

This Is How It Happens

By Jack Gregory

It's been years and months since the aliens came.

First there was the staring in disbelief, followed almost immediately by the panicking and the rioting, followed by the military response after six whole weeks, which just went to prove that the governments of the world had never even considered planning a predetermined response to extraterrestrial arrival. Then, of course, since the arriving ships still just sat there, doing absolutely nothing, humanity decided to fall back on Operation Old Reliable: Pretend It Isn't There. Everyone just went back to work, doing the nine-to-five, indifferent to the massive chunks of burnt, gouged biometallic alloy that floated overhead. My coworker Jerry wouldn't shut up about it. "I'm serious, dude," he would say, "The world is ignoring it. It's like a screaming match on Christmas morning. Everyone remembers what happened, but no one's going to talk about it. It'll bite us all in the ass."

"Jerry," I replied, patiently, after the eighth time he said this, "Shut your damn mouth." And that was that.

At which point, naturally, things started to happen. Well, just one thing, really. We all woke up in the morning and found the aliens in the streets.

They weren't scaly, or humanoid, or covered in tentacles. They didn't kill anyone, or mutilate cows, or shapeshift into politicians, or open negotiations. They just showed up in little featureless groups of three, or seven, and did nothing.

I heard a few six-year-olds expressing their disapproval of this. The prevailing opinion was that aliens were supposed to "look scary" and "shoot things with laser guns", instead of looking like angular pieces of polished black marble and sitting quietly at the intersection of MacArthur and Elm Street. I'm sure Hollywood would have agreed.

Of course, this started Jerry right off again. He tapped the table at our lunch hangout with his fork. "I'm serious, dude," he would say, "What are they here for? They must have an objective, like a target or something. Seriously. They want, what, water? Sunlight? Nitrogen? Something is majorly wrong here, dude. I'm serious."

The arrival of the aliens had made Jerry extremely serious.

Lots of theories were expressed, mostly on the news by anchors who had probably never spent a moment wondering about extraplanetary life and by academics and pseudoscientists who had spent almost every moment doing exactly that. Jerry objected to all of them. He gestured at a newspaper stand as we left the bar. "I'm serious, dude," he would say, "None of these guys has a clue what's happening. Nobody does. Which is good for the aliens and bad for us. I seriously don't think we're even the point. It's got something to do with the planet itself, and humans are just one more species. The aliens probably don't consider us much more important than the bugs or the trees. I am so serious."

"Jerry," I replied, trying to be kind, "Stop being such a shithead." That shut him up.

He didn't stop poking his nose into the controversies, however. He started collecting information on where the groups of Blackstones were located. People started calling them Blackstones because of some biological study that had tried to identify them within the animal kingdom. Apparently the aliens gave off the same kind of bioelectric field as a living being, but were otherwise mostly like rocks. Jerry had a huge map of the world in his garage, covered with thumbtacks and Post-It notes and bits of string connecting it all in a spiderweb. I tried to tell him he could probably do it easier on a computer. He ignored me.

At this point, there was quite a subculture of people interested in the aliens. Jerry called them Blackstoners, because he thought it was funny. I should mention that Jerry had a sense of humor that hadn't grown since sixth grade. They were a mixed bag of people, some all gung-ho for collaborating and pooling information and others so paranoid they would barely communicate. Jerry started reading all the newsletters and websites, gathering more and more information and research. "I'm serious, dude," he would say, "This is important stuff. It's like I've seriously found my calling in life, you know? I can get excited about this thing. I'm always finding new patterns in the data, and I'm thinking about writing an article for this one Blackstoner magazine. They're taking submissions from guys like me. Can you seriously believe that?"

"Jerry," I replied, wrinkling my nose at the smell of his house, "When the hell did you last wash your dishes?" He just shrugged.

Well, he got published. Soon, Jerry was writing for every other Blackstoner that sent him an email. I read a few of the first articles, which had almost nothing in common with each other. Some were about divergent weather patterns, some were about arithmetic patterns based on the alien group locations, some were about insect migration and didn't even mention the Blackstones.

I haven't seen Jerry in a few weeks. The last time we spoke was when I tried to pick him up for work. He peered at me through his screen door. "I'm serious, dude," he said, "I'm getting close to cracking this thing. These bastards are here for a reason, and I think they'll seriously destroy the planet to get what they want. Small changes, you know? Small changes that could have seriously big consequences. It seems like they just sit there in their little groups, but it all intersects if you look at it right."

"Jerry," I replied slowly, "They've already destroyed one thing that I can see. I'm serious, dude."