

## Reg vs the Martians (Opening)

The ride-on lawn mower leaned ominously as Reg flung the vehicle around the corner, the alien ship close behind. The mower's back end clipped the side of a trashcan, and it rolled across the road, leaving a trail of potato peelings in its wake. Reg swerved left as a flash of energy crackled overhead. It slammed into a nearby apple tree, incinerating it. Reg flinched. Mrs. Braithewaite wouldn't be happy about that.

Reg squeezed the accelerator. The engine screamed in protest as the mower bounced over the curb, its metal blades grinding across the concrete, sparks flying behind it. Another energy bolt ripped past, so close it ruffled Reg's hair. He jerked the handlebars right, the mower leaning hard again.

The air grew warm and filled with the smell of ozone. His ears popped, and the sounds of the world around him became muffled and indistinct. The engine sputtered and coughed. Then it died.

Reg turned the ignition key.

The starter whined and growled and then fell silent. As the mower rolled to a halt, Reg looked over his shoulder. The alien

craft, two gigantic metal dinner plates welded together and fitted with dozens of pulsating blue lights, glided along behind him.

Something clunked deep inside the ship and a circular hatch opened in its underside. Bright light bathed the mower. It lurched backwards, tilting away from the ground. Reg clutched at its handlebars and squeezed his legs together. His heart thundering in his chest, Reg closed his eyes as he was drawn upwards into the blinding light.

A few seconds later, the mower rocked slightly and there was another clunk, close by this time. The light died. Reg opened his eyes and found himself staring down the barrel of what he could only assume was a revolver made of glass. Tilting his head so that he could see past the gun, Reg slowly raised his hands.

The gun's owner was small, barely four feet high, with short legs and no head. Instead, its eyes (small, yellow and perfectly round) and a horizontal slit that was presumably its mouth were set into its body, where the chest would be on a human being. It was naked, but Reg was relieved to see there was no sign of any traditional sexual organs. He'd never really been comfortable with public nudity.

The alien had two arms. The right, the one holding the gun seemed about the correct length for something that was only four

feet tall. But the left arm was far too long. And it had three elbows. It trailed along the ground behind the creature. The alien's red skin hung loosely on its body, and bony growths, the tips sprouting thick black hair, dotted the surface. The creature smelled of the beach.

Reg gave a little wave. "Good afternoon."

The alien ignored him.

Reg leaned back in the mower's seat, putting some space between him and the barrel of the gun, and looked around. They were inside a room that looked uncomfortably like an operating theatre, all sterile surfaces and polished metal that gleamed in the cold light of the lamps hanging from the ceiling. A trolley stood in one corner with some sort of device on top of it.

Reg had spent a lot of time in doctors' offices being poked and prodded, and the contraption on the trolley looked as though someone had taken every known medical implement, attached it to an articulated arm and then bolted those arms to one of those fancy bag-less vacuum cleaners. At least a dozen arms sprouted from the vacuum-like cylinder, all different sizes. The tip of each arm was fitted with a cluster of medical implements, knives or drills or pincers or syringes or weird corkscrew mechanisms.

Reg eyed the device nervously. He did *not* want to see it in action.