

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER

by Colin D. Smith

Jasper sat on his bed, his iPad propped up on his legs, flipping through yesterday's *New York Times*. On his bedside table was a copy of today's local newspaper, folded with page three on top. The main story was about a home invasion; Jasper had circled and annotated it with the red pen that now sat on top of the paper. Something about the story triggered a memory—he had read something somewhere about a robbery that bore a striking resemblance. His brow was knitted in concentration as he scanned the articles.

There was a sudden change in the atmosphere Jasper wouldn't have noticed except that he turned to swig from his Coke bottle. He looked up at the figure that now stood at the opposite side of his bedroom.

"Who—?" he said, swallowing the mouthful of Coke quickly before it ended up all over his bed. The figure was too busy shaking and smacking a black box to hear him, frustration scrunching up its pale face.

"Umm—hello?" Jasper said. This time the figure stopped and looked up. It grinned and blushed.

"You are English?" it said. Jasper's normally agile brain stumbled for a moment. He attempted to collect his thoughts.

"American, but close enough," he said, peering carefully at his unexpected visitor. "And you are— not."

"No," the visitor said. "I am from... um... Sweden. My name is Agnetha!" Jasper smiled.

"I don't think so." Jasper slid off his bed and walked toward the figure. His first major deduction was that it was a female human, or humanoid. The way her long platinum blonde hair was styled, her voice, and her demeanor screamed female. And the fact she chose Agnetha, and not Benny or Bjorn.

“You’re not from Sweden. In fact, you’re not from this planet, are you?” The girl almost dropped her black box. Jasper fought the urge to punch the air and scream “yes!” After years of reading Lovecraft and Azimov, and watching re-runs of *The X Files* and *Doctor Who*—at last! “It’s okay,” he said, reaching out a trembling hand, “don’t be frightened.”

“Eeek!” said the girl, and she began shaking the black box and slapping it some more. “How did you guess?”

“It wasn’t really a guess,” Jasper said. “It was just obvious to me.”

“Obvious?” said the girl. “How?”

“Perhaps the fact I can’t place your accent, and I’m very good with accents. Or maybe it’s the slightly blue tinge to your white skin. Perhaps your clothes—but I don’t know about fashion. Maybe skin-tight leather pants and long sweaters are in. Not in *those* colors, though. But I guess the clincher was the fact that, well, you just materialized in my bedroom!”

The girl didn’t seem to be paying attention; she was too busy shaking her box.

“What’s your name—your real name?” said Jasper. The girl looked up at him. Her eyes were purple. Purple! And quite a nice shade of purple, too.

“Pearl,” she said at last. “My name is Pearl, and, yes, I’m not from your planet.” She shook the box again, but with less energy. A tear formed in the corner of her eye.

“What is that?” said Jasper, looking at the box. Pearl rubbed her face with the palm of her hand.

“It’s how I got here,” she said with a snuffle. “But it’s not working. I think it’s run out of power.”

“You traveled here through space using a black box?” Pearl nodded. “Can I see that?”

Pearl offered him the box, and Jasper snatched it from her. It wasn’t much to look at. The front had

a series of windows that displayed a date and a location, beneath which was another date and another location. Both the top and the bottom date read January 25, 2012. The top location read “Thrax, Plectis 4,” and the bottom location read “USA, Earth.”

“Is that where you’re from?” said Jasper. Pearl was now sitting on the floor, her head between her long skinny legs, and her skinny arms dangling over her knees.

“I’m not from the USA. Didn’t you just figure out I’m not from Earth?” she said, not bothering to look up.

“No, I mean Plectis 4. Is that where you’re from?”

“No,” she said. “That’s where I was. Shopping for shoes. They have great shoes on Plectis 4. My home planet’s called Maralan. That’s what I meant to put in, but I accidentally put the wrong ‘to’ place.”

“Where is Maralan?”

“A long way from here.”

“How far?”

“A long long long way.”

“No, really, you can tell me. A billion light years?” Jasper turned the black box over in his hands. There was a power indicator on the side that emitted a dim red light.

“I don’t know!” Pearl said, looking up. “Possibly. Probably. I’m not very good at geography. Somewhere in Andromeda. Are you planning to visit? No, I didn’t *think* so! So what do you care where Maralan is?”

“How do you power this thing?” said Jasper, holding up the box. “Dylithium crystals? Or is it solar powered? It’s not nuclear powered is it?”

“What are you talking about?” Pearl frowned at him. “It runs on electricity, of course.”

“You mean, you run around the universe with this thing that’s powered by a 9-volt battery?”

“What’s a 9-volt battery?”

Jasper stared at her. An alien who doesn’t know what a 9-volt battery is? Perhaps they don’t have them on Maralan. Possible.

“Okay, so you need to charge it up...” *with electricity?* he mouthed incredulously. “Where does the electricity go?” He turned the box and started looking for some kind of power cord. Pearl got up and walked over toward him. As she moved closer, Jasper caught a sweet, flowery, citrus-y scent with a hint of something sharp and foreign, but not altogether unpleasant. Without thinking he reached out and touched her hand. Alarmed, she pulled her hand back.

“I’m sorry,” Jasper said, handing her the box. “I’ve... never met an alien before. S-sorry... I didn’t mean...” Pearl’s face relaxed into a smile. She pushed open a panel on the top and pulled out a long black cord. On the end of the cord was a block that looked like a Chinese puzzle. She pulled up a couple of pins from the block. “Some of these should fit into your wall—assuming you have electricity in your walls. You do, don’t you?” She suddenly looked very concerned.

“Yes, of course,” said Jasper, taking back the box and finding the correct three pin configuration.

“That’s good,” said Pearl. “I’m sorry for snapping at you—?”

“Jasper,” Jasper said as he fitted the block into one of the power outlets on the wall. Immediately, the box started to hum. “How long will it take?”

“A couple of minutes.”

“So, in a few minutes, you can charge up a black box that will take you across the galaxy back to

your home planet?”

“That’s right,” said Pearl, who was looking a little more relaxed, but seemed distracted by Jasper’s MacBook that was sitting open on his desk.

“How does it work?”

“What? The box? I have no idea. It’s all techy stuff. You have a computer!” She went over to his desk and gazed at his MacBook. It was as if she had never seen anything like it before. She ran her fingers lightly over the keyboard.

“Um, yes, I have a computer,” said Jasper, joining her. “It’s probably nothing compared to what you have back home, though.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She glided her hand over its shiny white surface and traced her fingers around the Apple logo in the center.

“I suppose,” said Jasper.

“What’s this?” she said, pointing to the screen.

“It’s a database I have of things I’m working on. Puzzles. Mysteries. Clues. I put information in there, and I use it to help me make connections, and solve problems.”

If Pearl’s eyes grew wider, they would have fallen out of her head and bounced across the table.

“Wow,” she sighed. “That little thing can hold all that information?”

“Yes,” said Jasper. It was his turn to frown. “Don’t you have computers?”

“Oh, yes. But not as small and beautiful as this!”

“But, you can make black boxes to travel through space! Surely a computer like that is nothing to

you?”

Pearl shrugged her shoulders.

“You Earthians are super smart. Everyone knows that. Sure, we can travel, but that’s about it. I probably shouldn’t tell you this...” Pearl’s eyes met Jasper’s. “My people visit Earth quite often and take your techy stuff back with them.”

“Really?” said Jasper. “You mean, we’ve been visited by aliens before?”

“We could never figure this stuff out for ourselves. Your CDs and mp3 players and DVCs—”

“DVDs, you mean.”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, our smart people come here and take your tech home and try to figure out how you do it.”

There was a gentle beep from the floor.

“It’s all charged up!” said Pearl, bending down and picking up her black box. Jasper unplugged it from the wall, and Pearl slid the cord back into its compartment. She grinned at Jasper. “Thank you, Jasper, for helping me.”

“You’re very welcome, Pearl,” said Jasper.

Pearl suddenly gripped him in a firm embrace that pinned his arms to his sides. Then she released him and took a step backwards. She waved. Jasper waved back. Pearl made some adjustments to the box, pressed a button, and was gone.

Jasper stood staring into space, his mind racing at what had just happened.

THE END

