**The Watery Place**

Isaac Asimov

We’re never going to have space travel. What’s more, no extraterrestrials will ever land on Earth-at least, any more.

I’m not just being a pessimist. As a matter of fact, space travel is possible; extraterrestrials have landed. I know that. Space ships are crisscrossing space among a million worlds, probably, but we’ll never join them. I know that, too. All on account of a ridiculous error.

I’ll explain.

It was actually Bart Cameron’s error and you’ll have to understand about Bart Cameron. He’s the sheriff at Twin Gulch, Idaho, and I’m his deputy. Bart Cameron is an impatient man and he gets most impatient when he has to work up his income tax. You see, besides being sheriff, he also owns and runs the general store, he’s got some shares in a sheep ranch, he does a bit of assay work, he’s got a kind of pension for being a disabled veteran (bad knee) and a few other things like that. Naturally, it makes his tax figures complicated.

It wouldn’t be so bad if he’d let a tax man work on the forms with him, but he insists on doing it himself and it makes him a bitter man. By April 14, he isn’t approachable.

So it’s too bad the flying saucer landed on April 14, 1956.

I saw it land. My chair was backed up against the wall in the sheriff’s office, and I was looking at the stars through the windows and feeling too lazy to go back to my magazine and wondering if I ought to knock off and

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hit the sack or keep on listening to Cameron curse real steady as he went over his columns of figures for the hundred twenty-seventh time.

It looked like a shooting star at first, but then the track of light broadened into two things that looked like rocket exhausts and the thing came down sweet, steady and without a sound. An old, dead leaf would have rustled more coming down and landed thumpier. Two men got out.

I couldn’t say anything or do anything. I couldn’t choke or point; I couldn’t even bug my eyes. I just sat there.

Cameron? He never looked up.

There was a knock on the door which wasn’t locked. It opened and the two men from the flying saucer stepped in. I would have thought they were city fellows if I hadn’t seen the flying saucer land in the scrub. They wore charcoal-gray suits, with white shirts and maroon four-in-hands. They had on black shoes and black homburgs. They had dark complexions, black wavy hair and brown eyes. They had very serious looks on their faces and were about five foot ten apiece. They looked very much alike.

God, I was scared.

But Cameron just looked up when the door opened and frowned. Ordinarily, I guess he’d have laughed the collar button off his shirt at seeing clothes like that in Twin Gulch, but he was so taken up by his income tax that he never cracked a smile.

He said, “What can I do for you, folks?” and he tapped his hand on the forms so it was obvious he hadn’t much time.

One of the two stepped forward. He said, “We have had your people under observation a long time.” He pronounced each word carefully and all by itself.

Cameron said, “My people? All I got’s a wife. What’s she been doing?”

The fellow in the suit said, “We have chosen this locality for our first contact because it is isolated and peaceful. We know that you are the leader here.”

“I’m the sheriff, if that’s what you mean, so spit it out. What’s you trouble?”

“We have been careful to adopt your mode of dress and even to assume your appearance.”

“That’s my mode of dress?” He must have noticed it for the first time.

“The mode of dress of your dominant social class, that is. We have also learned your language.”

You could see the light break in on Cameron. He said, “You guys foreigners?” Cameron didn’t go much for foreigners, never having met many outside the army, but generally he tried to be fair.

The man from the saucer said, “Foreigners? Indeed we are. We come from the watery place your people call Venus.”

(I was just collecting up strength to blink my eyes, but that sent me right

back to nothing. I had seen the flying saucer. I had seen it land. I had to believe this! These men—or these somethings—came from Venus.)

But Cameron never blinked an eye. He said, “All right. This is the U.S.A. We all got equal rights regardless of race, creed, color, or nationality. I’m at your service. What can I do for you?”

“We would like to have you make immediate arrangements for the important men of your U.S.A., as you call it, to be brought here for discussions leading to your people joining our great organization.”

Slowly, Cameron got red. “Our people join your organization. We’re already part of the U.N. and God knows what else. And I suppose I’m to get the President here, eh? Right now? In Twin Gulch? Send a hurry-up message?” He looked at me, as though he wanted to see a smile on my face, but I couldn’t as much as fall down if someone had pushed the chair out from under me.

The saucer man said, “Speed is desirable.”

“You want Congress, too? The Supreme Court?”

“If they will help, sheriff.”

And Cameron really went to pieces. He banged his income tax form and yelled, “Well, you’re not helping me, and I have no time for wise-guy jerks who come around, especially foreigners. If you don’t get the hell out of here pronto, I’ll lock you up for disturbing the peace and I’ll never let you out.”

“You wish us to leave?” said the man from Venus.

“Right now! Get the hell out of here and back to wherever you’re from and don’t ever come back. I don’t want to see you and no one else around here does.”

The two men looked at each other, making little twitches with their faces.

Then the one who had done all the talking said, “I can see in your mind that you really wish, with great intensity, to be left alone. It is not our way to force ourselves or our organization on people who do not wish us or it. We will respect your privacy and leave. We will not return. We will girdle your world in warning and none will enter and your people will never have to leave.”

Cameron said, “Mister, I’m tired of this crap, so I’ll count to three—”

They turned and left, and I just knew that everything they said was so. I was listening to them, you see, which Cameron wasn’t, because he was busy thinking of his income tax, and it was as though I could hear their minds, know what I mean? I knew that there would be a kind of fence around earth, corralling us in, keeping us from leaving, keeping others from coming in. I knew it.

And when they left, I got my voice back-too late. I screamed, “Cameron, for God’s sake, they’re from space. Why’d you send them away?”

“From space!” He stared at me.

I yelled, “Look!” I don’t know how I did it, he being twenty-five pounds

heavier than I, but I yanked him to the window by his shirt collar, busting every shirt button off him.

He was too surprised to resist and when he recovered his wits enough to make like he was going to knock me down, he caught sight of what was going on outside the window and the breath went out of him.

They were getting into the flying saucer, those two men, and the saucer sat there, large, round, shiny and kind of powerful, you know. Then it took off. It went up easy as a feather and a red-orange glow showed up on one side and got brighter as the ship got smaller till it was a shooting star again, slowly fading out.

And I said, “Sheriff, why’d you send them away? They had to see the President. Now they’ll never come back.”

Cameron said, “I thought they were foreigners. They said they had to learn our language. And they talked funny.”

“Oh, fine. Foreigners.”

“They said they were foreigners and they looked Italian. I thought they were Italian.”

“How could they be Italian? They said they were from the planet Venus. I heard them. They said so.”

“The planet Venus.” His eyes got real round.

“They said it. They called it the watery place or something. You know Venus has a lot of water on it.”

But you see, it was just an error, a stupid error, the kind anyone could make. Only now Earth is never going to have space travel and we’ll never as much as land on the moon or have another Venusian visit us. That dope, Cameron, and his income tax!

Because he whispered, “Venus! When they talked about the watery place, I thought they meant Venice!”