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## E.T. the Extraterrestrial Storybook

*William Kotzwinkle*

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A boy discovers an extraterrestrial botanist in his mother's vegetable patch, and helps him return to his planet, 3 million light years away.

The New York Times The experience of reading E.T. is extremely satisfying. Kotzwinkle seems to improve upon and enrich Spielberg's film. -- About the AuthorWilliam Kotzwinkle is the author of many books, including E.T.: The Book of the Green Planet, The Bear Went Over the Mountain, and Doctor Rat, for which he won the World Fantasy Award for best novel.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Chapter One The spaceship floated gently, anchored by a beam of lavender light to the earth below. Were someone to come upon this landing site, they might, for

a moment, think that a gigantic old Christmas tree ornament had fallen from the night sky -- for the Ship was round, reflective, and inscribed with a delicate gothic design. Its mellow radiance, the scattering of something like diamond dust on its hull, would make one look again for the ornamental hook at its point, by which it had hung in a far-off galaxy. But there was no one nearby, and the Ship had landed purposefully, the intelligence commanding it beyond navigational error. Yet an error was about to be made... The hatch was open, the crew out and about, probing the earth with strangely shaped tools, like little old elves caring for their misty, moonlit gardens. When here and there the mist parted and the pastel light from the Ship's hull fell upon them, it was clear they weren't elves, but creatures more scientifically minded, for they were taking samples -- of flowers, moss, shrubs, saplings. Yet their misshapen heads, their drooping arms and roly-poly, sawed-off torsos would make one think of elfland, and the tenderness they showed the plants might add to this impression -- were someone of Earth nearby to observe it, but no one was, and the elfin botanists from space were free to work in peace. Even so, they started in fear when a bat twittered by, or an owl hooted, or a dog barked in the distance. Then their breathing quickened and a mistlike camouflage surrounded them, flowing from their fingertips and from their long toes; then they would be hard indeed to discover; then a solitary walker in the moonlight might pass by the misty patch, never knowing a crew from ancient space huddled there. The spaceship was another matter. Enormous Victorian Christmas tree ornaments don't fall to the earth with great frequency. Their presence is felt -- by radar, by military intuition, by other scanning devices -- and this gigantic bauble had been detected. It was too big to be missed; no protective fog could completely cover it, on earth, or swinging in the tree of night. So -- an encounter is at hand. Government vehicles are out, government specialists are earning their night's pay, bouncing around the back roads, talking to each other on radios, closing in on the great ornament. However, the little old crew of botanists are not really disturbed -- not yet, in any case. They know they have time; they know, to within the most subdivided increments of time, how long it will be before the gruff, clumsy noises of earthly vehicles sound in their ears. They have been here before, for the earth is large and there are many plants to pick, if one wishes to have a complete collection. They continued their sampling, mist flowing about each of them as he walked back with his prize from Earth's soil. Up the hatchway they went, and into the lovely ornament's interior pastel glow. They moved unconcernedly through its pulsing corridors of technological wonders, and into the central wonder of the Ship: a gigantic inner cathedral of Earth's foliage. This immense greenhouse was the core of the Ship, its purpose, its specialty. Here were lotus flowers from a Hindu lagoon, ferns from the floor of Africa, tiny berries from Tibet, blackberry bushes from a back-country American road. Here, in fact, was one of everything on Earth, or nearly everything -- for the job was not yet done. Everything flourished. Were an expert from one of Earth's great botanical gardens to come into this greenhouse, he would find plants he'd never seen before -- except in fossil form, imprinted in coal. His eyes would certainly pop, to find, alive, plants the dinosaurs had dined on, plants from Earth's first gardens incalculable ages ago. He would faint, and be revived with herbs from the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. From the fanning roofline, moisture dripped, with nutrients that nourished the countless species that embellished every surface of the Ship's core, the most perfect collection of vegetation on Earth, old as the Earth is old, old as the little botanists themselves, who come and go; and the crinkling lines at the corners of their eyes have the look of fossils too, etched over immense ages of gathering. One of them entered now, carrying a local herb, its leaves already drooping. He took it to a basin and placed it in a liquid that affected its disposition at once, leaves suddenly reviving, roots waving. At the same moment, from a rosette window above the basin, a pastel light came on, bathing the plant and causing it to stand up straight again beside its neighbor, a little flower of antediluvian make. The extraterrestrial botanist gazed at it for a moment, to see that all was well, then turned and recrossed the greenhouse. He moved beneath Japanese cherry blossoms, hanging flowers, and some ordinary horseradish that leaned his way lovingly. He patted it and walked on, back through the pulsating corridor and down the glowing hatchway. Out in the night air, his body exhaled faint mist again, which surrounded him as he walked along to gather more plants. A colleague passed him, holding a wild parsnip root. Their eyes did not meet, but something else took place: their chests glowed simultaneously, an inner red glow from the heart region suffusing their thin, translucent skin. Then they passed, the one with his parsnip and the other, empty-handed, down a rocky incline, his heart-light dark once more. Mist-shrouded, he entered tall grass, tall as his own head, and came out the other side, at the edge of a redwood forest. There, dwarfed by the enormous trees, he turned back toward his Ship, and his heart-light glowed again, as if he were signing to the Ship itself, to the beloved old ornament he'd been riding in for ages. On its catwalks, in its hatchway, other heart-lights glowed, like fireflies moving here and there. Satisfied that his protection was near, and knowing there was still time to work before danger came, he entered the redwood forest. Nighthawks sang, insects creaked in the shadows, and he walked on through; his naturally distended stomach skimmed the surface of the forest floor, hobgoblinish, though it was actually a perfectly suitable arrangement, giving him a low and stable center of gravity. However, it was not a form that Earth folks could readily take to, these large webbed feet coming almost directly out of a low-hanging belly, and long hands trailing ape-fashion beside it. For this reason, he and his colleagues were million-years shy, and never had the inclination to make contact with anything other than the plant life of Earth. A failing, perhaps, but they'd monitored things long enough to know that to Earthmen their beautiful Ship was first of all a target and they themselves material for a taxidermist to display under glass. So the extraterrestrial moved cautiously, quietly through the forest, eyes searching around --

bulbous eyes, enormously convex, the kind you might find on a giant frog hopping along. He knew what chance such a frog would have for survival on a city street, and he rated his own about the same. As for giving instruction to humanity at some seat of international government -- it was out of the question when your nose was like a bashed-in Brussels sprout and your overall appearance was like that of an overgrown prickly pear. He waddled along, in perfect stealth, knuckles brushing the leaves. Let some other visitors from space, of more familiar form, be humanity's teachers. His only interest was a little redwood sapling he'd had his protruding eye on for some time, up ahead. He stopped beside it, examined it carefully, then dug it out, murmuring to it in his gravelly spacetongue, words of weird, unearthly shape, but the redwood seemed to understand, and the shock to its root system was neutralized as it lay in his great creased palm. He turned, and a faint light reached his eyes, light that attracted him, from the little suburb in the valley beyond the trees; he'd been curious about it for some time, and tonight would be the last night he could investigate, for tonight a phase of investigation ended. His Ship would leave Earth behind for an extended period, until the next great mutation in Earth vegetation, a period to be marked by centuries. Tonight would be the last chance he'd have to peek in the windows. He crept out of the stand of redwoods and lowered himself to the edge of a fire road cut through the hillside. The sea of yellow house lights glowed tantalizingly. He crossed the fire road, stomach dragging through the low brush; on the long voyage back through space, he'd have something to offer his shipmates: the tale of this little adventure into the lights, a lone prickly pear on the human road. The ancient crinkle lines at his eyes smiled. He tiptoed down the edge of the fire road, on great webbed feet with great long toes. Earth wasn't perfect for his form; he'd been wrought on a planet that made sense out of feet like this. Where he'd come from, things were more fluid, and you could sort of paddle along and only infrequently have to waddle on solid ground. The houselights flickered below, and for a moment his own heart-light answered, glowing ruby red. He loved Earth, especially its plant life, but he liked humanity too, and as always when his heart-light glowed, he wanted to teach them, guide them, give to them the stored intelligence of millennia. His shadow shuffled before him in the moonlight, head shaped like an eggplant on a long stalk of a neck. As for his ears, they were hidden in the folds of his head, like the first shy shoots of baby lima beans. No, Earth would have too good a laugh were he to walk up its aisle of world government. Not all the stored intelligence in the universe was enough when people were laughing at your pearish silhouette. He kept it hidden in the moonlight, with faint mist attending it, and proceeded on down the road. Inside his head he received the warning signal from the Ship, but knew it was premature, knew it was to give the more clumsy-footed members of the crew time. But he -- he swung one duck-webbed monster of a foot forward, and then the other. He was fast. By any standard of speed on Earth, of course, he was impossibly slow, an Earth child could move three times as fast; one had almost run him down with a bicycle one terrible night. Close, very close. But not tonight. Tonight he'd be careful. He stopped, listened. The Ship's warning signal came on again, thumping in his heart-light -- the code of alarm. The instrument fluttered lightly, calling for a roundup of all crew members, second preliminary message. But there was time enough for the swift; he waddled left, right, left, knuckles fairly swimming in the leaves, as he dragged along toward the edge of the town. He was old, but he moved well, faster than most ten-million-year botanists with feet like marsh ducks. His great orbicular eyes rolled, scanning the town and the sky and the trees and the ground immediately ahead. No one was coming from any direction, only himself, coming in for one quick look at an Earthling, and then goodbye for several rounds in the beloved Ship, far from here. His orbiting gaze jumped suddenly forward, down the fire road, where a shaft of moving light appeared, followed by another, twin lights racing toward him out of nowhere! Simultaneously, his heart-alarm went into the panic stage: all crew return, danger, danger, danger. He stumbled backward, then sideways, disoriented by the advancing light, which was much faster than a bicycle, much louder, much more aggressive. The light was blinding now, harsh Earth light, cold and clear. He stumbled again and fell off the fire road into the brush, light streaking between him and his Ship, light cutting him off from the redwood forest and the clearing beyond it, where the Great Ornament hovered, waiting. Danger, danger, danger... His heart-light flashed wildly. He reached for the little redwood sapling that had fallen on the road, its roots crying out to him. His long fingers advanced, and drew back in a blur as the blinding light struck, and then roaring engines. He rolled in the brush, frantically covering his heart-light with a loose branch. His great eyes snapped, taking in detail on all sides, but none more horrible than the sight of the little redwood sapling, crushed by the vehicles, young leaves mangled, its consciousness still crying out to him: danger, danger, danger. Light and more light followed on the fire road, a road that had always been empty, but now echoed with the sound of vehicles, and human voices, shouting, raging, intent on capture. He struggled through the brush, fluttering heart-light still hidden by his hand, while the cold light sought for him, sweeping the brush. All the star intelligence in seven galaxies could not help him move faster in the foreign element. His duckish toes, how absurdly useless they were; he felt the swiftness of human feet upon their own ground, advancing all around him, and knew what a fool he'd been to tempt them. Their quick thumping sounded and cold streaks of light cut the brush, over and over. Their alien tongues bellowed, and one of their number, with much jingling at his waist, was on the scent. In the flashing light, the old botanist saw the man's belt, with something hanging from it like an assemblage of teeth, jagged-edged, trophies possibly, wrenched from the mouth of some other unfortunate space creature, and placed on a ring. Time, time, time, called the Ship, rounding up its last straggling members. He lunged under the surging lights, to the edge of the fire road. The vehicles were scattered, as were the

drivers. He turned on his protective mist and glided across the road in the moonlight, blending with the foul exhaust from their engines, the noxious cloud momentarily adding to his camouflage -- and then he was across the road and sliding down a low ravine. Just as quickly, their cold lights turned, as if sensing where he'd crossed. He huddled against the sand and rock, as the Earthmen leapt across the ravine. His orbiting eyes raced upward and he saw the horrible ring of jingling teeth, grinning hideously as its owner leapt over him. He crouched deeper into the rock, mist around him, no different from other little patches of fog one sees in ravines, by night, where the moisture clings. Yes, I'm just a cloud, Earthlings, one of your own, insignificant, don't probe it with your lights, for there is a great long neck inside it, and two webbed feet with toes as long and spindly as the roots of a purplish toadshade plant. You wouldn't understand, I'm sure, that I'm on your planet to save your foliage before you completely annihilate it. The others jumped over him, dark voices excited, enjoying the hunt and well armed. He scampered up after the last one had passed and entered the forest behind them. His only advantage was his knowledge of this beloved terrain, from which he'd been gathering. His eyes revolved quickly, locating the trail, a faint indentation in the gathering of branches that netted the darkness, a path he and his crewmates had made while bearing the seedlings away. The rough ungracious light stabbed the dark, shining at different angles. The Earthmen were confused now, and he was navigating directly along back to the Ship. His heart-light grew brighter, the energy field of his group strengthening it as he neared them, all their hearts calling to him, as well as the hundred million years of plant life on board, calling danger, danger, danger. He rushed between the sweeping lights, along the single clear path in the forest, his long toe-roots feeling each impression with exquisite sensitivity. Each tangle of leaves, each spiderweb was known to him. He felt their gentle messages, speeding him through the forest, saying this way, this way... He followed, fingers trailing the soft floor, long roots dragging, wiggling, receiving signals from the forest -- while his heart-light blazed, eager to merge with those hearts in the clearing where the great Ship waited. He was ahead of the cold light now, its beams entangled in branches that had admitted him, but which denied his pursuers; branches sprang out, locked together, and blocked their passage; a low root lifted slightly, tripping the fellow with the ring of teeth, and another root trapped the foot of his subordinate, who fell face-flat on the ground, cursing in the tongue of the planet, while the plants cried run, run, run... The extraterrestrial ran, through the forest to the clearing. The Grand Ornament, Jewel of the Galaxy, waited for him. He waddled toward it, toward its serene and beautiful light, light of ten million lights. Its wondrous powers were all converging now, emitting supreme waves of radiance that reflected all around. He pushed along through the grass, trying to become visible to the Ship, to put his heart-light in touch, but his long, ridiculous toes were entangled in some weeds that wouldn't let go. Stay, they said, stay with us. He yanked loose and pushed forward, into the outermost aura of shiplight, just at the edge of the grass. The radiant ornament shone through the stalks all around him, casting its glorious rainbow. He spied the hatch, still open, and a crewmate standing in it, heart-light flashing, calling to him, desperately searching. I'm coming, I'm coming... He shuffled through the grass, but his hanging stomach, shaped by other degrees of gravity, slowed him, and a sudden group decision flooded him, a feeling that swept through his very bones. The hatch closed, petals folding inward. The Ship lifted off as he burst from the grass, waving his long-fingered hand. But the Ship couldn't see him now; its enormous power-thrust was being employed, blinding light obliterating all detail in the landscape. It hovered momentarily, then departed, spinning above the treetops, the lovely ornament returning to the outermost branches of the night. The creature stood in the grass, his heart-light flashing with fear. He was alone, three million light-years from home. Copyright 1982, 2002 by Universal Studios Publishing Rights, a division of Universal Studios Licensing, Inc.