

INVASION

by Joanna Ross

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They were terrible.

The Doctor found one under the operating table in the hospital (impossible to tell its sex) that regarded her suspiciously and then, as she reached for it, vanished with a *pop!* of inrushing air.

The Second-in-command discovered three of them between the sheets as he started to make the bed in the quarters he shared with the Captain. The creatures rolled away from him, grinning, and vanished.

An especially small one—who'd been in the swimming pool, it seemed, and who was dripping wet, its yellow costume all soggy—materialized against the hand-woven tapestry on the cabin's wall, slid down, and left a trail of water-blurred color behind it. It shrieked excruciatingly and vanished.

The Navigator walked into her study area and found two of them sitting on top of her antique wooden bookcase. Normally a peaceful woman, even a bit shy, she threw herself at the intruders, shouting "No!" only to receive a painful barrage of books in the face, most of which then rolled under the bed as she grabbed for them, acquiring disc-destroying grit in the process. Several hit her on the forehead, hard. When she was able to scramble out from under the bed, her hands full of them, the intruders were gone.

One perched weightlessly on the Communicator's head as he was combing his hair. Two others landed heavily in his lap. One said, "Comb *my* hair"; another, "Give us a kiss." The one sitting on his head dropped into his lap, crowding the other two (who kicked and rocked for a few seconds, trying to get the lap back for themselves alone) and asked, in an unexpectedly deep, hoarse voice, "Do you like worms?"

The Communicator thought for a moment. Then he said, "Worms are fine in the soil of Botany Level Two, but nowhere else."

Little number three looked in its overall pocket, sighed, its whole face expressing woe, and vanished. Little number one-in-the-lap cried, "Comb my hair!" so he did, using the mother-of-pearl-backed hair-pick that had been in his family for generations. Two rocked back and forth on his lap, humming—they were actually fairly heavy litters, he decided—and number one subsided into dreaminess while having its wild, fuzzy, orange hair combed. The combing accomplished, the Communicator thought for a minute or so while little number two sucked its thumb. Then he said, carefully, "I'm going to tell you a wonderful story. Once there were three little people and they were just like you—"

The Engineer found that one of the creatures (a really young one) had crawled inside a ventilation duct and was gnawing at the lining with a look of fascination on its pudgy features. An older one was reaching for the fusion reactor controls. The Engineer was not one to act hastily or unthinkingly, even when something threatened her engines, and she also had the great advantage of having been brought up on a male-dominated planet as the eldest of nine. Stealthily she reached for the shelf near the radiation-proof door, on which she kept items confiscated from tourists or staff, mostly food and some gadgets her assistants had carried into the area, or rather had planned to carry, for she was down on

anything that might interfere with efficient single-mindedness. (She over-compensated for her bringing-up.) The little one (she thought) should like a jingling bunch of keys, while for the other she took off the shelf a torus toy, made of rubber and filled with nothing stranger than plain water ... that crawled out of your hand no matter how you held it. She mimed dramatic dismay. The small little crawled with amazing speed out of the duct, its plump rear switching from side to side. It pounced on the fallen torus, only to have the older little pounce on it, in turn, and pull the toy out of the baby's grasp. The younger proceeded to mourn its loss with loud screams of anguish. The Engineer picked it up, like the expert she was, and jiggled the little. Then she jiggled both the little and the keys against her shoulder. It grabbed for the keys and inspected them. It made them jingle. The bigger one looked calculatingly at her as if to say, *You want this back, don't you?* and she shook her head. Then, wondering if the creature could understand any human speech or behavior, she spread both hands out, palms front, meaning *It's yours if you wish*. The little went to its companion, picked it up (staggering under the other little's weight) and made its way to the corridor. The Engineer, enormously relieved, punched the complicated signal that locked the Engine Room. Now the doors would open only to her voice command or that of her primary assistant.

There was a tap on her knee.

Looking down, she saw number two, the bigger one, politely handing her back the torus toy. She took it.

The little vanished.

Now I will tell of the time the yoomin beans caught us, it was sad but o so fine. Kick Mwres, bash Mwres, no more soundings. Quiet, Mwres. *I am to tell*. It was big ship, big shape looming and glooming in the starlite when—no, not G'lydd, *I me*—saw and took all in. Funny on outside, spidery things and bumps and "numbers," G'lydd say. Sh, Mwres. So we all swarm in, it being allalonetime now and You Know Who not here, he/she in sun, not knowing what we doing baddie stuff. *Oof!* into metal wall, *ping!* inside metal, streaming on to round plastipak cover, can see within.

Creatures! A whole round of creatures is ambulating, zizzing, flesh voice-boxes (such they have, to be sure) et cetera. *Yick!* says Ulf. *Beans*, say I. So we go all ways into different places, full of interest, to see beans do such, so we become beanshape, in yellow, to do bean-suches acts, as: Crawling, yelling, jumping, shrieking, et cetera. We fell on hair and lap, got told story like real little crittur, went in and out of water, sat on big, wood-eny thing, pulled a toy from littler bean, we yelled, we gave it back, we rolled between "sheets" on "bed," and so on.

Then a tall, goldy-topped bean SAT on us. Shriek! Shriek! Help! Haw, goes Gr, was sat upon. The beans all shake up, another do a bean thing called "laff," others too but hide tee-hee under hands.

Short, round-shape bean with front bumps say, "Why is my ship infested with babies and small children in yellow overalls?" and other person reply, "Mam, we receive distress call from planet Ulp, is terrible disease ramping among adults, must be send up kiddies to be safe."

(This is not lie *exactly*. Maybe not so true, either, says G'lydd. Yes it is, I say indignants. Horrible rigidity disease all over down below, can be ONLY ONE THING AT TIME, can think of worse?)

Tall story-teller bean say, "Mam, I attempted to verify distress call with"—here Gr interrupt, *tweedled* and *twaddled*, but tall bean really say with all cryptograms and codes and distortions and what-not but cannot find no signal except planet Ulp's (sent, as WE know, by YOU KNOW WHO) so Ulpians send up all these babies and small children to ship to be safe.

Starey-eyed Second-person mutter to self, Yes, but will *we* be safe from *them*? Mwres snicker. Says, *I slummed down pretty wall hanger, ho ho, will never be same.*

Nasty! says G'lydd.

Funny skinny little person with front bumps say Oh Mam, oh, mam, they is only innocent little beans, kiddies and such, let us be kind to them, feed them broth and cookings, give them nice place to sleep, &c. We all haw haw at bumpy person; we want eat cherry pie, whipt cream, pickled herrings, wiener buns, strawberry shore cake and such. Make come out of walls. Gr know how.

Doctor say Mam, is against humanities not to give refuge to poor little mites. Gafroy bite her, ugh, taste awful from toes not washed for week, report Gafroy. Doctor pull foot back. Except that one, she say, glaring. We loff, go: we are innocent, innocent.

Uh-oh. Sour-faced Second-person open mouth, say: Captain, I have suspicions these not kiddies—but here Gr and Grf and I ram into its stummick, causing loss of breath to speak, & Ff bounce up and down on midsection, causing fuss and silence. Shame! cry Doctor-person, to say such of poor innocents which their peoples is dying down there in droves. Tsk tsk say all. So we run all of us to splashing pool and splash in, making big fun, then zoom out to food room and gorge selves on cherry pie with whip cream, leaving some on floor, alas. Then to beds which we roll in "sheets" and leave feet-marks on "blankets." Captain say Can any of you really envision these poor little children six to a bed in *your* bed? and all persons grab each other and say, no no no, please help, anywhere else, will get in way something terrible. We know what they thinking and Ff want to tell but I won't let. Not proper. Maybe somebody will read us storybooks? They have all this things like stuff was throwed at us. So we nice to all, stick out little bellies, wiggle eyelashes, &c. say, Oh read us a story, plees, plees, O Lady who Steer. Is such lovely thinkings. So she pleesed and do so, very lovely, very exciting, Gr and Ff kiss from it & dance. Is all in rhyme and alliteration, can not understand but beauty. Then somebody else do and somebody elses and elses. This take seven hours forty-five minutes ten seconds three milliseconds. We not tired. Wow. Then off to food room for strawberry pie and chocolate bars wow wow even tastier. Then time to play poker at bottom of swimming pool, which upset guard bean until G'lydd explain we O.K. but still upset so we sleep in botanical place instead, Ff snacking off plants with Mwres. Leave them alone, sir. Comb hair. Clean teeth on plant stalk. All say together, oh You Know Who, guard our sleep but stay away, plees. Then we all loving and goody and glow with friendlies. Then we sleep.

Next day: Doctor-bean very active in laboratory trying find cure for rigidity disease. Muttering to self about blood samples and such we bring up from Ulp surface: Why, these are all ideally normal! Is no disease here. She putter & putter &c tsk. G'lydd want to tell her but Ff and I sit on she: No! Mustn't! until give up. G'lydd shake haughty and toss head and vanish away. Lie in sun room pretend bean, with cache-sexe and dark glasses but in switched places. Haw! Then Doctor say Aha! I have found fraction of lipid protein is very strange, without which these people would be mere heaps of protoplasmic gunk. But this cannot be a cure for disease unless disease is normalcy itself. Hurrah! I have found it. Ulpians catch normal humancy from us on ship; that is disease. She then grab and inoculate laboratory squirrel, which was hiding under papers on desk to get away from doctors. Behold! It turn into a mess of Jell-O. Then she inoculate own knee, which also turn all squudgy and nasty. Behold! she say. The antidote to the disease of Form!

Meanwhile nice story-teller person finally contact planet Ulp and up is coming—

No, no! yell Mwres, I didn't it was THEY who did it, I didn't mess up tapestried. I didn't throw books at steer-lady. I didn't gnaw tube, it was THEM.

Ff and LI and Gafroy say: Look WHO is coming.

It is You Know Who.

Uhoh.

With one loud Word YKW make us fall into line and behave—anybody acts naughty now gets incarnated as cactus for fifty years—and we all sob & cry & promise to be good, turning back into our treu shape, which is two-foot-high pyramids of green Jell-O. YKW is a six-foot-high pyramid of green Jell-O. I flash a bit into my yellow-overalls yoomin form to say goodbye.

YKW trounce me. That is telepathic and very awful, tho' I won't say how. If you are pyramid of green Jell-O, it *hurts* (to make ripples). So I regress right back into being a nauseous Thing.

Story man say softly in mind: You are very beautiful just as you are, little Things. Life is beautiful. Nothing is so graceful and lovely as a heap of green Jell-O.

So we leave happy. Crying goodbye, goodbye, I sorry I hurt your artifactual and put water on it. I was bad. I ate and messed up food room and did other awfuls. But I am only a lit-ul child.

MARCH! says You Know Who.

So we march.

Down on the surface everybody is now cured of looking like Yoomin Beans, and is back to normal, viz. green gunk. Life is again horrible. Up in ship only Ff is still there, try to hide out in botanical bay, imitating frond. Is not successful, is almost devoured by botany cat, must come down to surface in disgrace, to look forever like Graminidae. Sometimes we look up into sky, remembering beautiful ship and food and cry, O ship-thing, ship-thing, wherefore art thou up so high/like a carpet in the sky? And we flow about, savagely chanting:

Rigidity, rigidity,

Wherefore art thou so fond of we?

Which is a sort of spring thing, a festival cry with which we assault the boring semi-liquidity of our fate.

Meanwhile:

Mam say to steer-person: Did you authorize the entry of these ... ah ... youngsters without checking out Ulp and said species computer-wise?

All say No no, nobody let them in. Do not do bad things to us, plees. Was not our fault.

Enough. We shall torment you no more. Goodbye, goodbye.

The day shift slept, the Engineer dreaming that she was at home with too few rights and far too many little brothers and sisters. The Doctor woke every few minutes with a start, having dreamed repeatedly of an operating room overrun with Ulpian youngsters, until she gave up, rose, put on her robe, and went to enter results into the hospital computer, from where she could keep an oblique watch on the hall and the next room. The Navigator slept on her face, over a cache of her most precious discs. The Communicator alone slept soundly and did not dream. Both reading, both wearing glasses (the Captain for myopia, her First for a touch of astigmatism) the Captain and the First were in bed together,

the latter in pajamas. After a while the Captain put down her book (*Military History of the Late T'ang*) and frowned. "Thinking about those children?" said the other.

"They were *not children*," she said decisively, and shuddered.

"Well, yes," he said, "they were aliens, true but even as pyramids of green Jell-O, they were, . . . well, baby pyramids."

"Hm!" said she. There was a moment's silence. He went back to his own book, an annotated *Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Then she said slowly:

"Love, do you think . . . did it ever occur to you that all children are aliens?"

He said, "Do you mean the bouncing on adults and the cherry pie between their toes? Oh yes. No, not really. Anyway I rather liked them. The small pyramids, I mean."

"I suppose," she said, a bit sharply, "that it's perfectly normal for human male philoprogenitiveness to be roused by contact with small pyramids of green goo. Nonetheless—"

"No, not by them. By you."

"By me?"

"Absolutely." He added, "Do you want to back out?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. We'll do it. It'll be human, after all. Not like them."

Indeedy yes. Will be little yoomin bean. Will be playmate. Will be *lonely*. You Know Who go away again soon.

We come back.

-end-

About the author:

Joanna Russ is one of the finest stylists of the last forty years in science fiction. Her stylistic excellences were indeed the foundation of her reputation in the 1960s and early 1970s, only to be superseded by her reputation as perhaps the most cutting-edge feminist in SF in the 1970s, the author of *The Female Man*, "When It Changed," and *The Two of Them*. She also wrote critical essays (for which she has received a Florence Howe Award from the Modern Language Association and later the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association) and reviews (mostly in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*) throughout the 1970s; she then fell silent in the mid-1980s.

She has published too little fiction since winning the Hugo award for her novella, "Souls," in 1983. Not even a story a year. So it is a rare treat to find a stylistic tour-de-force such as "Invasion." It appeared in *Asimov's* in the same month (January) as a letter from Russ in the magazine's letter column responding to an editorial. She also published a substantial collection of her essays, *To Write Like a Woman*, a Hugo nominee in 1996. We can only hope for more. This story is pure fun.