

I MARRIED A MONSTER FROM OUTER SPACE

Dale Bailey

Dale Bailey won the 2014 Shirley Jackson Award for his story “The End of the End of Everything,” which was the title piece of his collection. The book came out from Arche Press last March. A new novel called *The Subterranean Season* was recently published by Underland Press. Dale’s wistful new story owes its genesis to fifties B movies. He tells us, “I’d lately been looking at old SF films, and when I saw the title I knew I had to use it.”

Third shift, three in the morning, even the Walmart in Crittenden, Pennsylvania, is quiet. Just the soothing hum of the buffer over in grocery and a few zombies cruising the aisles looking for something they’ll never find, because there’s some things even Walmart doesn’t carry and never will. Margo is busy at the customer service counter, so I’m alone in my chute, stealing a chance to lounge against my register, and here comes this alien rolling down the alley that runs between housewares on one side and hardware on the other.

First thing I think is, it’s the best Halloween costume I’ve ever seen. It’s just turned October, after all, and the hotspot front and center of the store is packed with your skull-shaped candles and plastic witches’ cauldrons and dozens of cheap Halloween costumes, ranging from super-hero duds for the tots to sexy Vampirella get-ups for their moms. I reckon there’s got to be an alien costume or two in the mix, but it’s hard to believe this guy is actually wearing one of them. Sure, his silvery foil jumpsuit looks the part, but he has these giant pincers for hands—think crabs and you’ll get the idea. And his head—well, if it’s a mask, it’s the best mask I’ve ever seen. Imagine a colossal brussels sprout, only the brussels sprout is really an exposed brain surmounting these black goggle eyes that give absolutely nothing away, and I mean nothing. He doesn’t have a nose to speak of, just a pair of slits beneath those googly eyes, and his mouth, underneath all this ugliness, is a thin, lipless scar. Plus he’s seven feet tall if he’s an inch. What I’m trying to say is that he was an alien and after that first fleeting thought, there was never any doubt about it in my mind. He was clutching this blue Walmart shopping basket with one set of those pincers, too.

Me, I didn't bat an eye. If there's one thing you come to appreciate working the third shift at Walmart, it's just how inconceivably weird the world can be. I've had a guy dressed like the Pope come through my lane (he was buying Marlboro Lights), and I've had Elvis, too (a twelve pack of condoms, ammunition, and a bag of tangelos).

So when the alien glides into my lane, it's not like I'm not prepared. Nor am I surprised by all the weird stuff he's piled into his basket: a box of tampons, a sewing kit, and a crescent wrench the size of a baseball bat. A can of Fix-A-Flat (which Donny says never to use—but more about Donny later). And a Blu-Ray disc from the bargain bin in Electronics—*National Treasure*, which isn't much of a movie, though Donny likes it. And there I am with my blue vest and my nametag that says Ruth and this seven-foot alien standing in front of me. I say, "Find everything okay?" and start dragging his selections across the scanner and slipping them into the bags on the whirligig at the end of my lane. I was always careful about that. You don't want your Tide and your milk in the same bag because it makes your milk taste like laundry detergent. But this alien just stares at me with his big bug-eyes and if he appreciates my efforts, he doesn't say. He doesn't say anything at all, actually, and I don't take that to heart either. To most people, a Walmart clerk just fades into the background, and that's how I felt most days, Ruth Sheldon, the invisible woman. Sometimes even Donny, sweet as he could be, made me feel that way, like his eyes were just sliding right past me.

That's what I'm thinking as I'm dragging old Bug-Eyes' last purchases across the scanner. "That's sixty-one ninety-three," I say, smiling, and the whole time I can feel Margo's eyes drilling right into the back of my head, like twin laser beams. It's not the alien either. It's me she's looking at. Maybe it's just the old animosity between salary and benefits and \$7.25 an hour and hope you stay healthy, and maybe it's not.

Last week, my register came up \$7 short, which precipitated a sit-down with the shift manager. No, I didn't steal it, if that's what you're thinking. You try running a few hundred transactions every night, and see if you don't make a mistake or two counting back change. I'm sure Margo had her own sit-down with management. It had happened on her watch. I'm sure she wasn't happy about that, either—which is a roundabout way of saying that as this is all going down I'm barely paying any attention at all to the big galoot standing in my lane.

What I'm focused on is bagging every item just so. And all the time, Margo's making my skull smoke with those laser beams of hers. So when Bug-Eyes just stands there, I'm not a happy camper.

"Forget your wallet?" I say.

Bug-Eyes just stands there.

"I'm sorry, sir," says Margo, who has somehow closed the distance between the customer service counter and my chute at the speed of light. "We'll have to void your order."

So that's what I have to do. Drag each item out of its bag, scan it, and dump it back into his empty basket, like a time-lapse film run in reverse. The whole time the two of them stand there staring at me, Margo with this thin-lipped sneer and the alien with no expression that you can discern. Who knows what he's thinking? He's an alien. But in that moment, I could have clawed that smug expression right off Margo's face and peed on Sam Walton's grave. What I'm saying is that I feel a certain sympathy for this big heap of ugly because it wasn't too long ago that I'd come up short at the grocery store and had to look on as the cashier fished stuff out of *my* bags and voided them one by one, until we got down to what I could afford, which was exactly \$57.30. I ask you: is it too much to ask to have a pint of Ben and Jerry's Boom Chocollata once in a while?

The whole thing was humiliating, so I feel some sympathy, or empathy, or whatever's the right word, for old Pincers here. Which is why what happened after my shift happened at all, I suppose.

The alien, it walks out of the Walmart, and into the night. Four hours later, I punch out and follow it, zipping through the sliding doors and into a morning so beautiful that I almost forgot how much my feet hurt and how tired I felt.

The sky was all streaky with different shades of pearl and gray, and low in the east, just where the sun was breaking, it looked like some careless artist had smeared these swathes of red and orange and gold and half a dozen other colors I didn't have a name for. It almost took my breath away it was so pretty. I stood there and took it all in, letting the rays of light shooting over the Hooters just burn Walmart right off of my skin.

Then I noticed all the buggies that people had left standing in the lot right where they had unloaded them—I mean, is it really too much trouble to walk them over to the cart corral?—and I noticed the spindly trees that looked so sad standing there on their little islands and the discarded Coke bottles and the crushed beer cans and this pile of cigarette butts where someone had dumped their ashtray. I even saw a seeping diaper lying right out there on the blacktop where someone had changed their baby in the backseat. I knew what kind of life that baby would face. I turned away from it all, and trudged toward my car at the far end of the lot. It wasn't much to look at, that car—it was a sun-blasted Oldsmobile 88, it must have been older than I was—but it ran like a tick. When it comes to engines, Donny's a genius with his hands.

I slid in, started her up, and swung the big wheel toward the access road that ran next to the highway, and that's when I saw the alien. It was sitting on a curb under one of those spindly trees. It had its head between its knees and six or seven of those crushed beer cans from the lot between its feet. It must have been sucking out the backwash, and I could have sworn it was eating year-old mulch.

I've never quite figured out why I did what I did next, but what I think is that it all came crashing down on me. The sneer on Margo's face as she watched me unwind the alien's order and the bitter taste in my mouth when that grocery store clerk ran my own Boom Chocollata backward over her scanner. I think it was those rays of light like you see in Bible pictures shooting over the Hooters and lighting up acres of gray pavement littered with stuff people didn't want anymore. Maybe it was the Hooters itself, where I could have gotten a job even if I didn't have a diploma, only I don't look anything like a Hooters girl, and can't lean over and push my boob up against Donny's shoulder when I deliver a fresh pitcher of Coors Light. Donny always over-tips at Hooters, and afterward, when we get home, he tastes of beer when he kisses me, and he always turns off the light.

So maybe that was it, and maybe it wasn't.

But what I did was cut across the lot and brake right there in front of the alien. I wound down the window and said, "Come on and get in, if you want to." The alien looked at me out of those big googly eyes. Then it climbed to its feet, pincered open the door, and folded itself into the passenger seat. It had to bend its head over to keep its brain from rubbing the tattered upholstery of the roof, and it smelled like stale beer and dead mulch and something else, a dry alien odor that prickled your nostrils.

It said something in a language like no language I'd ever heard before. Its voice sounded like a locust trapped in a jar. I pretended I understood it.

"I don't know where we're going," I said, but where we went was home.

* * *

About halfway there it occurs to me that it's a pretty dumb thing I've done, picking up an alien. I'm not even sure what planet it's from for one thing, and for another I don't have the first clue about its intentions and whether they're honorable.

"Just don't get any ideas in your head, okay?" I say to the alien, though given the size of that brain, I reckon that it must be all over ideas. It buzzes at me in that locust voice and I pretend I know what it's saying. Thanks for the ride, it says, and I say,

"You're welcome." I feel a little better after that. It's always chancy picking up someone you don't know—you want to set the ground rules right away—and I wonder why I've risked it in the first place.

Except I don't really wonder. Not really. You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to figure it out.

It started with Scrap. Every morning I drove home from work, I see this mutt tied up outside this rotting trailer. Half the time it had flipped over its water bowl and the other half it didn't have a water bowl in the first place. I figured it must be halfway dead with thirst, so one day—I still don't know what came over me—I pull over and march straight up the stairs of that old mobile home and start hammering on the door. You pound on the door of a trailer—it's nothing but flimsy metal—you make a lot of noise, so I've barely gotten started when there's suddenly this wiry, shirtless guy with washboard abs standing in front of me.

This is what I'm thinking about as I make the turn onto Zion Road with Brainiac from Planet X here in tow: I'm thinking about this sloe-eyed guy with a scraggly beard and hair like Jesus. He props himself in the doorway, a joint smoldering between his fingers, and he says, "Well, I'm up. What do you want?"

"I want that dog," I said, and he just looks at me like he didn't even know he had a dog. Then I hear this girl from inside the trailer. Her voice is good looking the way a DJ's voice is good looking. You know how you can just see them inside your head.

"What do they want, Aaron?"

Aaron takes a hit off the joint, exhales, and sucks the smoke back up through his nostrils. "She wants the dog," he says.

"Then give her the fucking dog, and come back to bed."

Aaron shrugs. "You heard her. Take the fucking dog."

So that's what I do. When I showed up back home with it lolling out the window of the Olds, Donny says, "You're gonna get us shot, Ruth, stealing people's dogs," and I say, "They don't care about that dog," and I guess I'm right because the boy with the Jesus hair and his girlfriend with the good-looking voice never have shown up to claim it.

After that, I'm all over animals. I make Donny stop the truck so I can move turtles out of the road. And when someone drops a couple of kittens in the woods across from our trailer, I take them in, too. Thing 1 and Thing 2, Donny dubbed the kittens.

So it's Scrap that greets us the morning I bring the alien home. He comes tearing out from under the trailer, yapping his head off the minute we pull into the driveway. I reckon that he'll calm down once he gets a chance to snuff my hands and lick my face, the same as he always does, but I forget about the alien climbing out of the passenger seat. *Thunk*, goes the alien's door and the dog falls silent for maybe a second squared and then he rips into another tirade.

I'm starting to get him settled down—the whole time the alien is just standing beside me—when the door opens and there's Donny in sweats and a wife-beater, leaning against the doorway of our trailer, in the exact same position as the boy with Jesus hair, only Donny's hair is a lank no-color brown, and he doesn't have washboard abs. Donny's built more like the Pillsbury Doughboy, and he's yawning and scratching lazily at his big, soft belly as he watches us. When Scrap finally calms down enough for him to get a word in edgewise, he says, "You've really outdone yourself this time, Ruth."

* * *

"Klattu barada nikto."

That's what Donny ends up saying to the alien, and believe it or not, the alien chirrup something back at him in that locust voice. Donny grins this big loony grin,

and I feel something break inside me for this sad, stupid man and the situation we've gotten ourselves into. We're just barely old enough to drink and between us we've already acquired one dead baby, one dog, two cats, an alien, more in the way of medical bills than we can ever hope to pay, and grief enough to last two people a lifetime. We live in a rundown firetrap of a rental trailer and work crap jobs, and a big night on the town is twenty wings and two pitchers of Coors Light at Hooters, after which Donny fucks me in as many ways as he can think of—which is a lot—in a room as dark as he can make it. And here he is spitting gobbledy-gook at our alien who is spitting it right back at him. I love him a little bit, I guess, and I vow that I will love him even more—or try—as he waves us grandly inside.

Which is hardly fit for company. Here I have an alien in tow and Hurricane Donny has blown right through the place. Six empty cans of Milwaukee's Best on the coffee table, a bag of crushed Doritos on the sofa, and the congealing remains of a TV dinner, presently being investigated by Thing 1, on the counter. Thing 2, meanwhile, is clawing at the sofa, and Scrap, who has followed us inside, has his front paws on the alien's thigh and is rooting around in its crotch. This is my house—dirty dishes in the sink, the TV blaring, and the ammonia stink of cat pee in the air, because Donny always forgets to clean the box—and this is my husband, slipping out a morning fart, his face tattooed with lines from the sheets.

Donny says, "Why don't you rustle us up some grub, Ruth? I'm gonna go shower for work," and just like that we slip into our morning routine, and I have the same thought I always have, which is, why bother showering in the first place? Donny works in the pit at the Quicky Lube out on Route 70, staring up at the underside of one car after another for eight hours straight. By the time he comes home, he'll be filthy: black gunk caked under his nails and in his hair. Sometimes it takes me two or three washes to get his coveralls clean enough to read the name stitched over his right breast.

"It's a waste of his talents," I tell the alien, muting the TV. I sweep up the beer cans and dump them into the trash, ditto the Doritos bag and the TV dinner, much to the distress of Thing 1. I set the coffee going and stir up some eggs. The alien sits down on the sagging sofa. Donny found it by the curb in some swanky neighborhood and loaded it up in the bed of his F-150. It's beginning to pill and I hate that because it has such a pretty pattern.

The alien buzzes its locust buzz.

I pretend I know what it says.

"He's a genius with his hands, leastways around an engine. Give him a day or two with a klunker and he'll have it running like a tick. If he had his certificate he could be pulling down eighteen dollars an hour easy, but he dropped out of school to take care of me. My dad put me out soon as he knew I was pregnant."

An interrogative buzz.

"He's supposed to be studying for his GED so he can take a few classes over the community college." Emphasis on supposed to be. What Donny does with his off hours is mostly watch old movies and guzzle beer. But before I can go on, Donny comes scotching out of the bedroom in his clean coveralls. I slap down a plate of scrambled eggs and a cup of Maxwell House for him, same deal with the alien, right there on the beat-up coffee table. Donny starts wolfing it down like he's starving to death and couldn't live off his fat for six months straight. All the alien does is sit there looking at me.

Donny says, "It ain't gonna eat, I'll take it."

That's when I remember. I head outside with a plate. When I get back, Donny has helped himself to the alien's eggs. "Gort here didn't seem to mind," Donny says.

"Gort?" I say.

"Well, we got to call him something," he says. "What you got there, Ruth?"

What I've got is a plate of old mulch from last spring, when I insisted Donny try to dress the place up a bit, and what I do is set it down in front of the alien. Gort. I open it a can of Milwaukee's Best and Gort digs right in.

Donny whistles. "Least he's going to be cheap to feed. What is it you plan to do with him, Ruth?"

"Put him up for a while, I suppose."

"You can't just keep an alien, Ruth. It's not like he's a dog."

"I didn't say I was keeping him. I said I was putting him up. Why don't you listen for once?" And then: "You want to go up to the Hooters Saturday night? I'm off."

Donny's stumped. He knows he wants to go to Hooters, but we can't really afford it. This is just about my only card, and I don't play it often, but sometimes you do what you have to do.

Finally—you can practically see the wheels turning—Donny says, "Well, I guess it couldn't hurt to put him up a little while, anyway. Long as he eats mulch, I guess we can afford to feed him."

"Thank you, Donny," I say, and what I do next is I kiss him on the crown of his head, which smells of Pantene.

He just shrugs and climbs to his feet, saying, "I better get moving or I'm going to be late for work."

"Have a good day," I say, but how you could have a good day in the pit of a Quicky Lube, I do not know. I don't say this to Donny, of course. I just endure his coffee breath when he leans over to kiss me and watch him out the door. A moment later, the F-150 rumbles to life. I listen to its engine noise fade down the road. In the silence that follows, I put my elbow on the counter, prop my chin on the heel of my hand and gaze across the room at the alien.

"I guess it's just you and me now, Gort," I say.

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Sometimes I think that was at the bottom of all the trouble that followed, Donny giving the alien a name. Once a thing has a name, it starts to acquire other things you might not want it to have. Gort was clearly a boy's name, for instance, so the alien acquired a sex. It's not like we ever actually had him sexed, you understand, the way they'd sexed Thing 1 and Thing 2 at the vet when they were kittens. It's just that with a name like Gort, you'd never check the little F box on those forms you fill out at the urgent care. And that's just the start of it. Before you knew it Gort had his own place at the table and his own spot in front of the TV and his own square of countertop to keep his Tupperware containers of mulch, which I put there so I wouldn't have to go out and fetch it in the rain. But I guess I'm getting ahead of myself because none of that had happened yet. All I'm saying is, you give a thing a name, it'll take everything you ever had if you're not careful.

That's what I'm thinking as I stand there staring at Gort—not consciously, exactly, but in that way you chew things over in the back of your mind without quite realizing you're doing it. Meanwhile, Gort's just sitting there with his pincers in his lap, staring at the TV. The *Today Show's* on and Matt Lauer's watching some TV chef whip something up in the kitchen. You can tell Matt's wisecracking by the deadpan expression on his face.

"You want the sound up?" I ask.

Gort buzzes back at me, which is how I end up sitting there on the sofa beside him, fumbling with the remote. You'd think he'd put me off, with his weird alien funk and those big bug-eyes of his, but I keep thinking about dragging the stuff in his basket backward across the scanner. The whole thing makes me so sad somehow that I wind up teary-eyed and shivery inside. It's all I can do to turn up the sound.

Gort buzzes at me.

"I'm okay," I say. "Don't worry about me."

After that, it's quiet except for the TV, which is probably the nicest thing we own. Except it's not ours, not technically. We got it from Aaron's Rent To Own and who knows when it'll ever really be ours to keep, if it ever is. Which makes me want to cry all over again. Thing 2 plops down beside me on the sofa, curls up, and starts to purr. Over by the door, Scrap yawns and lowers his head, looking mournful the way dogs do. On the TV, Matt's taking a break while Natalie Morales reads off the news. And the whole time me and Gort are just sitting there.

After a while—I don't know how long—he buzzes at me again, and I say, "It's nothing, really." And then, because that's obviously a lie, I say, "It just made me sad, having to drag all that stuff in your basket back across the scanner. Don't you have any money?" I ask, which is kind of a stupid question. He's an alien, after all.

Gort buzzes.

I pretend I know what he's saying, and I say, "We get by, I guess."

But we didn't, hardly. There was always something. I was seventeen when I got pregnant, and here we are five years later. It might have turned out different, I guess, but everything went wrong at once. First the doctor put me on bed rest. Then I was too sick for homebound, and then the baby and all that.

Blah, blah, blah. Everybody's got trouble. Mine is nothing special, and I know it, but here I am on the verge of tears all over again. Gort buzzes at me, and this time I can't help it, I start to cry a little. "It's nothing," I say. "I just get weepy when I'm tired."

Gort buzzes, and I pretend I know what he's saying.

I tell him he can stay as long as he wants, it won't be any trouble, and I tell him this and I tell him that and I tell him the other. It was blah and it was blah and it was blah until I flat ran out of blahs. He buzzed once in a while, but that alien was mainly a bear for listening, Gort, even though he didn't have any ears as far as I could see. He was all brain, that alien, all the way down to his shoulders. Those goggle eyes and the twin slits of his nose and his lipless little mouth seemed to have been stuck on as an afterthought, the way you stuck on Mr. Potato Head's features when you were a kid.

By then, Matt was long gone and Judge Judy was nearly over. I nip into the bathroom to use the can, and when I come back Gort's standing in the hall, staring into the spare bedroom. We always keep that door shut, but here's Gort, his first day in the place, he's gone and opened it right up, like the whole place belongs to him. I feel something kind of loosen inside me, and I say, very firm but gentle, too, the way you'd talk to a toddler, "Gort, that door stays shut. House rule, you understand?"

He only stands there, staring into the room. And what I do is I walk down the hall and lean past him into the bedroom. It's half lit up, but I contrive not to see anything as I get hold of the doorknob—it's cool in my hand—and swing the door shut.

"It's late, and I have to work tonight," I say. "I'm going to bed."

Which is what I do. I leave the door cracked in case Scrap wants to join me, and he does after a while. So I lay there in the gloom with Thing 1 and Thing 2 in a heap at my feet, and the dog curled up on Donny's side of the bed, smelling all doggy, the way dogs do. But none of it helped any. I couldn't sleep and I wanted Donny, even though he was dumb and I didn't love him but only a little, and I wasn't even sure of that.

It was quiet then, except for the sound of the TV. Gort was watching some soap opera and everyone had secret identical twins and was having an affair and someone had gotten himself murdered, and so on, all this crazy stuff, and when it lulled me to sleep at last I dreamed this crazy dream in which *I* had a secret identical twin who'd never gotten pregnant in high school, and had a whole different life that should have been mine.

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Turns out Gort's spaceship had come down on Jim Hastings' old Christmas tree farm across the road from the Walmart. When I was a kid, Jim had had fields of pine trees to either side of the road for what seemed like miles. But Jim had gone bust somewhere along the way, and his farm got parceled out commercial. What used to be Hastings' Lane became Hastings' Highway, lined on either side with your fast food chains, your Applebee's, and your standard big-box stores, a Best Buy and an Office Depot, even a SuperTarget for the people who were looking for something a step up from Walmart when it came to discount retail. Then the economy tanked and you couldn't move real estate even down on Hastings' Highway.

Which is a long way of telling you how Donny found Gort's ship when he got off from the Quicky Lube that afternoon. "Wasn't much to it," he says over TV dinners and mulch that night. "Anywhere else people would have seen it. And he couldn't have walked far, could you, Gort?"

Gort buzzed and Donny forked up a big bite of Salisbury steak and shoveled it in. "Hard landing, wasn't it, Gort?" Donny says, and Gort buzzed again, and Donny says, "Ship's intact, but you can see where he came in. Trees are all torn up. Must have lost an engine, or something. You oughta see it, Ruthie. It's something to look at."

He was right about that, though I didn't see it for myself until the next morning, when I hiked across the road after work and ducked into the trees. I found it four or five hundred yards in, totally invisible from the road. Branches slapped at my face the whole way, and my hands got gummy with all the sap, but it was worth the trouble. Sure, it looked exactly like every flying saucer you ever saw—just a disc of silver metal—but it was big. Really big, is what I'm saying. If you lined up three or four buses and drew a perfect circle around them, you'll get a sense of just how big I mean. Plus, the sun shooting down through the trees made it seem all shimmery and strange, and I couldn't help thinking that it had been to places so far away that I couldn't begin to imagine what they must be like—other planets, I mean, circling other stars. Which kind of put our own sun into perspective. It's funny to consider the sun just another star, because we don't really think of it that way, do we? For us it's the center of everything, and we take it for granted. But peel back that complacency, and what you have is nothing but mystery and more mystery, all the way down. Standing there, I understood how small I really was. I guess none of us really matter in the long run, not when you think about how big and strange the universe is. Even Gort's gigantic ship seemed like a brittle, tiny thing, zooming from star to star through all the endless black space in between. It was fragile, too. It had crashed, hadn't it, plowing this long divot in the ground and scattering pine trees like toothpicks, and as the sun rose higher, I could see that it wasn't quite as smooth and bright as I had thought it was. Sooty black streaks ran the length of it, and it had been pretty dinged up by the trees. I wondered if there might be dead Gorts inside it. The thought made me awful sad somehow, and I felt selfish for being all weepy the other morning like I was.

Who could say what Gort had been through, and what it might have done to him? I stood there a long time, just wondering.

So all this, and I'm home late, and here's Donny standing in the doorway, trying not to look angry as I barge past him. Inside, the TV is blasting. Gort's sitting on the sofa with Thing 2 curled up in his lap. He's petting her with one pincer and clutching a can of beer with the other. I never saw an alien who could put away such whopping quantities of beer.

"Where have *you* been?" Donny says. He has to shout over the TV. Donny tends to jealousy, but as far as he's concerned it only runs one way. Take the Hooters girls, for example. Especially Star. Donny always asks to be seated in Star's section. The

service is better, he says, by which he means that Star always gives him a nice long close-up of the beauties jiggling around in her little Hooters T-shirt when she leans over the table to deliver our wings. The service, by the way, is inadequate, I'm pretty sure that Star isn't her real name, and even if it was, she wouldn't be giving a guy like Donny the time of day if he wasn't paying her for it.

All of which passes through my head in an instant as I dump my purse and reach for the remote, silencing Savannah Guthrie midsentence. "I went to see the ship, Donny, that's all."

At that his whole face lights up.

"Gosh, isn't it something?" he says.

"It is." By this time, I've shrugged off my coat, and I'm reaching into the refrigerator for the eggs. "Too bad it's wrecked. We could all fly off to the stars and live happily ever after. Wouldn't that be nice?"

And it would, too, but Donny, who's a homebody at heart, says, "I don't think I'd like that, Ruth."

"What would you like, Donny?"

"I think I'd like to fix it," he says.

"Fix it?" I look up from where I'm cracking eggs into a pan.

"So Gort can go home."

"Donny, you can't fix that ship."

"Why not?"

"It's not like it's an old car."

"Sure it is. It's just a machine."

"It's a machine designed by aliens for traveling in space, Donny. No way you can fix that."

To which he says, kind of put out, "Give me enough time, Ruthie, I think I could fix just about anything." I look up at him, then, and what I see is that light in his face all over again. Just looking at it I could see there was more to Donny than I'd ever given him credit for. Maybe people weren't so different from the Universe itself: maybe you never really got to the bottom of them. Peel back the surface a little and it's just mystery and more mystery, all the way down.

"What are you looking at?" Donny says.

"Nothing," I say, and that's when I realize that I've left the eggs on too long. Donny likes his yolks runny, but it's two or three minutes too late for that, and the whites are going to be rubbery, too. To be honest, the eggs are practically inedible, but Donny—the Donny I was married to who wouldn't stand for rubbery eggs for even a minute—Donny just sits down and starts forking them in.

I dump some mulch in a bowl, pour a can of Milwaukee's Best over it, and hand Gort a spoon. Once I'd got them both started, I sat down at the little table between them, no appetite at all, I felt so strange. I'm thinking again that maybe there's dead Gorts inside, but I can't bring myself to say it, not in front of Gort, so we sit there in silence except for the piggy little grunts Donny makes when he eats and the clink of Gort's spoon against his bowl.

"I'm gonna have a look at it when I get off work today," Donny says, pushing his plate away, and a minute after that he's off to brush his teeth, and a minute after that he's gone. I missed him when I woke up that evening, too. Usually we get an hour or two in the evening over TV dinners. Donny always eats the value-sized portions and I stick to the Weight Watcher's Smart Ones, even though they always leave me feeling hungry and they don't help any anyway. You could say I'm big boned, the way my mother did, or you could say I'm fat. Either way it comes to the same thing. But that night it was just me and Gort staring at the TV while Donny was out messing around with Gort's ship.

"I think I'm gonna have some ice cream," I say. "You want a little mulch?"

And Gort, he buzzes. I act like I know what he's saying, so I serve us up and we sit there in front of the TV, feeding our faces and watching reruns of *Law and Order*. Then it's time for me to go to work. I'm already out the door when Donny's truck comes rattling into the yard. He climbs down and we stand there for a minute, talking in the cold October air. I want to ask him if there are dead Gorts inside in the spaceship, but I can't bring myself to do it. Somehow I don't want to know the answer at the same time as I do, and for sure I don't want to know it this way, passing in the yard, and having to work through whatever he tells me while I'm running a register at Walmart. Donny's got other things on his mind, anyway. He's practically breathless with excitement, and I can see right away that it's going to be this way for a while yet. Donny's love for Gort's spaceship trumps his love for me, at least for now, and at the thought of it, something breaks inside me, and is still.

* * *

After that it seemed like I spent more time with Gort than I did with Donny. Half the time I didn't see Donny except at breakfast; the other half I passed him in the yard as he came in from tinkering on the flying saucer and I slipped out to the Olds for my shift at the Walmart.

Gort was always there, though. Mornings, we watched *Wheel of Fortune* and *The Price Is Right*. Evenings it was *Law and Order* reruns or *The Big Bang Theory*, while Gort snacked on mulch and drank beer and I ate a Smart One and then treated myself to a big bowl of ice cream with Hershey's syrup on top. Even though I know it doesn't make any sense to do that, I couldn't help myself. I never could. And sometimes I passed Donny on the lawn as I left for work and sometimes I didn't.

And we talked, Gort and I. Buzz buzz, he would say, and I would say, Lord, my feet hurt, and I would soak them for a while in Epsom salts and warm water. They would feel better then, but only a little. My feet always hurt. You try standing in front of a register for eight hours at a time and see how your feet feel. I'm not complaining. I'm lucky to have a job at all, and I know it. I'm just saying.

Or my phone would ring and Gort would buzz and buzz when I didn't answer it. I always checked the number on its screen and it was nobody I wanted to talk to. I didn't have any girlfriends, and Donny—well, Donny used to call me on his lunch break, but he didn't do that very often anymore. Mostly it was just those weird mystery calls you get from out of state—people wanting to sell you something or take a poll or whatever—and I didn't want to talk to them, anyway.

But Gort buzzed and buzzed every time it happened.

That's how I ended up telling him how it used to be the hospital that called us all the time, hounding us about their money. Turned out they had charged us more than a hundred thousand dollars to let our baby die. I ignored them to start with—where was I going to get that kind of money?—but finally they sent somebody out to knock on our door, so we set up what they called a hardship payment plan, which is why the hospital takes forty dollars out of our checking account at the end of every month. I did the math one morning and figured out that we'll be almost two hundred years old before Donny and I pay them off, and that without interest.

Just telling it I start to cry. I can't help myself. Gort buzzes, and I say, "It's nothing. Don't worry about me," and what I do is, I lean my head up against his arm. I don't know why. It's nothing I think about. I just do it, the way you do things sometimes. His foil jumpsuit is softer than you'd think and cool against my cheek. He doesn't say anything, so I just lay up against him and cry. Maybe I even doze a little, because when I lean my head against Gort like that we're watching *Friends*, the one where Chandler gets locked in an ATM with a supermodel, and when I open my eyes it's

Seinfeld, the one where Jerry starts getting those tiny little checks for twelve cents from Japan and doesn't know what to do with them.

I knew what I'd do with them. I'd cash every one of them. And that starts me crying all over again. My face is all snotty and I can't breathe good. "Let's turn off the TV for a while," I say, but Gort just sits there staring at the screen. He takes a slug of beer. After awhile, still wiping at my eyes, I get up and go to bed.

* * *

Then one day I had to get out of the house, so we went to see this dumb sci-fi movie. It was your standard stuff, aliens invading the Earth because they wanted our water or our women or whatever. The whole thing embarrassed me, because Gort wasn't anything like those aliens at all. It got worse when we had to move to the back row because some creep behind us kept complaining that he couldn't see over Gort's brain.

I was mortified, which was my mother's word, so it's her I'm thinking of when we stop by Mickey Dee's to get something to eat. I scoop up a handful of pine needles from under the shrubbery outside and set him up with them on a napkin while I order a double quarter-pounder with cheese, large fries, and one of those fancy coffee drinks, even though I can't afford it. When I sit down to eat, Gort buzzes at me, and the funny thing is I'm still thinking of my mother, and that's exactly what he asks me about.

So I start to tell him about how nice she always was to me. She really was. I was the kind of kid nobody cared enough about even to be mean to—and it's better to be bullied than not even noticed in the first place, right? But Mom always promised me that things would get better for me. She said I was a wallflower and that the thing about flowers is, they always bloom. I let myself hope that maybe I would, too. Then Mom died, and I couldn't lie to myself anymore. The truth was, I wasn't a flower at all. I was just a wall, and the thing about being a wall is anyone can hang up any old picture they want on it, and from then on that's what they see. Dad hung Mom's picture up no sooner than she was cold in the grave, and right away I went to packing his lunch for him and cooking his dinner and getting him another beer when he wanted one. The teachers at school hung up a picture of a plain girl with a bad complexion who walked the line between overweight and obese, and because she always managed a C, didn't cut up in class, and didn't mess with drugs, they didn't waste their time ever looking at her again. As for the other kids, well, they didn't even bother hanging up a picture in the first place. To them I wasn't a wall, I was a window, and they walked the halls of Crittenden Senior High and looked right through it without even smudging the glass.

Except for Donny, I say, pushing my tray aside, and Gort, he buzzes, and I say, "Donny, he really saw me, if you know what I mean," and at the time I thought he did, leaning up against my locker and chatting and looking me right in the face, like he didn't care that I was fat and had a lot of pimples. Not that he was anything to look at himself—even then he was built like the Pillsbury Doughboy—but he had friends. Anybody who has hands as talented as Donny's are, he's gonna have friends in auto shop and wood shop and classes like that. Me, I was college-prep and people mostly didn't date across that line, but here's Donny leaning beside my locker. One day he's asking me for help on his English homework—which is really easy, barely English at all—the next he's asking me out to the movies, and the first thing you know, he's asking me to go to prom with him, only we couldn't, because Dad wouldn't spring for a dress. Who cared anyway? That was what Donny said when he heard it.

Which is how we ended up at Mount Horeb, parked behind an abandoned church where you could look out over town, which from up there looks almost pretty, like a handful of fallen stars glittering in the dark valley below. Donny had gotten a pint of Old Crow somewhere and he had a six-pack of Sprite, too. We sat on the tailgate of

his truck drinking whiskey and Sprite. It was better than prom, didn't I think so? he said. It would be all crowded and hot in the Elks Club, and nobody really wanted to wear those ridiculous clothes anyway. Wasn't this better? I allowed that it was, though secretly I was sorry I wouldn't have a prom picture to look at later, or any of the favors, like a napkin and a fancy glass with the prom's theme etched on it, which that year was Moonlight Serenade.

But it really was nice up there with the spring breeze and the trees smelling green and fresh, and I liked the bite of the whiskey among all those bubbles. So I took another drink and then another one after that, and the next thing I know I'm flat on my back in the bed of Donny's truck, with my jeans hanging off one ankle and my bra rucked up around my shoulders. Donny's kneading one of my breasts and probing around with his thing between my legs until he finally hits the spot and pushes it right up inside me. From then on, that's all I can feel, that and the ribs of the truck bed digging into my back. I can smell the sting of Donny's aftershave, too, and over the curve of his shoulder I can see an ocean of stars, it's so clear. I let my mind rise up there into the stars until what Donny is doing to me is happening a million miles away, and what I'm thinking is does anyone really live up there in all that sky? Then Donny lets go with a little grunt, and bam, I'm right there in the bed of the truck again, pounding on his back, saying, Get off me, Donny, get off me!, until he finally pulls away. I'm crying a little as I put myself back together. My bra is all twisted up and I can feel his stuff leaking out into my panties.

Blah blah blah, right?

Except I don't say all of that to Gort, of course. It's not like he needs the play-by-play. Nope. I wind it up at the part where we're sitting on the tailgate sipping whiskey, and I put the bit in about looking up at the stars early. What I do is put a cheery smile on my face and finish my five-dollar coffee and say, "I know, right? Even then I was thinking about aliens. And I'm glad, because you're a good friend, Gort. You really are."

He is, too. That's what I'm thinking as I dump my trash and rack the tray. So I reach up and take his elbow and we stroll out of Mickey Dee's together. Maybe people stare—it's not every day you see an alien like that—but I don't care. It feels so good walking arm in arm with Gort. It's like we own the place.

* * *

A couple of weeks pass this way, and then one morning I say to Donny, "It's my night off. Why don't we go up to Hooters for some wings?"—because the truth is, I miss him. We've been married five years at this point. He's the only man I've ever had sex with, and even if you don't really like someone, if they're that big a part of your life, not seeing them anymore is a little bit like having a limb amputated. Plus there's the baby, which was a funny thing, because it pushed us apart and held us together at the same time.

So it hurt my feelings when Donny hesitated. I can see right away how much he's torn between tinkering with that ship and going out to Hooters—and I can see too that I don't have much to do with the dilemma. In Donny's mind, it's spaceship versus Star, and it's only when I say, "C'mon, Donny, please," that Star finally wins out.

"All right," he says, and he shoots straight home after work to clean up. Me, I've got my best jeans on, plus a filmy white blouse Donny was always fond of. Gort's wearing his jumpsuit, the same as always. It didn't seem to need washing, and he didn't either. He'd been with us a couple of weeks at this point, and he didn't have any odor to him at all except that dry alien smell, plus a tinge of mulch and Milwaukee's Best. It wasn't a bad odor, and neither was Donny's once he scrubbed all the grease off, only he put too much aftershave on, the way he always does, and it reminded me of that night in the bed of the pickup. The way it always does.

We took my car. We always do when we go to Hooters, because Donny drinks too much. Pulling into the lot takes me back to the morning this whole thing began, with those Bible rays shooting down so that everything looked beautiful for a minute or two, and then the truth revealed itself, and the truth was a dumped ashtray and a dirty diaper and a bunch of people who can't be bothered to walk their buggies over to the cart corral.

In the misty October dark, though, you can pretend that everything really isn't so ugly, after all. You can ignore the abandoned carts, and the lights shine through these soft, yellow halos, like angels. Even the traffic whooshing by on Hastings' Highway sounds soothing, like one of those oscillating fans on a summer evening.

It's a weeknight, so the Hooters isn't crowded, but we still have to wait because Donny insists on a table in Star's section. Star acts like she hasn't seen us in a thousand years. "Where have you guys been? I've missed you!" she exclaims. She's this tallish blonde, only the blonde is mostly bleach, and the guys she's talking to is mainly Donny, not me. She's something to look at, all right. Her orange booty shorts are crawling up the crack of her rear end, and she's about to pop right out of her little Hooters T-shirt as she takes our drink order—a pitcher of Coors Light—and sashays off to get it. Donny's eyes nearly bug out of his head when she comes back with a free appetizer of fried pickles, seeing as it's been so long since she's seen us. You can almost see him swell up, and by the time she brings out our wings and brushes her boob against his shoulder when she sets them down, steam is practically shooting out his ears.

Which is pretty much how it goes. Gort just sits there drinking beer and Donny focuses on the wings, pausing between bites to eye up the nearest Hooters girl. Me, I've lost my appetite. I don't have but one or two wings, but I hit the Coors Light pretty hard—we end up downing four pitchers of the stuff—because I know what's on Donny's agenda for the night and I have to kind of loosen myself up for it.

By the time we stagger out of Hooters, I've had too much to drink to drive us home. Donny's in no shape either, which is how I wind up in the back seat while Gort takes the wheel. He has to scrunch down with his brain between his shoulders to do it, but at least he's sober. As far as I can tell, he's always sober, no matter how much beer he pours down that lipless little mouth of his. He's not much of a driver, though—he's too heavy on the gas and too hard on the brake. He about jerks me out of my skin, driving like that.

Then we're home, and it's the usual stuff: Scrap screaming out from under the trailer, and Thing 1 and Thing 2 twining through our legs as we push our way inside. Some pretty hilarious moments follow. I remember them in flashes, the way you do when you've had too much to drink. Donny starts up with the drinking games and we all sit around the kitchen table bouncing a quarter at a juice glass. Me, I've never been any good at quarters, but Donny's a master at banging the coin into the glass. It's always me he chooses to drink. Gort isn't much good at it, and doesn't seem to get the game, anyway. He just takes a drink no matter what happens. Me, I miss the glass first time every turn, and around and around it goes, until I'm half-sick with beer.

And then we're dancing to some stupid death-metal band that Donny likes, and Donny and I are laughing so hard because Gort's getting his groove on, too. He's on his feet, anyway, bobbing his giant brain and moving his arms stiffly, pincers clicking, in that old robot dance, you know the one I mean.

After that, who knows how long, we're all crowded in front of the TV, stuffing our faces. I've splurged on a pint of Boom Chocollata and Donny has his favorite, too, which is Salted Caramel. Even Gort's mulch is fresh. I'd walked over to the garden shop, which is pretty much dead this time of year, and snagged the last two bags. They looked kind of forlorn, and I thought maybe they had dried up, too, but I bought them anyway.

"It's a little late in the season for landscaping," Margo said when she rang me up. "What do you want those things for?"

"I just do," I said, and now I'm glad I picked them up, because the mulch is nice and moist right out of the bag like that and Gort is really chowing down. The only thing wrong with the moment is that I'm a little queasy, and Donny's put on one of those late-night Skinemax movies. You know the ones. This one's called *Stacked Racks from Mars*, which I figure might embarrass Gort, because it's another movie about space invaders. It embarrasses me, anyway, but Donny's Donny and there's not much you can do about that.

And then—I don't remember saying goodnight to Gort—Donny and I are in bed. I'm so drunk I can let go enough to enjoy it. But the truth of the thing is in the back of my mind even then, and the truth is that I'm just a picture on the wall to Donny, too, and it's usually a picture of Star—Star in her little booty shorts (or out of them) and her little Hooters T-shirt with the stupid owl on it.

When we're done, I lie awake in the dark for a long time. After a while, I get to thinking about Gort, and what kind of losses he might be coping with. Finally, I can't help myself. There are things you have to know even if you don't want to know them. I say, "Donny."

He grunts and rolls over. I poke him. "Donny."

"Leave me alone, Ruth. I'm trying to sleep."

"It's Gort's ship," I say.

"What about it?"

"Did you find any"—I hesitate, and then, I can't help myself, I say—"Did you find any dead Gorts inside?"

Donny's quiet so long that I think maybe he's drifted off again. Part of me feels relieved, like it's better not to know. But it turns out he's only thinking, because finally he says, in this voice that's all of a sudden wide awake and sober, he says, "No. There's nothing in there at all, Ruth," and I know from the way he's said it that he's lying.

I choose to let it rest, though. Some things you just don't want to think about.

"I'm close to fixing it," Donny says. "I'm a day or two away. Maybe a week. I just want you to be ready."

"Well, sure," I say. "It's not like he's a pet, Donny. We're just putting him up for a while."

"Okay. I just want you to be ready."

"I'm ready," I say, but the truth is, I wasn't. The prospect made me really sad, and it sobered me up some, too. I didn't realize how attached I'd become to Gort, or how sorry I'd be to see him go. I thought on it a long time, and I was still thinking on it when I fell asleep.

I had this weird dream about his flying saucer. In the dream, it was all fixed up just like Donny said, only I was inside it. From the inside it was like looking through a glass dome, with only the blackness of space around us, and we sat without speaking in the dark, Gort and me, while stars slipped past on either side of us. I was thinking how quiet and peaceful it was when I woke up headachy from all the beer.

It's after four by then, and I heave myself out of bed to get some Tylenol and a glass of water, only when I go out into the living room, Gort's not there. And Gort's always there. He doesn't sleep—he doesn't do much but watch TV and drink beer—but here he is, flat gone, the TV flickering silently in the dark. There's an infomercial for the Brazilian Butt Lift on. It promised you a supermodel's butt. Maybe Star used it.

That's what I'm thinking when I notice that the bedroom door in the hall is open, the one I told him not to go inside of. Something clenches inside me, and suddenly I'm not even thinking about how thirsty I am or how much my head hurts. Suddenly I'm standing at the door, and I don't even know how it is that I've gotten there. I mean, I know that I walked, but I don't have any memory of doing it. I'm just there. The room

is lit up with this eerie light from the TV, but I force myself not to see anything but Gort. He's standing in the middle of the room, staring out toward the little window.

"Gort?"

He buzzes at me, but he doesn't turn or look. He just stands there.

That's when I step into the room, still not looking at anything.

"Come on," I say, tugging at the sleeve of his jumpsuit. "I don't want you in here. I don't like anyone to come in here."

Taking hold of one of his pincers—it's hard to the touch, it doesn't give at all—I coax him into the hall. I lead him to the sofa and we sit there together in the light from the TV, and suddenly I'm crying. It seems like all I do anymore is cry. Gort buzzes at me. What's wrong, he says, and I say, "I'm all right. Don't worry about me." Gort buzzes back, and then he's silent while I cry myself out. We just sit there staring at the TV after that, until the Brazilian Butt Lift infomercial gives way to one called *Hot Tub Fun*. The first hint of dawn is showing around the curtains by the time I steal back into the bedroom and slip under the covers beside Donny.

He's flat on his back, snoring to shake the house down. Me, I'm a long time going back to sleep and when I finally did doze off I fell right back into those crazy dreams. In one of them Gort was stroking my face—his pincer was warm and soft and it felt like old leather, I remember that like it was yesterday—and in another one he was sitting at the foot of the bed, buzzing away, only when I woke up it turned out to be Thing 2, purring at my feet. Donny had already left for work—he was good about not waking me up after a long night like that—and what I thought about was Gort leaving soon, and I felt so sad that I started to cry all over again.

* * *

First thing I see when I pull myself together and leave the bedroom is Gort, kicked back on the sofa, sipping a can of beer and watching Dr. Phil. Second thing I see is that door down the hall. It's still open, and what I think of is this old story I learned about in school—the one about the forbidden room and the secret behind the door. All the dead wives.

Some doors ought to stay closed, that's all I'm saying. This is one of them, too, only it's standing wide open, and I can't cope with it—not with the hangover that's just starting to set in, not with Gort buzzing at me.

"Good morning," I say, and if I'm a little short with him it's because I'm trying not to be mad about him going in there when I told him not to. He's a guest, after all. But now I'm going to have to walk down there and close that door myself. I feel like that kid in *The Shining*, tempted down the hallway to room 217, or whatever—that same feeling of dread that draws you forward, that you can't resist, no matter how hard you try. That kid, he had to open the door, he didn't have any choice. Me, I have to close this one, because Gort opened it, and in cajoling him out into the hall last night, I stupidly left it open behind me. I don't want to see what's inside it, but here I am.

Here I am, and when I reach in to pull the door closed, the room is filled with this golden late-morning light, shining through the blind covering the little window. I can't help but see it. Every day and every night I see it in my mind. But you can keep yourself busy, you can watch reality TV or eat ice cream or read those celebrity magazines they have on the last-chance rack at the Walmart—who has the best beach bod and who doesn't and who's together and who's not and who's in rehab and who's sobered up. The point is, it goes on and on, that kind of stuff. So when you're not really looking at what's in a room, when it's just inside your head, you can shunt it away to the back of your mind and pretend it's not there. You can drown it out with noise. I knew because I've been doing that for years. But standing there in the doorway, I can't shunt it away, I can't drown it out with noise, I can't do anything but see it. And what I see is—what I see is—

A pink room. The walls are this really light pink, and everything inside those walls is pink and baby blue. The crib and the dresser and the changing table that Donny picked up at a yard sale and refinished, they have these perfect pink and baby blue accents. Not to mention the little sheet and comforter set with the penguins on them that I just had to have when I saw it at Babies R Us. The matching penguin mobile—the penguins are wearing these powder blue tuxedos with pink bowties, and around the top of the room there's this border with more penguins marching along in more powder blue tuxedos and little pink bowties, and the thing about it is, it's a room with real stuff in it. It's like it's not even part of a rotting old trailer that you can't get the landlord to fix up and you've furnished it with a rental TV and a bunch of stuff your husband has plucked off the curb in some swank neighborhood. No. It's this perfect room, and there's a perfect dream house around it, and a perfect dream life where Donny has his mechanic's certificate and I'm a dental hygienist or whatever, and most of all we have this perfect little baby, and every night I sit down in the rocking chair in the corner and rock her to sleep in this perfect pink nursery.

I guess you knew all that already. It's not like you have to be Sigmund Freud to figure it out. But that dream life isn't mine. Which is why I just slide to the floor right there on the spot. I would cry but I've cried myself out. I've cried this whole story and I can't cry anymore. I'm just empty. Gort buzzes. I look up and there he is in the hallway, towering over me, staring down at me with those big bug-eyes of his.

"I'm fine," I say. "Don't worry about me."

The baby's name was Alice.

* * *

Gort buzzes, and I realize that I must have said it aloud, so I say,

We'd have been better off not to name her at all. I think I knew from the start that she wasn't going to come home with us. She was such a tiny thing and she'd arrived so far ahead of schedule they wouldn't even let me hold her. I guess that's what I remember most, that and standing outside the nursery and looking through the window at her, all wired up to about a thousand machines and a tube down her tiny throat and the line on the heart monitor just flattening out. I was right there when it happened, standing at the window. I started screaming and pounding on the glass until somebody yanked a curtain over it, but by then there were so many doctors and nurses crowded around her that I couldn't see anything anyway.

Gort buzzes, and I say,

I don't remember much after that. Donny says that somebody gave me a shot. All I know is that when I wake up, I'm in my room. Donny's sitting in the chair beside the bed, all hunched over like someone's just punched him in the stomach and I know it from the set of his shoulders, I don't have to ask. I can't help myself, though. There are things you have to know even if you don't want to know them, or even if you already do.

What I say is, "Donny," and he looks up at me. His face is gray and he just shakes his head. After that, I cried a little. He did, too, but he'll say he didn't if you ask him, and two days after that, when we had a little service for the baby, he didn't seem to have any tears left in him. Something had closed up inside him like a flower closes up at night, only it never opened up again and daylight never really came, just an endless flat dawn the color of sour milk. You keep hoping that something will happen on a morning like that, that the sun will break through or that maybe it'll just go ahead and pour, but it never does. It just goes on and on.

Gort buzzes, and I say,

If I'd known everything would turn out this way, I never would have gotten pregnant in the first place.

Gort buzzes, and I say,

I wanted to hang on to him, I guess. I thought he really saw me, if you know what I mean. Mom was dead, and Dad, he'd hung up a picture on my face that wasn't really me, and my teachers had hung one, too, but Donny, he really saw me—only later I realized that he had pictures of his own, that I was a wall not a wallflower, and always would be.

Gort buzzes, but I don't have anything else to say. I just sit there with my back against the wall in the baby's bedroom. It smells of dust and disuse. And what I do is, I start to cry. Turns out I'm not out of tears, after all.

* * *

Which is more or less how this story comes to an end, except for one last part. We all hung on like that for a few days more. It was the usual thing: beer and mulch and TV dinners, and *The Price Is Right* in the mornings and *Law and Order* after dark. Gort and me, we talked. It was buzz and blah, buzz and blah, all day long.

Then Donny comes home one night, we're passing on the lawn, and he says, "I think I've got it, Ruthie."

Which is how it ended up that I called in sick, and we all trooped out to Jim Hastings' old tree farm in the middle of the night. We saw the ship before we ever got there, lights twinkling through little gaps in the pine trees. And then we stepped into the clearing, and it like to took my breath away. It looked just like every flying saucer you ever saw, all lit up like that, but it was bigger than you ever thought one could really be, and you could tell it was practically aching to break free of the Earth and shoot off toward the stars. Colors streaked around its rim—blue, then green, then red, and then the whole sequence started all over again. It hung about four feet off the ground, hovering on this column of white light, and there was a ramp sticking out you could walk up to get inside. It hummed, too, only you couldn't really hear it. You felt that hum in your bones. We stood there for a long time, staring at it, with the black pine trees pressing close around us and the night sky looming huge overhead and the full moon shedding down its light. All I could think was that soon Gort would be zooming through all that darkness up there. And I thought of my dream. Maybe on the inside the ship really *would* be see-through as glass, and you could sit there in peace and quiet, watching the stars slip past.

Then Donny kind of laughs. "It sure is something, ain't it?"

It sure was. It was something to look at.

Donny had that spaceship running like a tick.

Then it's like he's all business. He turns to Gort and he says, "It may not handle just right. I had to jury-rig a lot of it. I had some trouble getting parts, so you'll want to take it easy to start."

Gort buzzes. Donny reaches out to shake, but Gort just stands there, his pincers hanging at his sides, and when I go in for a hug, it's the same thing all over again. I press my face up against his jumpsuit and I breath in that strange, dry odor of his. "I'm gonna miss you, Gort," I say, and all the time he just stands there. When I finally step away, he looks at us for a minute, the moonlight shining in his big googly eyes. He buzzes one last time and then he turns away and starts up the ramp. Something breaks inside me it's so sad, and before I know it, I'm halfway up the ramp myself, I'm shouting, "Gort, Gort—"

He turns to face me, and there I am with Gort above me and Donny below, staring up from the bottom of the ramp. I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it. But what I say is this: "I'm going with him."

"But Ruth," he says, "he's an alien."

I'm used to it, I want to say, but I hold it inside of me. I don't want to hurt his feelings any more than I have to. Then the strangest thing happens. Donny Sheldon starts to cry. It's like a dam breaking, those tears, the way they come. It's like catching

a glimpse of a whole other man. I realized then how many Donnys I'd known since the day he showed up beside my locker in Crittenden Senior High. Some of them were pretty ugly, like the one who'd deflowered me in the back of his old F-150, and some of them were talented, like the Donny who'd fixed up Gort's flying saucer, and some of them were giving, like the Donny who'd quit school to go to work full time and take care of Alice and me. Some of them were loving, and me, I hadn't bothered to see any of them. I'd hung a picture up over his face instead, and I'd never bothered to take it down and look at the grieving man underneath, who didn't want to open the door to Alice's room anymore than I did. Gort had torn it open for the both of us.

I turned to look up the ramp at him. The bright door of the spaceship was empty. He was gone. *It* was gone, because the truth was, I never really knew whether Gort was a he or a she or something else altogether. But the doorway to its ship stood open all the same, and there was nothing to stop me from walking right up the ramp and stepping inside and flying off to the stars.

What I did instead was, I walked back down and took Donny in my arms. Some things would have to change, sure. Nights out we were going to the Applebee's first of all, and Donny was going to learn to look at me in the light. And me, I was going to have to change some things, too.

That's what I was thinking when the ramp of Gort's flying saucer drew up inside it and the door slid closed. The ship just sat there for a minute, and then it rose straight up on that column of light until it was hovering above the trees. The colors around its rim picked up speed, blurring into a streak of light, and it shot off over the woods, and then it was gone. It was just me and Donny.

After a little while Donny got a hold of himself. "Cold out here," he says.

"Sure is," I say.

And so we struck off into the trees. We held hands for a little while, but it was hard going, and soon enough we were on our own again. But things have gotten better since then. These days we leave the lights on as often as not, and when we steal a night off we usually go to Applebee's. Donny's got his GED and started taking classes for his certificate at the community college. Me, it's my turn next. I think dental hygienist may be the way to go, at least to start.

I still think of Gort, though. I miss him, though I know now that he was always just an alien, no matter how much I wanted to believe otherwise. Sometimes I wonder if we aren't all aliens, hanging pictures on empty walls to show us what we want to see. And other times, I know, the pictures come down, if only for a minute or an hour, and on that fleeting edge of time, I love Donny for himself, a little or a lot, and sometimes he loves me, too. Maybe that's all any of us can ever know or hope for. Maybe it's enough.