

Passersby

Contact has been made.

Earth seemed unimportant to the two alien ships parked in lunar orbit.

"They're talking to each other, Madam President."

"We're listening in?" the Chief asked her old college roommate and now her science adviser.

"It's in waves we don't understand, but not radio."

"What could they be saying?"

"Cosmic gossip, maybe nothing good — or it's a hoax, some people are saying."

"How?" asked the President.

"A big holo projection, if it can be done at all."

"Maybe the Indonesians!" said the President. "They have all that new tech."

"Why would they?"

"To sow confusion. I don't know. Maybe to claim that they have the only contact with a truly advanced civilization."

"Unlikely," said her adviser, as always eschewing political interpretations. "I think it's real."

"But Marty, why would they be here?"

"Maybe a passing curiosity, Madam President."

"Then we must be of interest."

"We would like to think so," said her adviser.

"Think of the costs to come here! They've probably solved all economic problems to spend so much."

"Interstellar travel may be cheap for them, or just irresistible despite the cost, Madam President."

"Well, they can't be paupers, but are they a danger to us? What would interest them about us, given how much they obviously have and we don't."

"I think there's only one thing that interests them, Madam President."

"What's that, Marty?"

"They wonder what we might think about ... well, everything, about the puzzle of existence, the nature of reality ... that sort of thing."

"What do you mean?"

"To compare notes. It's the only thing with which a civilization might tempt another."

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"They're

eavesdropping!"

"Not much we can

do about it."

The President gave him a horrified look. "We might not know what we have to interest them. Can we stop them?"

"I doubt it."

"They might be getting ready to shoot at us."

"No sign of it, Madam President, and unlikely."

"How can we know?"

And stop calling me Madam President! I used to do your laundry in college." She gave him a defeated look. "So what could it all be about? What do we know they want?"

Her old friend's pitying look told her how much he despised wearing political blinders, while she had always noticed when a relationship had to be modified by politics. She had begged him to be her science adviser. "You're the only one I can trust!" she had said, wondering even then if it was a sign of weakness.

But trust was right, with truth a part of trust, if not all of it. They had always agreed on that much.

"I think they just want us to know that they exist, Madam President ... that they're somewhere out there. Think of it as a gentler, wiser kind of first contact."

"Suspicious," said the President. "Maybe we should announce they're a hoax and throw it into the media conspiracy basket, where you can't tell truth from the trilobytes. Best place to hide a truth we can't deal with yet."

"I think that this may well be a great opportunity to learn something of their motives."

"How so, Marty?"

"Well, Henrietta, as you know," he said uncomfortably, "we've made few provisions for the survival of our cultures, our history, against the dozen or more bullets threatening to kill us off, including our own fissionable innards."

"No provision, you say?" asked the President.

"Next to nothing. No spacefaring, no Lunar or Martian colonies, no real time capsules, not to mention all the biodiversity we're killing off. Shutting down our life support system is no way to run Spaceship Earth."

"Well, we sent out those two Voyagers back when, with ... those gold discs Carl Sagan made," said the President.

"Long ago. They're still out there, but they won't get anywhere for millions of years, as their crawl takes them. We'll be long gone by then."

"Why didn't these intruders notice the Voyagers on their way in?"

"Weak radio signal, and all that volume of space. No telling from which direction they came."

"I wonder if we have another copy of the disc?" she asked. "I'll bet

Neil deGrasse Tyson has one."

"Great idea, Madam President," her adviser said.

"It won't have far to go, and we won't have to wait for the Voyagers to get anywhere, or get picked up," she said. "And its contents are mercifully unembarrassing, given what's happened here since."

"It went off on a fast flyby," Marty said the next day. "Best old booster we could borrow from the Russians."

"They let us borrow one?"

"Well, we had to pay a few people, Henrietta. Not much."

"They might think we're shooting at them," said the President. "Maybe we should have left them alone."

"It's on a near miss course."

"Or they'll think we're a bad shot," she said.

Forty hours later, they stood and stared at the tracking screens, and as they blinked there was suddenly no sign of the booster carrying the golden disc, or the two alien ships.

"What happened!" cried the President.

Her adviser laughed.

"We're in luck." He laughed again. "They snatched it and left." □



GEORGE ZEBROWSKI is best known for his *Brute Orbits*, *Macrolife* and *Cave of Stars*, recently chosen as one of the best SF novels since 1985. A collection of stories with Jack Dann, *Decimated*, is from Borgo/Wildside Press. All his fiction is available from Gollancz's SF Gateway (www.sfgateway.com) and Open Road Media (www.openroadmedia.com).