

“Minced”

By Conner Smith

Haunted Acres was alive once again with fall festivities. Every October it offered corn mazes, a pumpkin patch, fire pits, gift shops, and all manner of decadent fair food; popcorn, cotton candy, caramel apples, funnel cakes. But the most popular attraction by far was “Joe & Jane’s Galaxy-Famous Corn Dogs”, a sensational gimmick where the two vendors – “Joe” and “Jane” – dressed in astonishingly convincing alien costumes each year to sell their award-winning beer-battered corn dogs to hungry Midwesterners.

Pete and his roommate Don braved the long line of customers; they felt they’d earned some corn dogs after a lengthy trek through one of the mazes. Pete loved this time of year, and especially loved Haunted Acres. He admired its quaint atmosphere. He took in all the familiar, exquisite aromas: the cool night air, the smoke of the bonfires, and hot, buttery popcorn and fried snacks. Perfectly content. He didn’t care how long the line was because he wasn’t in a hurry to leave. Besides, it would be worth the wait for some “galaxy-famous” corn dogs.

He overheard some of the chatter in line:

A young woman asked, “So, do we know who these people are, or...?”

“They’re probably some rich nerds who go all out at conventions and stuff,” her girlfriend speculated.

Further back, a younger boy remarked enthusiastically, “The prosthetics are *insane*. Like Tom Savini, man.”

Another kid replied, “Who?”

“Never mind...” the boy sighed.

Eventually they were close enough in line to where Pete could take a good long look at the freaky fry cooks. His contentedness gradually gave way to discomfort. The costumes really were incredible, and grotesque. Big, bulbous heads; leathery green skin; yellow, luminescent compound eyes; sideways mouths lined with razor-sharp teeth; three long, pincer-like fingers at the end of each hand. Their aprons were like Jackson Pollock paintings of grease and goo. The two creatures were almost indistinguishable, save for their comical HELLO-my-name-is nametags pinned to their drab uniforms. Jane’s otherworldly gibberish - their exclusive form of communication – came at a higher pitch than Joe’s. *Incredible performances*, everyone thought.

Finally, the boys reached the front of the line. Jane manned the counter while Joe did the frying. It was Pete’s turn to order. He hadn’t expected to feel this anxious. Jane was a (large) head taller than he was, glaring down at him with her bright yellow eyes. He struggled enough with eye contact as it was. *Try looking at people’s mouths instead*, his mother suggested once. He watched as Jane took phlegmy, hissing breaths through her fearsome maw. He shuddered slightly, pulling his polar fleece jacket a little tighter. *That* didn’t help. He looked down at the counter.

“Um...one corn dog, please?” he asked nervously, placing some bills on the counter.

“And, uh...keep the change.”

The thing presented a basket with a freshly fried corn dog (with mustard), gurgling a few shrill, incomprehensible syllables.

“...thanks.” he said, furrowing his brow. *Yeesh.*

As the boys left to find a table, Don wondered aloud: “So do the aliens *do it*, or what?”

That made Pete feel worse.

Suddenly there was some commotion nearby. Someone was yelling; patrons were crowding around and laughing. Don and Pete went to have a look. It was a young, spectacled man in shabby clothes – and wearing what appeared to be a tin foil sombrero – waving around a picket sign, shouting hysterically at passersby. The misspelled sign read “YOUR EATING PEOPLE!” on one side, “THERE NOT COSTUMES!” on the other. He looked genuinely fearful.

“They’re not *costumes!* They’re *REAL!* ‘Joe’ and ‘Jane’ are *ALIENS!* The *meat!* It’s *PEOPLE!* You’re eating *PEOPLE!*”

Naturally, the crowd loved it, thinking it was just another part of the gimmick.

Is this staged? Pete wondered. *Just a stunt? Or is this guy for real? He’s selling ‘crackpot’ pretty well...*

“Alright, that’s enough,” Don said. “Let’s get out of here.”

As the two of them moved away from the spectacle, Pete took one more concerned look at the bug-eyed monsters in their food truck.

A few days later, Pete was taking a walk through the neighborhood, like he usually did. The cool autumn weather was refreshing that afternoon; a welcome break from the hot, sticky summer. His denim jacket kept the breeze comfortable. He appreciated the rubber and plastic

ghouls, ghosts, witches, and critters that now haunted the suburban lawns. But he was bored with his usual route, and decided to take a longer path. He walked for about half an hour. The road took him to a less populated part of town. He saw a lonely, modest house (with no decorations). There was some kind of trailer parked out front. As he approached it, getting a better look, he stopped in disbelief. *No way!* It was “Joe & Jane’s” food truck from Haunted Acres. Knowing he probably shouldn’t, but unable to resist, he walked through the front yard to check it out, crunching through the dead leaves.

He then picked up a strange humming sound coming from the garage. It was like nothing he’d ever heard before. He scanned the area. There was no one around. Hesitant at first, he went to investigate. He couldn’t see through the stained windows on the garage door. Knowing what kind of trouble he could get in for trespassing, but his curiosity getting the better of him, he went around the other side where he found a window. He peered through the dirty glass, he found the source of the noise: a chrome tripod machine with a large funnel on top, radiating an eerie green glow from within. Pete had no idea what he was looking at.

The rest of the garage was filled with large wooden crates. Someone was rummaging through what seemed like a refrigerator, emitting a harsh blue light from behind its door. The rummager turned out to be Joe (or maybe Jane?) still in their trademark goo-splattered apron, and, to Pete’s utter bewilderment, still alien. The thing held a bottle of beer in its claw; a Tom Paine Common Lager, the kind used in their “galaxy-famous” cornbread batter. It popped the cap with two pincers, threw back its giant head, and chugged it down its thick, gulping gullet, smacking its vertical lips when it was finished. The thing studied the empty bottle for a moment. A moment later, it began messily munching its way down the neck, like a caterpillar through vegetation, crunching the glass in its drooling mandibles. In seconds the bottle was gone, and

after a bit more chewing, it gave a hard swallow, and then a long, low belch. Pete's mouth fell open.

“THERE NOT COSTUMES!”

The ugly brute moved along to the stack of crates. With a grunt it hoisted one of the boxes, shuffled across the dirty garage floor on its trunk-like legs, and heavily planted it on the worktable near the tripod. It pried it open with its pincers, removed the lid, and reached inside. Pete could faintly hear a clamor of high-pitched squeaks, like rodents. When he saw what the monster pulled out, it sent him to the brink of insanity.

It held in its grip a mass of tiny, humanoid creatures: imp-like, bright pink, beady eyes, two long antennae on their heads, squealing and writhing in terror. Limbs flailed about in every direction. Some were already dead. Some were painfully dangling by their antennae, frantically kicking their feet. The giant clenching them was expressionless, merely inspecting them clinically. Pete couldn't breathe. With agonized cries, the creatures were stuffed into the tripod's funnel, sucking them down into the machine's glowing core. The hum became a low bellow while the green light blinked rapidly for several seconds. When it finally stopped, a long, coiling tube of disgusting meat slowly squeezed out from the bottom of what Pete now realized was a meat grinder.

“YOUR EATING PEOPLE!”

Pete fell to his hands and knees and vomited on the yellow grass, tearfully heaving and coughing. When he was finished, he turned his head and froze. Jane (or maybe Joe?) stood over him, growling menacingly. The thing held a large, chrome sphere in its claw. To his horror – and astonishment – the sphere started to levitate right out of the alien's grasp. Rings of neon pink

light rippled across its surface in electronic drones. As they rippled faster and faster, the droning grew louder and louder, until finally, with a sound like a crack of lightning, he was struck by a dazzling, rose-tinted energy blast.

Pete jolted awake. His eyes needed adjusting to the dark. He blinked hard, trying to collect his thoughts. He thought about “Don”, “Haunted Acres”, and “corn dogs”. He quickly realized he was lying on a hard surface. *Geez, did I fall out of bed?* He groaned and sat up. He thought about alien monsters, floating spheres, and horrible meat grinders. The strange nightmare was over, to his relief. But now that he was fully awake, he detected a familiar sound. A kind of humming?

Then, he was startled when the walls began creaking violently. He was startled again when the room filled with gasps and murmurs. He jumped to his feet, struggling to keep his balance. He was overwhelmed with confusion and panic. *Who’s in here? What the hell is going on?* In an instant the ceiling was gone; harsh, blinding light poured in; the humming filled his head. He squinted and yelped. Immediately the murmuring turned to screaming. He rubbed his eyes, and finally saw them.

Dozens of terrified men, women, and children, stark naked, scrambling around, their bright pink bodies blurring and colliding like a frenzy of fish. Young and old, short and tall, fat and thin. Some held each other, some trampled each other, some desperately, pointlessly tried clawing their way out. Some trembled in a fetal position, some fell to their knees in tearful prayer, some pulled their antennae in anguish. Some were already dead. Pete looked upward

where the ceiling used to be, and his antennae drooped in fear when he saw what was looking back at him: a gargantuan green head, glowing yellow eyes, razor-sharp teeth.

Before he knew it, Pete and several others were scooped out of the crate by a giant, crustaceous claw; his brothers and sisters, comrades and friends, all shamefully squished together in a painful grip. Their captor observed them with burning, remorseless eyes. The others uselessly wriggled and flailed, wailing and gnashing their teeth. Pete was silent at first, numbed by shock, looking down at the grungy floor as it drifted away from him.

But in the end, he couldn't help joining in the screaming when he saw it.

The meat grinder.