INFECTION

By C.J. Nash

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They’re gone. They will never return. They were heralded as the salvation of mankind but now they’re gone. And it’s my fault. My name is Terrence Holloway, and this is what happened:

It began on a hot, lazy summer afternoon in Northwest Georgia. I was sitting on my back porch swatting flies and watching the cows in an adjacent pasture. My best friend, Mark Davis, was sitting at the other end of the porch describing in long, boring detail the TV show he had watched the week before. I have never understood how anyone could squeeze the entire plot of a half-hour show into two hours and forty-five minutes, but Mark always managed. I visualized myself walking across the porch, wrapping my hands around Mark’s neck and squeezing until his lifeless corpse finally stopped talking. “Shut up!” I shouted mentally. I had not wanted to watch the show; I had no interest in that show, but I was going to be forced to listen to it anyway.

The reason I didn’t kill Mark that afternoon was simple. He is my best friend. Okay, he’s my only friend. I never really had a social life. I was a bookworm in school while Mark was generally the center of attention. I got the good grades; he got the girls. I graduated number two in my class and Mark just barely graduated, but *he* was voted most likely to succeed. I’ll admit that I’ve always been a little jealous of Mark, and I wish that I had strangled him that day.

Mark and I went to technical college together. I studied programming and he picked up girls. Without my help I don’t believe Mark could have ever completed the school. But there we were, both with certificates in our hands, ready to enter the workforce. Somehow we both managed to get interviews for a job at Arizona Ceramics on the very same day. (Arizona Ceramics is located in Northwest Georgia—not Arizona. Who would have guessed?) I had a beautiful resume with copies of all my certificates proudly displaying my 4.0 academic performance. All Mark had was the job application form, and half the blanks on the form were *still* blank. I left with a handshake and a promise that they “would let me know.” Mark left with an invitation to go fishing in Florida with the human resources manager.

Okay, I was jealous and a little resentful, but still, I like Mark. How could anyone not like him? And besides, I owe him. He got the job and managed to convince the HR manager that *he* needed an assistant. We made a great team. He did all the talking and I did all the work. He negotiated our salaries and what I got was well above my expectations. I am fortunate to have Mark for a friend—sometimes.

But I digress. On that hot summer day, I was still working on the can of Coke that I had opened when Mark first began the story that seemed to have no end. He was just finishing his fourth Miller. There was the disgusting *plop-plop-plop* of a cow fertilizing the pasture. Besides the *plop-plop-plop* and the *buzz-buzzing* of the flies and Mark’s mind-numbing drone, I heard another sound. It was like a slide whistle with the slider being rapidly stroked in and out—the kind of sound you would hear in a low-budget ‘50s movie when a flying saucer was about to land. And then—no shit—there it was. A round vehicle, bigger than my house, squashed that cow just as flat as her latest deposit. I pinched myself just to make sure I was awake. I was.

Mark said, and I quote, “Holy shit! What the f\*\*\* is that?” A large part of Mark’s vocabulary is the “F” word. I estimate that he uses it, on average, about forty times an hour.

Before I could think of an answer that made any kind of sense, a door opened and a ramp slid out of that damned flying saucer. A little man in a silver suit walked down the ramp, held up his hand and said, “Greetings, Earth people. I come in peace.”

I swear, I’m not making this shit up. Mark was the one drinking the beer and I was stone-cold sober. I closed my eyes and pinched myself four or five more times but, when I opened my eyes again, the little space man was still there.

So what are you supposed to do when an alien drops in on you from outer space. I guess that you are supposed to reply something like, “Greetings. On behalf of Earth and all its inhabitants, I welcome you.” But that’s not what I said. Instead I said, “Well come on up and have a seat. Can I get you a Coke—or a beer?” I think Mark would have been better at intergalactic diplomacy except for the fact that he was miraculously silent.

The alien accepted both a Coke and a beer and explained that he had come to Earth to study our art. Well, I had some reproductions of reproductions of pictures that look like something a third-grader might draw, so I gave him those. When he asked about literature, I was about to show him my vast collection of *space opera* science fiction. But then I remembered the classical literature collection that I had picked up at a yard sale. I didn’t figure that I was ever going to read them anyway, so I offered them to my guest. He asked about other art forms, so I burned him some CDs with classic Rock ‘n’ Roll—only the good stuff, ‘50s through the ‘80s. Then I burned some DVDs with TV shows. I don’t watch the crap that’s on TV now. I have all the good stuff—I Love Lucy, Get Smart, The Beverly Hillbillies (black and white only—for some reason Hillbillies aren’t funny in color.)

My new alien friend asked if he might have another Coke and another beer. I gave him a six-pack of Cokes and Mark’s last Miller. The alien thanked me, walked back into his flying saucer and departed. Once the cheesy slide-whistle sound effects had faded, I looked over at Mark. He was still sitting there with his mouth open, staring at the squashed cow. He remained that way for what must have been an hour before he looked over at me and asked, “What the f\*\*\* was that?!”

I thought that would be the end of it because there was no way in hell that anyone would ever believe that crazy-as-bat-shit story. But that wasn’t the end.

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You may not have noticed but, in October 2009 for about two weeks, the Internet was really slow. I noticed it because I am a *really* heavy user (I am not admitting to any piracy.) Well anyway, it was right after that, a man from the State Department showed up wanting to talk to me. I thought that the Internet slow down and the State Department’s interest might be related, so I was trying to formulate a good explanation for all the discs that I had collected. But it turned out that they weren’t interested in my collection of music and videos after all.

“Mr. Holloway,” he said, “I understand that you had a visitor about six months ago.”

“Just my friend, Mark,” I replied. “He usually comes over once or twice a week.”

“We’ve picked up your friend and he is on his way here. What we want to discus is a visitor that arrived in a very unusual vehicle.” He was staring at the spot where the squashed cow had been. That’s when I realized that someone *would* believe the crazy-as-bat-shit story after all.

When Mark arrived, we recounted the details of the strange visit. When we finished, the State Department man gave us each a thick folder. “Read this.” It was more of a command than a request. It was long and dry and boring. It reminded me a lot of one of Mark’s narratives. In simple terms, it described a visit that the alien had made to the U.S. government. It was still top secret, hush-hush, and we weren’t ever to divulge a word about what those documents contained.

The alien had come from a planet that didn’t have a name. He had said that a name was unnecessary. The planet circled a star that we know as 20 Leonis Minoris, about fifty light years from Earth. (I looked it up. It is actually 48.58 light years away, but that’s splitting hairs.) Its residents have been civilized for over a million years. They have eliminated war, hunger, disease, hatred, etc., etc., etc. But somewhere along the way, they also eliminated their culture. They were willing to exchange their technology for our culture. We could have machines that would eliminate the need for people to work. People would be able to work, play or do nothing, as they desired. The machines could manufacture food of infinite variety. With hunger and poverty eliminated we could then turn to eliminating the cause for cultural stress. The planets and moons in our system could be terraformed in less than a dozen years and that would allow people that couldn’t tolerate cultural differences to live in comfort far from those that could. We could have Utopia if we would just lend the aliens our culture.

The aliens had developed faster than light travel about a half million years ago, but they had never ventured out of their own solar system until recently. Their machines were constantly collecting data from every possible source. When the people of Earth began broadcasting radio and then television, the machines collected that also. The desire to obtain Earth culture began to grow among the population and one of their number was chosen to travel to Earth in order to accomplish that goal. They were watching our television shows from the ‘60s, but they wanted more.

I put the folder down. “So, what do you want from us.”

“Just you,” the man from the state department replied. “That alien downloaded the Internet—the whole damn Internet! And he put it on a frigging thumb drive! Can you believe that technology. Two frigging weeks to backup the Internet to a thumb drive. But he says that he needs a living human being to explain parts of our culture. We offered him some of the most brilliant minds on the Earth, but do you know who he wants? He wants you! He says that you have good taste in music. He wants you, and you can bring one other person with you. I have a list here that you can choose from.” He gave me a list that contained several of the most brilliant minds I had ever heard of, but most of the names were completely unknown to me.

That was when Mark entered the conversation. “Who’s your best friend?” he asked me.

“You are,” I replied.

“And who is always there for you through thick and thin?”

And it went on and on. Mark really wanted to visit an alien world and how could I turn down my best friend. The man from the State Department said that Mark couldn’t go and Mark made a sad, puppy-dog face. Before I realized what I was doing, I said, “If Mark can’t go then I’m not going, either.” I stood my ground until Mark was confirmed as my traveling companion.

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It only took about a month to travel the fifty light years to 20 Leonis Minoris. And that is *real* time, not relativistic time. The planet was beautiful; everything was clean. There were no streets; one traveled by stepping on a floating disc. The people were all thin and healthy even though they ate as much as they desired, There was no class distinction; there were no rich and there were no poor. It was a Utopia such as Earth has never known and I had been chosen to deliver that Utopia to mankind.

It was when we first stepped off the spaceship that I began to regret that I had chosen Mark as my traveling companion. He asked, “So what do you have to drink around here?” A machine immediately delivered a glass of water. “Ain’t you got no beer?”

After a conference between our host and several of the machines, a can of beer was produced. “Is this what you desire?”

“Yeah. Is that the only one you got?”

Our host smiled. “We will have it duplicated. It will not take long.”

“And make sure that it’s chilled to exactly thirty-two degrees,” Mark called after the machine that was departing with the only can of beer on the entire planet. The machine halted while I explained that thirty-two degrees was the triple-point of water; then it continued on its way. In about five minutes, several machines returned loaded with perfectly reproduced gold Miller cans. Mark pulled a tab and drank deeply. “Perfect!”

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Over the next several weeks, the part that I played in bringing culture to these aliens became insignificant. As always, Mark was the center of attention. Slowly his new circle of friends learned to enjoy all the same things that Mark did. Every night was poker night with lots of pizza and beer. Every day there were *horse races* with the aliens riding five legged steeds (ugly sight watching a five legged creature run!) The aliens learned to play football and suddenly there were a dozen *professional* teams. Those that didn’t play, watched and bet on their favorite team. The concept of money had been totally alien to these—well…aliens, but now they never went to a *sporting event* without pockets full of twenty dollar bills. They drank. They gambled. They even laughed at Mark’s jokes (and Mark can’t tell a joke worth shit!)

But even before the end came, I began to notice changes in Utopia. The once pristine landscape was beginning to be littered with beer cans, fast food wrappers and drunk aliens. Graffiti was beginning to cover the walls of the once beautiful homes. An actual fight broke out at a soccer game.

Then one morning when I awoke, I realized that we were back aboard a spacecraft. I shook Mark and he opened one very bloodshot eye. “Leave me alone. My head is killing me.”

“Mark,” I said, “We’re on a spaceship. I think they’re sending us home.”

His eyes popped open. “They can’t do that. I’ve still got more culture to teach them. I was about to introduce them to professional wrestling.”

Mark banged on the door to the pilot’s cabin but was not allowed entry. Finally there was an answer, “I am taking you back to Earth. Your cultural mission is complete.” I couldn’t tell if the voice belonged to an alien or one of their machines.

Mark banged on the door again. “There’s a lot more that we can teach you. Come on, turn this ship around.”

“I can’t do it,” the voice replied. “There’s been an infection. The entire city has been quarantined. We have to take you home before the infection spreads.”

“Holy f\*\*\*!” said Mark. “Just like *War of the Worlds.* The sumbitches have been without disease for so long that they ain’t got no f\*\*\*ing immune system. I hope they can cure whatever it is that we gave them.”

“So do I,” I said. I knew that Earth would not be getting the promised technology because Earth would have to be quarantined also. And I didn’t have the heart to tell my best friend the truth. The alien medical science is so far advanced beyond anything that we have, that no bacteria or virus that we carried in our bodies could have possibly been a threat. The infection that they could not allow to ravage their Utopia was mankind in general—Mark in particular.

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