

MARTIAN OR MOTHER-IN-LAW
by Art Stevens

My mother-in-law comes to visit us once a year. She comes all the way from Sweden. Communication between us is perfect. She speaks no English and I speak no Swedish. Without my wife in the room at the same time my mother-in-law and I would never understand each other.

When my mother-in-law makes her annual pilgrimage to Sanibel, my wife brushes up on her Swedish and plays the part of U.N. interpreter during our mother-in-lawson-in-law summit meetings on the beach.

However, when my wife wants to play a little practical joke on us, she will suddenly disappear leaving my mother-in-law and me to stare at each other in dumb and despairing discomfort.

In anticipation of this habitual epic encounter, my mother-in-law studied a Swedish-English dictionary assiduously one winter before her annual visit. She was ready for me. By God, she was going to communicate with me in my own language. Exit my wife. The two of us are alone together during our first encounter since she arrived from Sweden. She looks at me nervously. In her hand is the little Swedish-English dictionary. She clutches it as though it were a bible. I didn't know what she was up to. I was prepared to wait out this uncomfortable sequence of silent staring once again by turning to the sports section of the Island Reporter and hoped my wife would return soon.

Suddenly — "Yessy Yaksin." My mother-in-law had spoken. I looked up.

"Pardon?"

"Yessy Yaksin. A goot ma,n."

"Oh Yes. Jesse Jackson. A very good man."

She was on a roll. She pointed to the sky. "Is very nice day. The sun does shine and the sky is... is..." She started mumbling something in Swedish and was thumbing through her dictionary.

"Blue?" I suggested.

She stopped thumbing and smiled. "Yes, yes, blue. The sky is blue." She couldn't be stopped now. "The village of Sonibel is very nice."

"Sanibel," I suggested. Then feeling guilty about correcting something as minor as that in the ultimate scheme of things. But it didn't phase her. "Sanibel," she repeated. "Sanibel is very nice village. The people is robots."

She lost me. "Robots?"

"Yes, robots. Is not robots? I look in book." And she began to thumb through the pages again. She found the page, gently hit her head with her right hand, and said "Robust."

"Ah, you mean the people of Sanibel are a robust people."

She nodded and continued. "Is beautiful country America. Streets are beautiful. Sky is beautiful. People is beautiful. Trees is beautiful. Auto is beautiful..."

Fearing that she planned to name every single object insight, I interrupted. "It is good to have you with us again, Mom. I am very glad to see you," I volunteered in slow and halting English.

She beamed. "Yes, it is good to see me also. I am very glad to see me."

"No," I said. "I am glad to see you. You are glad to see me. We are glad to see each other."

She looked puzzled. "Yes. Glad each to see you. Good is beautiful for people to be glad to see you and is sky Sanibel street with good robust."

"Yes, very good," I encouraged her.

"Day to tomorrow make day to come in morning when rain no come to eat when street make rain with you," she pointed out.

"Good show," I surmised.

My wife returned at this point with the merest suggestion of a naughty smile.

"How are you two getting on?" she asked teasingly.

"Is good," her mother responded. I also responded, "Am good rain sky when blueness come in street today if tree swing in hollow of valley only to mark song of bird running on sand with chair on floor. And where the hell were you?"