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The Wretched and the Beautiful

By E. Lily Yu
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Award-winning author E. Lily Yu's short fiction has appeared in many international publications. This story, which was selected for The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2017, asks readers what it truly means to be human. As you read, take notes on which group is "the wretched" and which group is "the beautiful."

[1] The aliens arrived unexpectedly at 6:42 on a hot August evening, dropping with a shriek of metal strained past its limits onto the white sands of one of the last pristine¹ beaches on Earth. The black hulk of the saucer ground into the sand and stopped, steaming. Those of us who had been splashing in the surf or stamping rows of sandcastles fled up the slope, clutching our towels.



"Zanzibar Star" by Anastasiya Malova is licensed under CC0.

Once our initial fright dissipated,² curiosity set in, and we stayed with the policemen and emergency technicians who pulled up in wailing, flashing trucks. It was all quite exciting, since nothing out of the ordinary seemed to happen anymore. Gone were the days when acting on conviction³ could change the world, when good came of good and evil to evil.

One of the policemen fired an experimental shot or two, but the bullets ricocheted off the black metal and lodged in a palm tree.

"Don't shoot," one man said. "You might make them angry. You might hit one of us."

[5] The guns remained cocked, but no more bullets zinged off the ship. We waited.

At sunset, a pounding began inside the ship. No hatches sprang open; no rayguns or periscopes protruded. There was only the pounding, growing ever more frantic and erratic.

"What if they're trapped?" one of us said.

We looked at one another. Some of us had left and returned with the pistols that did not fit in our swimming trunks. A whole armory⁴ was pointed at the black disk of metal half buried in the beach.

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1. **Pristine** (*adjective*) in its original condition; unspoiled or unpolluted
 2. **Dissipate** (*verb*) to lessen or reduce
 3. **Conviction** (*noun*) a strong belief

The pounding ceased.

[10] Nothing followed.

We conferred, then conscripted ⁵a machinist, who with our assistance hauled her ponderous cutters and blowtorches over the soft sand and set to work on the saucer.

We stood back.

While the machinist worked, any sounds from the saucer were drowned out by her tools. With precise and deliberate motions, she cut a thin line around the disk's circumference. Sparks flew up where the blade met the strange metal, which howled in unfamiliar tones.

When her work was done, she packed her equipment and departed. The aliens had failed to vaporize ⁶her. We let out the collective breath we had been holding.

[15] Minutes crawled past.

At last, with a peculiar clang, the top half of the saucer seesawed upward. In the deepening dusk we could barely distinguish the dark limbs straining to raise it. Many monsters or one, we wondered.

"Drop your weapons," one policeman barked. The upper part of the saucer sagged for a moment, concealing whatever was within.

From within the ship, a voice said in perfectly comprehensible French, "We do not have weapons. We do not have anything."

"Come out where we can see you," the policeman said. The rest of us were glad that someone confident and capable, someone who was not us, was handling the matter.

[20] It was too dark to see clearly, and so at the policeman's command, and at the other end of his semiautomatic, the occupants of the ship — the aliens, our first real aliens — were marched up the beach to the neon strip of casinos, while we followed, gaping, gawking, knowing nothing with certainty except that we were witnessing history, and perhaps would even play a role in it.

The lurid glow of marquees ⁷and brothels revealed to us a shivering, shambling crowd, some slumped like apes, some clutching their young. Some had five limbs, some four, and some three. Their joints were crablike, and their movement both resembled ours and differed to such a degree that it sickened us to watch. There were sixty-four of them, including the juveniles. Although we were unacquainted with their biology, it was plain that none were in good health.

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4. a place where guns and ammunition are stored
 5. forced to help
 6. **Vaporize** (*verb*) to kill by turning into gas or steam
 7. an illuminated sign

"Is there a place we can stay?" the aliens said.

Hotels were sought. Throughout the city, hoteliers⁸ protested, citing unknown risk profiles, inadequate equipment, fearful and unprepared staff, an indignant clientele,⁹ and stains from space filth impervious to detergent. Who was going to pay, anyway? They had businesses to run and families to feed.

One woman from among us offered to book a single room for the aliens for two nights, that being all she could afford on her teacher's salary. She said this with undisguised hope, as if she thought her offer would inspire others. But silence followed her remark, and we avoided her eyes. We were here on holiday, and holidays were expensive.

[25] The impasse was broken at three in the morning, when in helicopters, in charter buses, and in taxis, the journalists arrived.

It was clear now that our guests were the responsibility of national if not international organizations, and that they would be cared for by people who were paid more than we were. Reassured that something would be done, and not by us, we dispersed to our hotel rooms and immaculate¹⁰ beds.

When we awoke late, to trays of poached eggs on toast and orange juice, headlines on our phones declared that first contact had been made, that the Fermi paradox¹¹ was no more, that science and engineering were poised to make breakthroughs not only with the new metal that the spaceship was composed of but also the various exotic molecules that had bombarded the ship and become embedded in the hull during its long flight.

The flight had indeed been long. One African Francophone¹² newspaper had thought to interview the aliens, who explained in deteriorating French how their universal translator worked, how they had fled a cleansing operation¹³ in their star system, how they had watched their home planet heated to sterility¹⁴ and stripped of its atmosphere, how they had set course for a likely-looking planet in the Gould Belt,¹⁵ how they wanted nothing but peace, and please, they were exhausted, could they have a place to sleep and a power source for their translator?

When we slid on our sandals and stepped onto the dazzling beach, which long ago, before the garbage tides, was what many beaches looked like, we saw the crashed ship again, substantiation of the previous night's fever dream. It leached rainbow fluids onto the sand.

[30] Dark shapes huddled under its sawn-off lid.

Most of us averted our eyes from that picture of unmitigated misery and admired instead the gemlike sky, the

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8. a hotel owner or manager
 9. **Clientele** (*noun*) customers
 10. **Immaculate** (*adjective*) perfectly clean
 11. the idea that aliens are very likely to exist but have never been seen
 12. French-speaking
 13. an attack where all the people of one kind are killed
 14. **Sterile** (*adjective*) free from all living organisms
 15. a part of the Milky Way galaxy where Earth is located

seabirds squalling over the creamy surf, the parasols propped like mushrooms along the shore. One or two of us edged close to the wreck and dropped small somethings — a beach towel, a bucket hat, a bag of chips, a half-full margarita in its salted glass — then scuttled away. This was no longer our problem; it belonged to our governors, our senators, our heads of state. Surely they and their moneyed friends would assist these wretched creatures.

So it was with consternation¹⁶ that we turned on our televisions that night, in the hotel bar and in our hotel rooms, to hear a spokesman explain, as our heads of state shook hands, that the countries in their interregional coalition would resettle a quota of the aliens in inverse proportion to national wealth.¹⁷ This was ratified¹⁸ over the protests of the poorest members, in fact over the protests of the aliens themselves, who did not wish to be separated and had only one translation device among them. The couple of countries still recovering from Russian depredations were assigned six aliens each, while the countries of high fashion and cold beer received two or three, to be installed in middle-class neighborhoods. In this way the burden¹⁹ of these aliens, as well as any attendant medical or technological advances, would be shared.

The cost would be high, as these aliens had stated their need for an environment with a specific mixture of helium and neon, as well as a particular collection of nutrients most abundant in shrimp and crab. The latter, in our overfished and polluted times, were not easy to obtain.

This was appalling²⁰ news. We who had stitched, skimped, and pinched all year for one luxurious day on a clean beach would have our wallets rifled²¹ to feed and house the very creatures whose presence denied us a section of our beach and the vistas we had paid for. Now we would find these horrors waiting for us at home, in the nicer house next to ours, or at the community pool, eating crab while we sweated to put chicken on the table and pay off our mortgages. Who were they to land on our dwindling planet and reduce our scarce²² resources further? They could go back to their star system. Their own government could care for them. We could loan them a rocket or two, if they liked. We could be generous.

[35] Indeed, in the days that followed, our legislators took our calls, then took this tack.²³ If they meant to stay, shouldn't our visitors earn their daily bread like the rest of us? And if biological limitations made this impossible, shouldn't they depart to find a more hospitable clime?²⁴ We repeated these speeches over the dinner table. Our performances grew louder and more vehement after a news report about one of the aliens eating its neighbor's cat; the distraught woman pointed her finger at the camera, at all of us watching, and accused us of forcing a monster upon her because we had no desire to live beside it ourselves. There was enough truth in her words to bite.

It did not matter that six days later the furry little Lothario²⁵ was found at a gas station ten miles from home,

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16. **Consternation** (*noun*) a sudden feeling of amazement and dismay
 17. This means that the richer a country is, the fewer aliens it would take.
 18. to sign into law
 19. **Burden** (*noun*) difficult responsibility
 20. **Appalling** (*adjective*) very bad; awful
 21. **Rifle** (*verb*) to look through something with the intent to steal
 22. **Scarce** (*adjective*) limited
 23. direction
 24. a climate that is suitable or comfortable

having scrapped and loved his way across the countryside. By then we had stories of these aliens raiding chicken coops and sucking the blood from dogs and unsuspecting infants.

A solid number of these politicians campaigned for office on a platform of alien repatriation,²⁶ and many of them won.

Shortly afterwards, one of two aliens resettled in Huntingdon, England was set upon and beaten to death with bricks by a gang of teenaged girls and boys. Then, in Houston, a juvenile alien was doused in gasoline and set on fire. We picked at our dinners without appetite, worrying about these promising youths, who had been headed for sports scholarships and elite universities. The aliens jeopardized all our futures and clouded all our dreams. We wrote letters, signed petitions, and prayed to the heavens for salvation.

It came. From out of a silent sky, rockets shaped like needles and polished to a high gloss descended upon six of the major capitols of the world. About an hour after landing, giving the television crews time to jostle for position, and at precisely the same instant, six slim doors whispered open, and the most gorgeous beings we had ever seen strode down extruded silver steps and planted themselves before the houses of power, waiting to be invited in.

[40] And they were.

“Forgive us for imposing on your valuable time,” these ambassadors said simultaneously in the official languages of the six legislatures. Cameras panned over them, and excitement crackled through us, for this was the kind of history we wanted to be a part of.

When they emerged from their needle ships, their bodies were fluid and reflective, like columns of quicksilver, but with every minute among us, they lost more and more of their formless brilliance, dimming and thickening, acquiring eyes, foreheads, chins, and hands. Within half an hour, they resembled us perfectly. Or rather, they resembled what we dreamed of being, the better versions of ourselves who turned heads, drove fast cars, and recognized the six most expensive whiskeys by smell alone; whose names topped the donor rolls of operas, orchestras, and houses of worship; who were admired, respected, adored.

We looked at these beautiful creatures, whom we no longer thought of as aliens, and saw ourselves as we could be, if the lottery, or the bank, or our birthplace — if our genes, or a lucky break — if only —

We listened raptly as they spoke in rich and melodious²⁷ voices, voices we trusted implicitly,²⁸ that called to mind loved ones and sympathetic teachers.

[45] “A terrible mistake has been made,” they said. “Because of our negligence, a gang of war criminals,²⁹ guilty of unspeakable things, namely —”

25. a man who wants to seduce a woman

26. the act of returning to one’s home country

27. **Melodious** (*adjective*) pleasant sounding

28. **Implicitly** (*adverb*) without doubt

29. people who commit terrible crimes during a war, such as killing innocent people

Here their translators failed, and the recitation of crimes came as a series of clicks, coughs, and trills that nevertheless retained the enchantment of their voices.

“ — escaped their confinement and infiltrated your solar system. We are deeply sorry for the trouble our carelessness has caused you. We admire your patience and generosity in dealing with them, though they have grossly abused your trust. Now we have come to set things right. Remit³⁰ the sixty-four aliens to us, and we will bring them back to their home system. They will never disturb you again.”

The six beautiful beings clasped their hands and stepped back. Silence fell throughout the legislative chambers of the world.

Here was our solution. Here was our freedom. We had trusted and been fooled, we had suffered unjustly, we were good people with clean consciences sorely tried by circumstances outside our control. But here was justice, as bright and shining as we imagined justice to be.

[50] We sighed with relief.

In Berlin, a woman stood.

“Even the little ones?” she said. “Even the children are guilty of the crimes you allege?”

“Their development is not comparable to yours,” the beautiful one in Berlin said, while his compatriots in their respective statehouses stood silent, with inscrutable³¹ smiles. “The small ones you see are not children as you know them, innocent and helpless. Think of them as beetle larvae. They are destructive and voracious, sometimes more so than the mature adults.”

“Still,” she said, this lone woman, “I think of them as children. I have seen the grown ones feeding and caring for them. I do not know what crimes they have committed, since our languages cannot describe your concepts. But they have sought refuge here, and I am especially unwilling to return the children to you — ”

[55] The whispers of the assembly became murmurs, then exclamations.

“Throw her out!”

“She does not speak for us!”

“You are misled,” the beautiful one said, and for a moment its smile vanished, and a breath of the icy void between stars blew over us.

Then everything was as it had been.

[60] “We must ask the aliens themselves what they want,” the woman said, but now her colleagues were standing

30. **Remit** (*verb*) return

31. **Inscrutable** (*adjective*) mysterious

too, and shouting, and phone lines were ringing as we called in support of the beautiful ones, and her voice was drowned out.

"We have an understanding, then," the beautiful ones said, to clamorous agreement and wild applause.

The cameras stopped there, at that glorious scene, and all of us, warm and satisfied with our participation in history, turned off our televisions and went to work, or to pick up our children from soccer, or to bed, or to the liquor store to gaze at top-shelf whiskey.

A few of us, the unfortunate few who lived beside the aliens, saw the long silver needles descend point-first onto our neighbors' lawns and the silver shapes emerge with chains and glowing rods. We twitched the kitchen curtains closed and dialed up our music. Three hours later there was no sign of any of the aliens, the wretched or the beautiful, except for a few blackened patches of grass and wisps of smoke that curled and died.

All was well.

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