The Mongolians were the last to get one. A bomb I mean. Once they had it, they joined the rest of the countries of the world in their game of nuclear stalemate. It was an absurd state of affairs.

It was soon after that the sightings began. UFO's began appearing over every political seat of power. The White House. Downing Street. Brussels. Moscow. Beijing. Canberra. Everywhere. It was unsettling and we reacted as we always do of course, complete paranoia. We scrambled fighters to intercept them, assuming they were hostile instead of waiting to find out, and that seemed to do the trick. At least, the UFO's went away for a while. But then I guess they couldn't really come back to finish what they had started, the world at that point was already in a state of heightened anxiety. An F-15 Hornet patrolled the skies over 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue twenty-four seven.

However, over time they did come back, but not to the political power bases. Instead they began to appear over deserts, over great swathes of open land and over sparsely populated areas.

There had been reports that some of them had actually landed and there had been human contact. Those that had conversed with the "grays" who had alighted from the spaceships told the same story, all of them using the same term to describe the visitors – "The mirror men." I didn't understand the moniker. I don't suppose many other people did either.

I never thought it would happen to me. I never thought I'd have a close encounter with intelligent life. It was one of those things. Weird stuff always happened to other people. Not to me.

I was driving Interstate 40 in Arizona, admiring the night sky among the giant cacti of the desert. It's not difficult to admire the night sky out there, there's so little light pollution the stars practically light the way. It's for that very reason that it's also not difficult to see a bright light in the heavens when it appears.

I couldn't tell you when or how it appeared, whether it was something that slowly got brighter until I noticed it, or whether it just flared into existence. All I know is that one minute it wasn't there, and the next, it was.

It traced a gentle arc across the sky, a slow purposeful descent towards me, growing ever larger as it approached – although given the distance, its movement could be described as anything but slow. As it got closer, I could see it for what it truly was, a ship of some kind, flying directly towards me at speed. I was gawping at it through the windshield, too dumbstruck to realize it was going to buzz me close, and it was only when it was practically on top of me that I swerved off the road and down the slight embankment, coming to a final stop on the sand. In hindsight, I wonder if that was intentional since later,

when I tried to pull away, the wheels were stuck fast in the soft sand that skirted the asphalt.

I watched the ship recede into the night sky and then slowly bank, turning back towards me and slowing as it approached. It stopped about two hundred feet above me and hovered.

From underneath it appeared as nothing more than a giant silver disc, so featureless and uniform in color that it was difficult to detect any kind of motion from the strange ship, spinning or otherwise. At its outermost edges, the flat bottom of the craft curved upward. It was, indeed, a flying saucer.

There was also no sound from the thing, an observation that was emphasized by the fact that even the bugs that usually chirped and filled the night air with their song had fallen silent.

I stood there and examined its underside for a matter of minutes before it began to descend, a movement that made me instinctively back away from my car, my unconscious mind forcing my body to move in some misguided notion that it might aid self preservation. I brought my hands up to shield my face from the expected blast of sand but none came and I allowed them to fall back to my sides as I gazed at the ship in wonder. From the outside, it was impossible to tell how the ship was powered, but it was clearly not jet or rocket propelled, and if I was in any doubt before, it was clear to me now that here was technology that was infinitely better than anything we had yet developed on Earth. The circular craft touched down softly, making only the slightest scuffing sound as it landed.

Minutes passed and nothing happened. Though the now visible top of the craft had no windows that I could see, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was being scrutinized by whoever or whatever lay within, that somehow my worthiness was being appraised. The hairs on the back of my neck pricked up and I shook off an involuntary chill. I felt somehow violated.

Suddenly, part of the seam that ran the circumference of the ship cracked, pulling apart to reveal an entryway. Swirling clouds of vapor poured from the opening, backlit by a bright pinkish light that pulsed from deep within the craft. As I watched, stupefied, a silhouette appeared in the doorway, humanoid in form, but clearly not human. The stick like figure walked gingerly toward me, emerging slowly from the mist that concealed it, until finally it stood in full view.

The gray studied me for a moment, like someone gazing upon something that they truly can't comprehend. It cocked its head to one side and looked me up and down, something I could tell from the motion of its head and not from its large, almond shaped, eyes which were solid black and therefore gave no clue upon what they were fixated. It blinked, transparent nictating membranes sweeping forward from the sides and then retreating.

"I...I mean you no harm!" I stammered.

The gray cocked its head to the other side and studied me further. It nodded as if directing something at me and pain erupted in my head. I clasped my head in my hands and screamed. As quickly as it started, the pain stopped. "What do you want with me?" I asked.

The gray's lipless mouth opened and it vocalized in a series of squeaks punctuated with guttural barks. The gray seemed to frown, if frowning was possible on a creature with

tight, hairless skin; a tiny set of furrowed lines appearing on its smooth forehead. It seemed frustrated at its inability to communicate and then, as if remembering something, it lifted its hand and reached for me.

I watched, terrified, as the hand moved towards me. The gray's skin looked slimy and amphibious and I was repulsed by the thought of its clammy touch, yet at the same time I was rooted to the spot and unable to flee. I stared at the elongated fingers as they closed in on my scalp, imagining how they would feel against my head. And then my world exploded.

I began to shake uncontrollably as thousands of images tore through my consciousness. It was too much for the human mind, what the gray was showing me. Too much information from a sheer volume point of view, but too much information to actively assimilate, comprehend and believe.

Five thousand years of human history...No! Human evolution...was being shown to me in mere seconds. I saw the movement of the continents, natural disasters, world wars, the homogenization of cultures and creeds, the emergence of a single race, mans journey to the stars, human adaptation to life in space, evolution. I fell to my knees. I saw colonization, commercial space travel, the technology boom, and finally, the construction of the machine that sat upon the sand only yards away from me.

The gray took his hand from me. I fell the rest of the way to the sand, laying there a moment to catch my breath while my head throbbed and my body continued to convulse. The gray looked down at me and I up at him. Once again it opened its mouth and this time three words came out.

“We are you.”

The mirror men.

“Wh...What?” I stammered.

“We are you.”

I rose unsteadily to my feet. “What? You can talk my language now?”

The gray paused, as if carefully considering its answer. “Yours is a simple dialect. It is a language long lost to us.”

“Lost to you? What the hell do you mean?”

The gray seemed to deflate. “You do not understand. Your brain is too simple to comprehend all that it has just absorbed.”

“Oh, I understand all right!” I said.

“Then you should understand – We are you.” The gray's tag line was fast becoming old, and despite my protestations to the contrary, I still wasn't quite sure I fully grasped what it was trying to tell me. The visitor continued. “We spoke like you once. Communicated verbally. Even used your common tongue. We no longer have the need to do that, nor have we for millennia. We communicate with telepathic thought.”

“Was that the pain in my head?”

The gray's disposition seemed to brighten. “Yes.” It seemed there was hope for me yet. “Although your brain is not developed enough to process the signal. I apologize for any...discomfort...you may have felt.”

I rubbed my temple, not wanting to be reminded of the brief but explosive pain. “It's okay,” I said. “I guess you had to try.” The gray gave a small nod of agreement.

“Why have you come here?” I asked.

“It is in our own best interests to come.”

“But why now?”

“Now?” And there it was again, that semi-frown. “We have always come. It is well documented.”

“UFO’s!” I said, incredulously.

“That is your term for our machines. Yes.” The gray paused. “Yes. We have always come. At first it was to prove what we refused to believe. Now our presence is needed.”

“Needed? Why?”

“Our race is in peril.”

“Your race! Who on earth could your race be in peril from? And what does that have to do with us? With me?”

“*Our* race is in peril.”

I stopped. He was using ‘our’ to describe us collectively.

“It has everything to do with *us*,” the gray finished.

I flashed back to the images the visitor had shown me before. It was starting to make sense, the pieces beginning to fall into place, although the conclusion to the stream of thought racing through my mind was almost too fantastic to believe.

“What planet are you from?” I asked. The gray seemed at once both confused and disappointed in my question. I’d expected as much and the reaction confirmed my new found belief. “You’re from the future aren’t you?”

The gray nodded once and I was sure I saw the slightest of smiles touch the corners of its lipless mouth. “We are you.” It said again.

Despite my deduction, it was still incredible to believe. “Why have you not revealed yourself before?”

“We didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know? Didn’t know what?”

“We did not know we were descended from you. And when it looked possible, we refused to believe.”

“Why?”

“You are – we were – such a violent people. It is difficult for us to comprehend that we could have harbored so much hatred towards our own kind, that we were even capable of such thoughts. It is not our way now.”

“So what happened? What changed your mind?”

“Our lineage was undeniable once we had genetic proof.”

“How did you...?” I trailed off, not wanting to put a voice to my thoughts. If I was correct, then why was this stranger standing before me now. “Alien abductions?”

The gray nodded. “Although the abductors were not alien. It was simply assumed they were because they did not look human.”

“But what about the other things, the cattle mutilations?”

“Necessary. Imagine you were looking back into the primordial soup. It would be impossible to identify your microbial ancestor without taking a random sampling.”

“Is that how you view us? Are you that much more physiologically and technologically advanced than us?”

“Somewhat, yes. The paradox is mildly amusing. We are, in essence, your children, although you appear as nothing more than children to us.” The gray paused,

allowing this thread of our conversation to die before speaking again. “There is need for you to spread this message.”

“Why? Why now?”

“The nuclear proliferation threatens your existence and, by definition, therefore threatens ours.”

“But just your being here suggests that nuclear annihilation is averted.”

“In one thread of history, yes, but there are many threads working on many different levels.”

“Which is why you need the time machine.” I stated.

“Yes.” The gray nodded. “It allows us to operate in many different timelines, across many different planes. We work to avoid many different eventualities.”

“But why me? I’m a nobody.”

“Your leaders will not talk or listen to us. We must reach out to the underlings.”

“So you want me to single-handedly avert a nuclear holocaust?”

“Yes and no. We need your help but we have spoken with others to make sure the message is heard. You are part of the plan. An instrument in the salvation of mankind.”

He said no more after that, simply turned and walked back into his ship and I watched as it ascended, banked away and receded into the night sky. There was a flash and then it was gone.

Sometimes I wish I’d never met the gray. He had bestowed on me a responsibility that was impossible to fulfill. I tried telling people, of course, but no-one wanted to listen to stories of the end of the world.

It’s even harder trying to tell people now. In here. Don’t get me wrong, I like it here. They keep the flower garden real nice. I can see it through the barred window of my room and in the summer they sometimes let me wander out there when the air is warm. I sit on the benches among the rosebushes and watch the other residents shuffle around. Sometimes I just stare out into space for hours.

I have visitors too. My sister comes most frequently. She sits across from me, clasping my hands in hers over the table. We don’t have much to say. Her eyes fill with tears and fall down her cheeks as she looks at me with sadness and wonders at what I have become, or what she thinks I have become.

I still talk about it occasionally, hoping to get through to someone, but the young girls that work here in their uniforms of white smile sympathetically. They tell me to relax; that I need to get my rest and that makes me mad. Sometimes the frustration gets too much. I scream and yell and demand to know why no-one will listen to me, why no-one will believe me and that’s when the heavies come and force me onto my bed, strapping me down until the rage passes.

And then there are the other days, where I don’t seem to care about the gray or what he had to say to me. In fact, I don’t seem to care about anything much. The days where the doctor stands over me and watches to make sure I swallow the cocktail of medicaments they have prepared for me. A rainbow collection of round and oblong pills that numb my senses and dull my thoughts. Reds and blues and greens. I like the green ones. The pretty green ones...

They're all insane in here you know. Every one of them. Every one except Robert down in cell fifty-four. I know this because Rob and I have talked and, well, he's met them too.

He knows about the mirror men.