

Mrs Ambergris Goes to Jupiter

By David K. Barnes

*Originally performed live by Liam Bewley for 'The Unseen Hour' podcast.*

Well. I'm not the sort of person to spread gossip, but my next-door neighbour was abducted by aliens last Wednesday.

And I must admit, I did find that surprising.

I mean, say what you like about Mrs Ambergris – she's done a lot for this community, and we'd never have got the lido completed on time if she hadn't campaigned for it, but still – I've never thought she's the type of person who'd provoke interest on other planets.

She's certainly provoking interest in the papers, of course. They've got it all wrong, but that goes without saying these days, doesn't it? Freedom of the press? If I had it my way, there'd be a little less freedom and a little more fact-checking. Know what I mean?

Mind you, I only got involved through sheer chance. If I hadn't been kept awake that night by a bad attack of toothache – caused by a tiny collision with a glacier mint – then I wouldn't have been out taking a stroll at 2 in the morning, oblivious to the fact that strange forces had been at work. I'd just passed the pet cemetery and was growing swiftly adjacent to the allotments, when there she was: middle of the night, dreadful to look at, stumbling over the rhubarb. Mrs Ambergris.

I said, "Mrs Ambergris?" (We're not on first name terms.) "Are you alright, Mrs Ambergris?" She looked at me with eyes as wide as saucers.

Flying saucers.

And I said her name again, and then she sort of laughed, in that way that a mad person does – I know that's not PC, but I think we can stretch a point, because she'd been abducted by aliens. She was covered in grime and mud and dirt, and I only had a hankie, so I led her home, where I poured her some brandy, like they do in those old films that I used to collect on video cassette.

It was only then that I realised that her husband wasn't home. I knew they'd been arguing a lot recently – in fact they'd been at it earlier that day – and I thought, you know, maybe something had happened, domestically. But there were dinner things for two on the kitchen table, and his coat was still in the hallway. Henry his name was, and we got on well. We liked talking about ITV, and how it was better in the 60s. Before we were born.

Well, anyway, to cut a long story short, the two of them had gone for a walk after dinner, when suddenly this enormous spaceship appeared from nowhere and whisked them both off to Jupiter.

I said, "Jupiter, really?" Because you hear about this kind of thing, don't you, but you never think it'll happen to someone you know.

And she said, "Yes." And I said, "How was that?" and she said, "We were only there for an hour or two," she said, "So we didn't get to see much of it."

I said, "What's it look like?" and she said, "Hard to describe," and well it would be, wouldn't it, especially after a long night like that. I looked it up and Jupiter is 588 million miles from Earth, so I expect she was a bit jet-lagged.

Anyway, apparently the aliens, who had two heads and six arms, or six heads and two arms, I can't remember... they conducted all these tests on Mrs Ambergris and her husband, you know, giving them a bit of a prod and a poke. Made the hairs on the back of my legs stand up, I can tell you. And then apparently they said – the aliens I mean – they said they needed to keep one of them. For further experimentation.

At first, Mrs Ambergris thought this meant that one of them was for the chop, ready to be fed to a pack of alien monsters. She was told they were vegetarian, but Mrs Ambergris thinks all vegetarians are simply suppressing their natural instincts. “Mark my words,” she says, “When the chips are down, and the world’s in ruins, and a vegetarian’s eating me alive, I shall make sure I say ‘I told you so,’ before I’m swallowed.”

However, all the aliens meant was that they required one subject to remain behind with them, whilst the other would be sent home. Henry volunteered to stay behind, or rather he’d flipped a coin and lost, and so he stayed behind on Jupiter. The aliens whipped Mrs Ambergris back home and deposited her in a cabbage patch, before zipping back where they came from... leaving no physical evidence that they’d ever been here at all.

Now.

I’m ashamed to admit it, but part of me didn’t believe her story.

You see, I knew Henry never carried change, so how could he have flipped a coin on Jupiter? But then I realised, “Mrs Ambergris might have lent him one,” so that was the loose ends in the story tied up.

She swore me to secrecy, of course – I mean, it doesn’t matter now, but at the time I made a solemn vow. Then I said I’d best be off and we said goodnight, with the certainty that she would never see her husband again. For he was on another world. Being poked and prodded. 588 million miles away.

(PAUSE)

Well, after a few days I’d forgotten all about it, because you get busy, don’t you? But the other day, I was coming home from the shops, past the very allotments where I’d seen Mrs Ambergris. And I saw that the whole area was cordoned off by police tape, and some officers were wandering about.

I suspected it was a precaution in case the aliens came back, though how the police knew about it I couldn't understand. After all, I hadn't breathed a word about it, and Mrs Ambergris had been too busy getting rid of all her husband's possessions and booking a long holiday in Majorca.

I asked innocently what was going on and an officer told me. It was Henry. His body had been found buried beneath the tomato plants. Completely dead.

Well. I knew what this meant, of course.

(TUTS) "So the aliens brought him back, then?" I said.

... "What was that?' they said.

"Well," I said, looking over my shoulder, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but last week we had some unexpected visitors..." (TAPS NOSE)

... Anyway, I think I explained it all very badly, because Mrs Ambergris was arrested and given 30 years.

I said till I was blue in the face that it was the aliens that did it, but nobody listened. They just drew their own conclusions. And now there it is in the papers! All wrong! Well, as I've always said, you can't trust what you read in the papers. The truth is stranger than fiction.

Still.

It's enough to drive you up the bloody wall, isn't it?