

## **A Visit from the Future**

by Anita Lorene Smith

**B**obby Fuller let the screen door slam as he marched into the kitchen with ten soda pop bottles in his arms.

"How many times have I told you to put those in the garage, Bobby?" his mother said. She was dressed for work, wearing her overalls, kerchief, and boots.

I wonder what she looks like with the welding helmet on, Bobby thought. It seemed strange for his mom to be dressed in men's work clothes when he was used to seeing her in a dress and high heels.

"I have to wash out the bottles first," Bobby said.

"Do it outside," his mother demanded. Bobby started to go outside with his bottles, but his mother said, "Never mind. You're already in here. But next time...." She pointed her finger at him.

Bobby didn't envy her, working twelve-hour shifts at the bomber factory—6 p.m. to 6 a.m. Her bus had to travel during daylight hours in case there was a blackout.

Bobby took his bottles to the sink and turned on the tap.

"I've left you boys some meatloaf in the icebox. Don't eat it all up tonight. We need to stretch it through tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am." Bobby set each bottle on the dish drainer.

"And clean up your mess. I don't want to come home to a sink full of dishes."

"Yes, ma'am." Bobby turned around. "Mom?"

"Yes, Bobby."

"Can I come to work with you?"

"Bobby, we've been over this. Kids aren't allowed in the plant."

"Can't they make an exception for educational purposes? I want to see how the bombers are built."

"No, Bobby. Our work is top secret. Employees only."

Bobby sighed. "Okay, but there's nothing for me to do."

"There's plenty to do. You and your brother can do laundry, sweep out the garage, and water the vegetables."

"I know, but I want something fun to do."

Just then the neighbor lady knocked at the screen door. "Come in, Mabel," said Bobby's mother. "I think we have time for one quick cup of coffee before the bus comes."

"Hello, Bobby."

"Hello, Mrs. Miller. How are you today?"

"Just fine. I'm glad it's Friday."

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Bobby would have been glad for Friday too, if school were in. It would be soon enough though. He wanted to do something exciting or at least interesting before it started again.

"Have a good night at work, Mrs. Miller—and Mom."

As Bobby went out the door, he heard Mrs. Miller tell his mother that he was such a polite boy.

Bobby went to the garage and counted his pop bottles. He had enough to earn himself seventy-eight cents. He loaded his wagon and started for Conrad's Market.

**T**hat evening after Bobby had finished his chores and was lying in bed counting his money and reading his comic book under the covers with the flashlight, he heard a thump and saw a flash of light outside his window. He rushed out to the living room, stubbing his toe in the dark along the way, and found his brother lying on the floor listening to the radio.

"Owen, did you see that light outside?"

"Shh. I'm listening to *Captain Midnight*."

"Owen, this is important. There was a thumping sound too."

"I didn't hear anything. Go back to bed."

"I'm going outside to look."

"Wait. I'll go with you when the commercial comes on."

Owen went outside with Bobby and they searched the perimeter of the house with a flashlight.

"Keep it low," said Owen. "We're supposed to be in a blackout."

"I know," said Bobby. Ever since Owen had started high school, he acted like he was smarter than anyone younger than himself.

"I don't see anything. It's your imagination."

Bobby didn't see any point in arguing with Owen, and they both went back inside.

**B**obby had been sound asleep when he was awakened by a tap on his window. He sat up abruptly and shined his flashlight outside.

"I need your help," a man's voice spoke. "Please, let me in."

Bobby's heart pounded in his chest. The man had brown skin and wore some kind of scarf around his head. Bobby slammed the window shut.

"Wait, please. My ship is not far from here. I can show it to you."

Ship? What kind of ship would be docked in the middle of the desert?

Bobby slowly opened his window and examined the man's face. His eyes were slightly oval and he had a goatee. "Are you a Jap?"

"I beg your pardon?"

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"You look like a Jap."

"Oh, you mean Japanese. I have some Japanese ancestry, but also Spanish, Italian and Danish." He had an odd accent—sort of British with something else mixed in.

Bobby scooted out of bed and grabbed the toy gun under his bed. "Don't make me shoot you, Mister."

"My name is George." He held up his hands. "I have no weapons. My shipmates and I just need to use your com. We can't seem to get in touch with Mission Control, or anyone."

"You're talking crazy. What do you mean by a com? And what's Mission Control? Are you makin' this up, Mister?"

"Listen, let me just show you our ship. Then maybe you'll believe me."

Bobby thought for a minute. "Only if I can take my gun."

"One more thing," said George.

"What?" Bobby was still pointing the gun at him.

"Do you have any food? A loaf of bread? Some fruit? Anything? We haven't eaten for many hours."

Bobby lowered the gun. George didn't seem like a threat. If he tried anything, Bobby could yell for Owen. "Let me get dressed first."

"Of course."

Bobby traded his pajamas for a pair of Levi's® and a T-shirt. "Oh, what the heck. You might as well come in."

George climbed through the window. He was dressed in a silver jumpsuit. He followed Bobby through the living room and into the kitchen.

"Be quiet, we don't want to wake up my brother."

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Bobby Fuller."

"Nice to meet you."

Bobby opened the icebox but found nothing ready to eat except the meatloaf. "I can't give you that," he pointed. "Mom would kill me."

"If that is meat, Bobby, we don't eat it."

Bobby was surprised but didn't comment. "I know, we can make you peanut butter and jelly sandwiches." He turned around to look at George. The man was tall for an Oriental. "How many men on your ship?"

George hesitated. "Only me."

"But I thought you had a crew."

"Yes, I'm the only man. We have three women and a robot."

"Oh," said Bobby. "You have a lady captain?"

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George chuckled. "I wouldn't call her a lady, but yes, we have a female captain."

Bobby pointed up to the cupboard. "Would you get that down for me?"

"Certainly." George reached up to the cupboard and brought down the jar of peanut butter. He tapped the jar with his fingernails before handing it to Bobby. "This is real glass."

"Of course. What else would it be?"

George shrugged his shoulders.

"But you can't get money for it like you can for pop bottles. Mom saves them anyway."

After they finished making the sandwiches, Bobby wrapped them in waxed paper and put them into a grocery bag.

"Bobby, do you have any type of communication device?"

"Huh? Oh, we've got a telephone. It's a five-party line, but there's probably no one on it now since it's the middle of the night."

George looked puzzled. "I may want to use it later."

"Okay. Ready to go?"

"We could use some water too. Do you have any containers?"

Bobby frowned, then brightened. "Yeah. We've got a bunch of milk bottles outside. The milkman doesn't come for another two days. You can use them just as long as I can get them back."

After they'd filled the bottles and loaded everything into Bobby's wagon, George picked up a newspaper from a stack in the garage. He stood still with his mouth and eyes popped wide open.

"What's the matter, George?"

George slowly looked toward Bobby. "Is it really August 15, 1943?"

Bobby took the paper. "No, that's from last week. Today is August 20."

"Nineteen forty-three?"

"Of course. How long have you been out there on your ship?"

George sighed. "Only a few days, but when we left Mars, it was 2119."

"Oh, sure. You're from Mars? I may be only a nine-year-old kid, but even I can't buy that one."

"I'll just have to prove it to you then, Bobby."

**G**eorge's ship looked like a giant airplane with delta wings. "You flew to Mars in that?"

"Yes, and back, but we must have gotten caught in some kind of temporal rift. It's so hard to believe."

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Bobby thought about Buck Rogers going five hundred years into the future, but Buck didn't time travel—he was frozen and woke up later. "Yes, it is hard to believe, even for me," said Bobby. "So, do I get to see inside your ship?"

"Just a minute. I'll have to ask the captain." George tapped the side of his head as if he were listening to something. "Captain, I've got some supplies out here, but the boy wants to come in."

"Is there a telephone in your head or something?" Bobby asked.

"Yes, something like that."

"What does she say? Can I go in?"

"She hasn't answered yet." George held up one finger. "Okay, Captain."

"Well?"

"The captain says only for a few minutes and don't touch anything."

Bobby and George loaded the water and food into a small elevator and waited until the empty bottles returned. Then they entered the elevator and rose up to the inside of the ship. Bobby was scared. What if these people took off with him inside? Bobby thought. But he was curious enough to take that chance.

"This is what you call a spaceplane, Bobby. It can fly through the air directly into space," George explained.

"Do you have rocket engines?"

"We have jets, afterburners, rockets to boost us, and ion engines to sustain our speed."

"Gee whiz!"

George smiled. "Let's go introduce you to the crew."

Captain Fitting was a tall, muscular woman with a man's haircut. She shook Bobby's hand briefly but didn't crack a smile.

"Any way we can get in touch with the authorities?" she asked George.

"Captain, we've time traveled into the past."

"Doesn't surprise me," she said without emotion.

"Bobby's got a telephone. If my history is correct, this civilization is in the middle of a war. Not here, but in other parts of the world."

"There's an army base about fifteen miles from here," Bobby added. "You could call them."

The captain turned toward another woman, who also was tall and wore short hair. Her skin was very dark, which scared Bobby for a moment until she smiled. "Newton, go with George and the child and use the primitive communicator to contact their army people. We're going to need fuel and supplies. BETI can calculate our coordinates to return to the rift and try and get us back to our own time."

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"Yes, ma'am," said Newton.

"Is BETI the robot?" Bobby asked.

"Yes. BETI means Bionic Electronic Techtronic Intelligence."

"Can I meet her? Please?"

George looked at Captain Fitting.

"When you return. BETI's busy right now." The captain turned and walked through a door—probably to the cockpit or whatever they called it. Bobby wished he could see that, but he'd already pushed his luck.

The other crewmember, Ensign Childs, escorted Bobby and George back to the elevator.

**D**awn was starting to break by the time Bobby and George reached Bobby's house. What if Owen was up? Naw. Owen always slept in late if there was no school.

"Whisper when you talk on the phone, George. I don't want to wake my brother."

They tiptoed into the living room. Bobby dialed the zero and waited for the operator. "Muroc Army Air Field, please," Bobby said. Then he handed the receiver to George.

George waited for what seemed like ten minutes before he talked to anyone. "I need to talk to your commanding officer," he said. "No, this is not a prank." Pause. "Well when will he be available?" Pause. "Okay, I'll call back then."

George handed Bobby the receiver and sighed. "I can't convince them we need help."

"Sorry, George. When did they say to call back?"

"Eight-oh-clock."

"My mom will be home by then. I can't let her see you." Bobby thought for a moment. "Listen, there's a pay phone down at Conrad's Market. It takes a nickel if you don't call long distance. You can walk there. It's only about a half-mile."

"We have no nickels," said George.

Bobby reached into his pocket and pulled out his pop bottle change. He gave George four nickels. "In case you need to make more than one call."

"Thanks, kid. You'll be a hero back in 2119."

Bobby examined George. "Wait here." Bobby went to the coat closet and pulled out a raincoat and one of his father's hats. "You'd better wear this. If people see a Jap, uh, Japanese walking around in a getup like you've got, they might just put you in jail right then and there."

"Hmm, you may have a point." George tried on the coat and hat.

"You look swell, George."

"Uh, thank you, I think."

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Bobby laughed. "Now let's go back to your ship so I can meet BETI." Bobby glanced at the clock in the living room. "It's almost five. We have to hurry."

**B**ETI looked like no robot he had ever seen in movies or the comics. She looked like a real live woman. "You're kidding me," he said to George. "This is a robot?"

"Actually, I am what is called an android, but I take no offense to the term, robot," BETI said in a soft female voice.

Bobby jumped back. "Whoa!"

"Is there something wrong?"

"Uh, no." Her voice did sound a bit mechanical. Bobby touched BETI's arm with his finger, then pulled it back quickly. She felt like a real person.

"Go ahead, ask her some questions," said George. "I'm going to check in with the captain." George left the room.

Bobby felt strange being all alone with a robot.

"BETI, can you tell me if my dad will make it back alive? He's a bomber pilot."

"I do not have access to that detail of information. I have some history stored in my brain, but what you are asking would require a search of the network. We have no access to that at this time.

"Hmm. Well can you tell me if the Allies win this war?"

"Yes, the Allies win."

"Whew! Well that's good to know. How do we win?"

BETI held out her right arm. Her skin rolled back, and a tiny screen appeared. "It is much easier to show you on my viewer."

Bobby looked into the tiny movie screen while BETI narrated.

*"The Allies win World War II in May 1945 and again in August 1945. The August defeat is won with two terrible weapons that change the world forever."* Then Bobby saw the huge explosion of a cloud shaped like a mushroom. A city was wiped away in an instant. People were running down the streets and screaming. Bobby ripped his eyes away from the viewer.

Just then, George came back into the room. "What's the matter?"

"I wish I hadn't looked," said Bobby.

George pushed a button on BETI's arm and reran the movie. Then he somberly pulled away and looked at Bobby. "Oh, that."

"It makes me sick. Does it really have to happen?"

"Well, that's history from our timeline. It's possible that your future will be a different timeline than ours."

Bobby frowned and looked over to BETI then back to George. "I sure hope so." Bobby thought for a moment. "But I still hope the Allies win."

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"So do I, Bobby." George tapped his head. "It's almost 6 a.m. local time, Bobby. You'd better get back home."

**B**obby woke to the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. For a moment, he forgot where he was. Then he remembered George and the spaceplane. He looked at his alarm clock. It read 11:27. Slowly, Bobby sat up and peeked out his window. The sun was already high in the sky. He noticed a paper bag on the ground with his name written on it in black ink. He climbed out and brought it in. Inside were his dad's trench coat and hat. And a note.

"Thank you, Bobby, for all your help. We will always remember you."

Bobby unfolded the coat and something dropped on his bed. It was a small silver metal object. Bobby fiddled with it and found it opened up. Inside there was a small screen and a red blinking light. He pushed the "on" button and George's face appeared.

*"Hello, Bobby. I just want you to know your army air corps is helping us get some fuel. They wanted to detain us at first but agreed to let us go in exchange or some of our laser technology. I can only hope they use it for peaceful purposes. I doubt I can communicate with you when we reach our time, so I'll just say this. Don't worry about the future, whatever it may be. Just keep helping others as you did us. Peace be with you all."* Then the screen went blank.

Bobby got dressed and ran outside. He looked across the field, but the spaceplane was already gone.

THE END