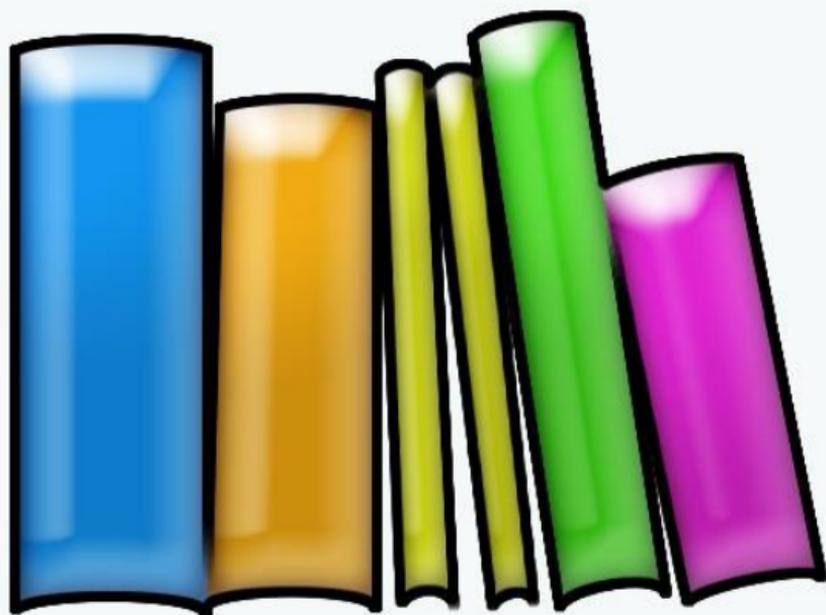


Passerby



Larry Niven

Produced by calibre 0.6.40

PASSERBY

It was noon of a hot blue day. The park was lively with raised voices and bright clothing, children and adults and the geriatrics generation, of which I have the honor to be a member. I had come early enough to claim a bench, and was old and feeble enough to hold it.

I had brought a sandwich lunch in a Baggy. I ate slowly, saving out an orange and a second sac of beer for later. The populace danced before me, never dreaming that I was watching.

The afternoon sun burned warm on my

scalp. A lizardlike torpor stole over me, so that the sound of adult voices and children's screaming-for-the-hell-of-it dimmed and faded.

But I heard the footsteps. They jarred the earth.

I opened my eyes and saw the rammer.

He was six feet tall and massively built. He wore a scarf and a pair of blue balloon pants, not too far out of style, but they didn't match. What they exposed of his skin was loose on him, as if he had shrunk within it. Indeed, he looked like a giraffe wearing an elephant's skin.

He walked without springs. His feet

slapped hard into the gravel with all his weight behind them. Small wonder I had heard him coming. By now everyone in sight was either looking at him, or turning to see what everyone was looking at. Except the children, who had already lost interest.

To me he was irresistible.

There are the casual peopewatchers who watch their neighbors in restaurants or monorail stations when they have nothing else to do. They develop their own amateurish technique, and they don't know what to look for, and they usually get caught. But I'm not that kind of peopewatcher.

There are the fanatics, the dedicated ones, who learn their technique in a closed-circuit 3V class. They hold lifetime subscriptions to Face In The Crowd and Eyes Of The City, the hobby magazines. They write letters to the editor telling how they spotted Secretary-General Haruman in a drug store and he looked unhappy.

That's me.

And here I was not twenty yards from a rammer, a man from the stars.

He had to be that. His taste in clothing was odd, and his carelessly draped skin was alien. His legs had not yet learned to cushion his weight against Earth's

heavier gravity. He projected an indefinable combination of discomfort and self-consciousness and interest and surprise and pleasure, that silently shouted: Tourist!

His eyes, looking out from behind the ill-fitting mask of his face, were bright and blue and happy. Our staring rudeness was noticed, but did not affect his almost religious joy. Nor did his feet, though they must have hurt. His smile was dreamy and very strange. Lift the corners of a spaniel's mouth with your forefingers, and you'd see such a smile.

He drew in life from the sky and the grass and the voices and the growing

things. I watched his face and tried to read it. Was he the priest of some new Earth-worshipping religion? No. Probably he was seeing Earth for the first time: tuning his bio-rhythms to Earth for the first time, feeling Earthweight settle over and into his bones, watching suns rise twenty-four hours apart, until his very genes told him he was home.

It made his day when he saw the boy.

The boy was around ten, a handsome child, naked and tanned all over. (When I was growing up, even the infants wore clothing in public.) I had not noticed him until now, and he in turn had not noticed the rammer. He knelt on the path that

passed my bench, his back toward me. I could not see what he was doing; but he was very intent and serious about it.

By now most of the passerby had turned away, from disinterest or an overdose of good manners. I watched the rammer watching the boy. I watched through half-closed eyes, practicing my famous imitation of an old man asleep in the sun. The Heisenberg Principle implies that no peopewatcher should allow himself to be caught at it.

The boy stooped suddenly, then rose with his hands cupped. Moving with exaggerated care, he turned from the gravel path and crossed the grass toward a dark old oak.

The rammer's eyes went big and round. All his pleasure gave way to horror, and then the horror drained away and left nothing. The star man's eyes turned up in his head, his slack face went even slacker, and his knees began to buckle.

Stiff as I am these days, I reached him. I slid an admittedly bony shoulder under his armpit before he could fall. All the mass of him came gratefully down on me.

I should have folded like an accordion. Somehow, I got the rammer to the bench before I had to let go of him. To an astonished matron I wheezed, "Get a doctor!"

She nodded briskly and waddled away. I turned back to the rammer. Sick eyes looked up at me from under straight black bangs. The rammer's face was oddly tanned: dark where the sun could reach, white as milk where folded skin cast shadows. His chest and arms were like that too. Where the skin was pale it had paled further with shock. "No need for doctor," he whispered. "Not sick. Something I saw."

"Sure. Put your head between your legs. It'll keep you from fainting." I opened my remaining beer sac.

"I will be all right in a moment," he said from between his knees. He spoke the tongue oddly, and his weakness slurred

it further. "It was the shock of what I saw."

"Here?"

"Yes. No. Not completely. . ." He stopped to shift mental gears, and I handed him the beer. He looked at it as if wondering which end to suck on, found the nipple, raised the sac and half-drained it in one desperate draught.

"What was it you saw?" I asked.

He had to finish swallowing. "I saw an alien spacecraft. Without the spacecraft it would have meant nothing."

"What kind of ship? Smithpeople?"

Monks?" These are the only known spacegoing races, aside from ourselves. I'd never seen one of their ships; but they sometimes docked in the Lésy worlds.

The rammer's eyes narrowed in his quilted face. "I see. You think I speak of some registered alien ship in a human spaceport." His voice was no longer slurred; he picked his words with apparent care. "I was halfway between the Horvendile and Koschei systems, shipwrecked at the edge of lightspeed, waiting to die. And I saw a golden giant walking among the stars."

"A humanoid? Not a ship?"

"I . . . thought it was a ship. I can't prove

it."

"Mmm."

"Let me tell you. I was a year and a half out from Horvendile, bound for Koschei. It would have been my first trip home in thirty-one years. . . .

Flying a ramship under sail is like flying a spiderweb.

Even with the web retracted, a ramship is a flimsy beast. Cargo holds, external cargo netting and hooks, pilot cabin and life support system, and the insystem fusion motor are all contained in a rigid pod just three hundred feet long. All else is balloons and webbing.

At takeoff the balloons are filled with hydrogen fuel for the insystem fusion motor. By the time the ship reaches ramscoop speed the fuel is half gone, replaced by low-pressure gas. The balloons are retained as meteor shielding.

The ramscoop web is superconducting wire, thin as spiderweb, tens of thousands of miles of it. Coiled for takeoff, it forms a roll no bigger than the main pod. Put a uniform negative charge on it and it spreads to form a hoop two hundred miles across. It ripples at first under the differentiating fields. .

Interstellar hydrogen, thin as nothing, enters the mouth of the ramscoop web.

An atom to a cubic centimeter. Differentiating fields compress it along the axis, compress it until it undergoes fusion. It burns in a narrow blue flame, yellow-tinged at the edges. The electromagnetic fields in the fusion flame begin to support the ramscoop web. Mighty forces add, making web and flame and incoming hydrogen one interlocking whole.

A rigid pod, invisibly small, rides the flank of a wispy cylinder of webbing two hundred miles across. A tiny spider on an enormous web.

Time slows down, distances compress at the higher velocities. Hydrogen flows

faster through the web; the ramscoop fields increase in power, the web becomes more rigid, more stable.

A ship should not need supervision as it approaches the midpoint turnover.

"I was halfway to Koschei," said the rammer, "carrying the usual cargo: genetically altered seeds, machine prototypes, spices, and three corpsicles: passengers frozen for storage. We carry anything that cannot be sent by message laser.

"I still don't know what went wrong. I was asleep. I had been asleep for months, with a current pulsing through my brain. Perhaps a piece of meteoric

iron entered the ramscoop. Perhaps the hydrogen grew thin for an hour, then thickened too fast. Perhaps we entered a sharply bounded OH + region. In any case, something twisted the ramscoop field, and the web collapsed.

"I was wakened too late. The web had roman-candled, and was trailing the ship like a parachute that will not open. Wires must have touched, for much of the web was vaporized.

"It was my death," said the rammer. "Without the ramscoop web I was falling helplessly. I would enter the system of Koschei months too early, moving at nearly lightspeed, a dangerous missile. For my honor I must inform Koschei by

laser, that I might be shot down before I arrive."

"Take it easy," I soothed him. His jaw had clenched, and the muscles that tightened in his face patterned the skin like a jigsaw puzzle. "Relax. It's all over. Smell the grass; you're on Earth now."

"I wept helplessly at first, though we consider weeping unmanly. . ." The rammer looked around him as if coming awake. "You are right. If I took off my shoes, would the law take offense?"

"No."

He took his shoes off and wiggled his

toes in the grass. His feet were too small for him, and his toes were long and agile, almost prehensile.

No doctor had appeared yet. Probably the matronly woman had simply walked away to avoid being involved. In any case, the rammer's strength had returned.

He said, "On Koschei we tend to large girth. Gravity pulls less heavily at the meat of us. To qualify as a rammer I sweated away half my body weight, so that the unneeded two hundred earthweight pounds of me could be replaced by payload cargo."

"You must have wanted the stars badly."

"Yes. I was simultaneously learning disciplines whose very names most people can neither pronounce nor spell." The rammer pulled at his chin. The quilted skin stretched incredibly, and did not snap back immediately when he let go. "I cut my weight by half, yet my feet hurt when I walk the Earth. My skin has not yet shrunk to fit my smaller mass. Perhaps you noticed."

"What did you do about Koschei?"

"I sent the message. It would precede me to Koschei by just two ship's months."

"Then?"

"I thought to wait it out, to use what time

was left to me. My taped library was adequate . . . but even in the face of death, I grew bored."

"After all, I had seen the stars before. Ahead they were blue-white and thickly clustered. To the side they were orange and red and somewhat sparse. Behind was black space, empty but for a handful of dying embers. Doppler shift made my velocity more than obvious. But there was no sense of motion, of going somewhere."

"A month and a half of this, and I was ready to go back to sleep."

"When the collision alarm went off, I tried to ignore it. My death was already

certain. But the noise bothered me, and I went to the control room to shut it off. I saw then that a respectable mass was approaching, aimed dangerously, from behind."

"From behind! It was moving faster than my own ship! I searched among the sparse crimson dots with my scope at top magnification. Presently I found a golden man walking toward me."

"My first thought was that I had gone mad. My second was that my God had come for me. Then, as the intruder grew in the scope screen, I saw that it was not quite human."

"Somehow that made it better. A golden

man walking between the stars was impossible. A golden alien was a lesser impossibility. At least I could examine it sanely."

"I found the alien larger than I had thought, much larger than human."

"It was a biped, definitely humanoid, with two arms and legs and a well-defined head. Its skin glowed like molten gold, all over, for it was hairless and without scales. Between its legs was nothing but smooth skin. Its feet were strange, without toes, and the knee and elbow joints were bulbous and knobby-"

"Were you really thinking in big expansive words like that?"

"I really was. I wanted to forget that I was terrified."

"Oh."

"The intruder was nearing fast. Three times I lowered the magnification. Each time I saw him more clearly. His hands were three-fingered, with a long middle finger and two thumbs. The knees and elbows were too far down the limbs, but seemed quite flexible. The eyes-

"Flexible? You saw them move?"

The rammer became agitated. He stuttered; he had to stop to gain control of himself. When he spoke again he seemed to force the words through his

throat.

"I . . . decided that the intruder was not actually walking. But as it approached my ship, it seemed to be walking on empty space."

"Like a robot?"

"Like a not-quite-man. Like a Monk, perhaps, if we could see beneath the garment worn by Monk ambassadors."

"But-"

"Think of a man-sized humanoid." The rammer would not let me interrupt. "Think of him as belonging to a civilization advanced beyond our own."

If his civilization had the power, and if he had the power within his civilization, and if he were very egotistical, then perhaps," said the rammer, "perhaps he might command that a spacecraft be built in his own image."

"That is the way I thought of the intruder, in the ten minutes it took the intruder to reach me. I could not believe that a humanoid with smooth, molten gold skin would evolve in vacuum, nor that he could walk on emptiness. The humanoid shape is for gravity, for planets."

"Where does engineering become art? Once our ground-bound automobiles looked like spacecraft. An advanced spacecraft might be made to look like a

given man, and move like him, yet still have the capabilities of a spacecraft. The man himself would ride inside. If a king or millionaire could cause this to be done, why, then he would stride like a god across the stars."

"I wonder if you don't think of yourself in just that way."

The rammer was astonished. "Me? Nonsense. I am a simple rammer. But I find man-shaped spacecraft easier to believe in than golden giants walking on emptiness."

"More comforting, too."

"Yes." The rammer shuddered. "It came

up very fast, so that I must damp the magnification to keep him in view. His middle finger was two joints longer than ours, and the thumbs were of different sizes. His eyes were set freakishly far apart, and too low in the head. They glowed red with their own light. His mouth was a wide, lipless horizontal line."

"Not once did I think to avoid the intruder. We could not have reached a collision course by accident. I assumed that he had altered course to follow me, and would alter course again to protect us."

"He was on me before I knew it. I had flipped the magnification down another

notch, and when I looked the setting was at zero. I looked up at the sparse red stars, and found a golden dot as it exploded into a golden man."

"I blinked, of course. When my eyes opened he was reaching for me."

"For you?"

The rammer nodded convulsively. "For the pod of my ship. He was much larger than the pod, or rather, his ship was."

"You still thought it was a ship?" I would not have asked; but he kept changing the pronoun.

"I was looking for windows in the

forehead and the chest. I did not find them. He moved like a very large man."

"I hate to suggest it," I said, "not knowing your religion. Could there be gods?"

He jumped as if stung. "Nonsense."

"How about superior beings? If we've evolved beyond the chimpanzees, couldn't-"

"No. Absolutely not," said the rammer. "You don't understand modern xenology. Do you not know that we and the Monks and the Smithpeople are all of equal intelligence? The Smithpeople are not remotely humanoid in shape, yet it makes

no difference. When a species begins to use tools, evolution stops."

"I've heard that argument, but-

"When a species begins to use tools, environment no longer shapes that species. The species shapes its environment to suit itself. Beyond this the species does not develop. It even begins to take care of its feebleminded and its genetically deficient.

"No, he could have better tools than mine, this intruder, but he could not be my intellectual superior. He was certainly nothing to worship."

"You seem awfully sure of that," I

snapped.

Instantly I regretted it; for the rammer shivered and wrapped his arms around his chest. The gesture was ludicrous and pitiful at the same time, for his arms swept up an armful of folded skin and hugged it to him. "I needed to be sure. The intruder had taken my main pod in his hand and pulled me toward-toward his ship.

"I was glad of my crash straps. Without them I'd have bounced about like a pea in a dryer. As it was, I blacked out for an instant. When I opened my eyes I faced a great red iris with a black pupil.

"He looked me over with care. I . . .

forced myself to look back. He had no ears, no chin. A bony ridge divided his face where a nose might have been, but there were no nostrils. .

"He pulled back for a better view of the main pod. This time I was not jolted. He must have realized that the jolting could hurt me, and done something to prevent it. Perhaps he made his ship inertialess.

"I saw him lift his eyes momentarily to see over my pod.

"You must remember that I was facing back along my own wake, back toward Horvendile, to where most of the stars had been red-shifted to black." The rammer was picking his words with care

and patience. They came so slowly that I wanted to squirm. "I was not looking at the stars. But . . . suddenly there were a million clustered stars, and they were all white and bright.

"I did not understand. I put side and forward views on the screen. The stars looked the same in all directions. Still I did not understand.

"Then I turned back to the intruder. He was walking away across the sky.

"You must understand that as he walked, he receded at much faster than walking speed. Accelerating. In a few seconds he was invisible. I looked for signs of an exhaust, but there was none.

"Then I understood." The rammer lifted his head. "Where is the boy?"

"Boy?"

The rammer looked about him, his blue eyes searching. Children and adults looked back curiously, for he was a weird sight. He said, "I do not see the boy. Could he have left?"

"Oh, that boy. Sure, why not?"

"There is something I must see." The rammer eased his weight forward onto his bare and battered feet. I followed him as he crossed the gravel path, followed him onto the grass. And the rammer resumed his tale.

"The intruder had examined me and my ship with care. He had made himself and my ship inertialess, or otherwise cushioned us against acceleration. Then he had cancelled our velocity relative to Koschei."

"But that wasn't enough," I objected. "You'd still die."

The rammer nodded. "Still I was glad to see him go, at first. He was terrifying. And his last mistake was almost a relief. It proved that he was-human is not the word I want. But he could make mistakes."

"Mortal," I said. "He was mortal."

"I do not understand. But never mind. Think of the power of him. In a year and a half, at point six gravities, I had accelerated to a velocity which the intruder cancelled in no more than a second. I preferred death to his dreadful company. At first.

"Then I became afraid. It seemed unjust. He had found me halfway between stars, stranded, waiting to die. He had half-saved me-and then left me to die, no better off than before!

"I searched for him with the scope. Perhaps I could signal him, if I knew where to aim my com laser. . . . But I could not find him.

"Then I became angry. I-" The rammer swallowed. "I screamed insults after him. I blasphemed in seven different religions. The more distant he was, the less I feared him. I was reaching my stride when- when he returned.

"His face was outside my main window, his red eyes looked into mine, his strange hand was reaching for my main pod. My collision alarm was just beginning to sound, it had happened so suddenly. I screamed out- I screamed . . ."
"He stopped.

"What did you scream?"

"Prayers. I begged for forgiveness."

"Oh."

"He took my ship in his hand. I saw the stars explode in front of me." We had reached the shade of a dark oak, one so old and so spread out that its lower limbs needed the support of iron pipes. A family picnicking beneath the tree watched our approach.

"Explode?"

"That lacks accuracy," the rammer apologized. "What happened was this: the stars became very much brighter, at the same time converging toward a point. They flared horribly. I was blinded. The intruder must have shifted me to within a meter-per-second of

lightspeed.

"I rubbed my hand hard across my eyes. With my eyes closed, I felt acceleration. It remained constant while I waited for my eyes to recover. Through experience I was able to estimate its force at ten meters per second squared."

"But that's-"

"One gravity. When I could see again, I found myself on a yellow plain beneath a glaring blue sky. My pod was red hot, and was already sagging around me."

"Where did he put you?"

"On Earth, in a refertilized part of North

Africa. My pod was never built for such things. If Earth's gravity collapsed it, then re-entry should have torn it to pieces. But the intruder must have taken care of that too."

I am a peopewatcher, an expert. I can crawl into a man's mind without letting him know I exist. I never lose at poker. And I knew the rammer was not lying.

We stood beside the dark oak. The lowermost limb grew almost parallel to the ground, and was supported by three iron pipes. Long as were the rammer's arms, he could not have wrapped them around that limb. Its bark was rough and gray and powdery, and it smelled of dust. The top of it was level with the

rammer's chin.

"You're a very lucky man," I said.

"No doubt. What is that?"

Black and furry, an inch and a half long; one end wiggling in blind curiosity as it moved along the bark.

"A caterpillar. You know, there's no computing the odds you ran against being alive now. You don't seem very cheerful about it."

"I was . . . but think about it," said the rammer. "Think what the intruder must have reasoned out, to do what he did.

"He looked through the main window to examine me as well as he could. I was tied to a chair by crash straps, and his sensors had to see through thick impact quartz designed for transparency in the other direction. He could see me, but only from the front. He could examine the ship, but it was damaged, and he had to guess to what extent.

"First he must have reasoned that I could not slow my ship without the ramscoop web. But he must also have deduced the presence of reserve fuel to decelerate me to zero speed from the lowest speed at which my ramscoop can operate. It is apparent that I must have it. Thus he stopped me dead, or nearly so, and left

me to go home the slow way, using only my re-entry reserve fuel.

"After he had left me, he must have realized that I would be dead of age before I ended such a trip. Imagine how thorough his examination of me must have been! So he came back for me.

"By projecting my line of flight he must have known where I was going. But could I live there with a damaged ship? He did not know.

"And so he looked me over more carefully, deduced the star and planet where I must have evolved, and he put me there."

"That's pretty farfetched," I said.

"Yes! The solar system was twelve light-years distant, yet he reached it in an instant! But that is not the point. . . ." The rammer let his voice trail off. He seemed oddly fascinated by the black caterpillar, which was now defying gravity as it explored a vertical wall of bark. "He placed me not only on Earth, but in North Africa. He deduced not only my planet of origin, but the region where I had evolved.

"I stayed in my pod for two hours before I was found. Your United Nations police took a record of my mind, but they do not believe what they found. A ramship pod cannot be towed to Earth without radar

finding it. Further, my ramscoop web is all over the desert. Even the hydrogen balloons survived the reentry. They think that it must be a hoax, that I was brainwashed as part of that hoax."

"And you? What do you think?"

Again the rammer's face tightened into jigsaw-puzzle lines. "I had convinced myself that the intruder was no more than another spacecraft pilot-a passerby who stopped to help, as some persons will stop to help if your car battery fails far from a city. His power might be greater than mine. He might be wealthier, even within the context of his own culture. We were of different species. Yet he had

stopped to help a member of the great brotherhood, for we were both spacemen."

"Because your modern xenology says he couldn't have been your superior."

He didn't answer.

"I can pick a few holes in that theory."

"Can you?"

I ignored his disinterest. "You claim that evolution stops when a species starts building tools. But suppose two tool-users evolved on the same world? Then evolution might go on until one race was dead. We might have had real problems

if the dolphins had had hands."

"It may be." He was still watching the caterpillar: an inch and a half of black fur exploring the dark bark. My ear brushed the bark as I faced him, and I smelled the damp wood.

"Then again, not all human beings are alike. There are Einsteins and there are morons. Your passerby might have been of a race that varies more. Make him a super-Einstein-"

"I had not thought of that. I had assumed that his deductions were made with the aid of a computer. At first."

"Then, a species could evolve itself. if

they once started fiddling with their genes, they might not stop until their children were mile-high giants with a space drive stuck up their spines. What the hell is so interesting about the caterpillar?"

"You did not see what the boy did?"

"Boy? Oh. No, I didn't."

"There was a . . . caterpillar moving along the gravel walk. People passed. None looked down. The boy came, and he stooped to watch."

"Oh!"

"Presently the boy picked up the

caterpillar, looked about him, then came here and put the caterpillar safely on the limb."

"And you fainted."

"I should not have been so affected by what, after all, is no more than a comparison. I would have cracked my skull had you not caught me."

"A poor return for the golden one, if you had."

The rammer did not smile. "Tell me . . . if an adult had seen the caterpillar, instead of a boy-"

"Probably he'd have stepped on it."

"Yes, I thought so." The rammer put his tongue in his cheek, which stretched incredibly. "He is nearly upside down. I hope he will not fall off."

"It won't."

"Do you think he is safe there?"

"Sure. Don't worry about it."