

Math Hysteria

By Jack English

It was a warm summer evening in the town of Gilford and no one was coming in, so Cynthia Janes closed her art gallery early. She walked two blocks to the college where her longtime boyfriend, Nolan Arabesque, taught. It was a starry night. The air was silky, full of possibilities and magic.

By the time she got there, the students had all gone and she found Arabesque sitting alone, on a stool, in a large classroom with high ceilings and huge old glass windows. The windows were open letting in warm gentle breezes. The blackboards were covered with equations. Arabesque had one hand over his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered as she embraced him.

He could barely speak. “This,” he gestured toward one of the blackboards.

“What’s the matter? Didn’t it all work out?”

He looked at her. His eyes were a little bloodshot. “It did work out. Don’t you see?”

“Nolan,” her words took on a firmer tone, “you know I studied art history, not math or science. So, how could I see?”

He stood and looked at her like the professor he was and said, “Math isn’t hard. It just isn’t taught well.”

That is when she noticed it. His feet weren’t touching the floor. “Nolan, what’s going on?”

“This is going on,” he swept his hands in the direction of the blackboards again. I’ve found an equation that explains everything!”

“Great, but why aren’t your feet touching the floor?”

“To say I’m floating on air is an understatement.”

“But why aren’t your feet touching the floor?”

“Oh, you noticed that.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Well, I noticed something happening. Grab that yardstick over there and see whether you can pass it between the floor and my feet.”

“What?”

“It’s an experiment. I want to understand what’s happening.”

She slid the yardstick between the floor and his feet. There was no resistance and nothing to account for the fact that her longtime boyfriend was floating an inch above the ground.

“When did this happen?”

“I noticed something strange when I was halfway through the fourth blackboard.”

“Strange? How strange?”

“The equations seemed to glow like they were backlit with some kind of golden light.”

“How is that possible?” Janes asked.

“I don’t know. Let me show you.” He pointed to the first blackboard.

“You know I don’t know anything about math.”

“It’s so simple. I’ve just reduced everything down to its essence.”

“No!”

“Please. If I show you, you’ll understand.”

“We should call Reed.” Reed Collins and his main squeeze, Janet Santiago, were their best friends. Reed was also a doctor in the middle of his residency.

“I don’t need a doctor,” Arabesque said.

“Well, something is going on and you need help.”

“Tell you what,” Arabesque said, “I’ll let you call Reed if you let me explain the math to you.”

“OK,” she said. By this time, she was already on the phone. “Reed? It’s Cynthia. There is something wrong with Nolan. No, it’s not an emergency, and no we don’t need to call 911. It’s... I can’t explain it. OK...” she waited for Reed to say something. “Bring Janet. Once we figure this thing out, maybe we can all go to dinner.” She turned back to Arabesque. “Reed will be here in half an hour. He’s bringing Janet.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Now let me show you what I’ve got.” He started on the first blackboard with some basic calculus, introduced vector analysis, then differential equations and tensor analysis. At every stage he asked, “Does this make sense?”

“I’ve got it so far,” Janes said.

As he went, Arabesque introduced a series of operators, dot product, cross product, and others. Concepts like separation of variables and orthogonality whizzed by. Geometry in seven-dimensional space suddenly seemed obvious.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it!” Janes said.

By the time he started explaining the last blackboard, she said, “Something is happening. The equations are glowing. It’s like my brain is on fire with all these new ideas. Everything is so clear. It’s like I was blind and now I can see.”

“Just a little further,” Arabesque said.

Finally, he got to the end of the last blackboard. “Does it still all make sense?”

“It’s all so simple,” Janes extended her hand and swept it toward the blackboards.

“And guess what?” he asked.

“What?”

“You’re floating.”

Cynthia Janes looked down. Her feet were an inch above the floor.

Arabesque slid the yardstick between the bottom of her feet and the floor to confirm she was floating.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. I only know it has something to do with the math.”

Reed Collins appeared at the door. Janet Santiago was with him. “Nolan,” Collins said, “Cynthia said there was something wrong. What is it?”

“Notice anything unusual?” Arabesque asked.

“What,” Collins asked, “did you get a haircut?”

Santiago slapped Collins with the back of her hand. “They’re floating an inch above the floor.”

“What’s going on?” Collins asked.

“You’re the scientist,” Arabesque said, “you tell me.”

“When did this happen?”

“I was working on these equations,” he pointed over his shoulder, “and when I was done, I began to float. These equations gave me so much clarity about...”

“What?” Collins said.

“Everything.”

Cynthia Janes spoke up. “For the first time in my life, math makes sense. It’s like it set my brain on fire.”

“Look,” Collins said, “I’m all in favor of math and physics and stuff, but I don’t see how it explains floating.”

Arabesque put his hand on Collin’s shoulder and pointed him to the first blackboard. “The stuff on this board is what you get in college textbooks. I’ve just stripped it down to its bare essentials.” He pointed to the next two blackboards, “This is cutting edge math. It’s been published in journals, but hasn’t made its way to the textbooks.” He pointed to the last blackboard, “This is my original research where I pull it all together into a general theory of everything.”

“But I still don’t see...” Collins protested.

“Let me walk you and Janet through it. If you still don’t see by the time we finish, then I’ll do whatever you want.”

Santiago stepped closer, “Nolan, I’m a lawyer. You know lawyers can’t add.”

“Janet, give me half an hour, if you still can’t follow it, that’s OK. Just give it a look.”

“Humor him,” Janes said. “What can it hurt?”

A half hour later, Dr. Reed Collins and Janet Santiago, Attorney at Law, were floating an inch above the floor.

“Wow!” Santiago said, “what a rush! It’s like everything was low definition black and white TV and we suddenly went to ultrahigh def.”

“OK, doc,” Arabesque asked sarcastically, “Got an explanation? What just happened to us?”

“The only thing I can think, and this is just a guess, is that all this beautiful math dumped a mass of neurotransmitters into our brains unlocking parts that we’ve never seen before.”

“What do we do now?” Janes asked.

Arabesque looked at the clock. “I’m starved, let’s eat.”

~

The best part of living in a small college town is that everything is in walking distance. They decided to eat at the Blue Parrot, a dimly lit out of the way place. Most of the dinner guests were gone by the time they arrived.

Nobody at the restaurant noticed that their feet weren’t touching the ground. They sat and ordered.

“Do you think this... whatever it is, is permanent?” Janes whispered.

“Well,” Collins said, “neurotransmitters are usually cleared from the brain after a couple of hours. If it is neurotransmitters, it might be gone by the time we finish dinner.”

“It was nice while it lasted,” Arabesque said. “Please pass the salt.”

The salt shaker slid across the table and plunked itself into his hand.

“Did anybody just see that?” Arabesque asked.

“Do it again,” Jane said as she took the salt shaker from him and placed it in the far corner of the table.

“Please pass the salt.”

The salt shaker slid across the table to Arabesque’s hand.

“Please pass the pepper,” Santiago said.

The pepper shaker slid across the table to her.

The four of them looked at each other.

“What the hell is going on here?” Janes whispered.

“Try something else,” Santiago said.

Arabesque turned to the table next to them. It was empty, but it had already been reset. “I need a spoon.”

The spoon snapped off the table into Arabesque’s hand.

“We need to get out of here and talk,” Janes said. That’s when the waiter returned with their food. “Can we get that to go?” she asked.

“Sure thing,” the waiter said and made an abrupt about face, heading back toward the kitchen.

There was a 1950s clock on the wall made in the image of a black cat. As the tail swung back and forth in one direction, the cat’s eyes rolled in the other direction.

Collins raised his hand in the clock’s direction.

“What are you doing?” Santiago asked.

“Nothing,” he grinned. He raised his hand again and with the slightest flick of his wrist set the clock forward fifteen minutes.

“Cut it out,” Santiago said. “Someone’s going to see you.”

“Let’s go to my house,” Arabesque said.

“Your house?” Santiago asked. “Why your house? It’s five miles out in the country.”

“I know. That’s why my house. We need to figure out what’s going on without anyone watching us.”

“Paranoia runs deep,” Janes said.

“Into your heart it will creep,” Collins said.

“It starts when you’re always afraid,” Arabesque said.

“Step out of line, the man come and take you away,” Santiago said. “So, let’s keep this thing, whatever it is under wraps until we understand it a little better.”

As they were walking from the Blue Parrot back to the college’s parking lot, Janes spotted a beer bottle lying on the sidewalk. There was a trash can not five feet away. She flicked her wrist and the beer bottle flew up from the sidewalk and landed in the trash can. “Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t help it.”

They all turned toward her and chuckled.

A half block from the parking lot, they noticed that the police had booted a car.

“Should I?” Arabesque asked.

“Whose car is it?” Collins asked.

“No idea, but it’s not nice to boot someone’s car.”

“Don’t do it,” Santiago advised. Then, she turned her head slightly then broke out in a smile. “I don’t suppose you could un-boot it just a little?”

Arabesque pointed the palm of his hand at the boot, then closed his fingers a tic. The boot popped off and hovered in midair. He waved his hand ever so slightly and the boot snuggled itself up to a parking meter. Then he closed his hand and the boot wrapped itself around the meter. “Do three good deeds every day,” he said.

The college parking lot was dark when they got there. Arabesque’s old Ford Crown Victoria was the only thing in the lot. They all piled in. It had the advantage of a big back seat and the certain guarantee that no one would want to steal it.

They had just left the town limits and were driving through an area surrounded by corn fields when Arabesque noticed the revolving red and blue lights of a police car coming up fast behind him.

“I told you not to mess with that boot,” Santiago said.

He pulled over and rolled to a stop on the shoulder.

A police officer in a wide-brimmed hat approached.

Arabesque glanced at the officer’s name tag. “What’s the matter Officer Pierce?”

“Broken tail light and something is obscuring your rear license plate. May I see your license and registration?”

Collins was sitting in the back seat and pointed out through the rear window, “Officer, your car is rolling.”

The officer looked back and sure enough his car was rolling backwards down the road. The officer trotted back toward his car, but the closer he got the faster it rolled.

“Are you doing that?” Janes asked.

“Well,” Collins said, “a broken tail light isn’t much of an excuse to stop a car.”

The officer eventually caught up to his patrol car, jumped inside and pulled it up behind Arabesque's Crown Victoria.

"Are we done with him or...?" Collins asked.

"Not quite done with him," Janes said.

Before the officer could get out of the car, it rose a foot in the air and slid sideways, across a drainage ditch, and gently set down in a muddy cornfield. The officer got out of the car and sank up to his ankles in mud. "Hey!" he called out to Arabesque and the others.

Jane closed her eyes a second, and a bright bubble of light surrounded the Crown Victoria. The bubble got brighter and brighter until the officer had to shield his eyes and turn away.

"I think we're done now," she said.

"OK," Arabesque said and pulled back onto the road headed for home.

The bubble of light persisted for another two or three minutes, then slowly faded away. By the time it did, Arabesque and the others were gone.

Officer Pierce climbed back into his patrol car and tried to pull forward. His tires spun in the mud. He tried to back up with the same result. He was stuck. He got on his radio, "Dispatch, this is Pierce. Something lifted my car..." He thought about how that was going to sound and changed his report. "Somebody ran me off the road."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, but I'm stuck in a field. I need a tow." He gave dispatch his location.

~

When the four of them got to Arabesque's house, they were still laughing about Officer Pierce.

"What do we do now?" Janes asked.

"What do you want to do, Cynthia?" Arabesque asked as he and the others climbed out of the car.

"It's such a warm, silky night it would be a shame to spend it inside," she said.

"OK, let's sit around the firepit and talk."

"What should we talk about?" Santiago chuckled.

"How about this?" Arabesque raised his palms skyward and rather than hovering an inch above the ground, he floated up a foot... then three feet, then floated up to his roof where he sat on the ridge. "Join me." He patted the shingles near where he sat.

Janes, Collins and Santiago looked at each other, then by fits and starts floated up to the roof where Arabesque was sitting.

Collins took on a serious tone. "If all of this is because we've triggered some advanced neurotransmitters, the effect is likely to be temporary. And, we don't want to be in midair when the neurotransmitters fade away."

"Geez, Reed," Santiago said, "You're such a worrywart. When it wears off, it wears off."

“If all this is temporary, I better copy down the equations that got us here,” Arabesque said.

“So, it’s back to the college?” Janes asked.

“After the stunt you pulled with Officer Pierce,” Collins said, “the cops are going to be swarming all over the roads looking for your Crown Vic.”

“Roads? We don’t need no roads,” Arabesque said as he rose high above the roof. “Want to come with?”

Collins and Santiago looked at each other.

“Somebody has got to keep you out of trouble,” Janes said rising into the air.

The four of them flew from Arabesque’s house, over farms and fields, over the town and settled down just outside the classroom where the equations had been scribbled out. They could hear the plaintiff whine of a buffer waxing the floor as they entered. They found a lone man running the buffer at one end of the hall. He was wearing headphones and didn’t notice them come in. At the other end of the hall, a woman was pushing a cart full of cleaning supplies into his classroom. He quick marched in her direction. Just, then a large figure stepped out of an office and blocked his way.

“Nolan, what are you doing here?”

“Dean Podolski, how do you do?”

“I didn’t expect anyone to be here at this hour of the night. What’s up?”

“Nothing, really. It’s just that I left my phone in the classroom and I wanted to retrieve it before it got lost.”

“And who are these fine people?” the dean asked.

“This is Doctor Reed Collins, Janet Santiago, she’s a lawyer, but we won’t hold that against her, and Cynthia Janes, she runs an art gallery a few blocks from here. We were all out to dinner when I realized I left my phone here.”

“Funny, I just glanced at the parking lot and didn’t see your car.”

“I left it at the restaurant. It’s only a couple of blocks away and it’s a nice night for a walk.”

“Well,” Podolski said, “I won’t keep you any longer. By now, my wife probably thinks I died in my office.” He nodded his head at the group and walked away.

As soon as the dean was out of sight, the four of them ran to the classroom. In the upper left-hand corner of the first blackboard, Arabesque had written the words: “DO NOT ERASE!” He had drawn a box around the words. Neither the box, nor the words in it had been erased, but the rest of the blackboard was squeaky clean, as were the next two blackboards.

The cleaning lady was just wiping the last blackboard clean when Arabesque yelled, “Stop!”

“I thought you’d like to make a clean start every day,” she said, an eraser in her hand. She seemed frightened by his outburst.

Arabesque waved his hand a little. “Generally that’s true, but I was setting up something for tomorrow’s class.”

“Beggin’ your pardon professor. I didn’t mean to...” She had a slight Irish accent.

“No problem,” Arabesque said, “I’ll come in early and put it all back on the boards. So why don’t you finish up in some other classroom and leave this one to me.”

“But the trash...”

“I’ll sort all that out. Just leave it to me.” He shooed her toward the door.

The four friends gathered around the equations that remained in the lower right-hand corner of the last blackboard.

“Is that going to be enough to put it all back together?” Janes asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Once these neurotransmitters are swept from the brain, and metabolized by the liver, we can say goodbye to all this.” Collins cupped his hand a little and a chair slid across the room.

Just then a pair of police officers appeared at the classroom door. They made a bee line for Arabesque. “You’re a professor here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m Professor Arabesque, but please, call me Nolan.”

One of the officers stood close by Arabesque and hooked his thumbs in his belt. “Professor... Nolan, my name is Schmidlap. You wouldn’t know whether anyone at the college is flying drones, would you?”

“I couldn’t say. A lot of people have drones.”

The officer spread his hands wide, “I mean big ones.”

“No, I don’t think anybody at the college has drones that big.”

The officer stepped closer to Arabesque and turned his back to Janes, Collins and Santiago so they couldn’t hear what he was saying. “We just got a bunch of calls about something big flying over the town.”

“You mean like a jumbo jet?”

“No, not that big.”

“You mean like a regular jet.”

“Not that big either.”

“How small was it? Was it the size of a bird?”

“It was bigger than any bird I’ve ever heard of. And you know what?”

“What? Somebody said they saw four of them.”

“And you are sure they weren’t birds or something.”

“Look professor, I didn’t see these things myself, and if only one or two people saw them, I would have a tendency to write them off as crazies, you know?” He made a circular motion with his finger near his ear. “But, more than two dozen people saw these things.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you. Biology is way outside my field. I’m just a math guy.” He pointed to the equations that hadn’t been erased.

“But you’re a scientist, aren’t you? Shouldn’t you have a theory or something?”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t have enough data to construct a theory.”

Officer Schmidlap scratched behind his ear. “Well, I thought as long as I was here, I would ask.”

As soon as the officer was gone, they all looked at each other and laughed.

Arabesque took a photo of the last remaining equations with his phone, then asked, “What shall we do now?”

“Nolan, where is the police station from here?” Cynthia Janes asked.

“Why?” Arabesque asked. “What do you have in mind?”

“Just a little visit, that’s all.”

“A flying visit, no doubt.”

She grinned. “Well, Reed said this neurotransmitter burst probably won’t last forever. We might as well play with it while it lasts. What do you say, Janet?” She extended her hand toward Santiago.

“So, you want to play a college prank on the police?” Santiago asked.

“Something like that.”

“OK, as long as nobody gets hurt... and they can’t trace it back to us.”

~

Three miles away, Officer Pierce’s cruiser was being towed out of a muddy cornfield. “I told you sergeant, a ball of light lifted my car off the ground and slid it into this cornfield.”

“I believe you,” Sergeant Mankowitz said. “Now, just blow into this breathalyzer.”

Pierce put the breathalyzer tube in his mouth and blew. Moments later, the sergeant got the results. “No alcohol in your system. You’re going to have to provide a urine sample to check for drugs.”

“What? Here? Now?”

“The sooner you do it, the better for all.” Mankowitz handed Pierce a sample jar and plastic evidence bag with Pierce’s name and badge number on it.

Pierce glanced at the tow truck driver who couldn’t help but overhear the conversation. She stood there in her overalls; a tiny bit of grease marked her cheek. She had a crooked smile on her face.

“Sarge, if you don’t mind, I’m going to give the sample out there.” Pierce pointed out to the middle of the field.

“Don’t get lost.”

~

Arabesque, Janes, Collins and Santiago landed on the roof of the police station. “What should we do?” Janes asked.

Arabesque smiled a flat smile and said, “Watch.” He cupped his hands and held them apart a little. A bright ball of light appeared in the street. The light was so bright, the four of them instinctively used a hand to shield their eyes. The light shined in through the windows of all the buildings on the street, lighting their interiors. It also cast harsh shadows down the street. Arabesque slowly brought his hands together. The ball of light flattened into a disk almost as wide as the street.

Policemen and women piled out of the station house to see what was going on. Most of them held one hand in front of their faces to shield themselves against the harsh light. Several of the police were wearing mirrored sunglasses. The sunglasses didn't help much.

Arabesque flicked his wrist a little and the glowing disk began moving down the street, slowly at first, and the police followed it on foot. Then with a slight hand gesture, the disk began moving faster. The police couldn't keep up on foot.

Two patrol cars pulled up. The police piled into them. The cars chased the object. In less than a minute, the object and police cars sped out of site.

"What do you think they'll make out of that?" Arabesque asked.

"Are we done here?" Santiago asked.

Arabesque spread his hands and shrugged.

"Be careful," Dr. Collins said, "time is passing. Whatever neurotransmitter cascade your equations triggered has got to be wearing off soon."

"We get it, Reed. *Tempus fugit*." Santiago slapped his arm with the back of her hand.

"So just button it and let us ride this rollercoaster to the end."

That's when they heard screeching tires in the street below. A state police car skidded to a stop in front of the police station, followed seconds later by a second state police car. That was followed by two police cars from Cherry, the next town over. They were all rolling their red and blue lights. The officers from all four cars jumped out, their weapons drawn.

A Gilford police officer walked out to greet them. "What's up?"

"We heard the police station was under attack! What happened?"

"Don't know. I was in the basement filing records when someone poked their head in at the top of the stairs and said, 'We've got a hot pursuit situation. Mind the store,' and they bolted out of here like they'd seen a ghost."

"But you're OK now? The station isn't under attack?"

"It's as quiet as a grave here. Come on in and I'll put on a pot of coffee."

The police all holstered their weapons.

"Something must be going on," the state police sergeant said. "Why all the kerfuffle?"

"It was a quiet night until Officer Pierce ran his car off the road. He claimed it was levitated by a ball of light and was dropped in a field."

"Drunk?"

"Breathalyzer says no."

"Drugs?"

"Don't know. Sergeant Mankowitz got a urine sample."

About that time, the two Gilford Township police cars returned. Mankowitz stepped out of his car.

The state police sergeant walked over. "We heard your station was under attack."

"We weren't sure what was happening. We saw a bright light in front of the station, like a flair or something, only much bigger and brighter. We went to investigate, it looked

like..." he paused. He knew how it would sound if he said he saw a bright glowing disk hovering over the road.

"The station was buzzed by a flying saucer," a young patrolman blurted out. "And we chased it for about a mile before it disappeared.

"A flying saucer? You chased a flying saucer in patrol cars?" the state police sergeant's statement dripped with sarcasm.

The other Gilford Township police nodded in agreement with the young officer.

"All right boys," the state police sergeant circled his hand in the air. "Nothing to see here." The state police got back in their cars and the Cherry Town police got back in their cars and began turning around.

~

Arabesque, Janes, Collins and Santiago watched from the police station roof.

"You want to help the home team here?" Janes looked at Arabesque.

"Your turn," he said.

Cynthia Janes held one hand above the other and gave a little jerk. A fifty-foot-wide glowing disk appeared in the street a few doors down from the police station. It wasn't as bright or as solid as the disk Arabesque created. In fact, it was slightly translucent. She flicked her wrist and it took off down the road in the direction Arabesque sent the last disk. The Gilford Township police, the state police, and the Cherry Township police all jumped in their cars and took off after it.

"See how faint that disk was?" Collins asked. "The neurotransmitters are being metabolized out of our systems. They will be gone soon. We better get down from here."

The four of them extended their arms, cupped their hands slightly and rose into the air. They turned back toward the college, floated a few blocks and landed in the parking lot just as it was beginning to get light.

"What now? Janes asked.

"Even if we could still fly," Santiago said, "I don't think we should take a chance on flying during the day. People would ask a lot of uncomfortable questions."

"Always thinking like a lawyer, aren't you Janet?" Arabesque said.

"I'm just thinking," she said. "Somebody has got to think."

"I'll call a cab," Janes said.

~

The cab dropped them off at Arabesque's house a little after dawn. None of them were floating over the floor. They all had their feet planted firmly on the ground. Nolan Arabesque and Cynthia Janes piled into bed together, exhausted. Reed Collins and Janet Santiago collapsed onto the bed in the spare room.

~

They awoke around two in the afternoon to a banging on the front door. "Open up! This is the police."

Nolan Arabesque pulled on a pair of pants; plodded downstairs; and opened the door. "What do you want?"

“Good morning. I’m Sergeant Mankowitz. Is this your car?” He pointed to the old Ford Crown Victoria in the driveway. Officer Pierce stood a few feet behind Mankowitz.

“Yes, officer it is. Why?”

“Officer Pierce claims he pulled you over last night. Is that true?”

“Yes, why?”

“After he pulled you over, what happened? I mean did you see or hear anything unusual?”

“Yeah. First, I have no idea why he pulled me over. Then he asked me for my license and registration and before I could get them out of my wallet, he ran back to his car.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. It looked like his car was rolling backwards. Maybe he didn’t put on the handbrake or something.”

“Then what happened?”

“His car rolled out of sight. I waited five minutes for him to come back. He never showed. I figured he got called away.”

“And you didn’t see or hear anything else unusual.”

By this time, Cynthia Janes, Reed Collins and Janet Santiago had gotten up and were standing behind Arabesque at the door.

“Not a thing, sergeant. Why do you ask?”

Mankowitz did a half turn in Pierce’s direction and spread his hands.

“Ask them!” Pierce pointed to Janes, Collins and Santiago.

Arabesque stepped aside and the others squeezed into the doorway.

“Did any of you see anything unusual last night?”

“Nope,” Janes said.

“Not a thing,” Collins said.

“Nada,” Santiago said.

“Ask where they were all night,” Pierce said.

“Where were you all night?” Mankowitz asked.

“Right here,” Arabesque said.

“You’re Professor Arabesque, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“We got a report that one of our officers spoke to you at the college around ten. Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“But you just told me you were here all night.”

“I was here all night after about ten thirty.”

“Can you prove that?”

Arabesque crooked his thumb in the direction of Janes, Collins and Santiago.

“I mean did anyone else see you here?”

“A cab driver dropped us off here around ten thirty, you can ask him.”

“Which company? Do you remember?”

“Not a clue.”

“How did you get into town? Why didn’t you drive?”

“Look, officer, it’s a long story.”

“I’d like the four of you to come downtown and make a statement.”

“Are we under arrest?” Santiago asked.

“No.”

“Then we’re not going anywhere unless you tell us what this is all about.”

“Officer Pierce was involved in an... accident last night. And we’re just trying to nail down some of the details surrounding the accident.”

“Tell you what, sergeant, we’ll follow you into town,” Arabesque said.

“We have two patrol cars. We’d prefer it if we could take two of you in each of them.”

“I’m sure you would. If you want us to come and not lawyer up, we’ll follow you.”

“OK,” Mankowitz said, “but don’t get lost.”

~

When they got to the police station, it was a madhouse. People were crowded into every square inch, in the aisles, in the offices, everywhere.

“We want to get your statements in writing,” Mankowitz shouted over the noise.

“There’s an interrogation room in back where it will be a little quieter.” He pushed through the crowd.

As they followed Mankowitz, they overheard bits and pieces of conversation. “Flying saucer... UFO... it was witches, I could see them flying over my garden.”

As soon as Mankowitz seated them in the interrogation room, two men in black suits barged in and flashed some credentials in the sergeant’s face. “Who are these people?”

“They were the last people to see Officer Pierce before his car... ended up in the cornfield.”

“Thanks,” one of the men in black said. “We’ll take it from here.” He turned toward Arabesque, Janes, Collins and Santiago. “I’m Agent Johnson,” he pointed to his comrade, “and this is Special Agent Johnson. No relation.”

“Are you FBI agents?” Arabesque asked.

“I didn’t say we were from the FBI. I just said we were agents, Federal government agents. Now, who are you?”

Janes turned toward her companions, “Sounds like a question from a hookah smoking caterpillar.” She repeated the phrase slowly as spoken in the movie, *Alice in Wonderland*.

“Ah, whoooo rrrrrr uuuuu?”

They all laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Johnson asked.

“A small literary illusion, agent. I am Cynthia Janes. I run an art gallery in town.”

“I’m Dr. Nolan Arabesque, a math professor.”

One of the Johnsons whispered, “Geek,” under his breath.

“I’m Dr. Reed Collins.”

“I’m Janet Santiago, Attorney at Law and I’m here to protect their rights.”

Johnson ignored her and leaned across the table toward Arabesque, “When Officer Pierce pulled you over, you didn’t see a ball of light did you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You didn’t see anything lifting the officer’s car off the road, did you? You didn’t see any UFOs or flying saucers or little green men, did you?”

“Little green men?” Santiago asked.

Arabesque, Janes and Collins looked at her and silently mouthed the words, “Little green men?”

“No, sir.” Arabesque said. “I didn’t see a thing.”

“Good,” Johnson said. “Let’s keep it that way. This is just a case of mass hysteria.”

“Math hysteria?” Arabesque grinned. “Yeah, math hysteria.”

“I said mass hysteria,” Johnson said. “What are you stupid?”

“Not according to my diplomas,” Arabesque said under his breath.

An army lieutenant barged into the room.

“What?” Johnson barked.

“We’ve set up a three-mile perimeter around the police station.”

“The cornfield where they found the police car, is it inside the perimeter or outside?”

“Inside.”

Johnson turned back to Arabesque, Janes, Collins and Santiago. “Give the lieutenant your phones.”

“Why?” Arabesque asked.

“He’s going to download your photos and videos.”

“Why?”

“To make sure you haven’t documented anything with national security implications.”

“Don’t you need a warrant for that?” Santiago asked.

“The police need a warrant, but I don’t need a warrant. I was never here. And the Army doesn’t need a warrant because they were never here either. Phones please.” He extended his hand.

They gave up their phones.

“You’ll get these back as soon as we’re done with them,” Johnson said. Then he said, “Lieutenant, send in the others, four at a time. These four can go. They won’t make any trouble.” He turned back to face Arabesque, Janes, Collins and Santiago. “You won’t make any trouble, will you?”

They all nodded no.

~

They were a few feet from the door when a woman said, “Him! I saw him flying over my garden!” She pointed to Arabesque. “And, her too,” she pointed to Cynthia Janes.

Special Agent Johnson grabbed Arabesque’s arm. “This man?” He turned toward the old woman, “You saw this man flying?”

Johnson got up in Arabesque’s face. “She says you can fly. What do you say to that?”

“Of course, I can fly,” Arabesque said. He gently placed the fingertips of one hand on his head while holding the other hand limply at shoulder height. Then he jumped a half inch off the ground, twirling around and around shouting, “I can fly. I can fly. I can fly.”

“Get the hell out of here,” Johnson said.

“Hold on just a minute,” one of the police officers said. “When we went out to see that... that... ball of light thing, I thought I saw some people on the roof of the police station.”

“So?” Johnson’s question was sharp, clipped, impatient.

“I think it might have been these people,” his hand swept up and down the line from Nolan Arabesque to Cynthia Janes to Reed Collins to Janet Santiago.

“All right, you four,” Johnson said as he waved an Army lieutenant over. “Back to the interrogation room.”

“Are we under arrest?” Santiago said.

“No.”

“Then we’re leaving.”

The lieutenant stepped up.

“These four people have volunteered to stay and help us with our inquiries,” Johnson said.

“No, we haven’t,” Santiago said.

“Lieutenant, escort them back to the interrogation room and see that they stay there.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant said. He motioned four soldiers forward.

“He too serves who only sits and waits,” Arabesque said as he headed back to the interrogation room.

~

A half hour later, Agent Johnson and Special Agent Johnson returned. They were carrying coffee cups and a manilla file folder. Arabesque, Janes, Reed and Santiago sat on one side of the table, Johnson and Johnson sat on the other side.

Special Agent Johnson opened the folder and spread some papers out on the table. “I have statements from two people who said they saw you flying and a police officer who swears you were on the roof of the police station when the UF... when the flying... when the bright light appeared in the street. What do you have to say to that?”

Santiago’s lawyer gene kicked in. “In your experience, Agent Johnson, do you come across a lot of flying people?”

“I’m Special Agent Johnson, that’s Agent Johnson,” he pointed to his colleague.

“Special Agent Johnson, you come across a lot of flying people?”

Johnson furrowed his brow, “I’ll ask the questions here.”

“It told you I could fly,” Arabesque flicked the back of his hand at Johnson.

“Were you on the roof of the police building?”

“No,” Arabesque said lightly.

“Where any of you?” Johnson pointed to the other three.

They all said no.

“Seems to me, Special Agent Johnson, that anyone could get onto the roof of the police station,” Santiago said. “There must be a door or hatch or something to get up there.”

“We checked. The door to the roof was locked.” Johnson leaned across the table. “How did you get up there, anyway?”

Dr. Collins looked at his companions, “Got anything?”

“Not much,” Arabesque said. As he said it, he held his thumb and forefinger apart and closed the gap a little.

One of the legs on Johnson’s chair shortened a quarter of an inch. His seat rocked sideways. He rocked back to steady it.

“What the hell is going on here?” Special Agent Johnson demanded.

“May I ask a question?” Collins said.

“Is there any way to stop you, doctor?”

“What’s the career path like at the FBI...”

“I didn’t say I was from the FBI.”

“What’s the career path at your agency for anyone claiming to have seen a UFO or flying saucer or little green men?”

“Not good.”

“And, what is likely to happen to you if you report flying people?”

Johnson rocked on his chair.

“But you were flying, weren’t you? Admit it.”

“Let’s focus on what’s best for you, for a moment,” Collins pressed. “Wouldn’t it be better for you if you reported that these folks,” he reached across the table and tapped the witness statements, “saw a drone, a flock of geese or even weather balloons?”

Neither of the Johnsons answered the question.

Santiago swept the back of her hand a little and Agent Johnson knocked over his coffee cup. Coffee flowed down the table toward Special Agent Johnson.

“Why do you think,” Special Agent Johnson asked, “these people said they saw you flying?” He noticed the coffee rolling toward him and jumped up, knocking over his own cup, spilling coffee onto the file folder with the witness statements in it. “Damn!” he shouted and grabbed the file off the table. It was soaked in coffee. He held the file by two fingers and let it drip into a nearby trash can. “So, you think it was a drone, or geese or a weather balloon or something?”

Nolan Arabesque, glanced at Cynthia Janes, who smiled to Dr. Reed Collins who nodded yes to Janet Santiago. They all swept the back of their hands a little, then they heard a lot of cursing and shouting from the outside.

“Johnson!” Special Agent Johnson said, “Keep an eye on them and clean up that mess! I’m going to see what’s going on.”

Arabesque looked at his friends, “Got anything left?”

“Nope!” they all said.

“Let’s try that pen,” he pointed to Agent Johnson’s pen.

Concentrate as they may, they just couldn’t move it.

“It’s gone,” Janes said.

“What’s gone?” Agent Johnson asked as he held the file folder and witness statements over the trash can, letting the coffee drip off them. “And what did you want with my pen?”

Arabesque spread his hands and smiled sweetly, “Nothing.”

Special Agent Johnson returned twenty minutes later, a frazzled look on his face. He tracked coffee in on his shoes. “Everybody spilled their coffee. It’s a mess out there.”

“Paper towels?” The other Agent Johnson asked.

“No paper towels, no toilet paper. They are trying to sop up the mess with copy paper.” He held some in his hand. Then he tried to pat dry his coffee-soaked file folder and the papers in it.

Arabesque spoke up. “One of the local police officers, I think he said his name was Schmidlap, asked us whether we saw a drone that night.”

“Where was that?”

“I went back to the college to get my phone. It was about ten.”

“So, was it a drone?”

“Officer Schmidlap seemed to think so. Why don’t you talk to him?”

Johnson’s chair rocked one way then the other. “I got a statement here from Officer Kurtz. He swears he saw you four on the roof of the police building. What do you say about that?” Johnson continued trying to pat dry the statements in his file.

“May I see his statement?” Arabesque extended his hand across the table.

Johnson handed him the soggy paper.

“It says here,” Arabesque said, “that he also swears he saw a UFO land right in front of the police station and that he and half a dozen other officers chased it for more than a mile.”

“So?”

“Do you believe him when he said he saw a flying saucer?”

“Well... no. I guess not.”

“But you believe him when he says he saw us on the roof of the police building.”

Johnson rocked sideways in his chair again. “I don’t know.”

“Agent Johnson...” Santiago said.

“Special Agent Johnson,” he corrected her.

“Special Agent Johnson, what’s best for your career? That you file a report from a police officer who claims he chased a flying saucer, or that the report never gets filed?”

“Well...” his chair rocked sideways again.

“Let me ask a question,” Dr. Collins said.

“I don’t suppose there is any way to stop you.”

“Are you trying to prove that something happened here? Or are you trying to prove that nothing happened here. That this is all math hysteria, I mean mass hysteria.”

Arabesque, Janes and Santiago smiled at his slip of the tongue.

“I... I don’t know,” Special Agent Johnson admitted.

“Then isn’t keeping us here and all this questioning a little Kafkaesque?” Janes asked.

“Who is Kafkaesque? What did he or she see?” Special Agent Johnson asked.

“Franz Kafka wrote about out-of-control bureaucracies.”

“Where can I find Kafka?”

“In the library,” Janes said.

Special Agent Johnson turned toward Agent Johnson, “Find the lieutenant and have him send somebody to the library to get Franz Kafka.”

“It won’t help you,” Janes said.

“Why not?” Special Agent Johnson pounded on the table.

“He’s dead.”

“Who killed him?”

“Not who, what,” Janes said. “He died of tuberculosis.”

Special Agent Johnson leaned into the table. “Doctor, should we be quarantining the library? Quarantining the town?”

“No need,” Janes said. “He died in 1924.”

“And he’s still in the library? What is this? A town full of ghouls?”

“His books are in the library,” Janes said.

“Oh, why didn’t you say so.” Special Agent Johnson frowned, then reached into a leather briefcase. “I want you to fill out these forms and sign them.”

“Question one is,” Arabesque said, “have you ever seen a flying saucer or UFO? Question two is, have you ever seen, been contacted by, or abducted by an alien? If so, describe.” He turned toward Special Agent Johnson, “You’ve only left a quarter inch high space to describe an alien abduction.”

“Have you ever been abducted by aliens?” Special Agent Johnson poked his finger onto the form.

“No.”

“Then keep your smart mouth to yourself and fill out the damned form!” He pounded his fist on the table.

“I can hardly wait to see what the other questions are,” Arabesque said under his breath.

“What?” Johnson snapped.

~

For three days and three nights, Johnson and the Army held the town in quarantine while they interviewed everyone and searched every square inch inside their perimeter. Pizzas, baloney sandwiches, and Diet Pepsi were brought in for every meal. It was awful.

At various times, Johnson said he was a CDC Agent and the town was being quarantined because of an infectious disease. At other times he said he was from the EPA and was checking for some kind of toxic discharge. At other times, he just said he was a federal government agent and declined to name his agency.

The townspeople who reported something strange weren’t arrested, they just weren’t allowed to leave. The Johnsons and their army of interrogators asked the same questions

over and over again and then told people how to answer the questions they asked. “You didn’t see anything unusual, did you? You didn’t see a UFO, did you? You didn’t see a flying saucer, did you? You didn’t see mysterious lights, did you?”

When people gave the right answers, they were eventually released from the police station.

On the morning of the fourth day, The Johnsons and their Army detail were gone, vanished in the middle of the night.

After a week, things returned to normal, whatever that is. Nolan Arabesque, Cynthia Janes, Reed Collins and Janet Santiago got together in their favorite restaurant, the Blue Parrot.

“Well, it has certainly been an interesting week,” Janes said. “I wouldn’t want to go through that again.”

“Cynthia,” Santiago said, “you are a master of understatement.”

“What do you think happened to us?” Janes asked Collins.

“My best guess is still that Nolan’s math stimulated some unknown part of the brain causing a neurotransmitter cascade, something like a runner’s high, but obviously more profound.”

Santiago turned toward Arabesque, “Nolan, I don’t suppose you were able to recreate your math from the handful of equations that were left on the blackboard, were you?”

“As a matter of fact, I think I have.”

“Why didn’t Johnson and his buddies erase them from your phone?” Janes asked.

“I don’t think that’s what they were looking for. I think they were looking for pictures of flying saucers or little green men. They probably felt equations were harmless. Or, mostly harmless.” Arabesque reached into his briefcase. “I’ve got the recreated equations on my tablet. Want to see them?”

The other three all pulled back a little. Then they leaned in as Arabesque paged through the equations.

“Do you think the equations will have any effect on us this time?” Janes asked.

“I don’t know,” Arabesque said. “Please pass the salt.” The salt shaker floated through the air and slapped itself into his hand.

“I need a clean spoon,” Janes said and a spoon from the next table flew into her hand. They all laughed.

THE END

More Jack English short stories are available at: <https://www.jackenglishstories.com/short-stories>.
Jack English Novels are available at: <https://www.jackenglishstories.com/gallery>