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“Confetti”
by Darryl Benjamin

“If I tell you something, will you promise not to think I’m crazy?”

My daughter Angelica was on her knees in the living room arranging her mother’s Time-Life books. “*England and the Renaissance, Women Heroes of the Civil War, Roots of the Russian Revolution.* History goes here, Mystery here,” she pointed to shelves. She knew I didn’t approve of the worn out style of jeans she insisted were all the rage. I didn’t want people to think we were bums.

She looked at me. “I promise that whatever you tell me I will *not* think you’re crazy.” She looked so solemn I wanted to hug her.

I paused for a moment. “Come with me,” I said. Angelica followed me to my bedroom. I removed a box from under the unmade bed, shoving aside mounds of unwashed laundry. I had been collecting newspaper articles, mostly from the *Enquirer*, more or less the entire month.

She threw the comforter aside and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting.

“What I’m about to say is of the utmost secrecy.”

She nodded.

“You can’t talk about it with anyone.”

You have to be a genuine nut case to believe that little green men are snatching people like peanuts at a zoo refreshment stand. But I was on my coffee break reading the

Enquirer when I came across a series of articles about a recent rash of alien abductions in New York, Tokyo and London. Normally I don't go in for much of what the *Enquirer* says, but occasionally they have intriguing stories that sounded as if they might be true. You get a feeling. Something rings like a bell deep inside, a chord is struck and the sound vibrates through you like a tuning fork slapped on concrete and held close to your ear.

She nodded again.

I told her my hunch.

“You mean kidnapped?” she asked. Her face was lightly freckled, like Joyce's, as if someone had upturned a pepper container for a fleeting moment. Her nose was curved slightly, like mine.

I expected her to laugh, or cry, or hit me; instead, she said in a low whisper, “How come you think that?”

I showed her the clippings.

I work at Fargo-Kramer News & Magazines Distributors, Inc. My job is to shred the returns. Teen magazines, news magazines, nudie magazines, you name it, I shred it. But first I rip off the covers. They're counted and returned to the magazine companies and we get money. The folks upstairs like that. Newspapers are easier, you just shred them straight. It's a one-man operation. After I tear off the magazine covers and stick the carcasses — that's what I call them — onto the conveyor belt, they take a short trip to the shredder where they come out confetti. I love the smell of ink. After fifteen years on the belt, I sure as hell better. In they go, nice and whole, and out they come, in long strips of colorful snatches of people and print. Once, Angelica asked me to collect the

eyes. She made a collage for art class. It took me about a month, and she was late with the assignment, but I gave her a brown lunch bag full. She got an “A.” She’s really clever that way.

I met Joyce at a gas station when she was twenty-one. I was pumping gas for a living, she had locked her keys in the car. I jimmied the lock and she let me take her out to dinner. When she told me her dad was a pediatrician, I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want her to know I wasn’t loaded, though she had already guessed it from the job I had. (I thought he was a foot doctor, because the year before I had a corn on my foot that kept me out of work for a week. Later, I looked it up and learned that he was actually a *child* doctor, not a podiatrist, which is a *foot* doctor. Go figure.)

After we married, Joyce took a job as Cataloging and Acquisitions Librarian at the town’s public library and I got my job at the magazine distributors. Joyce didn’t seem to mind that we didn’t have a lot of money. I suspected her father did.

The next morning Angelica was up before me and the coffee maker was bubbling. A dusting of black coffee grounds covered the counter. It was the first time she’d ever made coffee for me.

Joyce had remodeled the kitchen soon after we moved in. She wanted a room reminiscent of her childhood. It had been a wedding gift from her father, and was the only room we’d put any real money into (though I’m not sure how well it would go over if we ever sold the house). She antiqued the cabinets, giving them an Old World look; the corners of each door were sanded off for a rounded, worn effect, enhanced by little

finger latches. Antiqued and distressed, the painted green cabinetry featured cracking, pullout wicker baskets and dish and cup racks. She had gotten the idea from *Better Homes and Gardens*. The microwave was hidden behind a pocket door. Panels on the dishwasher and refrigerator kept them out of sight.

I kept my mouth shut and waited for Angelica to say something.

“Sometimes at night I see weird lights,” she whispered, looking out the window. “Once I heard a rustling sound. I woke up, but when it stopped I fell back asleep.” She sat at the scratched maple table we had bought almost twenty years before. It was still in pretty good shape, though we never got around to buying a glass cover for it.

“Don’t worry,” I said, staring at the back of her head, “I’m not going to let them take you.”

She turned. “Why would they take *me*?” she asked.

“Sometimes they try to reverse engineer the parents from the kid’s genes.”

I knew I had made a mistake as soon as I said it.

“Take me apart?” She said, her eyes wide.

I know it sounds crazy, but there is plenty of hard proof aliens exist. You can’t argue with hundreds of sites on the internet; some are crackpot, no doubt about it, but many are respectable. There are pictures, even videos, of bizarre, inexplicable crafts and creatures. One has a head that looks like a chair. You can always tell the fakes because they’re too obvious. For instance, they’ll show a man’s body and an alien’s head, which is absurd, because evolution would never make such an unlikely mix of creatures. Even if an alien race is experimenting on humans to cross-breed them, the alien baby wouldn’t

be half of one race from the neck down. That's just stupid. It would be a subtle blend, such as in the eyes.

It was on a Monday morning at around eleven thirty when the conveyor gagged on the carcasses. The machine sputtered and groaned and then seized up tighter than a rusty screw. I switched off the power, which is a good thing to do, ever since that temp worker got sucked into the machine and shredded when I was on vacation five years ago. I had saved a year for that trip to Mexico but I ended up spending the whole week sick in the hotel room. Montezuma's Revenge. I guess I shouldn't have eaten that taco from a street vendor. God knows what was in it. I'll never forget the blue walls in "Hotel America." Or the blue toilet. At least Joyce and Angelica had a good time. They brought back a sombrero and a piñata shaped like a turtle.

I climbed into the mouth of the machine, a huge gaping hole, and shinnied my way along the belt until I found the problem. About fifty of the magazines had gotten wedged against the metal ceiling. Lately, I was in the habit of blaming everything on the aliens. Could this too have been a plot? Maybe they knew I was on to them. What if they switched on the power? I'd be roast beef, rare, in no time flat. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

I pulled hard on one of the magazines that was sticking me in the eye, a picture of a three hundred pound woman before she received the miracle weight-loss treatment, staring at me as if I was to blame. I yanked the magazines, but they held fast.

Joe came in and knocked on the hull. "Everything ok in there?" he asked. Joe was my foreman, and we got along pretty well. He left me alone, and I did my job. We had an understanding. I assured him everything was fine. "Just a minor glitch," I said.

When I was in grade school kids called me retarded. Mr. Riley, a speech therapist, asked me to his office one day and handed me a dictionary. I was in the third grade.

“Look up the word ‘home’,” he said. I found it immediately. He shook his head, as if to say, they don’t know what they’re talking about. “You’re fine,” he said, and sent me back to class.

What Mr. Riley didn’t know was that I used to read the dictionary. It fascinated me that words we use every day and thousand more were contained in a single book. I had a supernatural knack for turning directly to the page of the word I was seeking.

I don’t remember much from high school, which is pretty much as far as I got, but I do remember this: a body in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted on by an outside force. I even forget who said it, but it sounds like something that’s true.

I had freed the machine by worrying the magazines back and forth, patiently, until they gave way.

Angelica practically grew up in the library. We never employed a nanny, not that we could have afforded one had we wanted to. Joyce was determined to keep Angelica close at hand. She was dead set against child care. “My mother kept me at home and there’s no reason we should do any different with Angelica,” she told me.

Angelica loved the zoology section in the children’s nook at the library and kept a careful journal of species, listed by country. She numbered the pages and put a table of contents in front. Her favorite country was Australia. She thought the duck-billed platypus was hilarious. She once tried for an entire afternoon to explain to me how

Australia broke off from Pangea, back when the continents were joined. “That’s why Australia has such strange creatures,” she said. “it’s because it was on its own. It developed by itself.” Bandicoots made her giggle. She was fond of kangaroos, and Joyce bought her kangaroo bed sheets. Before Angelica would go to bed they would sometimes sing a song they had learned from the library’s old record collection,

*In the bad backlands of Australia
Many years ago,
The aborigine tribes were meeting,
Having a big pow-wow*

I can’t carry a tune for beans.

I brought a sleeping bag and a foam mat up from the basement and laid it on the floor, next to my bed. I thought it would be safer for her to sleep in my room, just for a little while.

Angelica finished her homework and sat at the computer desk.

I pulled up a chair and sat beside her. “I’ve heard that the sum total of human knowledge will be on the internet before long,” I said. It was more than I could imagine.

“Listen to this,” Angelica said, reading from the screen.

“In 1999 Barclay Evans reported his wife was being abducted regularly by aliens. The authorities dismissed him as a lunatic. One night his wife disappeared through a closed window. He witnessed the entire incident.”

“They can do that?” I interrupted.

“Oh sure,” Angelica said nonchalantly. “It happens all the time. It says here there are two ways you can be abducted. One is physical, the other astral. On the physical plane, they come right into your house and take you, just as humans would. On

the astral, they don't even have to be in the same galaxy. They project themselves right into your bedroom and levitate you *through the wall* into their dimension.”

We shivered at the prospect. There was nowhere to hide.

She continued, “Apparently the aliens had failed to knock out this Barclay guy completely; he was paralyzed, but able to watch.”

“Why do they prefer to take women?” I interrupted again.

Angelica sighed, as if the answer were too obvious to bother with. “Probably for cross-breeding,” she said. “If men could give birth they'd take them, too.”

She paused for a moment, then continued reading. “Barclay's wife reappeared the next morning with a scar on her neck and no recollection of what happened. He was so frightened he tied her to the bed every night. For weeks nothing happened. Then he awoke one morning to find her missing, the ropes scattered like spaghetti on the empty bed.”

Joyce's idea of a good time was to read while I clipped coupons from various Sunday papers. Sunday papers were the fattest and had rich pickings that keep me busy most of the week. You'd be surprised how much money you could save. We averaged about eighty dollars per week, and that's no small potatoes.

I took pleasure as Joyce curled up in the large leather chair, her knees drawn together, arms wrapped around her legs, hands grasping a book so tightly her knuckles whitened. She adored history. The only fiction she liked was mystery. *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Empty Copper Sea*, *Trouble in Paradise*, I could go on forever. I preferred newspapers. What's happening *right now* is what's interesting. It's not that I think “History is bunk,” as Henry Ford was supposed to have said, it's more that I didn't have

the patience to read it. When it came to reading, Joyce could sit for hours on end. I'm way too antsy.

The following evening Angelica and I decided to follow the advice of www.precautions.com. We drove to the local hardware store and purchased an Uninterruptible Power Supply, the kind you usually hook into computers to protect against electric failure, because current usually shuts off once an abduction begins. We also bought a warning buzzer, in case the power failed, and two floor fans. When we returned home, I plugged the lamp and fans into the UPS and directed the fan's airflow away from us, according to the site's instructions.

I hauled a bag of rock salt that had been laying around the garage for ages and we scooped it out by the handful and sprinkled it around each of our beds. The salt bounced and skittered across the floor. It made crunching noises under our feet. "I suggest we don't go barefoot," I said. "How in the world is this going to keep them away?" Angelica shrugged. "The site recommends it. It doesn't make sense to me, either. As humans we're mostly salt and water anyway. I would think it *attracted* the aliens." We looked at each other and shrugged.

We knew if the aliens really wanted Angelica, they'd get her.

"Ropes like spaghetti on an empty bed," Angelica reminded me when we were through setting up, and we sat at the computer screen without speaking.

Angelica searched for something encouraging. She was more or less your typical sixteen year old, maybe a little compulsive, like me, getting up every morning at 7:45 to eat her Lucky Charms. She liked to establish a routine and keep it. Not long ago she

went through a superstition phase. *Watch out for ladders and black cats.* When she was fourteen she was a vegetarian. No chicken or fish, either; she swallowed the whole thing. When she was fifteen, she recycled everything she could lay her hands on. As a little kid Angelica followed Joyce around like a shadow, watching documentaries on TV and reading books, a picture-perfect reflection of her mother.

“Take a look at this. Sometimes abductees return to earth with amnesia,” Angelica reported. “They have to be taught everything again, how to use the bathroom, make their bed, even how to eat with a knife and fork. It’s as if their minds have been wiped clean.”

Angelica wanted to go to the library to continue our investigation. I wasn’t too hot on the idea, but she was convinced we’d learned all we could from the internet and tabloids. “Now it’s time to do some old fashioned research,” she said.

Huge windows were set deeply into walls, admitting light through yellowed glass. Angelica knew exactly where to go. She led me through a maze of corridors to the astronomy section. Light fell like a dirty blanket on book titles, making them hard to read. Angelica had no problem locating the books she wanted. She suspected her mother had been to a planet in our own solar system, or possibly one of Jupiter’s moons. She knew a lot about Io because Voyager had flown by it; it was the focus of a documentary she’d seen with Joyce. “It has a core of iron,” Angelica explained, “she would be most comfortable there. It’s got live volcanoes and a magnetic field, just like earth.”

We borrowed books and magazines. Mrs. Phillips, a cheerless woman who had been Joyce's boss, made sympathetic noises in our direction. She allowed us to leave with the magazines, which was clearly an exception to the rules. We reassured her we would return them. It was my job to look through *Nova*, *Smithsonian*, and *Natural History*. I was good with magazines. Angelica had me look for articles about new species and genetic engineering, or anything that seemed unusual, such as new diseases and their cures.

Sometimes, after reading, we would walk through the park at night.

"People come and go," I said. "What I mean to say is, nothing is permanent."

"Comets come and go," Angelica said after a moment. She was trying to make it easier for me. "Halley's comet passes by earth once every seventy-six years," she said.

"So a person could see it twice in their lifetime?" I asked. "When was the last time?"

"1986."

"Next time I probably won't be around," I said, "but you will."

"Shooting stars come and go," Angelica said.

"I've never understood how a star could shoot," I said.

"Me neither."

We swapped information like a pair of research scientists on a mission. When it came to data, Angelica's mind was more nimble than mine, able to make associations and notice details I had missed.

Angelica began a journal. She cataloged our thoughts and drew pictures with question marks next to them. She pasted photocopies of articles and chapters into it. In no time it bulged and strained the binding.

When Joyce spoke of her mother she would gasp for breath, as though the memory of her was suffocating. Sometimes, when someone is gone, or taken from us, we feel them more strongly. Suddenly they are no where and everywhere at once, impossible to dispel and grasp. Joyce's mother died of stomach cancer at the age of thirty-seven. The first time Joyce wore lipstick was to her funeral. Space is a vacuum. We are always rushing to fill voids.

Sometimes I see Joyce in the way a woman reads a book while sitting on a park bench, the pigeons pecking at unseen objects at her feet, or in the way the wind blows across the tops of trees on an otherwise still day. I know it's her, though she's been taken apart and dispersed like the confetti in giant barrels at the end of the conveyor belt. I can feel her watching us, impatient and white-knuckled, praying Angelica won't be next.