

The Spaceman and the Glorious Day

by

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The first time the spaceman showed up, Ray didn't even notice him. It was a spring day to end all spring days, and that's why it was weird that there was no one else in the park. No one was there except Ray, his wife, and his daughter.

"I'm so glad Mr. Swanson let you have a day off, dear," Elise said.

"Yeah, well, with Easter coming we've been swamped." Ray furrowed his brow.

"Speaking of which," Elise said as she rummaged through the picnic basket, "when are you going to take Clara's portrait?"

"I'm going to do it right here, soon," Ray said. "Didn't we already have this conversation?"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry, 'it's like you're working on your day off'."

"Well, it is."

“But you like taking pictures,” Elise said.

“I do, so don’t push it.”

“I didn’t mean--”

“I know,” Ray said, the anger and energy deflating from his voice, “it’s just . . . I’m under a little pressure these days.”

Elise looked at Ray and had no words this time. She was sorry and compassionate and so much more all in that one look. Ray knew that she wasn’t trying to add to the pressure, but he couldn’t help but feel it, in his head, on his chest, everywhere.

“Isn’t she lovely?” Ray said and watched their daughter running with abandon in the open field.

“Don’t get too crazy,” Elise called after her. “Come here, take your picture first, and then you can run around.”

Clara, dressed in her Sunday best and with curls and ribbons in her hair, came as she was told. “What, mommy?”

“Daddy’s going to take your picture.”

“Come with me,” Ray said. “I think that hill over there will do it.”

Elise continued to set up the picnic as Ray took Clara by the hand and looked for the perfect spot with the perfect angle and the perfect amount of sunlight. This was different than taking all those photographs in the studio, but Ray liked a challenge, and Elise was right: he liked taking photos, especially without the stares, questions, and criticisms from his boss and the unruliness of other people’s children.

The park was more than empty. Not only were there no people, but there were no birds chirping, no sounds of his feet sloshing through the grass, no sounds at all really. It was like how

Ray imagined outer space--a vacuum, more silent than silent. He coughed to cut through the stone cold quiet. And he felt a chill go down his spine.

The first astronauts and cosmonauts had only recently returned to earth, but none of them had really talked of the experience. None had done more than one or two interviews. They answered no questions, not really, and none of the questions asked of them had any depth whatsoever. Why did the interviewers ask such lame questions that even the viewers knew the answers to them? *Was it thrilling to go to space?* Of course, it was.

Ray dreamed of space and wish he knew more. He sometimes went out on clear nights to take long exposure pictures of the stars, which created images of what looked like space vortexes. What would come out of these vortexes, up to that point, were merely figures of Ray's imagination. Sometimes, Ray didn't care what might come out, but rather he dreamed of being sucked in and away from this world.

"How about here, daddy?" Clara asked.

"Yeah, that's fine," Ray said. "Sit down." He positioned her, turned her head in just the right way. She was so much more cooperative than other people's children. She didn't cry. She didn't complain. He gave her more instructions how to pose. He took the photos without a soul around that he could see.

"Are we done, daddy?" Clara asked after about the tenth photo was snapped.

"We're done," Ray said.

The sky began darkening sometime after that tenth picture was taken, and it was darkening rapidly. He had a slight headache; he wasn't sure when it had started or even if it had already begun to dissipate. Ray and Clara made it back to the picnic blanket. The first sound of thunder came as Ray took the first bite of his sandwich.

“Maybe that’s why no one was here,” Elise said. “They knew a storm was coming.”

They packed up as quickly as they could, only getting half soaked on their way to the car. Clara loved it and screamed with glee. Ray and Elise held hands and laughed as well.

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The Easter rush at the portrait studio began to wane--at least the picture taking part of it did--and now was the time when the families came to pick up their pictures, choose the ones they liked best, and buy, buy, buy. Or as Mr. Swanson mandated Ray, sell, sell, sell.

Even when choosing pictures that were already taken, other people’s children were trouble. They stood on the chairs. They stood on their parents laps. Some even stood on Ray’s newly shined shoes as he tried to politely shoo them away and let the parents know that they should be controlling their kids. What was happening to the world? The children cried and whined about the stupidest things. How does this world even get by? Ray nearly sprinted out the door when his lunch time came.

He grabbed a paper to read as he ate his ham and cheese sandwich. Another space capsule had returned to earth, and Ray wanted to read whatever he could of it. That story had been regulated to the back page. The lead story read, “The Enemy Threatens Nuclear Attack”. Again, thought Ray.

Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing. He wouldn’t have to go to work.

Ray looked at his watch and nearly spit out his cola. How did the time move so fast? Even running at top speed, he was going to be late coming back from lunch. A few minutes wouldn’t matter to most people, but to Mr. Swanson it mattered a whole damn lot.

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“You’re late again, Ray.” Mr. Swanson said in a harsh whisper. There were paying customers around whom he apparently didn’t want to disturb more than they already were. “I have to dock you an hour’s pay.”

“An hour’s pay for five minutes?” Ray felt himself biting the inside of his lower lip.

“We’ll talk later,” Mr. Swanson said. “You have another family to take care of.” He pointed at them with his double chins and walked away.

Ray served them obediently.

*

After dinner, Ray went to the basement to develop the photos he had taken the other day at the park. Elise and Clara were bugging him to see them, so although he was worn out like a used-up space capsule returned to earth (he thought), he obliged. He went to his personal darkroom down in the basement. His family was his solace from work, and his darkroom was his solace from his family. The entire process took a couple of hours, probably longer than it should have, but when Ray was in his darkroom, it was like he was floating, lost in space.

As the pictures began to develop, Ray stared at them, watching them form their images. They were like ghosts entering from another dimension, solidifying, and becoming real people, things, and landscapes. In this case, the thing entering this world was his daughter Clara. All ten pictures were nearly identical--his daughter’s smile only varying slightly from image to image. There had been no wind that day, not at the time the photos were taken, so neither Clara’s hair nor the ruffle of her dress changed much, if at all. Only one photo was glaringly different from all the others: the tenth one. It was the one that had seemingly brought on the wind, the darkening sky, and the enveloping storm.

In the tenth photo, behind Clara, standing a little in the distance, a little uphill from where father and daughter had been, was a figure of another person. Was it a person? Ray looked more closely. It was a figure for sure, and it looked like a spaceman in a white space suit, complete with a helmet of sorts and a shaded visor. It was watching them. The figure was staring directly at Ray, his daughter, and the camera. Its arms were akimbo. What was it? *Who* was it?

The photos dried on a line, and Ray kept going back to that tenth photo. Just a trick of the eye or a trick of the light? Maybe it was a bird flying by. It was eerie, but Ray remembered not seeing or even hearing any birds that day--not that that proved anything.

*

Elise sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and a novel. Ray sheepishly entered. “Is Clara still up?”

“I had to send her to bed,” Elise said. “It’s a school night. What took you so long?”

“Just lost track of time.”

Elise almost snorted. “Only you could lose track of time staring into nothingness.”

“You don’t think it happens to other people?” Ray could hear the defensiveness in his own voice, but he was happy that Elise wasn’t the kind of person to escalate such things.

“So show me,” she said. “How’d the photos turn out?”

Ray placed them on the table in front of his wife one by one. Elise made sure to move her teacup up to the kitchen counter so she wouldn’t mistakenly spill or stain the photos.

“These are nice, Ray,” she said. “Clara is so beautiful, and you’re such a good photographer, too. You should really become a professional.”

“I *am* a professional,” Ray said.

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“It isn’t that easy,” Ray said.

“I know, honey,” she said. “I know it’s a sore subject with you. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I’m sorry,” Ray said. “It’s just . . .” and he let out a long sigh.

Ray put down the last photo.

“What’s this?” Elise laughed a little laugh. “Is this some of your trick photography? I know you love all things space, dear, but this is a little too much.”

“What do you see?” Ray asked her.

“An astro--cosmo--whatever they’re called. A spaceman, don’t you see it?”

“Astronaut? It’s no trick. It was really there.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean I didn’t put him in the photo. He was there.”

“You didn’t mention anyone at the park dressed up like some . . . astronaut,” Elise said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t see him at the time.”

“It’s not even close to Halloween. No one would be dressing up like that. What kind of prank are you playing, Ray?”

“I thought it might have been a bird,” Ray said, “but it doesn’t really look like it.”

“Are you pulling my leg, Ray?” The laughing seemed to empty out of her, and at that moment, her voice turned serious. Her expression was serious, too. Ray was glad that she had moved her teacup earlier because if she hadn’t, it would have been spilled right about now. As it was, she dropped her paperback from her hand, off the table, and to the floor.

“I’m not pulling anything,” Ray said.

“It’s giving me the willies,” she said.

“Me, too. That’s why it took me so long.” Ray scratched at his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose. “It shouldn’t be there.”

“It looks so real,” Elise said. “It’s so creepy, like from one of those movies you like. Maybe it’s from one of those *saucers*.” She said it, but from her voice, Ray could tell that she didn’t fully believe it.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Ray said.

“I don’t know if I can sleep,” Elise said.

“Let’s try. I’m ready to drop from exhaustion.”

Clara peeked into the kitchen. “What’s going on, mommy?” she asked.

“I thought I sent you to bed a long time ago, missy,” Elise said.

“I know, but I wanna see the pictures. Are those the pictures, daddy?” She had already run over to the table and wedged herself between Ray and Elise. Kids were squirmy and wiggly like that. With Clara, it was okay. With other people’s children, it was somehow not.

“Hey,” Clara said as she held up the nearest photo. “I like how I look, and the spaceman is there, too.”

“You know the spaceman?” Elise asked.

“Yeah,” Clara said. “He visits me in the closet sometimes.”

Elise staggered back as if she had been punched.

“There’s a man in your closet?” Ray asked. Under different circumstances, he would have chucked it up to a child’s imagination, but here was Clara speaking about a real figure in a real photo.

“Yeah, he visits sometimes.”

Ray didn't wait to hear any more. In only a few steps, he was in the backyard grabbing a baseball bat and then back in the house. The baseball bat was from the first time Elise had been pregnant, Ray had been hoping for a son, a son whom he could teach to hit a baseball. He never got rid of the bat.

Ray continued to march down the hall and flicked on the lights as he proceeded.

“Da-ad,” Clara called after him. “You think he wants to play baseball? He's not there. He only comes when everyone is asleep.”

Ray heard Elise ask, “What do you mean, honey?” And then their conversation was out of earshot. His daughter's room was full of dolls and stuffed animals--that one tiger that he had won for her at the fair. A few picture books were at her bedside, but no one and nothing else. He opened the closet. A couple of board games and some clothes stared back at him, but there was no man, spaceman or earthman.

Ray let out another deep sigh. “I don't want to go to work,” he said to himself. “I don't want any of this.”

*

They all slept, somehow, through the night. Ray remembered a really deep sleep, a deep dream, but couldn't recall more than that. He woke to the smell of breakfast, and when he made it to the kitchen, the photos were not on the table.

“Where--,” he started to ask, but Elise shushed him with her eyes and he looked over to the closet by the foyer where his briefcase was. There was a manila envelope leaning against his briefcase. Ray had to look at the photos once more before he ate breakfast and before he even dressed.

The spaceman was still there. He was not as scary or ominous as in the darkroom or the nighttime kitchen, but he still sent a shiver down Ray's spine. What the hell was it? What did Clara mean that he had been in her closet? Just a child's imagination? One that showed up in a photograph?

Clara was now at the table eating her waffles and sausage. Elise came up to Ray so that the little one wouldn't hear.

"I'm going to walk her to school today," Elise said, "and walk her back home when her day is over. We need to talk about this when you get home." She paused with a serious expression on her face. "Just make sure you get home before dark."

"If Mr. Swanson will let me," Ray said.

"Tell Mr. Swanson your wife said so."

*

It was another hellish day at work. One kid vomited in the middle of a photo shoot. Who was going to clean it up? Certainly not the parents. Mr. Swanson was trying to get Ray to do it, but he finally convinced his boss to have the department store's janitor do it.

The kindly black man cleaned it up, and even though it was the man's job, Ray couldn't help but feel that it was unfair for anyone to have to clean up vomit. The studio was clean, but the stench remained. Ray skipped eating during his lunch break because after just looking at his food, he knew he wasn't going to be able to stomach it.

When the next family came in to have their twins' picture taken, Ray did his best to pretend the odor did not exist even though the family could clearly smell it. They scrunched their noses and wore sour expressions on their faces, even when told to say 'cheese', but they didn't utter a peep about the lingering smell.

*

When Ray made it home, it was twilight. The further that he got from the stench, the more his stomach settled down. By the time he parked the chrome-trimmed car in the garage and opened the front door, he was starving.

The scene was like any other evening. Clara was busy at the kitchen table with something, probably coloring or doing some simple math homework, while Elise was finishing the dinner preparations.

“Welcome home, dear,” Elise said.

“It’s good to be home,” Ray said. “Whatever you’re cooking smells good.”

“Really? You usually don’t like my meatloaf.”

“I’m starving,” Ray said.

Elise put her hand under Clara’s chin, so she would look up. “Aren’t you going to say hello to your daddy?”

“Hi, dad,” Clara said.

“Hello, munchkin,” Ray said and kissed her on the top of her head.

He looked down at the table. Clara was drawing with crayons.

“What’s this?” Ray asked.

“A picture,” she said.

“Oh, honey,” Elise said. “You got some mail.”

Ray looked at his place at the table. There were a couple of bills, which would have to wait for his Friday paycheck in order to be paid, and there was the latest issue of his science and technology magazine, which he subscribed to. The cover story was about the future of space travel. Is this our best chance of escape from our impending nuclear doom? the magazine asked.

Ray put the mail aside and got comfortable.

After dinner was finished, the kitchen cleaned, and TV watched, Clara went to bed. Ray checked and double-checked the closet before he kissed her goodnight. He checked the window lock, too.

Elise was in the kitchen with her cup of tea and her novel. Ray sat down at the table across from her.

“How’d it go today?” Ray asked.

“The whole thing is already fading from my memory,” Elise said, “so let’s not talk about it.”

“But earlier you said--”

“I can ignore it as long as you don’t show me that picture ever again.” Elise stood up and quickly washed her cup.

“But Clara said--”

Elise shook her head. “I don’t want to hear it.” She dried off her hands, got behind Ray, and massaged his shoulders. “I know you’re tired, honey, and your job is wearing you down. It’s not what you were made for, but I’m being worn out, too, and I just can’t handle any” (she almost hiccupped) “spacemen right now. This earth has enough problems.”

“I completely understand.”

“Are you coming to bed?” Elise asked.

“Did you say you were tired?” Ray asked.

“Exhausted,” she said.

“I think I’ll stay up awhile.” Ray kissed Elise goodnight, and when all was quiet and all was dark, except for the dim kitchen light above the table, Ray read his magazine.

He noticed a soft drizzle outside. Was it supposed to rain? He couldn't recall the forecast even though he had been watching the news not that long ago. Whether it was supposed to rain or not, it was.

Ray felt calm when he thought about the stars and dreamed about traveling through the skies. He read about how humankind would colonize the moon and maybe even Mars in the not-so-distant future. Would he live to see it? Would the bombs drop first?

What about Clara? That made him sad. His heart felt like it weighed a thousand tons at the thought that Clara might not grow up, and that if she did, she would see horrors unimaginable.

But what if she didn't live? Would that be so bad? Ray often thought that it might have been better if he had died young, maybe in a glorious car wreck from speeding down the highway with his high school sweetheart next to him. But Clara was too young for even that. Too young to know that kind of romance.

Ray put his magazine aside and got up to see what was in the refrigerator. That thing hummed. It was soothing, almost hypnotic. He stared into it looking for food, but only saw a bottle of beer. He took that, and then he noticed Clara's picture again, the one that she had been drawing when he got home. She had drawn stars in the sky and a house on the ground and a man, with a dark rectangle for eyes, standing on the roof.

And that's when Ray felt it--a presence. The chill from the hairs on the back of his neck standing up was the only warning he had. He swiftly turned around to see the spaceman standing there. Ray fell to his knees. It was like being in the presence of an angel or demon or some supernatural being. It wasn't just a *spaceman*. It was a *spacebeing*.

Stand up. It said. *Unless you prefer being on your knees.* And it laughed. It laughed like it spoke, not with sounds that could be heard, but with sounds within Ray's mind.

What is this? Ray thought. His beer had spilled on the floor. He left it there, and stood up. The spacebeing's suit wasn't quite the same as an astronaut's suit. It seemed to be made of a thick canvas material, and the visor seemed plastic. How could a suit like that protect one against the pressures of space travel? A man would be squished like a bug in that thing. (Or would a man explode?) It somehow reminded Ray of a beekeeper's suit. Ray couldn't say any of this. His tongue felt like a rock at the bottom of his mouth and his lips were frozen over in a dumb gawkish expression.

You assume many things about many things, the spaceman said. Yes, you can call me a spaceman, but what I truly am you cannot understand.

"P-p-please," Ray managed to say, his tongue somehow looser. "Don't hurt my family."

The room was glowing different somehow. Ray looked up at the bulb. It was brighter than he had ever seen it.

I am here to help you. I am here to help all of mankind, but you appear to be unready to hear my message.

"I'm ready," Ray said. His tongue was limber again. "What do I have to do to prove that I'm ready?"

I'll come back when you are ready.

"But how do I—"

It won't be long.

The spaceman lifted his right hand in what Ray interpreted as a gesture of farewell and goodwill, and the spaceman disappeared into the air in his kitchen. The bulb went dim again, and Ray felt the spilt beer soak through his slippers.

"How do I get off this rock?" Ray asked. "How do I keep my family safe?"

Silence and darkness were the only answers.

*

He didn't tell Elise about the visit. He didn't tell anyone.

*

Ray went to the stairs of the library building to eat his lunch that day. Sirens began to sound. They were the duck-and-cover sirens that Clara heard every week at school to prepare her and her classmates for what was to come. Sirens should cause alarm, but Ray felt peace. He didn't move. He didn't even twitch. He remained on the steps of the library and continued to eat his ham and cheese sandwich. The people who were outside began to run this way and that. They then scurried towards the closest building they could find, as they had been instructed by the numerous public service announcements on television and on the pamphlets mailed to all the citizens of this great land.

Ray sat there, neatly finishing his lunch. He drank his cola straight from the can as always, only this time it was as the streets continued to empty and the sirens continued to sound. Ray was not afraid, only calm at the doorstep of humanity's annihilation. He looked up at the sky to see if there was anything coming down. The sun was so bright that it distorted his sight. He saw spots and rays, and something flying, shiny and reflective? No, only the glare of the sun.

The sirens were unrelenting, and the people who were running for some kind of cover really did seem panicked. And Ray started thinking that he should be panicked, too. Some inner part of him was panicked and was starting to get nervous, but he ignored that part and now sipped--not drank--his cola, trying to make it last.

He didn't regret not telling anyone about his visit with the spaceman. He'd only be mocked and teased if he had said anything. He had only pondered what he had to do to "be

ready". Space, the final frontier. Was that even true? If he had to go to space, all he had to do was pack a bag and ask the spaceman to take him. Could it all really be that easy? The true final frontier was death. There was no packing for it, and one did not return as easily from death as an astronaut did from space. Did the spaceman want him to be prepared for death? Was that what he had meant? But the spaceman hadn't even mentioned the final frontier, death or space, so why was Ray even thinking such things?

You assume many things about many things.

The sirens shut off. There were no missiles in the sky, but there was a quiet now with everyone inside and Ray being so alone. And he thought how he might prepare for death, how he might secretly be wishing for it. It was to be a glorious day when he could travel to that final frontier, whichever it was: space or death. What was out there? Worlds of great beauty?

He looked down at the steps in front of him. Crawling slowly, only two steps down from where he sat was the most hideous looking insect he had ever seen. He heard a sharp piercing sound from the loudspeaker nearby. It was the squeaking those contraptions make when someone first turns them on.

"Attention! Attention, citizens!" the voice said. There were public loudspeakers scattered all over town. The sounds from each were reaching Ray at slightly different times. "False alarm! False alarm! Please return to your business. To repeat it was a false alarm. Please return to your business."

Ray looked at his watch. He still had ten minutes left on his lunch, so he sat there and watched the people return to the outside world. The peaceful silence disappearing as more people came out. He sat there and sat there. He didn't want to get up. And then he couldn't get up.

Much after one o'clock and sometime before five (time had lost much of its meaning), Ray made his way back to the department store and up to where the photo studio was. He told Mr. Swanson that he was quitting, effective immediately, and that Mr. Swanson should mail his last paycheck to his house when it came in.

A strange kind of energy filled Ray. For the rest of the afternoon, he wandered the streets and looked in the shops. He picked up a paperback novel for his wife. It was one that looked interesting, to him at least. He hoped she hadn't read it before. He also bought a coloring book for Clara. Even if she already had this one, she could color it again.

*

Time got away from Ray, as it often did, and he found himself getting to his car as the shops were closing and the sun was going down--later than his usual time. He got home and he could smell dinner, but he could also smell that it was made a long time ago.

"Sorry. Had to work late," Ray said.

"I understand," Elise said with no passion or understanding in her voice. She was washing dishes.

"You can leave those," Ray said. "I'll do them for you."

"You're offering to do dishes? Did someone hypnotize you down at the photo studio?"

Elise looked to Ray, who had no idea if he looked disheveled or pleasant.

He gave her his best smile.

Elise quickly turned away. "No, thanks. I already started. I'll do them."

"Hi, daddy," Clara said. She was sitting at the kitchen table as usual at this time of evening and was coloring some more--her own original art.

"I got you something," Ray said. He opened his briefcase and took out the coloring book.

“Great,” Clara said.

“Don’t say ‘great’,” Elise said, “say ‘thank you.’”

“I was going to,” Clara said. “Thank you, daddy. I have something for you, too.”

“You do?” Ray asked and bent down so he could look her in the eyes.

“Yes, let me get it.” Clara went scampering down the hallway to her room.

Ray took out the paperback novel. “I got something for you, too. I hope you haven’t read this one yet.”

Elise glanced at the cover, her hands wet and soapy. “Thanks. No, I don’t think I have read it, but I like that writer, though. Did you know?”

“Just a guess,” Ray said.

“Well, good guess. Thank you, dear.”

Ray sat down at the table waiting for Clara to come back. He watched his wife finish scrubbing the dishes and laying them out to dry. Her shoulders were hunched over and her hair frizzy. She looked as tired and worn out as Ray had felt only a short time ago.

Since this afternoon, with the sirens and quitting his job, he had a brand new energy. A quiet energy for sure, but one that made him think that he could stay up forever.

“I’m going to take some pictures tonight,” he said, and then Clara bounced into the room with a smile on her face and a picture in her hand.

“Daddy, daddy, I drew it for you.”

“Well, thank you, munchkin,” he said.

“I’m not a munchkin, I’m Clara.”

“I know, sweetie,” Ray said. “What do we got here?” And he took the picture out of her hands. It was the same one from the other night, only with more details drawn in. The spaceman was standing on the roof of the house.

Elise looked back to see, but Ray kept it from her eyes.

“That’s our house,” Clara said. She pointed to two faces in the windows. “That’s me and mommy.”

“That’s great,” Ray said. “Who’s this?” He pointed to the spaceman. “And what’s this?” There was also a flying saucer floating above the house and next to the spaceman.

“That’s you, daddy,” Clara said. “You’re coming home from work. You just parked your car, see?” She pointed to the flying saucer.

“Well, thank you, sweetie. It’s beautiful.”

“You’re welcome, daddy.”

“Honey,” Elise said. She was talking to Clara. “It’s getting late. I want you to get dressed for bed and brush your teeth.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes, you have to.”

Clara looked up at Ray.

“Yes, you have to,” Ray said. “Do as your mom says.”

“Okay,” Clara said and ran away.

Elise was cleaning up the sink now, finished with the dishes.

“You’re taking photographs tonight? Won’t you be tired in the morning?”

“Mr. Swanson gave me the day off,” Ray said.

“He did?”

“Honey, look at this.” Ray held up the picture Clara drew. “What do you see?”

“I see our house, me, Clara, you, and your fancy car with the tailfins.” She pointed to each one as she said what it was.

Ray must have had a perplexed look on his face because Elise said, “What? Do you see something else?”

“No, I’m--no.”

“I’m teasing you,” she said and kissed his forehead. “Get over it. Enjoy taking your space pictures tonight.”

“I will.”

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The night air was still and cool, not too chilly. It wasn’t the time of year for crickets yet, but Ray heard a few chirps and creaks in the night. He set up his tripod and camera so that the photo would be framed by the tops of trees. The night sky was clear, and Ray hoped no clouds would sweep in and block the view of the lens. When he had it set just right, he went back to the porch, sat down in his favorite chair, and let the picture take.

He felt like he should have a beer in his hand or a can of cola or even a cigarette (although he didn’t smoke), but he had nothing. He had a thought of retrieving his radio to listen to the ball game, but that thought was quickly stifled.

He enjoyed the silence again. The stillness of the night reminded him of the stillness that he experienced earlier in the day when the sirens sounded. At lunch he was alone even with all those people tucked away in buildings. And now he was alone again, his wife and daughter behind him in the house, faded from his mind. The moment was over quickly. He no longer felt alone. Isolated, yes, but not alone. He felt eyes on him. Someone watching him.

He looked as far and deep into the darkness as he could, looking for what was there. He was hoping, too. That was the real reason he had come out here. He was hoping to see the spaceman again and--and what? He didn't know. Take a ride in his spaceship and go far away.

You assume many things about many things.

Ray started and nearly fell out of his chair. He managed to stand up, though, grabbing the chair's arms tightly. He didn't want to let go, afraid he would fly off or be spirited away. He was in a half-stand, half-sit. He peered into the darkness of night again, only the stars and moon were giving light, and saw nothing.

Ray eased back down in his chair. There was a presence nearby. An evil. It was something he had felt for a very long time. Something everyone felt, even if they didn't know it. If there was an evil out there, so too must be a force of good. Ray thought he was good, how he cared for his family, how he treated people even if they treated him like trash, even if they vomited where he was. Everyone vomits at some time or another, don't they? He thought himself as good, but did the world think differently? A miserable man stuck in a life that didn't make sense. Some people thought they knew what life was about, but not Ray. He was a good, but miserable man. The answers had to be out there.

He stood up fully from his chair this time. He left the porch and looked up into the amazing night sky, full of stars and wonder. The answers had to be out there in the final frontier. But if no one could go there and talk about it, how could one know? The astronauts and the dead answered no questions.

Ray turned to go back to his chair, and the spaceman was waiting for him. Tall with his face blacked over, the spaceman stood with his hands on his hips like a conquering giant.

Dread entered into Ray. He had no reason to dread. It was only a man--or a creature--in a beekeeping suit, but the spaceman was threatening simply by being there, by being able to appear and disappear at will, and by being able to enter Ray's mind. The spaceman's presence was violating.

Ray trembled. He didn't want to, but he trembled. He wanted to speak, but he couldn't.

You thought you had the answers. You thought you were ready, but you are not. The voice sounded like the voice of a robot, synthetic.

"I-I don't know w-w-what you m-m-mean," Ray said.

You don't know what you think. You don't know what you believe. When glory rains down on earth you will know.

"I-I-I—"

Quiet, pathetic creature.

There was a smell to this thing. Ray wondered for a moment if he had smelled it at their last encounter. He couldn't recall. Time and memory were things that faded. Faded. But now there was a smell, this creature was real. It was the smell of a burnt out match that wafted into Ray's nostrils. A kind of smoke that calmed him down, but deep down was still the fear and trembling. If there could be fear and trembling for an evil creature, couldn't there be the same for a good one?

You are confused. The glory will rain down tomorrow and you will know what lies beyond.

"I—," Ray said. "Th-thank you." Ray didn't know why he chose those words, but he felt complete after saying them.

The spaceman faded out, disappeared into the night, and Ray felt the tons of pressure rise from him. It was as if an invisible elephant had stepped off his chest.

*

Morning came as it always does. Ray had no job to go to. He had no headache. He ate breakfast with his family, mostly in silence. Elise and Clara bid him goodbye, off to school. Ray finished his coffee and realized that he hadn't seen the paper yet. It was probably stuck in the rose bushes.

He went out the front door and into the world.

He looked up into the blue and cloudy sky. It was full of silver objects speeding towards him. Missiles or saucers, he couldn't be sure. He would finally get to see what he wanted to see, either space or death.

It was going to be a glorious day.

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