

The Lifeguard.

The Shoo Fly pies were cooling on the wooden Shaker dresser near the open sash windows. The enticing sweetness of the pies was double protected by the mesh of the screened windows and the individual domes of stiff, white muslin shrouding each one.

A pitcher of homemade lemonade counterbalanced the sweet aromas, filling the airy kitchen, with the sharp tangy smell of freshly squeezed lemons. A dish of spiced fish pie, a Cajun specialty of Emilie Lou Watkins, was waiting its turn for the oven along with the sweet potatoes. Emilie wiped the sweat from her brow as she walked to the porch door, raised her voice and called to her husband.

'Wilbur, you gonna warsh up now, suppers a' cookin.'

'Kay hun, just a' comin,' that's enough watermelons planted for one day.'

Emilie nodded in approval as she carried the jug of lemonade out onto the porch of the old farmhouse and placed it on the cane table. The porch ran the full length of the front of the white clapboard farmstead. It was generous in width and its north east aspect provided a shady haven from the sweltering summer heat.

By the time Wilbur had showered and joined her, with his bottle of ice cold root beer, she was on to her second glass of lemonade and was contentedly rocking in the old cane chair. With an anticipatory sigh he sat opposite her and took a large swig of beer straight from the bottle.

'Infernal hot day for early spring, I could do without this heat at my age. Springs ain't what they used to be.' He thought for a moment and then gave a deep chuckle at his pun. Yep, springs ain't what they used to be,' he repeated.

'Wilber, you and all the folks in these parts sure have short memories. Why, we oft' ways get the odd hot day start of every spring.'

'Emilie Lou my memory goes back even further than yours and I know the mercury never hit 85 degrees Fahrenheit this early in the season. Must be that global warming they goes on 'bout. Why, we're even short of water for the corn already.'

Emilie abruptly stopped rocking, 'I hear that word one more time blamed for a temperature rise, I swear I'll fair explode Wilber Watkins. Anyways at our ages we don't need concern ourselves 'bout that. That sweet chariot in the sky be swinging our way *long* before us need worry.' She vigorously fanned herself with her second best fan bought in New Orleans on their honeymoon. Reaching forward she took another long drink of lemonade rattling the ice cubes swirling in the glass. 'Gets you right here,' she indicated her heart with one work worn hand, 'those old spirituals, don't they hun? 'A comin for to carry me home,' an all dat.'

Wilber's voice was also affected by the sudden emotion and the ice cold beer. 'Sure does, sure does, Em,' he whispered hoarsely. 'I remembers singing them way back with mammy and pappy, granmammy and granpappy too, every Sunday all in us Sunday best suits, no matter how hot it was in the summertime. All the ladies wearing fine hats and nylon stockings' like we were all going to a wedding every week, such finery for poor folks. How things change. Pastor Curtis said the Ray brothers were enquiring 'bout more casual attire for church, to encourage the young folk to come they said. They wouldn't get away with that in Alabama, no siree, don't know what the worlds a' coming to.'

'They only young Wilbur, times change, you're gettin' cranky in your old age.'

Wilber's bare, muscled arms suddenly felt a movement in the air, he looked up. 'Well, pardon me, I do believe there's a south-easterly a' stirring in the pecan trees.'

'There, told you Wilber. It's a' comin' straight from the gulf, that'll cool things down. We'll all be a shivering day after tomorrow.'

They sat savouring the unexpected breeze. Emilie broke the companionable silence.

'You remember Wilber when we were a courtin' on an evening, sitting on your mammy and pappy's porch swing, cuddlin' up watching the shooting stars? We'd pretend we were riding high looking down from the sky, whispering to each other what we could see. We were pretty good too long before those space men saw the real thing. We could have told them couldn't we hun, especially 'bout the thin blue line of the atmosphere and how fragile it looked for all us folks to breathe. You said it protected us from our star's radiation. I said, what star and you explained our sun was a star. It amazed all the folks I told. But that was your good education, always shows, a good education.'

Wilber nodded, 'And that was a long ways before folks saw lights in the sky, that didn't start till '47. Folk 'ull imagine anything, flying saucers huh. Experimental aircraft, weather balloons and weather phenomenon more like; nearly all explicable.'

'Well, but how 'bout the inexplicable ones though Wilber? Your mammy and pappy saw something and that was ways before '47, fact a day before they found you. Your mammy always said the angels left you. There you were as snug as a bug in a rug in the bulrushes of the Mississippi; jus' like Moses in the good book. Your mama said you had tight, dark curls, big black eyes, long silken lashes and a little bitty squashed wide nose. No mixed roots there, pure Black American. Your birth mamma not been with no white trash.'

"Emilie Lou, we had enough prejudice, just 'cause we was black, to last ten life times. Best we practice what we preach and not put white and trash together in one sentence. All that gets a hold again and we'll be back in the bad old days. We got a black President now, we're progressing.'

She ignored her husband's reprimand. 'Any way's no poor girl came to claim you; you were real lucky with your adopted ma and pa; they done good by you.'

'Best in Louisiana,' said Wilbur, his voice once again hoarse. He looked wistfully out beyond the porch at the darkening sky. Then he straightened and sniffed the air, 'that fish pie smells like its ready Em.'

'Oh Lord, yes! Emilie said struggling out of her chair. There we go reminiscing 'bout the old days and time flies for we know it. Mm, I've got another of those headaches Wilbur; I'll go get a couple of Tylenols.'

'Em', he said gently, 'you need go see 'bout that.'

'Yep, I knows hun, I made an appointment with Doc Wilson, soon as he gets back from Montana, in a couple of weeks. And no, I'm not seeing any one else sooner. Doc Wilson and me go back a *long* way, an' I don't trust any o' the others.'

As she turned to go indoors Wilber's eyes swept her body. He felt something he had not felt before, an aching sadness. His eyes focused on the aneurysm in her head, it had reached a critical point of dilatation, it would soon give way. She did not have a couple of weeks. My dear Emilie Lou he thought, that sweet chariot would soon be swinging low to take her from him. And then *his* great chariot would return to carry him home.

He was weary now, always working in secret and keeping his true identity from Emilie and all the family. Life on these planets must, of necessity, make its own way unaided, though not completely unprotected. Once free of earth's gravity he would have one last job to do. He must block their SETI project; stop their transmission signals, their attempts to contact extra terrestrial intelligence. They must be protected until the time came that they had evolved enough to protect themselves from the rogue intelligences out there in the universe. He would fulfil his life guard directive.

Homo sapiens were well meaning but naive best that they hide, not wave for now. His successor would be back to check on their progress in the centuries to come. He hoped his replacement would find their evolution still progressing.

'Suppers ready Wilbur, you help me dish up?' Emilie called from the kitchen.

He looked up and saw the first stars twinkling in the night sky. What a different home he would soon be travelling to he thought, he gave a deep sigh.

'I'm a' coming,' he said.

Diane Wells.

