

# INFRINGEMENT

*Brought down to Earth.*

BY TIMOTHY J. GAWNE

I opened the front door and was not surprised by the tall man covered in bright blue feathers because I was distracted by the kilometre-wide flying saucer hovering overhead.

The feather-covered man looked down at a clipboard, and said: “Are you Mr Floyd Bromley of Birmingham, Alabama?”

“Yes, I am.” I noticed that the street in front of my house was lined with police, and that yellow barricades had been erected all around.

“Well, splendid then,” said the man as he looked up from his clipboard. “This shouldn’t take more than a few moments of your time. May I come in?”

“Um, sure,” I said, and I motioned for him to enter.

“You are”, said the man, “wondering what is going on.” The man wore a broad red sash covered with complex hieroglyphics that, as I watched, re-formed themselves to spell out ‘COPYRIGHT POLICE’.

I pointed to the sash. “Copyright Police?” “Ah good, the multilingual reformatter is working,” said the man. “Yes, I am an official of the universal body that deals with intellectual-property violations. I’m investigating a claim of infringement.”

“Oh,” I said. “And what is being infringed?”

“Allegedly infringed,” said the man. “Why, Earth, of course.”

“Earth?” I said.

“Indeed,” said the man. “Earth is quite a popular product, and allegations of it being pirated are taken quite seriously.”

“There is more than one Earth?” I said.

“Certainly,” said the man. “At last check there have been over one million sold.”

“And what do people do with all of these Earths?” I asked.

“Most use their Earths as decorations or conversation pieces, as I see you have a lovely brass clock on your mantelpiece. Some take on human form and go down onto the surface of the planet itself, to experience it directly. And there are always enthusiasts, who enhance the technology, overclock evolution — there are clubs and competitions for that.”

“So many Earths — are they all the same?” I said. “If someone could order an entire planet, wouldn’t they want something unique?”

“There’s good business in custom



planets, but most people are happy with mass-produced items.” He gestured at my living room. “After all, most of the furniture and appliances that you have are identical to what can be found in thousands of other homes.”

I nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. But what does all this have to do with me?”

The man looked down at his clipboard again. “It has been alleged that this Earth is not a suitably authorized Earth, but is in fact a pirated copy. I have been sent here to determine the truth of said allegation.”

The door opened and another man entered. This one was not covered in blue feathers, but was wearing a striped short-sleeved shirt with khaki trousers and tennis shoes. It took me a moment to realize that the other person was, in fact, me. I’ve obviously seen myself in mirrors and photographs, but I’ve never seen myself in person. It was strange.

“This”, said the feathered man, “is the Floyd Bromley from the manufacturer’s standard reference Earth. I’m going to use him to certify my calibrations, then take a few measurements on you to check.”

A complex arrangement of brass spheres and rings materialized in front of the feathered man. He took it and moved it around the other me. Then he started to move it around me.

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“Hmm ... blood cells check out,” said the feathered man.

“But the muscle fibres

are a hack, and the brain — good lord, what a mess they’ve made of the thalamus, and the cerebellum is hardly any better. And the mitochondria are rubbish. I’m sorry, Mr Bromley, but this Earth is in fact a pirated copy — and a poor one at that.”

Floyd Standard shook his head. “Tough break ...” I noticed that this other me was taller, and his skin was smoother. I wear glasses, and he did not. I have grey hair, and his was thick and black. Was I really a cheap copy?

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Well,” said the feathered man, “the counterfeit item will be impounded and destroyed. The offending party will be heavily fined ...”

“It might just be a cheap copy,” I said, “but I’m living on it. You’d snuff out billions of sentient life forms over a case of copyright violation?”

The feathered man wrinkled his nose. “Partial sentients. Although I do sympathize. You could appeal to the universal council.”

“I could?” I said. “How?”

“I can do it for you,” said the feathered man, “no trouble at all.” His eyes defocused and he mumbled something unintelligible to himself. Then, after barely ten seconds had passed, he refocused his eyes.

“Sorry, the council has rejected your appeal,” said the man.

“That’s it? Ten seconds, and it’s rejected?”

“I will have you know,” said the feathered man, “that more than 5,000 full sentients of the universal council participated in the discussion. They did not find your case to be without merit, but also recognized the harm that allowing such an inferior copy could do to the Earth brand. The deciding factor was the realization that this Earth has been so shoddily constructed that it will soon fall apart on its own. Plastic in the oceans, overpopulation, neoliberal economics ... the planet is doomed, and any stay of destruction would therefore be moot.”

“How long do we have?” I said.

“About a week, by your reckoning.” He bowed his head. “I apologize for the inconvenience. Thank you for your time.”

Then he and Floyd Standard turned around and left. ■

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