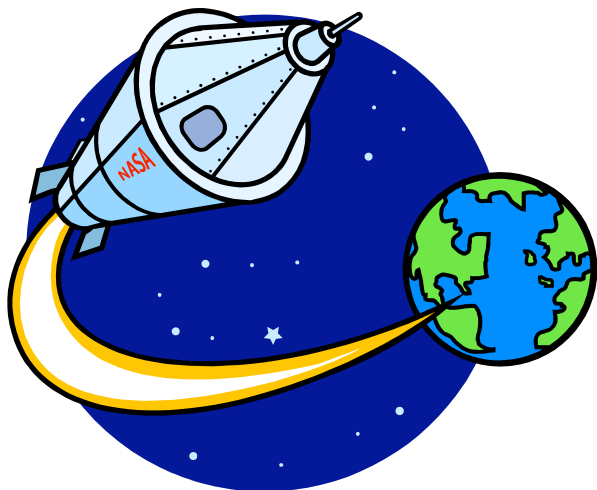


Them

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Boom! I turned away from the window, too saddened and angered to watch any more of the destruction of my home planet. "How could this have happened? How?" My father was the target of my outburst. Slowly he turned to face me.

"It has been a long cycle that set this awful force in motion." My father spoke like someone who had become tired of life. He had once been a happy, almost carefree man, but since we had first come onboard this space station that was now our home, along

with thousands of other refugees, he had become much more burdened. He spoke again in the same monotonous voice that had gradually become his in the past few weeks. "Let us go to our quarters where we may speak more freely."

We turned away from the window and began walking down the long, stainless steel corridor toward our cubicle. On our way we passed many other refugees. I recognized many of them, embittered fragments of our history, or what was left to see. It was like they had become zombies, going through the motions but not really living. We passed them, but they still lingered in my mind. "How had this happened? How?" was all I asked myself until we arrived at our cube.

It was a two-room enclosure with a pair of beds stacked on top of one another and a bathroom with a single sink. It was all painted in a wearisome metallic gray. My father walked in and sat down on the lowest bed, so out of respect I sat on the floor. He was silent a few moments and then he began. "Do you see this? All of this, in fact this entire station, is all a product of them." He paused, took a breath, and then continued. "They arrived about fifteen years before you were born in 2060. Small, hairless pink beings with no apparent weapons or threats, so after a few days of fear they were immediately accepted. At that time I was still Ambassador of the People, so along with the Ambassador of the Government, I was sent to befriend these people, and if possible, create peace so our societies could successfully coexist. As it turned out they were quite kind and benevolent beings and they took a shine to my people and me. We became friends and they taught me much about their technology and their way of life. They told me how they had come from their home planet on the ship in which they had just arrived. In many ways they are the whole reason our society is as advanced as it is today. Without them we wouldn't have intergalactic travel or mass space housing. Without them we wouldn't be here today. I guarantee it."

My father was in his mid fifties when this all happened and he wasn't the most fit guy. He often got excited over little things like stories or such. I tried to digest what I had just heard. Growing up I remembered these people vaguely. I remembered how they had always been different from us, how they could not jump as high, or how their arms were not as long. But most of all, I remembered how the night before my ninth birthday one of them showed up on our doorstep. The bell rang, and since I was a child I immediately dropped all my toys and went to answer it. There stood a tall man in a dark blue suit, who asked to speak to my father. I went and got him, but as soon as he saw whom it was, it was as if a veil had been drawn over his happiness. He said four words to me then. "This is adult business."

Hearing this I knew it was important, so I walked away in the direction of my toys, but instead I hid on the top of the stairs above the door. From my hiding place, I could catch snatches of the conversation between the two men.

Tall Man: So sorry... should have... warned you... leave tomorrow.

Father: Totally necessary...sure...children... goodbye.

The conversation was quite brief, but my overactive imagination came up with an assortment of possibilities, none of which were correct. Looking back I now believe that the reason this stuck in my head so vividly was because of what happened the next day. They vanished. Everything. It was as if they had never existed. We all knew they had, and there was evidence all around us. Skyscrapers reaching above the clouds and elevated temperatures. Extinction of native cultures and division of lands. Animal species adapting to high heat. The evidence had been all around us. They had been there.

I was startled out of my reverie by the sound of my father's waking and the creaking bed springs. He sat up lethargically and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He sat there for a while and then suddenly noticed me. After the initial shock it looked like a light bulb went on over his head and he then asked "Now, where was I?" I prompted his memory and he began speaking. "I remember now. After they had arrived and made friends with us, they requested only one thing. They wished to have one hour of live airtime on the holovid screens across the world. Well, we figured nothing bad would happen from them publicly speaking so we granted their plea.

They decided to give a speech and the topic was a request to be able to begin bringing out the rest of the contraptions they had brought from their planet. However, it was also a warning as to how these machines gave off noxious fumes and how they rapidly used non-renewable resources."

"Of course no one gave more than a moment's thought to their warning. Our planet was a rich and lush paradise, how could anything ruin it? The next week we had elections to see if they would be allowed to continue unloading. It was an almost unanimous vote to continue."

This sounded like a plot from one of my old Saturday morning cartoons. You know, the story about the cutesy bunnies that are really bloodthirsty vampire rabbits. Not that I watch cartoons or anything. I mean I am seventeen, what do you expect?

Anyway, my dad had talked right through this mini daydream of mine so when he paused for breath, I asked him to repeat what he had just said. "Alright, but pay better

attention next time. After the elections they waited a week before they opened up their cargo bay and showed us everything they had inside. Suddenly it was as if our entire culture vanished as we all learned to incorporate these devices into our everyday lives. This was when our society started to become modernized. Soon we were the envy of the cosmos and we were selling their inventions left and right. Of course being successful only made us want to sell more so that was exactly what we did. After about five years though, we started noticing some anomalies in people's health. More people had begun developing a disease the pink people called *cancer*. There were even some new illnesses that our people had never experienced before. But nobody bothered to stop and think what had caused these illnesses to manifest; they just invented cures and continued selling. Shortly after this you were born, and about two years later your mother passed away. The strange thing though, was that within the next fifteen years other people under very similar circumstances died as well. Their autopsies showed that they all had, even your mother, died of natural causes but I suspected there was something more at work. I decided it was time to have a history lesson.

I went to the public library by our house and checked out video lectures on all the gadgets they had brought, all the weather since they had arrived, animal behavior since their coming, anything I thought was potentially relevant I took. I studied them over and over until eventually it became an obsession. Then I noticed it right before my eyes. The weather was reluctantly warming, animals had slowly become endangered, even some plants had shown signs of problems. When I looked even closer I noticed that it had only started after their gizmos had arrived. Then one day their leader came to our doorstep. He apologized for everything and then left. I knew that we had brought about our destruction. We all packed up and left our planet for ever.

"But Dad, who were they?" I asked, still not understanding.

"They were humans, and they were from Planet Earth."

