

Earl P. Flowsnake

*- a story about drunk aliens, structuralist language theory, and all in all a very special night
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There are many who will claim that being drunk is overrated. "you get hangovers", "you kill your braincells", "it gets you out of control", the most trivial arguments go. The more sophisticated ones run in the vein of "it's just a way to hide from reality" or "there's so much beauty in the world when you're sober, I don't want to disrupt that".

There are also those who claim that being drunk is quite underrated, and Earl P. Flowsnake was one. Most people see alcohol as the party drug. You drink alcohol and then stagger around on the streets singing out of tune. You drink and then laugh furiously at bad jokes. You drink and get into a fight. You don't drink and then write poetry. You don't drink alcohol and then go on a journey of exploration through deserted areas of the city where graffiti is scrawled on the walls and there are broken tiles where no steps fall. That is, most people don't do that. It is just what Earl did. For Earl, getting seriously drunk was serious business. When he got drunk, his eyes changed, the spectrum of their vision was altered and he saw differently. Sure there were things he could not see when drunk, but there were also things he could only see when drunk. Not that the places actually changed, of course, but somewhere in the labyrinths between the objects themselves and our perception of them, doors had been opened and others locked, pathways revealed, trap doors shut. Earl had a recurring feeling - a feeling that there was something out there in the drunk world that he had not yet found. He saw himself as a lonely seeker, perhaps originating from a greek myth. Other people saw him as a bumbling loner, perhaps originating from a disused trash can.

It was time for the fourth shot of absinthe. When you've absolutely got to leave any kind of common sense behind, and you're also feeling vain enough to put yourself under a fake layer of historical mystique, it's absinthe, accept no substitute. Go out there and pretend you're Van Gogh even though you're just any random idiot. The fourth shot was as brilliant as the other three - astonishingly brilliant - and the fifth one, while it had some trouble making the journey from the bottle to the glass, also made a glamorous showing. Now it was time to go out and pretend to be Van Gogh, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Hemingway or maybe a bit of them all. Vincarthernestaul Van Verbaudingway.

Across the bridge, down the stairs, along the walls, through the gates. Ah the world was drunk now, the trees were glowing strangely, the road was shining. Little dreams flickered around the sides and the clouds were congregating. A blonde girl walked by, tapping on her cell phone.

Then a bunch of regular drunks passed, singing and falling about. Earl felt that they did not understand that he was a much more sophisticated drunk than they were. "All these people!" he thought, and at the first sight of an even darker alley, he dove right in. He totally looked like a drug dealer. His mind went back to all the other nights that had been passed in this way. Looking for something, "the edge", he called it - the point where something so remarkable would happen that it would stop time and turn the night into an image that would last the ages, like all the stars falling down or finding the elixir of life. Earl let out a rather impressive belch, but immediately looked to the side as if nothing had happened. The sidewalk kept trailing downhill and in the absence of light, Earl could get a feeling of being present and not present at the same time, a soothing feeling of flying above the scene where he walked, observing the trees and the houses and the leaves, keeping them in check.

A loud clanking sound was heard. Earl stopped short. Clapping wings of birds shook free from the nearby trees and flew away. Then like a crash of thunder, a much louder crack was heard, and Earl saw a huge shadow and some flickering lights in the proceeding silence. He ran towards the commotion.

"...is this it, here? over th... you know?", a figure said in the dark.

"what do you mean, the atmospheric adaptor function?"....

"well.... well, I was thinking about the whiskey bottle, but.,, adapteric atmofunctioner, yeah!! adaptopheric atmosphunker... fun words, heehee",

"okay listen up, the word we're looking for is supposed to be wandering around somewhere right here, but now you landed us too damn early, didn't you? You thought it was a marvellously splendid idea to land in the middle of this thorny shrubbery, AND upside down, didn't you? Just to make perfectly sure the ship's antenna is not hit by a passing meteor, I suppose? Ramming it into the ground has done the job, that I admit. I'm sure you wouldn't do something you hadn't thought over carefully first. Now let's find him and get this over with."

"Mate.... I was thinking..."

"....."

"Yes, what were you thinking?"

"If I was a pirate, do you think I would be the kind with an eyepatch.... eyepatch and a long beard, or more like the kind with a leaden woog, a lood, a wooden leg and a pirate on like, my shoulder? I mean a parrot..."

"I think you'd be more of a wooden leg type. Now, get to your senses, we're in the dictionary, we've got work to do here."

"ah... but don't you think I could grow a fabulous beard?"

Earl's heart was racing as he raced down the road towards the monstrous sounds he had heard. He looked into the bushes to the left and saw a large, metallic shape. It looked strikingly like a crash-landed, upside-down spaceship. This could be it! This could be the great day finally arrived. Now the stars were looking down at him in a very special way. Now the clocks on the walls suddenly weren't looking so smug. He walked high and slow, gracefully brushing the bushes aside with no regard for thorns.

"There it is! It came right over here. Very convenient, but also predictable in its way. Now I bid you come out and partake in this convergence of paths"

"But what would I have to do to become the eyepatch type? Is it.... the way I dress? I mean, woogerleg, that's just... I don't know. It's so not my kind of leg... Hey, where did you go? Quantozapflex-5000?"

"Come out and see now, it's right here!", Quantozapflex-5000 yelled from outside.

"Hello, aliens" said Earl, in a manner he considered sufficiently aloof. He felt an exquisite satisfaction at the idea that he was taking this so casually while most humans would be falling to their knees, fainting, waving guns or whatever subtle behaviour humans adopt when meeting strangers. "Here it is - 'Earl P. Flowsnake'", Quantozapflex-5000 remarked to the dark blob scrambling out of the supposed spaceship. "You know my name...", Earl said. Well of course, they were weird-looking aliens in a shrubbery, of course they knew his name, as surely as he knew his own name. "Indeed we do", remarked Quantozapflex-5000 in a tone as if speaking to a child that had just successfully solved a 9-piece jigsaw puzzle. "Now, please follow me". The alien beckoned Earl towards the spaceship. Earl stopped for a moment and let the true beauty of the 5th shot of absinth send its waves through his body. "Now I'm taking a ride on the wings of destiny" he thought to himself. The absurdity of the situation clutched his breath like a fist of ice, he breathed in hard, then exhaled and felt his body lighten, as if he would drift right off the ground. He winced at a thousand mortals who would run screaming or lie trembling. He called the green fairy to his side in his mind and said to the alien: "by all means, take me as far away as you please. I've had enough of this galaxy. Please don't drop me off anywhere within it. I've been thrown out of all the bars and I've slept with all the girls. Let's get going, what's that blob doing by the door?"

"Astounding..." , "most astounding and intricate... and a bit Tricia J. Wilkie", the alien said towards the blob, now rather as if talking talking about a small child that had just beaten him at chess the

first time it played.

"But the job must be done."

Earl heard the crack of a branch somewhere above, and his eyes darted up then down. His legs were walking towards the spaceship.

They got to the, upside down, door.

"I've been meaning to ask...Why are you speaking English when you're an alien?"

"Ah, we're using the Hollywood Fish. It's the opposite of the Babel Fish from The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy", Quantozapflex-5000 replied enthusiastically. "...we keep it here in our mouths, and it translates whatever we say into the language of whoever hears it".

"Ah, convenient", Earl said in his special clever voice.

They entered the spaceship and Quantozapflex was just about to urge Earl to sit down when he remembered that they had landed upside down. Earl kept wishing the panorama windows would display stars instead of downtrodden brown leaves. Just white dots on a black sheet, into infinity...

"There is something you need to know, Earl P. Flowsnake"

"Of course there's something I need to know!" he said, and the 5th shot of absinth cheered from inside his brain.

"There is something you need to know, which will alter your existence very radically."

Earl looked at the strange being in front of him. Somewhat humanoid, benign and yet repulsive.

What could its secret be? He felt as if sitting in the movie theatre watching the screen. What would the alien tell the hero now?

"Now, where to start...."

"...Your planet," it said

"...is a dictionary. Every human being is a word. You know how every human is unique?" Earl nodded earnestly. "...and do you know who Ferdinand de Saussure is?" Earl looked puzzled. The fourth and fifth shot of absinth grinned and cheered to each other inside him. "well, anyway, every human is unique because words attain their meaning through their communal difference. So, you see, we watch you when we need to recall what our words mean. The MegaOpticon language is a lot more complex than the sub-languages you speak here... which indeed you only speak because that's the character of most of the words we use. You might say we are linguistically in another dimension. Each human being is a word and the vocabulary is expanding rapidly. These days there is a substantial development in India words. We have a lot of different categories of words... Of course we also have basic, structural words that are simpler. They are all here in the dictionary, but they are not human beings."

"But... What does that... What do we mean, then?"

"I cannot answer that. You can go look in the mirror, but even that would not help much. The definition of you is your entire being. Everything you've ever said and done, the way you act, the way you think, the character of you. As I told you, our language is advanced. It takes more than a line of your words to define our words."

"So, what you're saying is... the meaning of my life..."

"The meaning of your life is Earl P. Flowsnake", the other blob cut him off.

The word before him was brought to silence for the first time. Quantozapflex continued:

"Now, our language is in constant development. Every definition is updated at least every 100 years or so, but definitions also change, new terms are coined and old ones are declared obsolete. It can be chaotic at times because most words include in their definition a reluctance towards their own deletion. Still, having defined these words, we are of course also able to round them up."

"Anyway," the serious blob went on. "We regret to inform you...". The blob paused and looked thoughtfully up at the spaceship's floor, then turned back. "... That we have come to take you away. You see, you have been declared obsolete by the language authorities."

Earl became struck by a distinctly human phenomenon, and hence one predominant in the MegaOpticon language - uncertainty. He was unsure about something. The thing that he was unsure about was whether he liked the situation. On the downside, he was caught with two aliens who were, more or less, threatening to kill him. On the upside, he was caught in an upside-down spaceship with two aliens who were more or less threatening to kill him! This drinking safari was fucking epic. Even in his dreams, which even Earl himself admitted were quite vain and well detached from any congruent or productive idea of actual future events, he had never imagined something like this happening on one of his rampant prowlings, not even the ones powered by Absinth, which were of course the best and finest and most elegant and rapturous. Finding a secret society in the middle of a littered shrubbery, maybe. Etching an unclear message on an alley wall and having several world-class poets answer, perhaps. But this was quite undreamed of. Actually, he decided right there and then that he was going to write a story about it. "I'm going to write a story about this!", he announced, with the same unfettered triumph in his voice as if he had just found the solution to the last bit of the crossword, which the whole family had been working on for hours. "What?" - one of the aliens shifted its body uncomfortably, or so it seemed. Upon mature absinth-based reflection, its movement might just as well have been an expression of the utmost comfort wherever it came from, or of sexual arousal, or flattery, or respect. Hopefully all of them at the same time, or none of them, or something he couldn't even imagine. Earl chuckled. "I kind of see what they mean", said the alien called Quantozapflex, which Earl thought was a cool name, in a carefully tasteless way.

"So, we're going to have to ask you to come with us and we'll kill you. But we're going to make sure it looks quite plain and predictable and we won't leave a mess." Earl thought that was nice of the aliens, but it also slowly began to dawn on him that when the alien said "we'll kill you", that might mean they were going to kill him.

"Hey, why are you deleting me? I find that kind of insulting.", he countered, not easily shaken. Any bunch of stupid hyperintelligent aliens would be outmatched by him and the green fairy. The aliens exchanged a glance. "Heehee, funny...", the less coherent blob muttered in the background.

"Well, it's a matter of discourse," the serious alien continued. "discourse, you know?" Earl kind of knew. "You see, the authorities have deemed it counterproductive to the growth and development of our society that people use you in their sentences, so you have been ordered removed from the dictionary. It's not something we've decided-", Quantozapflex-5000 gestured towards the other blob and let out a sigh at finding out he was apparently fast asleep. "we're just doing our jobs." His eyelike structures fluttered doubtfully in the direction of his colleague, who suddenly woke up with a start. "You lazy bum, you'll get fired, you know!" the serious blob wheezed under its breath at the sleepy blob. Earl sat back, somewhat mystified.

"But I don't understand..."

"It's okay, you can't be expected to understand. As we said, our planet is a lot more advanced than yours. It would seem, how do you say it in sub-language... mysterious... to you. In fact, we already knew before we came here that you of all words would not easily understand."

Earl pondered. He thought the alien's fatherly demeanour was somewhat audacious considering that they were going to kill him. He knew exactly what would happen because the whole story was so much like a b-movie. They would seal up the spaceship, then they would zoom off into space and then they would dispose of him in some clinical way. Earl sat up with a thud, darted to the door, hit the button so hard the whole spaceship trembled an inch, and ran away as fast as he could possibly run, mud spluttering at his pants, branches whipping at his forehead, to the street, then down the street, turned a corner, ran and ran and ran and ran. "That was fucking brilliant!", he thought, gasping. Not answering! Just suddenly running away without thinking... That had caught them off their fucking guards, the stupid, fat, ugly aliens. He kept running and running, past dark buildings, between streetlamps and cars, all along the black streets until he was in a completely different part of town. He stopped and looked out over the lights. "I'm going to write a story about this!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, all across the dark city. Then he kept running, with a lighter and lighter step, finding gravity no noteworthy ordeal. He'd never even realized he was such a good runner.

"Oh dear..." said Quantozapflex. "We're gonna have to find him again."

"Hey, I have a better idea," the other blob intercepted...

"Let's just go back to MegaOpticon and SAY we deleted the word..."

Quantozapflex let out a deep sigh, which was meant to sound fatherly but wasn't quite pulled off properly, and looked around at the capsized ship. Then it turned its gaze to its hopelessly inept colleague, sprawled across a comfy part of the spaceship ceiling, mouth wide open, half-smiling sheepishly. Quantozapflex paused for a while. There was an unrelated surge of wind.

"Okay, you win... you worthless waste of space." it said. "And let me do that....".

The ship rose up from its unrealistic dwelling point in the remote bushes, slowly turned around in the quiet and rather picturesque night, as if not to wake anyone up, then shot away into space and was gone, revealing a completely flattened can of Coca-Cola in the grass.