A Flying Saucer with Minnesota Plates

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I’ll take these,” he said.

The customer smiled in relief. “Thanks,” he said. “And thanks for the burger.” He started for the door.

“Any time,” Harry said, waving.

He glanced out the window, trying to decide whether the eastern sky might be starting to lighten a little.

What the hell, he couldn’t tell with the lights on, and he wasn’t about to turn them off, even if he didn’t have any customers in the place just then.

He probably wasn’t going to get any customers for at least an hour, either; the late-night oddballs who were his best customers wouldn’t be coming any more at this time of night, and it was still too early for the truckers catching an early breakfast.

That last guy had hung around later than most of the weirdos ever dared.

Well, an hour to kill would give him a chance to sweep up, maybe clean the grill; the grease was getting a bit thick.

He was out of practice looking after everything himself; he’d gotten spoiled having that kid working the graveyard shift with him for so long, and now that the kid had lit out for wherever the hell he was—he’d sent postcards from Pittsburgh and New York, so far—it was taking awhile to get back into the swing of it.

Maybe, he thought, he should see about hiring another kid—but there was always the question of how a kid would handle the late-night crowd, and just because the last one had done okay, that didn’t mean the next one would.

After all, Harry’s late-night customers were not your usual weirdos, not out here in the hills of West Virginia. Some of them, he was pretty sure, weren’t even human.

As long as they paid for their meals, though, he didn’t much care what they were.

The bell over the door jingled as he was pushing the broom along behind the counter, and Harry looked up, startled.

It was his last customer, back and looking worried.

“Something wrong?” Harry asked.

He hoped it wasn’t about the payment; those little coins he’d accepted looked like the platinum the guy had said they were, and that meant they were worth several times what the burger should have cost. He didn’t particularly want to give any of them back, though; after all, he’d have to take them up to Pittsburgh to sell them, and he deserved something extra to cover the overhead.

“Yes,” the man said. “It’s my...my vehicle. You know anything about...um...motors?”

“Well, that depends,” Harry said. “What sort of motor are we talking about here?”

The traveler opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Um...” he said. “Maybe you had better come take a look.”

Harry looked him over.

He looked ordinary enough, really. He was definitely human, and he was wearing pants and a shirt and shoes and a jacket, nothing particularly weird.

Of course, the shoes were cerise and appeared to be plastic, and the shirt couldn’t seem to decide if it was white or silver, but the pants were ordinary black denim and the jacket was ordinary black vinyl—cut a little funny, maybe, but it could pass for European if you didn’t know any better. The little display screen on the collar could pass for jewelry if you didn’t look close.

The guy’s head was shaved, but he didn’t look like a punk, especially not with that worried look on his face.

“Okay,” Harry said. “I’ll take a look.”

He slipped off his apron and draped it across the counter, and the two men stepped outside into the cool of a late summer night.

Harry blinked as his eyes adjusted, and the customer pointed and said, “There.”

He hadn’t needed to point or say anything. His vehicle was the only one in the lot. Harry stared.

Harry sighed.

The vehicle was silvery, with a finish like brushed aluminum that reflected the light from Harry’s signs in broad stripes of soft color. It was round, perhaps twenty feet in diameter, six feet high at the center, but curving gradually down to a sharp edge. A section of one side had lifted up to reveal a dark interior where various colored lights glowed dimly. There were no windows, portholes, or other visible openings, but a band of something milky ran around the lower disk and seemed to be glowing faintly.

It was, in short, a classic flying saucer.

“Oh, Lord,” Harry said. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know,” the customer said, worried.

Harry sighed again. “Well, let’s have a look at it.”

The customer led the way into the dim interior of the thing, and showed Harry where the access plate for the main drive was.

Harry went back inside, collected his tool box from the furnace room in back, and went to work.

He had never seen anything like the “motor” in this particular vehicle; about half the components looked familiar, but they went together in ways that made no sense at all.

And the other half—Harry didn’t even like to look at the other half.

After about fifteen minutes he emerged from the engine compartment and shrugged.

“I’m sorry, buddy, but I can’t fix it. I think that...that thing on the right might be bad—everything looks okay, no loose wires or hoses, but that thing’s got this black gunk on it that doesn’t look like it should be there.”

The customer stared. “What will I do?” he wailed. He turned and looked desperately at Harry. “Is there anyone in your world who knows such machines?”

Harry considered that long and hard, and finally replied, “No.”

“No? I am stranded here?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe somebody’ll come in who can fix it. We get all kinds here.”

“But you said...”

“Yeah, well, I meant that lives here, there’s nobody can fix it. But my place, here, I specialize in you guys, I figure you know that or you wouldn’t be here. Tonight, tomorrow, sooner or later we’ll get somebody in who can fix your gadget.”

“Someone from another time-line, you mean?”

Harry shrugged again. “Whatever. I don’t know who you guys are that come here; I just let you come and don’t hassle anybody. It’s none of my business if you’re from time-lines, whatever they are, or from Schenectady, but I do get a lot of you weirdos late at night.”

The customer frowned and looked over the controls.

“You are not very reassuring,” he said.

“Not my job to be reassuring,” Harry said. “My job is selling burgers. Now, would you mind getting this thing out of sight, before the sun comes up?”

The customer turned and blinked at him.

“How am I to do that?” he asked. “Without the primary driver, the vehicle cannot move at all.”

Harry’s eyebrows lowered.

“You serious? I thought you couldn’t do whatever it is you guys do, but you mean it won’t go anywhere?”

“It will not go anywhere,” the other affirmed.

Harry looked out the door of the craft; the sky was definitely getting lighter now. Early truckers might happen along almost any time now.

What would they do if they saw a flying saucer in his parking lot? This could be very bad for his daytime business.

“Maybe we can shove it back into the woods?” he suggested, not very enthusiastically.

The customer shook his head. “I doubt it very much. The craft has a registered weight of fifteen hundred kilos.”

“What’s that in pounds?” Harry asked.

“Ah...about, perhaps, four thousand pounds?”

Harry sat down on a convenient jump-seat. “You’re right,” he said, “We can’t shove it anywhere, unless it’s got wheels. I didn’t see any.”

“There are none.”

“Figures.”

The two men sat, thinking.

“Can we not leave it here, until someone comes who can repair it?” the customer asked.

Harry glowered. “How the hell am I supposed to explain a goddamn flying saucer in my parking lot?”

The customer shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Outside, an engine growled. The first of Harry’s daylight customers was arriving.

An idea struck him.

“Look,” he said, “I gotta go, but here’s what you do...”

The saucer sat in the lot through the morning and the afternoon, while Harry finished his shift and went home to bed, leaving the day shift in charge. It was still there at about 6:00 p.m. when the county sheriff pulled in and saw it.

He got out of his car and looked the saucer over from every side. The door was closed, and the exterior was virtually seamless. He had no way of knowing that its driver was asleep inside.

Painted on one side, in big red letters, was the legend, “Harry’s hamburgers—they’re out of this world!”

He smiled and went inside.

Twenty minutes later Harry came out of the back room, yawning, and poured himself a cup of coffee. The evening crew, consisting of Bill the cook and Sherry the waitress, paid no attention to him; they knew, from long experience, that he wouldn’t be fit company until he had had his coffee.

The sheriff knew it, too, but between bites of hamburger he said, “Cute gimmick, Harry, that saucer out front.”

“Thanks, Sheriff,” Harry said, looking up from his cup.

“Is it permanent?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Harry said sleepily. “Takes up a lot of space. Thought I’d try it, though, see if it pulled in any customers.”

The sheriff nodded, and took another bite.

“Uh...why d’you ask?”

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The sheriff nodded, and took another bite.

“Uh...why d’you ask?” Harry inquired, uneasily.

The sheriff shrugged and finished chewing.

“Well,” he said, “I figured it wasn’t there for good when I saw the Minnesota plates. If you keep it there more than a couple of months, you’ll want to take those off.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said, weakly.

He hadn’t noticed the license plates.

Three days later, just after dawn, a trucker pushed open the door.

“Hey, Harry,” he called, “What happened to your flying saucer?”

“Got rid of it,” Harry said, pulling a breakfast menu out from under the counter. “Wasn’t doing any good.”

“No? I thought it was a cute idea,” the trucker said, settling onto a stool.

Harry just shrugged.

“So, Harry,” the trucker asked, “where’d it go?”

Harry remembered the weird shimmer as the saucer had vanished, several hours before. He remembered the snatches of conversation he’d overheard about parallel realities and alternate worlds. He remembered all the strange coins and bizarre gadgets he had accepted in payment over the years. He thought of all the stories he could tell this man about what he had seen, in this very place, late at night.

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