

SECOND THOUGHTS

by Carol Moore

Illustrated by Jason Paulhamus

Science fiction is more than just supposition about future science, technology, and encounters with unknown life forms. It is also a metaphor for human nature and our success or failure in how cultures interact.



DAY ONE

Tuesday, June 15

At high noon a large spaceship floated gently down out of a blue sky to land on the front lawn of the White House. It rested motionless for the next five hours while the White House hummed with activity. The President was evacuated and then the military moved in with troops, tanks and helicopters. Stealth fighters roared overhead. Both Congress and the United Nations called emergency sessions as a frightened world held its breath.

At exactly 5:00 p.m. eastern time, a small door opened in the side of the craft and a human-like creature stepped out.

As beings go, it wasn't that alarming. About three feet tall, it had a large head atop a small body with two spindly legs. And there were feather-like appendages growing from its head as well as from what could have been a tail if it were a bird. But it moved like a human and wore a one-piece uniform of a gold metallic material that sparkled in the sun. Walking to the nearest soldier, it stopped short, its two unnaturally large eyes blinking twice. Then in perfect English with a high-pitched voice, it said, "Take me to your esteemed leader."

After much military and political consternation, the request was granted. Standing before the President of the United States, who was seated at his desk in the oval office surrounded by half a dozen secret agents, the little being bowed. "President and Chief Commander, I humbly come to you as ambassador facilitator for an ancient and distinguished race. Please realize that you're dealing with beings of such power that their purpose must be friendly or you'd have already been destroyed in my humble estimation."

It paused to scratch the base of a head feather. "I myself am Mooba. My kind is respected throughout the universe as the finest of translators. I must tell you that the Xxlepis ship has been moored at the edge of your solar system for a year now while I've been studying your languages and customs on their behalf. I know all there is to know about all of you, in my humble opinion."

The President smiled halfheartedly, "Should I find that comforting?"

Mooba brightened, "Of course. Because I'm thorough I rarely make mistakes." He shrugged. "I'll admit to a few, but none that wasn't rectified. I'm sorry to inform you that yours is not the only species I considered for contact on this planet. There are some others more appealing, but yours is the most intelligent. And yours is also the only species believing themselves in charge."

The President's eyebrows lifted at such a statement.

Mooba continued, "For purposes of decorum, tomorrow I will teach you about the Xxlepis." His top feathers suddenly stiffened. "Be forewarned. Although highly evolved intellectually, the Xxlepis are emotionally fragile and quick to perceive imaginary insults if decorum isn't carefully followed. They're quirky that way--easily offended. And if you offend them you will not reap the benefits they can bestow."

"Fair enough" the President agreed, but his expression was one of puzzlement.

The conversation was over.

DAY TWO

Wednesday, June 16

The next day two soldiers were sent to escort Mooba back to the White House, but he wasn't on the spaceship. Instead, when the President with his staff and secret agents arrived at the meeting room, Mooba was already there. Without anyone noticing, he had left the spaceship, slipped through a ring of military, a mob of reporters and White House staff to find the secured meeting room no one had told him about the day before. It unnerved the President and particularly his secret agents.



Standing at the back of the room Mooba waited for everyone to get settled. Then he abruptly began, "The first thing to do when introduced...is to bow. Some of your human cultures already practice that formality. And the second thing after bowing... is to do nothing." He paused for emphasis. "its best, Sir President, to allow me to do all the talking, particularly in the beginning. The Xxlepis themselves rarely speak because words to them are sacred. They believe that by saying less, what is said increases in value. So speaking only at the end of a conversation is a sign of respect. Of course, in my humble opinion, that makes for very short conversations." It was hard to tell if Mooba was joking so no one laughed.

The alien continued. "The Xxlepis find it difficult dealing with other cultures, so they take great care to insulate themselves. In addition to being their translator I serve as a filter to shield their refined sensibilities--but still I must be accurate and complete. Not an easy job, in my humble opinion. The Xxlepis are emotional, you see. Despite all their sophistication, they just want to be loved and they can't handle rejection. I think you humans can appreciate that." He watched as one of the staff arose and walked to a table at the side of the room pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"What's that?"

"The President smiled."It's coffee, a common beverage. And there are also donuts. Would you like some?"

Mooba's top feathers twitched excitedly. "Certainly." He stepped quickly across the room and to everyone's surprise gulped down a whole carafe of hot coffee. Then he grabbed several donuts. Returning to the front of the room, he noisily smacked his lips. Powdered sugar from the donuts had somehow ended up on his chin. It was a comical sight that everyone politely ignored.

"That was tasty," he said, "in my humble opinion. Now, let me explain more about the Xxlepis. Having mastered the mysteries of science and technology, they have returned to the arts, particularly their poetry. They are on a quest for new forms of expression. For example, the 20 ways an elephant calls to its young or the 59 words the Eskimos use for snow. Whether or not a language is written or spoken is of secondary importance. The Xxlepis take pleasure in converting all manner of creature communication into just the right word with a precise meaning and contextual flavor to be used in their poetry. So they traverse the universe in search of communication to define new words because, to them, only words have true value. Personally, I think it's because words convey emotions."

"Speaking of value..." Mooba stopped mid-thought. "Ah... could I have more coffee?"

"Sir, there's no more coffee," said one of the agents addressing the President.

The President waved his hand. "Well then, please get another carafe. It'll only take a minute."

The agent left the room. Through the door, which had not fully closed, squeezed a short, rotund Basset Hound. It went immediately to the President wagging its tail while casting side-glances at Mooba.

"Hi there, Sally," the President gently stroked the dog's back. "Mooba, this is my dog. She just had puppies four weeks ago. What do you think of her?"

Mooba was quite interested, particularly when Sally left the President to approach him, her tail still wagging. He bent over so that his face was almost level with the dog's and she licked the sugar off his chin. His head feathers danced wildly. "I like her," he said and then made a noise somewhere between a bark and a whine. It startled everyone in the room, but Sally woofed in response.

Suddenly, the agent with the coffee appeared. "Here's the coffee, Sir."

At that point Sally was let out of the room. Mooba drank more coffee, after which he continued instructing the President.

"As I was saying, concerning value it's things that have no price that are worth the most to the Xxlepis. Things such as honor or knowledge or joy. That's because emotions, or the intangible, offer infinite possibilities for new words of shading and intensity. When a thing has a price, its value is already set, defined and limited according to the Xxlepis. So instead of price, value for them is in how many words a thing inspires."

"But as for emotions...the Xxlepis fell in love with the Drugans on the planet Phizell because they're always laughing. They have 32 words for 'giggle'. The Xxlepis were so thrilled with this that they made fools of themselves, showering them with half our gifts." He frowned. "I had an awful time convincing them to leave that planet."

Rolling his eyes, the little alien continued.

"Unfortunately, your culture values *things* more than words. That's what I learned from your television and radio signals. For example, when a commercial says a car has a soul, where does that leave a man? In order to add value to a thing, you've stolen a word meant only for living beings and devalued it. And in devaluing that word you've devalued yourselves. The Xxlepis would never understand and it's better that they not know about it. "In my humble opinion."

Mooba patted a tail feather. "On the other hand, your world's libraries are filled with books and are an endless resource for poetry and great writings. Human beings are capable of deep thought and intense emotions and some have a desire to define them. It is these writings that will appeal to the Xxlepis and they will reward you beyond imagination. As long as they remain on this planet they will bestow gifts, so it's to your benefit to please them. That's all I can say."

He bowed and the meeting was abruptly over.

DAY THREE

Thursday, June 17

The introduction of the Xxlepis was set for noon. Although it was an unusually overcast day, that hadn't stopped a huge crowd from forming. At two minutes to 12:00 the President and four secret agents walked slowly up the red carpet and stopped 20 feet from the craft.



With the opening of a large door, a strange green mist emanated from the craft. Then a long and gently sloped ramp slid out upon which Mooba exited. The murmuring crowd hushed as three figures emerged from behind him. The figures were nearly seven feet tall, rather thin, and covered entirely in grey-green flowing robes and hoods. More than anything they resembled Gregorian monks, but it was how they moved that was startling. Although there was not a breath of wind, their robes rippled fluidly and they appeared to pour across the 20 feet coming to rest alongside Mooba and in front of the President and the agents.

Mooba's high voice spoke into the multitude of microphones set up by reporters and it sounded over the PA system.

"Members of planet earth, I am pleased to introduce you to the Xxlepis. And, they in turn are very pleased to meet you." As he said this, the three beings bowed deeply as did the President and his agents.

Mooba continued, "Supreme Commander, President of the United States and all citizens of earth, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Xxlepis that today they would like you to accept this gift that they offer you without reservation." Withdrawing something from a hidden pocket, Mooba handed it to the President.

Accepting the object, which fit into the palm of his hand, the President bowed again. "Thank you."

Seeing the three Xxlepis nodding from beneath their hoods, Mooba added, "The Xxlepis thank you, too."

The crowd roared their approval and the first meeting was over.

DAYS FOUR - TWENTY

Friday-Sunday, June 18-July 4

When the gift was examined, scientists were astounded. The President had been handed a container that turned out to hold bacteria from a distant planet. Because these bacteria could manufacture any mineral, the Xxlepis had cultivated and refined it for multiple purposes. Specifically in humans, once ingested the bacteria became symbiotic with living cells and went about curing deficiencies. The resulting good health was miraculous and the closest thing to a fountain-of-youth elixir that humanity had ever experienced. Furthermore, the bacteria were easily reproduced.

The President wished to reciprocate with a gift of equal value and at Mooba's recommendation commissioned a compendium of sacred writings to be compiled in their original languages. Mooba assured him that as a gift, this would be a delightful surprise for the Xxlepis. It was an ambitious project requiring scholars of every religion and the United Nations was appointed to coordinate it. All nations agreed that no amount of money or effort should be spared to have the gift ready for the next meeting with the Xxlepis.

Mooba hadn't anticipated the effect the Xxlepis would have on their hosts. Mankind became like children at Christmas. While the Xxlepis's gift of health was reproduced en mass, that was just the beginning.

Everything had to be Xxlepis-related. To accommodate the demand, manufacturers broke all records (nearly those of physics) to get out a plethora of products. Overnight Gregorian monk's garb became the fashion craze, gray-green the most popular color until Monday when pastel-greens were introduced followed closely by polka dots. People were dressing their babies and pets in robes with cowls. Xxlepis gray-green began showing up on toys, dish ware, buildings. If imitation is the highest form of flattery then the Xxlepis should have been flattered indeed.

Commercials advertising Xxlepis products had but one theme, life was better with Xxlepis whether you wore Xxlepis clothes or sat on Xxlepis furniture. The inference was, so long as you had Xxlepis you were a somebody with something. Unfortunately, the opposite inference was also true, for without Xxlepis you were considered a nobody with nothing.

The irony was not lost on Mooba who watched commercialism turn the Xxlepis, a race of beings who loved the nonmaterial, into the biggest name brand of all time.

DAY TWENTY-ONE

Monday, July 5

When the President and his staff appeared at the spaceship on Monday noon it was before a vastly different-looking crowd. Although a hot July day, the majority was wearing hooded robes, waving signs and holding banners that said, "Xxlepis rocks!"

This day, upon exiting the craft, the three Xxlepis did not immediately bow. Although their faces couldn't be seen, it appeared that from beneath the cowls they were turning their heads to examine the crowd. Watching them, Mooba's head feathers stiffened noticeably and he frowned.

This time it was the President who came bearing a gift. The President proudly offered the huge book heavy with gold leafing that one of the Xxlepis gingerly accepted, grasping it with long fingers while the other two Xxlepis stretched forward for a closer look. Their grey-green robes cast a greenish hue over the book.

"Please accept this gift from mankind," said the President, his voice trembling. "Over 300 of our finest scholars assembled it from our sacred writings."

Translating, Mooba looked pleased.

Caught up in the moment and almost as an afterthought, the President added, "Millions were spent. With its parchment and gold leafing, it's the most expensive book ever created."

Mooba's head feathers quivered the moment the President said *the most expensive book ever created*. He didn't look pleased. He stopped translating and stared at the President. "Ah, Sir President, in my humble opinion..." he interrupted, but his warning went unheeded.

"Go on. Tell them," the President urged and Mooba complied.

The reaction was immediate. Shoving the book back at the President, which he almost dropped, the three Xxlepis, murmuring bubbling-clicking noises, whipped about and swept back up into the spaceship faster than anybody thought they could move. Mooba followed as closely behind as his spindly legs allowed. Pausing at the ship's doorway he turned and shrugged as though apologizing just before the metal door slammed shut with a thud.

The President and crowd, indeed the whole nation and all of earth were stunned. They felt like children awakening Christmas morning to discover that their presents had been stolen.

There was no further contact with the Xxlepis although vigorous attempts were made using a PA system as well as radio and television waves and banging on the spaceship doors. Now nobody anywhere talked about anything except the Xxlepis and why they had so abruptly left the gathering. Earth commiserated.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

Tuesday, July 6

Early Tuesday, without ado, the huge spacecraft gently lifted into the morning air and disappeared.

It was then Mooba sought admittance to the White House, shocking everyone because they thought he had left along with his alien employers. Escorted to the President's oval office, Mooba's head feathers began to wave as he moaned sorrowfully. "In my humble opinion, my job is just too difficult."

The President agreed without knowing why as Mooba sat down on a chair. A couple of agents approached to stand behind him. "It's my fault. I thought I'd made you understand, but I was wrong. You meant only to impress when you said the book cost millions to create. But as soon as you gave it a price, in the eyes of the Xxlepis you declared it useless. They were insulted and horrified. They couldn't leave fast enough."

He hesitated and then glared at the President as if to suggest he did share responsibility. Then Mooba sighed. "It's my humble opinion that they'd never have understood your species anyway."

"Well then why are you here?" the President was incredulous.

Suddenly the little alien smiled. "Because unlike the Xxlepis, I don't care about words or meaning or money. Except in the performance of my job, of course. I'm due for a vacation and I'd like a little fun." Before agents could stop him he had jumped up and moved to the President's desk grabbing sour lemon candies from a dish. Popping them into his mouth he made slurping sounds.

The statement was so ridiculous the President had to laugh. "You mean a permanent vacation? Apparently they're never coming back."

Mooba grinned knowingly as his head feathers twitched. "On the contrary. I've been with the Xxlepis 120 years and don't you think that if anybody should know what they're doing and why they're doing it, it would be I? That's my humble opinion. As for selecting your species, I've had second thoughts. But don't worry, Sir President, the Xxlepis will be back. Before their ship left I put a puppy on board."

He popped another sour lemon candy.

The end.

Rules of Three

There was once upon a time a poor widow who had an only son named Jack, and a cow named Milky-White. And all they had to live on was the milk the cow gave every morning, which they carried to the market and sold. But one morning Milky-White gave no milk.

“What shall we do, what shall we do?” said the widow, wringing her hands.

“Cheer up, mother, I’ll go and get work somewhere,” said Jack.

“We’ve tried that before, and nobody would take you,” said his mother. “We must sell Milky-White and with the money start a shop, or something.”

“All right, mother,” says Jack. “It’s market day today, and I’ll soon sell Milky-White, and then we’ll see what we can do.”

So he took the cow, and off he started. He hadn’t gone far when he met a funny-looking old man, who said to him, “Good morning, Jack.”



“Good morning to you,” said Jack, and wondered how he knew his name.

“Well, Jack, and where are you off to?” said the man.

“I’m going to market to sell our cow there.”

“Oh, you look the proper sort of chap to sell cows,” said the man. “I wonder if you know how many beans make five.”

“Two in each hand and one in your mouth,” says Jack, as sharp as a needle.

“Right you are,” says the man, “and here they are, the very beans themselves,” he went on, pulling out of his pocket a number of strange-looking beans. “As you are so sharp,” says he, “I don’t mind doing a swap with you — your cow for these beans.”

“Go along,” says Jack. “You take me for a fool!”

“Ah! You don’t know what these beans are,” said the man. “If you plant them overnight, by morning they grow right up to the sky.”

“Really?” said Jack. “You don’t say so.”

“Yes, that is so. And if it doesn’t turn out to be true you can have your cow back.”

“Right,” says Jack, and hands him over Milky-White and pockets the beans.

Back home goes Jack and says to his mother:

“You’ll never guess mother what I got for Milky-White.”

And his mother became very excited:

“Five pounds? Ten? Fifteen? No, it can’t be twenty.”

“I told you couldn’t guess. What do you say to these beans? They’re magical. Plant them overnight and — ”

“What!” says Jack’s mother. “Have you been such a fool, such a dolt, such an idiot? Take that! Take that! Take that! And as for your precious beans here they go out of the window. And now off with you to bed. Not a sup shall you drink, and not a bit shall you swallow this very night.”

So Jack went upstairs to his little room in the attic, and sad and sorry he was, to be sure.

At last he dropped off to sleep.

When he woke up, the room looked so funny. The sun was shining into part of it, and yet all the rest was quite dark and

shady. So Jack jumped up and went to the window. And what do you think he saw? Why, the beans his mother had thrown out of the window into the garden had sprung up into a giant beanstalk which went up and up and up till it reached the sky. So the man spoke truth after all.

The beanstalk grew up quite close past Jack's window, so all he had to do was to open it and give a jump onto the beanstalk which ran up just like a big ladder. So Jack climbed, and he climbed till at last he reached the sky. And when he got there he found a long broad road going as straight as a dart. So he walked along, and he walked along, and he walked along till he came to a great big tall house, and on the doorstep there was a great big tall woman.

“Good morning, ma'am,” says Jack, quite polite-like. “Could you be so kind as to give me some breakfast?” For he was as hungry as a hunter.

“It's breakfast you want, is it?” says the great big tall woman. “It's breakfast you'll be if you don't move off from here. My man is an ogre and there's nothing he likes better than boys broiled on toast. You'd better be moving on or he'll be coming.”

“Oh! Please, mum, do give me something to eat, mum. I've had nothing to eat since yesterday morning, really and truly, mum,” says Jack. “I may as well be broiled as die of hunger.”

Well, the ogre's wife was not half so bad after all. So she took Jack into the kitchen, and gave him a hunk of bread and cheese

and a jug of milk. But Jack hadn't half finished these when thump! Thump! Thump! The whole house began to tremble with the noise of someone coming.

“Goodness gracious me! It's my old man,” said the ogre's wife. “What on earth shall I do? Come along quick and jump in here.” And she bundled Jack into the oven just as the ogre came in.

He was a big one, to be sure. At his belt he had three calves strung up by the heels, and he unhooked them and threw them down on the table and said:

Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman,
Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll have his bones to grind my bread.”



“Nonsense, dear,” said his wife. “You’re dreaming. Or perhaps you smell the scraps of that little boy you liked so much for yesterday’s dinner. Here, you go and have a wash and tidy up, and by the time you come back your breakfast’ll be ready for you.”

So off the ogre went, and Jack was just going to jump out of the oven and run away when the woman told him: “Wait till he’s asleep. He always has a dozen after breakfast.”

Well, the ogre had his breakfast, and after that he goes to a big chest and takes out a couple of bags of gold, and down he sits and counts till at last his head began to nod and he began to snore till the whole house shook again.

Then Jack crept out on tiptoe from his oven, and as he was passing the ogre, he took one of the bags of gold under his arm, and off he falters till he came to the beanstalk, and then he threw down the bag of gold, which, of course, fell into his mother’s garden, and then he climbed down and climbed down till at last he got home and told his mother and showed her the gold and said, “Well, mother, wasn’t I right about the beans? They are really magical, you see.”

So they lived on the bag of gold for some time, but at last they came to the end of it, and Jack made up his mind to try his luck once more at the top of the beanstalk. So one fine morning he rose up early, and got onto the beanstalk, and he climbed, and he climbed till at last he came out onto the road again and up to

the great tall house he had been to before. There, sure enough, was the great tall woman a-standing on the doorstep.

“Good morning, mum,” says Jack, as bold as brass, “could you be so good as to give me something to eat?”

“Go away, my boy,” said the big tall woman, “or else my man will eat you up for breakfast. But aren’t you the youngster who came here once before? Do you know that very day my man missed one of his bags of gold?”

“That’s strange, mum,” said Jack, “I dare say I could tell you something about that, but I’m so hungry I can’t speak till I’ve had something to eat.”

Well, the big tall woman was so curious that she took him in and gave him something to eat. But he had scarcely begun munching it as slowly as he could when thump! Thump! They heard the giant’s footstep, and his wife hid Jack away in the oven.

All happened as it did before. In came the ogre as he did before, said, “Fee-fi-fo-fum,” and had his breakfast off three broiled oxen.

Then he said, “Wife, the hen that lays the golden eggs.” So she brought it, and the ogre said, “Lay,” and it laid an egg all of gold. And then the ogre began to nod his head, and to snore till the house shook.

Then Jack crept out of the oven on tiptoe and caught hold of the golden hen, and was off before you could say “Jack Robinson.” But this time the hen gave a cackle which woke the ogre, and

just as Jack got out of the house he heard him calling, “Wife, wife, what have you done with my golden hen?”

And the wife said, “Why, my dear?”

But that was all Jack heard, for he rushed off to the beanstalk and climbed down like a house on fire. And when he got home he showed his mother the wonderful hen, and said “Lay” to it; and it laid a golden egg every time he said “Lay.”



Well it wasn't long before Jack made up his mind to have another try at his luck up there at the top of the beanstalk. So one fine morning he rose up early and got to the beanstalk, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed till he got to the top.

But this time he knew better than to go straight to the ogre's house. And when he got near it, he waited behind a bush till he saw the ogre's wife come out with a pail to get some water, and then he crept into the house and got into a big copper pot. He hadn't been there long when he heard thump! thump! thump! as before, and in came the ogre and his wife.

"Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman," cried out the ogre. "I smell him, wife, I smell him."

"Do you, my dear?" says the ogre's wife. "Then, if it's that little rogue that stole your gold and the hen that laid the golden eggs he's sure to have got into the oven." And they both rushed to the oven.

But Jack wasn't there, luckily.

So the ogre sat down to the breakfast and ate it, but every now and then he would mutter, "Well, I could have sworn –" and he'd get up and search the larder and the cupboards and everything, only, luckily, he didn't think of the copper pot.

After breakfast was over, the ogre called out, "Wife, wife, bring me my golden harp."

So she brought it and put it on the table before him. Then he said, “Sing!” and the golden harp sang most beautifully. And it went on singing till the ogre fell asleep, and commenced to snore like thunder.

Then Jack lifted up the copper lid very quietly and got down like a mouse and crept on hands and knees till he came to the table, when up he crawled, caught hold of the golden harp and dashed with it towards the door.

But the harp called out quite loud, “Master! Master!” and the ogre woke up just in time to see Jack running off with his harp.

Jack ran as fast as he could, and the ogre came rushing after, and would soon have caught him, only Jack had a start and dodged him a bit and knew where he was going. When he got to the beanstalk the ogre was not more than twenty yards away when suddenly he saw Jack disappear. And when he came to the end of the road he saw Jack underneath climbing down for dear life. Well, the ogre didn’t like trusting himself to such a ladder, and he stood and waited, so Jack got another start.

But just then the harp cried out, “Master! Master!” and the ogre swung himself down onto the beanstalk, which shook with his weight. Down climbs Jack, and after him climbed the ogre.

By this time Jack had climbed down and climbed down and climbed down till he was very nearly home. So he called out, “Mother! Mother! bring me an axe, bring me an axe.” And his mother came rushing out with the ax in her hand, but when she

came to the beanstalk she stood stock still with fright, for there she saw the ogre with his legs just through the clouds.

But Jack jumped down and got hold of the ax and gave a chop at the beanstalk which cut it half in two. The ogre felt the beanstalk shake and quiver, so he stopped to see what was the matter. Then Jack gave another chop with the ax, and the beanstalk was cut in two and began to topple over. Then the ogre fell down and broke his crown, and the beanstalk came toppling after.

Then Jack showed his mother his golden harp, and what with showing that and selling the golden eggs, Jack and his mother became very rich, and he married a great princess, and they lived happy ever.

The end

THE MAGICAL BALL



"Strike three, you're out", Billy shouted. "Man, you couldn't hit your way out of a paper bag."

Mike dropped the bat. No matter how hard he tried he just couldn't hit the ball. It just wasn't fair. All his life he had loved the game of baseball, more than anyone had. But every time he got up to bat, he got nervous. Why did he keep trying to play? He began walking home. No one seemed to notice.

He stopped at the Jackson's and picked up their daily paper and filled up a bowl of water for their cat. He entered his house

quickly and ran up to his room. All these odd jobs were beginning to pay off. Two, three, five dollars and one dollar and twenty-five cents in change. Yep, he finally had enough for a brand new 1999 Sammy Sosa, rookie baseball card. With tax six dollars and twenty-five cents was exactly what he needed. He may be a worthless player himself but he did appreciate true talent. Slowly but surely Mike was compiling an awesome baseball card collection. By the end of summer he'd show all the guys his amazing collection. Tomorrow morning he would ride his bike up to Family Sports Cards to purchase the gem. Mike could hardly wait.

Mike jumped out of bed early, got dressed and made his bed. He laughed because he knew his mom would think he'd lost his mind. The sun was shining and it was a magical day. Mike ate his breakfast and even helped with the dishes. His mother raised her eyebrows at him. "OK, what's up. Has the real Mike been replaced by a clean and tidy alien," she asked?

No, it's me. Can I ride my bike up to Family Sports Cards? I promise to stay on the sidewalk the entire way. And I won't go in the pantry and get any junk food either," Mike promised

His mom gave him the pondering stare. "All right, but brush your teeth before you go"?

Mike gave his mom a tight hug and raced to the bathroom. After he brushed his teeth he put his dollars and change in his pocket. He whistled Take Me Out to the Ballgame on his ride. What a great day. He noticed a strange orange cloud in the sky. It was magnificent. For some odd reason he felt like the cloud had eyes and that it was watching him. For no reason at all he waved to the cloud and continued out loud. "One, two, three strikes you're out at the old ball game," he sang in his best Harry Carey voice.

He parked his bike in front of the store. The nice young couple who owned it knew him by name. They'd probably be expecting him. But as he entered the store he was taken by surprise. It was foggy inside. It smelled very peculiar. It smelled like peanuts and hotdogs. Mike went back outside and checked the parking lot. Yep, he was in the right store. He began walking over to the glass counter where he knew the wonderful Sammy Sosa lay. A bright gleam on the shelf almost blinded him. He kept walking but looked back. It was just an old used baseball. He didn't see anyone working here. Stopping at the counter the sparkle of that old ball flashed again. Suddenly he heard an old gruff voice.

"What's your problem, boy?"

Mike looked around and saw an old man sitting in a dark corner on a bench. "Oh, nothing Sir. I just wanted to purchase a Sammy Sosa card."

"Does he play for the White Sox," the old man asked.



"No, Sir he plays for the Cubs," Mike answered. Heck everyone knew that, Mike thought.

The old man slowly stood up. "My aching back," he said. "The White Sox are the greatest team, you know"? He began walking towards Mike. He wore an extremely old hat with a large C on it. "You play ball, he asked"?

Mike hesitated. "Yea, but not very good."

"Ever play shortstop," the old man asked?

"No, they always stick me in the outfield since I'm so crummy."

"I was 0 for 28 one time and made an error every other day. But I rallied. Yep, I rallied for twenty years. Can't give up in baseball. Just ain't part of the game. Especially a boy like you, Mike," he groaned. The old man rubbed his finger. "Broke her in 1930." He lifted his leg. "Broke this here in 1938." He glared at Mike. "You here to buy something special," he asked?

"Yes Sir. I'd like to buy that Sammy Sosa, rookie card. It's right there on the first shelf," Mike pointed to the card.

The old man leaned over close to Mike and pointed to the strange ball that had caught Mike's eye earlier. "How about a magic ball, instead," he whispered "Six dollars and twenty four cents, just for you."

"No thank you. I gotta have Sammy," Mike said, kindly.

"Have it your way," the old man said as he pulled out the card. "That'll be six dollars and twenty five cents."

Mike pulled all the money out of his pocket. He began counting. Oh no, he thought. He was missing a penny. "All I have is six dollars and twenty four cents," Mike pleaded.

The old man put the card back in the case. "I guess it's the magic ball," he smiled. He reached up, grasped the ball and handed it to Mike. " You see this here ball, you'll hit it and you'll hit it good. Trust your elders, boy."



Mike grudgingly gave him the money. The old man handed him the ball. Mike examined it and it sparkled again. But it was old and it was dirty. He opened his mouth to ask for a new ball but the old man raised a hand.

"You'll see," he said as he turned and headed back to his bench. "I hit a homer when I was 75 years old. Everyone's gotta believe in magic. Now, get out of here and go play some ball."

Mike watched him sit down but the fog grew dense and he could hardly make out the old man. Thanks for the ball. See ya," Mike said.

When no reply came, Mike left the store. Clean air took him by surprise and when he looked back into the store it was so foggy he couldn't see a single thing inside. "Weird," he said out loud. He quickly began riding his bike homeward. He noticed the orange cloud and it got smaller and smaller as he watched it. Then it disappeared completely. It was official, Mike thought. This was the strangest day of his life, for sure!

As Mike rode down his street he saw all the usual boys playing baseball in the street. When he reached the game he got off his bike and looked at the old baseball. Six dollars and twenty-four cents, he got ripped. It was at least ten years old. One of the boys noticed him.

"Should we let the 'wiffer' bat," Greg laughed?

"No way," Billy shouted.

Mike tossed the baseball up and caught it. "Let's watch the girl swing," Greg said. He walked over and handed Mike the bat. Mike handed him the magic ball. Greg rolled his eyes and headed to the plastic mound. Every kid in the neighborhood was out. The team players got ready for the usual quick, three swings. Billy the catcher gave Greg the fast ball signal. Mike felt sweat dripping down his sides. Greg stepped back, lifted his leg, and threw the pitch right into the strike zone. Mike stepped on his front foot and swung the bat as hard as he could. He heard a loud pop. The ball hit the bat and soared into the sky. It kept going and going, higher and higher than anyone on the street had ever hit it before. Mike just stood on the plate until he heard someone yelling run, run, run! Still watching the ball he ran to first, then second, then third, then home. The two boys that had run after it were still running. Mike was in shock as he heard all the children laugh and cheer. Everyone patted him on the back and gave him high fives. When the boys finally returned they were exhausted and out of breath.

"Let's try this again," Greg demanded. Suddenly Mike felt unstoppable. Greg threw five more pitches to Mike and every single one went faster and farther than the one before. After the sixth homerun the outfielders begged Greg to retire for the evening and declared Mike the most valuable player of the street. For the first time in his life Mike felt proud and haughtily

self-confidant. He retrieved his baseball and went home in the orange glow of a wonderful evening.

The next morning Mike walked the Miller's dog, trimmed the bushes for his mom, and washed his dad's car. The whole time he thought about the magic ball. He must go thank the old man. After a hearty lunch he headed up to the Family Sports card shop. He parked his bike and entered the familiar shop. The usual nice lady was working. It wasn't foggy and it didn't smell funny. There was no sign of the old man. The lady approached him. "Hi Mike. What can I help you with today," she asked?

"I'd just like to talk to the old man who was working here yesterday," he said.

She looked around. "I was the only one here yesterday, just me, all day," she replied.

"But," Mike said. She smiled at him. The phone rang and she went to answer it. Mike was bewildered. What in the world was going on here? He walked slowly to the back of the store. How could this be? He still had the ball. He gripped it tightly in his pocket. Yes, it was still there. His heart beat quickly. Then a small orange sparkle caught his eye. He approached a poster of a young baseball player named Luke Appling, nicknamed "Old Aches and Pains". It stated a few amazing facts. He played shortstop for the Chicago, White Sox for twenty years. Luke

recorded 4,348 putouts and 7,218 assists with a .310 lifetime batting average. He was elected into the Baseball hall of Fame in 1964 and homered at age 75 in the Cracker Jack All-Star Game.

Mike could hardly breathe. In the corner of the poster he saw a picture of Mr. Appling when he was older and it was no surprise that that was the man who had given Mike the magic ball. Mike continued to read the poster, "Luke was the only White Sox player to win a batting tidal and he truly exemplified the spirit of the White Sox for two decades. Luke Appling was born April 2, 1907, died January 3, 1991." Mike leaned against the wall to support his wobbly legs. He swallowed hard. This was more than unbelievable it was impossible. Suddenly the storeowner called to him.

"Mike I have a glass ball cube here with your name on it and its all paid for." she walked back to where Mike stood. "Would you like that poster. I didn't order it and I have a Mark McGuire to hang there. I'm not sure where it came from."

"Yes, Ma'am, I uh, I'd really like it," Mike stuttered. She carefully took it off the wall and rolled it up.

She placed the ball cube and poster in a bag and handed it to Mike. He rode home feeling confused and thankful.

When he got home he examined the old ball. Using his magnifying glass he found a tiny L.A initial on it. Yep, Luke had visited him for sure. He placed the magic ball into the small glass cube. He would never hit this one again no matter how far or fast it went. It was worth too much. It wasn't just a ball to play with. Maybe the old players help the new players. No one knew better than Luke how much magic still existed in the game of baseball. Mike knew, thanks to Luke. This ball had made him feel successful, brave and proud. Even if it was only for one day. He would never again take the chance of losing this ball. It really was magic!

The following day it rained and rained but they day after that, baseball commenced on the street. With a newfound confidence, deep within and an old, chewed up tennis ball, Mike hit four beautiful homeruns and took up a new position on the team, shortstop! Yes, he thought it's a magical game!

THE END

Lenny the Flying Inventor

By Jeff Smith

Once upon a time there was a funny guy named Lenny. Lenny was an inventor. He invented all kinds of contraptions. His house looked like a mess, but he had some really cool things.

One day Lenny decided he wanted to fly.

"I am going to invent some wings and fly," Lenny told his friend Rudy.

"Now I really know you're crazy. You won't even get off the ground," said Rudy.

"You'll see," said Lenny.

So he went down to his workshop and began working. Day and night, he worked. No one saw Lenny for weeks. Then one day he came out of his workshop with a great big grin on his face.



He called Rudy on the phone. "Rudy, tomorrow I will fly, but I need your help," said Lenny.

"Did you really build some wings?" asked Rudy.

"Yeah and they are really beautiful," said Lenny. "They're a little heavy though. I need you to help me drag them up to the top of Kill Devil Hill."

"What did you make them out of?" asked Rudy.

"I made them out of some scrap metal I had laying around from when I built my helicopter last year," said Lenny.

"Metal! Don't you think that will be too heavy to use for wings?" asked Rudy.

"No, I calculated all of the angles. I will be like a human airplane," said Lenny.

Rudy just rolled his eyes. "Ok, I will be over first thing in the morning and we'll try them out," said Rudy.

"See you then," said Lenny.

The next morning they dragged the wings up to the top of Kill Devil Hill and Lenny strapped them on.

"Are you sure those are not too heavy?" asked Rudy again.

"No, the faster I run, the lighter they will get. The wind will lift me up and I will be flying," said Lenny, quite confidently.

"All right, I am going to get a running start and take off," said Lenny. So, Lenny backed up about fifty feet and started running. As he ran, the weight of the wings started to wear out his legs and he got lower and lower to the ground. Just as he got to the crest of the hill, his legs gave out and he skidded across the ground on his face.

After Rudy rolled around on the ground laughing for about a minute, he got up and asked Lenny if he was Ok.

"Yeah, Yeah, real funny," said Lenny. "I guess you may be right they are a little heavy, but I know the shape is just right. I will just go back to the workshop and make them out of another material. Something lighter"

A couple of weeks later Lenny called up Rudy.

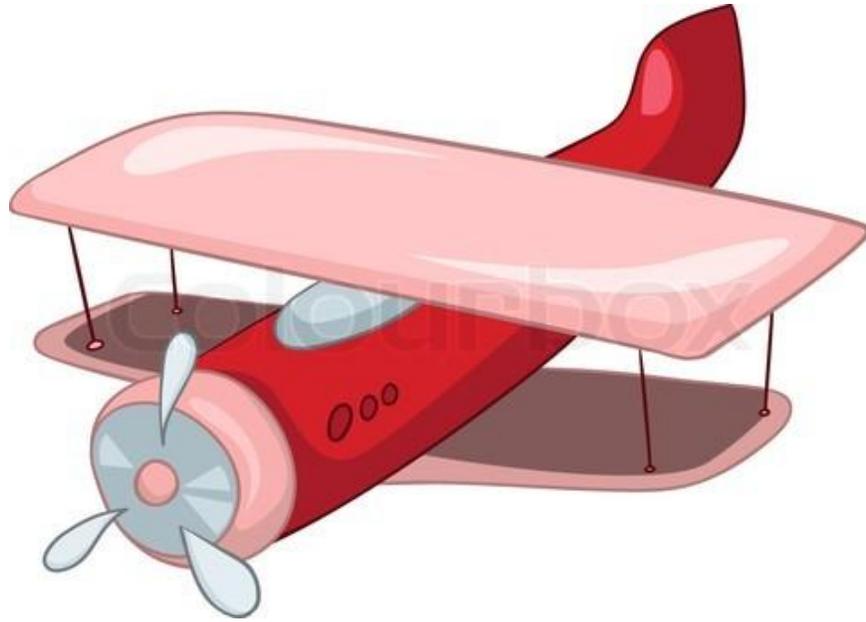
"I've done it," said Lenny.

"You've done what?" asked Rudy.

"I reworked the wings. I made them out of wood and tissue paper. These things are so light I may get going by simply jumping off the roof. Come on over, I need a witness," said Lenny.

"I'm on the way," said Rudy.

When Rudy arrived, Lenny was already up on the roof with these hilarious looking pink wings.



"Pink wings!" laughed Rudy.

"Yeah, this is the stuff I had left over from when I invented that giant Pig robot we used on Halloween last year," said Lenny.

"So you think you're just going to jump off and fly?" asked Rudy.

"Yeah. Here goes," said Lenny.

He backed up a little and took a quick dash and a jump.

Aaaaaaaagh, SMACK! The wings broke right off and Lenny landed on his head in the middle of some bushes next to the house.

After Rudy rolled around on the ground laughing for about a minute, he got up and asked Lenny if he was Ok.

"Yeah, Yeah, real funny," said Lenny. "I guess they may have been a little weak, but I know the shape is just right. I will just go back to the workshop and make them out of another material. Something not as heavy as the scrap metal and not as light as the tissue paper."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," said Rudy as he rolled his eyes.

A couple of weeks later Lenny called up Rudy.

"I've really done it this time," said Lenny.

"You've done what?" asked Rudy.

"I reworked the wings. I made them out of wax and balsa wood. These things look just like bird's wings. Meet me at Kill Devil Hill, I need a witness," said Lenny.

"I'm on the way," said Rudy.

When Rudy arrived, he saw the wings. They did look good!

"I need you to help me strap them on," said Lenny.

Rudy helped him strap on the wings. They fit real snug. There was a handle under each wing out near the tip for Lenny to use to move the wings up and down and a belt that went around his waist so that they would not fall off.

"Here we go," yelled Lenny as he backed up and began running towards the crest of the hill.

He didn't slow down and just as he got to the edge of the hill, he started to lift up into the air. He was flying!

YAHOOO! Yelled Lenny.

He flew and flew just laughing and hooting. He flew higher and higher. He was really getting high now, and he started to worry. "How do I land these things?" he asked himself.

That question was about to be answered. All of a sudden, he noticed that his wings were starting to melt. He had risen so high, that the sun was starting to melt the wax he used to make the wings. Pretty soon he had little tiny wings and he was flying about a hundred miles an hour down towards the woods.

"Boy this is going hurt again," said Lenny to himself.

He crashed into the trees.

Rudy ran up, "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so, but I am definitely going to quit trying to fly. This is too rough on the body," said Lenny.

To this day, no one believes Rudy when he tells the story of how Lenny flew like a bird. It may be good that they do not believe him, because others would probably get hurt, as did Lenny.

Lenny also made a commitment not to invent anything that cannot be used while standing firmly on the ground.

He often tells people, "If people were meant to fly, they would have wings!"



THE MISSING PICNIC FOOD

Once upon a time there was a forest fire in a big, big forest. All the little animals that lived there ran as fast as they could to get away from the hot flames. Squirrels, raccoons, foxes, snakes, turtles, rabbits, mice and many other animals had to find new homes. Some of them went to other forests, some of them went to parks, and some of them actually had to make their little homes in the yards of human beings, or, people.

Far, far away from the fire was a house where three little children lived. Their names were Thomas, Kathy, and Carrie. They all went to school but on this September day it was Saturday. They had been playing all morning. Now it was lunchtime. They were hungry. They asked their mom if they could have lunch, and she said, "Why don't you have a picnic in the yard"?

That sounded like a great idea, but WHERE in the yard? So Mom told them to lay a picnic cloth in the green grassy grass near the scruffy old juniper bushes. While they were doing that, she would make some celery sticks, carrot sticks, and some yummy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

When the kids had spread out the picnic blanket, they ran into the kitchen and asked if lunch was ready. Mom told them to take the carrot sticks and plates out to the blanket, and to take their drinks also. So Thomas, Kathy and Carrie took these things out to the blanket and arranged them carefully. Then they ran as fast as they could, huffing and puffing, back to the kitchen and said to Mom, "What else have you made so far"? So she said, "I've got your celery sticks cut up for you now - run these out to your picnic blanket." So out ran the three kids as fast as they could go to add these to the carrots on their plates.

But when they got to the blanket, something was wrong. Where were the carrot sticks? They were all gone! "This must be a trick," said Kathy. "Let's leave the celery sticks here and see what happens!"

Then they ran as fast as they could back to Mom, who by now was making the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They told her that someone had stolen the carrot sticks. She said, "You're kidding!" and they said "Come on - we'll show you!"

Mom hurried out with them to the picnic blanket. But now, not only were the carrot sticks missing, but the celery sticks

were gone, too! Mom said, "Maybe one of your neighbor friends is hiding them just to be silly."

So everyone spread out and looked behind trees, bushes, and just about everywhere. Unfortunately, they couldn't find the carrots, the celery, or anyone hiding.

Finally Mom said, "Well, your drinks are still out here. Let's get your sandwiches. You guys go ahead and eat them out here and maybe something will turn up."

So Thomas, Kathy and Carrie sat down to their picnic and they ate their sandwiches. Of course, while they sat there, they couldn't help but look around for the sneaky celery and carrot thief.

They were just about finished eating when Carrie looked over at the juniper bushes and saw something move. She softly said, "Shshsh!" to Thomas and Kathy. "There's something wiggling over there! See the bushes moving?" So everyone sat very still, and a little brown animal came to edge of the bushes and looked at them. It was a rabbit. Quietly it went back into the bushes.

"I have an idea", said Thomas. "Let's get more celery and carrots, and see if that rabbit is our thief. We'll put them at the edge of the bushes, and watch from the window."

They quietly went back into the house and got Mom to cut up more celery and carrots. They carefully put them down near the bushes and walked back to the house. As they watched,

the little rabbit came out and grabbed the vegetables in his mouth and carried them back into the juniper bushes. Mom had watched, too, and she said that she had never seen a rabbit in the yard before. She thought that maybe because of the forest fire, he had needed to look for a new home.

"Maybe we can keep feeding this rabbit, and he will stay here for a long time," said Mom.

That is just what they did. They fed the little rabbit every day. A few weeks went by. The weather turned cooler and finally winter came and they didn't see the rabbit. Sometimes they would take food out to the edge of the bushes, and sometimes the food would disappear, and other times it just stayed there. All winter they worried about the rabbit - was he cold, was he scared, did he move somewhere else?

Finally, spring came. They watched for the rabbit day after day. In early April, the day before Easter, when the trees had just a few leaves, Thomas, Kathy, and Carrie took the food out to the bushes, and as they watched, the little rabbit came out and grabbed it! Whatever he had done during the winter, he was OK now!

The kids continued to feed him, and one day, the little rabbit came out to get his food, and he had four little rabbits with him! Their rabbit was a Mommy rabbit!

So from that time on, the kids fed the rabbits, and year after year, there was always a little rabbit family that lived in their scruffy old juniper bushes.