

UFO
by Larry Griffin

All around Amy were mattresses, oceans of soft downy white, lined up in rows like headstones in a cemetery. She wasn't sure how she'd sell them. Maybe she could say *if you need a thing to sleep on, you've come to the right place*. The place had glass windows stretching from floor to ceiling. She felt like she was on display in a museum. But she needed the job, was the thing.

The manager's name was Red and he was a big guy with a blocky gut and a New York accent. He smelled a little bit like rain. He was telling her about how to sell things. He spoke fast and with a kind of intensity. She thought maybe there'd never been anyone who had cared so much about mattresses. He was running down the process – which ones to show the side-sleepers, which ones were best for back-sleepers. They all looked the same to Amy. Outside the sky was a blinding white and the clouds ran together like dripping paint.

When Red left, saying he had some other business to attend to, the door closed with a soft thump and she was alone. It didn't bother her being alone. It was refreshing if nothing else, to let the silence conjure up things in her mind. She'd go home with new and alien songs in her, things to let out at the next open mic.

Nate texted her: *Come to the beach house*.

Leaning on the counter she texted back: *Can't. Working*.

He didn't miss a beat. A picture came on the screen, breezy palm trees and the same bleached streaks of sky she could see. It was tempting, of course. The lawless vagrancy. Coke on the counter and Nate with his long arms and fingers, caressing her. But she had to at least try and be responsible.

He texted again: *It's so fucking nice down here*.

She texted: *Bottle up some sunshine and save it for me*.

Outside U.S. 1 was a steaming pool of sweat and sun and the truck exhaust hovered, black and bilious. There were cars driving by with various colorful insignia taped on and homeless men walking with bare chests over old khakis, shirts tied around their waists, sweat on their brows. A woman and her kids emerged from the car in the middle of the strip mall, and then all of them hobbled like a multi-headed alchemical aberration into the door of a Joann's Crafts store. There were two girls in their early 20s, one with spiked pink hair, the other with raven-shaded hair in a ponytail, walking hand in hand to the ice cream parlor next door, a place of pastel tiles and warm, bright lights. A few minutes later they were sitting on the curb and eating spoonfuls of chocolate and strawberry ice cream and Amy envied them, jealous of the surplus of time they had and of the camaraderie, the togetherness.

She'd once had that herself. Those endless days. It felt like it wasn't too long ago that she and Nate were a traveling music duo, playing anywhere someone would throw them a few bucks, sleeping under the stars along A1A and waking up dry mouthed on the beach. If she got up before the sun, she'd duck naked in the waves and watch the light come milky and hesitant over the far horizon as the white froth lapped at her shins and feet and stomach. Nate had been a connected man and got them shows far up the coast, up to Virginia and then to the heartlands with their bumpy hills, the big sky. Everywhere there were big exhaust-spewing Ford F150s and tractor-trailers and political stickers and slogans. It all blended together. She got used to just being in the rhythm of the music and living in the moment all the time. No thoughts of anything greater or anything behind them.

That had all come crashing down, as if through sanctioned demolition, with a phone call. Her father had lung cancer and couldn't work anymore. He needed help and, apparently, the burden of generations fell on Amy. Her mother had been out of the picture for years, lived in the Caribbean with an investment banker she'd cheated on Dad with. That had given Amy plausible deniability for years to do anything, had lent her freedom to roam like a wild child, but it was all done now.

Around 4 a fat man with his polo tucked into khakis came into the store. She asked him the questions about how he slept and he told her. She pointed out the right selections for him. The man wandered around the store for a while. He touched the mattresses as if he were inspecting them in some scientific study. He laid down flat on his back for a long time and looked at the ceiling. Then it was like he wasn't even there. Like he'd faded so deep into the fabric that he was gone.

She texted Nate to that effect. It felt, again, like they were drifting apart. She kept thinking back to their last nights traveling, when she'd detect boredom from him, catch him looking at his phone more often. There were always girls around, friends of his, friends of friends, and it had never bothered her before. But she'd begun to feel the breakup like a predator on the outskirts, something lurking but not yet arrived. It wasn't rage but instead a resigned dread settling first in her skin, then down to the bone and then somewhere much deeper inside her.

#

At home, her father watched CSI and ate strawberry ice cream from the tin.

"Bad for you," she said.

He shrugged. "Lung cancer's bad for me."

"Well, with *that* attitude." She was putting her bag on the table. She sat down at the table and kicked her feet up on one of the other chairs.

Her father said, "Can you take your shoes off?"

"Oh, sorry." She did so.

The little apartment was yin and yang, the kitchen with its yellow-orange light and the living room dark except the blue glow of the TV, the harsh and complete sentences of TV actors solving crimes filling every second with words and action, no silence at all, as if the writers had been afraid of it. Amy scrolled on her phone. There was nothing interesting. Nate hadn't texted her back.

Her father said, "I went to the golf course today with Bob and Tim."

"Oh, yeah?"

"First time in a few weeks. I got through most of a game, anyway."

"Is that safe for you?"

He grimaced and there was a shadow of the old smile she remembered, of the guy who'd taken her to the fair as a kid, rode the rollercoaster with her, wind in their faces. "Hell, if I can't enjoy golf or ice cream, what's the point of living?"

"That's fair enough."

"Is your job OK?"

"I guess. It's money, anyway. I don't think people really need mattresses that often."

He licked his lips. "You know that building used to be a strip club."

"It did?" She felt a grin come over her. He always had these stories, these anecdotes, and she always looked forward to his trivia.

"Yeah. About 10, 15 years ago. Big joint for the sleazy types. The cops kept getting called there for drugs and stuff."

She wrinkled her nose. "Did *you* ever go there?"

He rested his head against the back of the couch. "No comment."

She stood up and got a glass of water from the fridge's ice-making machine. "Hey, it's no shame. They're liberated women."

They sat in silence and watched TV. Her father leaned over to her during a commercial break, some ad for a back-brace, and said, "I'm real glad you're finally home, you know that?"

She smiled and said she did know that.

“All that traveling. I mean, I was always so worried about you,” he said, and then the show came back on and she let the silence resume.

#

The days began to drag on and turn into weeks. She kept missing the open mic nights out at the beach and told herself she'd catch the next one. Her guitar was collecting dust in the closet. She was just so tired all the time now. She drove her father to his appointments. The doctors were doing what they could and the medical jargon rarely made any sense to her. Her father looked withered and smaller, and that made a black pit of feeling in her that she couldn't shake.

At work, she wandered and paced as if there were something else to see but the mattresses laid out around the floor and in the back room. There was the gnawing feeling that she might die here. That there was the world outside and it was only finite. And she was spending her time here. She told herself she was being pessimistic, but somehow that didn't help.

A woman came in and she looked frightfully frail, carrying herself tenderly as if she were afraid to break something. She was what could be called traditionally beautiful, slender with a tan skin tone and long brownish-blond hair and eyes that seemed to glow, eyes where, if she looked at you, you'd feel validated for everything you'd ever tried to do, elevated to some nebulous higher place. If Amy had been attracted to women, she'd have been quaking in her Converse. She and Nate often made fun of those girls, mocking their shallowness and vapidness as they lounged in beach chairs or became magnets of conversation at crowded bars, but Amy sometimes felt bad about it. Nate seemed to bring out the negative. Sometimes with him she felt like she was trapped in a cloud.

The woman looked around for a few minutes. She stared out the window and Amy could see another pale ghost of her in the reflective glass, set against the highway chaos. She looked at the walls instead of the mattresses.

Amy stepped out tentatively from behind the desk. It felt like to talk to this woman, whose whole being seemed shrouded in deep aching melancholy, would be tantamount to pushing over a glass vase, watching it shatter. But it beat playing Pong on her phone again. "Excuse me, miss?"

The woman turned and her eyes were genuinely shocked. "Yeah?"

"Uh, can I help you with anything?"

She looked like she was dazed, unaware, possibly, of where she even was. "Oh, ah, no..."

"Oh."

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

They'd both spoken at once. Amy noticed a blush on the woman's cheeks. They just kept each other's gaze for what seemed like too long. The other woman beelined past her and out the door. Amy looked around the parking lot and could find no trace of her; she was as gone as anyone had ever been, a ghost evaporated.

#

Nate wouldn't text her back until late in the night while she was sleeping, and she'd wake with bleary eyes to text messages that were too short, too vague, obviously written as he'd been drinking or on the way to completely passed out. She stopped texting him back at some point during that aimless run of identical days.

The woman came back in the store again three days after the first time. She spent about ten minutes walking around, slow and airy, her gait like that of a ghost floating. Amy thought for sure she'd explain herself, that she'd say she'd just been out of sorts the previous day. But the other woman seemed more interested in the walls again. Amy wondered if it was drugs. She'd certainly seen the things they could do, the way they made the brain into a kaleidoscope.

Finally Amy had enough. "Are you OK, ma'am?"

The woman turned. "Y'know, I'm not even sure what that means. *OK*. Like, who decides what's OK?"

Amy had no idea what to say.

The woman said, "You ever hear of how they covered up the alien invasion here?"

Amy was flummoxed. "Huh?"

"The aliens." The woman spoke slow, as if talking to a mentally handicapped person. "Like, back in the 80s. Some farming family in town found a flying saucer and some little green men, like, crashed into their crops and stuff."

"That can't be a real story," Amy said.

"It is. The FBI came in and paid off the farmers handsome. They ended up moving to Florida. Got a nice beach house."

"I mean, though - wouldn't that be noticed by somebody else, if there'd been aliens?"

The woman's eyes twinkled. "FBI's got deep pockets."

"So you came into this store to talk about *aliens*?" Amy leaned on the counter. It was hard not to grin. She lived for this stuff. She hoped she didn't seem too sarcastic. It seemed a bad habit to be too cynical and Amy was trying to break the habit, trying to live in the moment and see the wonder.

The woman paced the floor. "I just don't have many people to talk to anymore."

"That's sad."

"And aliens are interesting. Just thinking that there's more beyond this bullshit world? That's not interesting for you?"

Amy tilted her head side to side. "I guess I've never really believed in that stuff."

The woman smiled. "You should do some more reading. I can send you stuff."

"What are you *doing* in here? Do you just... like, come around and talk to retail employees?"

The woman looked around. "Are you busy with anything else?"

"OK, you got me there."

The woman sat down on the edge of a mattress and it bounced pleasantly under her. "Wait until I tell you about how JFK is behind a lot of it."

"A lot of what?"

"Alien stuff. I have some good info on this. That he's still alive and in touch with the aliens and trying to negotiate a peaceful way for us all to coexist."

"The whole headshot thing didn't deter him, huh?"

The other woman rolled her eyes as if Amy had said she didn't know how to read. "Oh, please..."

"Got a lot of arguments, huh?"

She shrugged and when she spoke her voice sounded like she was dreaming. "I'm taking a ride with 'em. They'll come down from the sky. Then everyone'll see. This time, it won't be so... ambiguous. It'll change everything. But I guess I won't be around..."

Amy didn't know what to say to this. She watched the woman as she spoke, the woman's face going from hard determination to a sort of wistful loneliness. Her eyes were expressive. Like pools of emotion. Amy wanted to look away. The other woman got off the bed and walked around again. She did not speak for a few minutes, then said, "You know, this used to be such a nice club. One of the better ones, I thought."

"I was too young to know it."

She turned and laughed a little, meeting Amy's eyes. "Oh, yeah. I knew it. Danced a fair bit for a lot of guys, myself."

"Huh. A dancer." Amy didn't know what else to say without sounding inappropriate.

The woman was facing the window again, her ghost shimmering translucent in the reflection of the glass. "I had a great love from here. Her name was Julie. She was the best dancer in the club and I thought she was just sexy as hell. When I first talked to her, I was so fucking nervous. I thought she'd, like, blow me off. Like she'd just laugh in my face or something. Laugh at just the *idea* of me being with her."

"What? You?" Amy had to stop herself from scoffing. "I mean, you're... well, you're like a *supermodel*."

But the woman looked to be on the brink of tears. If she heard the compliment she didn't give any indication. "We *did* get together though. We had fun. A lot of fun... we were planning on moving in together." The way she was talking was so fraught and delicate that Amy thought she could reach out and touch the words. It was a sort of doomed fatalism in the woman's words. Something that tugged at Amy's heartstrings. She felt the gnawing dread in her gut that Nate always said was a weakness. He didn't cry at movies, didn't like sentimentality for its own sake, said it just slowed people down.

The woman said, "But then the strip club closed and we were out on our asses. She lost a special ring of hers at the club right before, and couldn't find it. I think it might be in the walls."

Amy heard the missing pieces of the story in the woman's words and still felt the gnawing pull of dread and terror in her, because the woman wasn't steering it toward a happy ending. "Uh, is she too busy at a new job to come in and help you look?"

The woman had tears brimming in her eyes. Her whole form was still as a statue. "I haven't seen her in... God, maybe six or eight months. I've been looking. Thing was, she started looking at these really shady places, other strip clubs on the other side of town, right? And one night she didn't come home and her phone wouldn't work. And that was it."

"God."

The woman wiped her eyes even though they were still dry. She nodded and gulped for air. She went to the furthest wall by the bathrooms. Kneeling down she put a flat palm on the wall. "I think it might be behind this wall... might be buried."

Amy tried to stifle her chuckle and didn't know if she'd succeeded. "Uh, what?"

"My energies are telling me it's here. The ring."

"Uh... did they rebuild the walls?"

"I don't know. It all looks different now."

Amy approached gingerly, feeling like if she made any sudden movements there could be violence, like the violence lived just beneath the surface. "Uh, I don't know if that's possible."

The woman turned and blinked her heavy lashes at Amy. "Yes, but how do you really know what's possible?" The woman stayed there a few moments longer, but then stood up. "I hope you change your mind. Try and open yourself to the possibilities."

She said she'd be by again when she could figure out a plan. And then she was gone again, out into the coming dusk with its rosy pink edges and the traffic and the lights. Amy stayed at the desk and scrolled her phone. There had been something bleeding and pained in the woman's words, even through all of her talk of aliens and energies. She had lost something of herself here, in this dry gray mausoleum of mattresses. Amy thought of her own life and realized she'd never cared about anything as much as the woman cared for this missing ring of hers. She'd had the loud and raucous shows in tiny dive bars and the road and the memories of her and Nate entwined and entangled under tents and skies. But it all seemed temporary now.

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At home the apartment was lit up by the TV but her father was not sitting there. The TV mindlessly churned out the commercials for new vacuum cleaners, supplements for diets, hair extensions. There was a bowl of popcorn half-eaten on the table. And from the hallway she heard the wretching and heaving and hacking. In the bathroom, lit up unflattering by the white-yellow lights, he was sitting on the floor and his face was pallid, slick with awful sweat. He looked at her and their roles were reversed from how they'd been at the beginning of her life, him now the one helpless and in need, and she got on her knees and started helping him up. His movements were slack and weak and he felt like something had been excised from him violently. There was a smell in the air like death. Once she'd gotten him into bed she called the ambulance.

At the hospital, they said the cancer was agitated now. That they wanted to keep him for a few days in the hospital, see what kinds of med cocktails they could use to tamper it down and help ease the pain. That was how they kept talking – not about the cures but about pain prevention. Her father looked

at her with bleary eyes and told her she should just sleep in her own bed. He wouldn't hear of her staying with him. She had no choice but to go.

#

At work, as the night fell and rendered the store a box of light in the dark, Amy took turns sitting behind the counter and wandering lackadaisically amid the mattresses, lying on her back on them, trying to find God in the ceiling tiles. There was no noise except for the low hum of traffic from the adjacent roads that blended into the natural ambiance, the mechanical melange of sounds of the road, the disconnect of this series of strip malls and roads and crosswalks. She thought about how nothing was really natural anymore and mankind had commodified just about everything, even the national parks, even then you had to pay to get in and they had Coca Cola brands to drink. She and Nate had found places in the wild to camp and enjoy being away, but that hadn't lasted either. She didn't know why she kept thinking about him. If it worked out, it worked out. She'd had other boyfriends, too. He didn't have to be special.

Her phone buzzed and it was audible across the room, a thundering buzz. With groaning muscles she got off the mattress and walked to it. It was her father, telling her he was OK, they'd let him back out of the hospital in the morning. So life just continued.

The door creaked open behind her. The woman came in again, still put together so well, wearing a blouse that clung to her slender form with frills and tight black slacks and fancy sandals with ornate gold straps laced around her feet like vines. She looked at Amy with something like amusement and expectation. "Hope you don't mind I keep coming in..."

Amy rolled her shoulders. "Not like we got any other customers."

The woman shrugged and walked around like she owned the place, flopped down on her back on a mattress. "This can't be what you really want to do, is it?"

Amy felt a grin come over her. "No, I always dreamed of working at a mattress store. As a little girl, it was like my biggest fantasy."

The woman laughed and it was a melodious sound that seemed to light up places in Amy she didn't know she had. "You're funny."

"Thanks."

"What did you want to do?"

Amy sighed and felt the slump of her soul, felt the weight of everything. "I just want to play music, man. I was, for a while."

"I hope you can get back to it." She got up and wandered again as she always did. She went to the wall again. Kneeling down, she said, "I can feel that my beloved's ring is here."

"Man, I don't know what we can do about that."

The woman looked at Amy with bright eyes. "There's not much time, you know. We won't have to be here anymore if we don't want to."

Something cold ran down Amy's arms. "Uh... you're not talking about, like, suicide, right?"

The woman shook her head. "There's a ship coming down. I just have to get this ring first."

"You did mention a ship."

"It'll take me to the stars. It's coming here tonight and we don't have a lot of time."

"It's coming *here*?" Amy felt a flutter in her gut. Like she only had so much time to get ready for company. But this was a flight of fancy. She thought about calling someone but was unsure what good it would do. Some things, she thought, just clawed and fought relentlessly against being understood. The woman wasn't acting out and she wasn't deviating from her story.

The woman said, "We worked out the communications. That they'd come to these coordinates."

"Who's *we*?"

Her eyes were clear, lucid. "Me and the others from the group chat. We're all just... we're tired. I think the aliens could help me out. I was just hoping I could find that fucking ring before I go. If I have that, it'll be easier to show them what I want to do.."

"Show them..." Amy felt like she'd been drugged.

"I'm hoping they'll have the technology to show me what happened to Julie. We all want things. If we go with them, maybe there'll be some way to find what we lost."

Amy's phone was lying on the counter like a slug. No notifications in hours. She could picture Nate at some crowded bar, a place where there was no bare wallspace, all posters and odd graffiti, and maybe he was talking to some girl with pale skin and dyed hair, or maybe he wasn't. She hadn't been to open mic in a long time and she didn't know who she was anymore. She had been thoroughly *changed*, metamorphosed into some creature of sterile retail stores, and there was the phone with no notifications, and the Home Depot's pumpkin-neon-orange lights were still lit up across the four lanes

of traffic. And maybe that was why she cleared her throat and told the woman, "Hey, I think I have a solution to your problem here."

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They came back twenty minutes later with sledgehammers. They were heavy but Amy liked the feel of the weight. They took deep breaths and positioned themselves in the area where the woman said her lost ring was buried. The wall was blank and obstinate and Amy thought there was something so suffocating about it, about the whole place. This sterile place where nobody came. She might as well have been in a tomb, preserved for all of time. And the woman's aliens would find her a collection of bones and ennui. The mattresses would still be there. Still usable.

That thought brought the rush of heat to her muscles and she swung the hammer like a baseball bat. The feeling of connecting with the wall was exhilarating. The release of strength was akin to orgasm. The ultimate release. The collapsing of the plaster came like a storm. The woman did the same. The sound was a great muffled boom and now there was a jagged hole in the wall. The woman dropped her sledgehammer and got on her knees in the rubble of the plaster. Amy worried about asbestos. About the things that could assail one's lungs years away. She had not considered what they'd find. It had all been impulsive, just something released from her like an explosion or an exorcism.

But the woman was standing up, her pants knees white with dust. She was holding up something small and gold and, despite its dusty fade, still shimmering in those clinical mattress store lights.

Amy felt her breath contract. "Well, fuck."

"See? Told ya," the woman said.

They stood there in the rubble. The plaster dust was all over like spilled cocaine. They sat down on one of the mattresses. Amy looked back at the hole and let out an exasperated laugh that turned into a sigh. "I think I'm done here. Like, my boss's never gonna forgive me for this. Lucky if I don't go to jail."

The woman just shrugged. "The world's just a small piece of what might be. Do you know how vast the world is, how much more there is out there where we don't go? And you're worried about this job?"

Amy sighed and felt old. They sat there for a while until the woman said it was time to go outside.

#

Outside, the woman looked at the ring under the moonlight and the pale cold lights of the store sign. She didn't seem to register the rest of the world anymore. Amy looked at the store with a dry mouth. The whole thing had been pure impulse, and now she thought she'd made a mistake. But the place paid pennies and her father wasn't going to get better just because she stood behind this particular counter. She looked at the inside of the store, at the fluorescent tube-lights illuminating the snow-white mattresses, the beige carpeting, the plaster and the ruin they'd just wrought. There had never been anything here for her.

Amy spoke just because she had all of it inside her, didn't know what else to do with it: "I think I need to really reassess my... like, my whole *life*."

The woman nodded. "Don't we all?"

"D'you ever have the feeling that everything's just spun completely out of control?"

"Maybe you'll come with me to the stars. There's a whole infinity out there."

"That does sound kind of nice."

Her cell phone vibrated. A text from Nate had come in. *U want to jam tomorrow?* He hadn't invited her anywhere in days. But looking at the words on the screen, the old pull came back. Long nights up with him smoking weed and drinking cheap tallboys outside gas stations and motels or at the park. Sweat all over. Spontaneous sex when they could find shady places to go. The ringing of ears in dingy bars, barely able to tell what they were playing with the shitty sound systems and the reverb, but enthralled by the primal exhale. It all came back to her as if it were right there, as if she were transported, a whole life that had not meant much to anyone but them. They'd been ashes in the wind and no one remembered them and it was just fine to her.

She looked around her, at this concrete hell with its strip mall storefronts, these dumpy squares of concrete and wood with nothing to draw the eye, places designed to sink into nothing. There was a patch of woodsy forest behind the place just to lend some meager authenticity, and there was the dark and the dirt and the far-off trees with their eerie limb-like branches and covers of moss and leaves

creating strange sanctuaries. There was a sign advertising a new condo coming to the area and it made Amy's insides shrivel up.

There were some other vehicles in the lot, headlights off, dusky behemoths with shadowy figures. Another car, a sedan as old as Amy was, was pulling in. The woman was craning her neck, squinting her eyes.

Some people, when they saw the woman, began to get out of their cars. She looked at Amy for a second and then flitted off to join them. The figures were only half visible under the pale weak streetlights; they were men with plaid shirts covering burgeoning guts, women in faded jeans, older folks with long hair tied behind their heads. They all seemed convivial and friendly and they were speaking in low tones Amy couldn't hear. They knew the woman and it seemed they were treating her with a level of awe and celebrity, paying attention as she spoke.

Amy looked at her phone and thought about texting Nate. She couldn't think of what to say. She thought of his lean arms and that husky laugh from all the smoking he did. She thought of the way he was quick to laugh, but how the laugh wasn't always a terribly sweet or affectionate one. He'd kiss her on the head when they were in groups, whisper in her ear that she was his only girl. He'd leave in the mornings before she woke up with no note, and she wouldn't hear from him for hours after that.

In the sky there was a light that seemed brighter than the others. It was getting closer. Sound seemed to surround them from every side. It sounded like farm equipment. The roar of machinery. The light was as bright as a car's headlights, and only about 10 feet above them now.

The people in the parking lot were looking up with big eyes and rapturous gasps and exclamations. It felt sacrilegious to speak. Like she were in church.

Amy walked out in the lot on shaky legs and tapped on the woman's shoulder, and the woman turned with a kind of confidence that was not of the world, making her look taller. Amy said, "Will we be able to come back?"

The woman had been looking at the sky. She shrugged. "Maybe? Probably. Probably sometime, we will." It didn't sound like something she'd considered at all.

Amy thought about her father, about those bathroom lights and the gut-churning sounds. A feeling filled her of being needed and she realized it was the first time in years someone had actually depended on her. But the need had all become too much. There was a need for balance, for another bout of fucking off and doing things only for herself. But now she thought about this and felt a sting of guilt like a hornet had gotten her.

The white light was bright as day now, illuminating the whole field, the dead grass, patches of dirt, the empty beer cans by the edge near the road. The thing coming down was massive and smooth and colored a shade of silver that did not seem native to the Earth, too smooth, too bright. To Amy, it looked like a big egg. She couldn't tell where the light was coming from, but it emanated from the thing, strong radiant beams, the color of ice.

Thinking of going made an awful churning, rolling feel in her gut that made her want to vomit. Finally she knew she'd made a choice. She said, "I think I gotta take a raincheck."

The woman's face dropped. "Aw. You sure?"

"Yeah. Next time, though."

"Next time." The woman looked back and waved as she walked to the vessel. There was a rectangular black doorway opening up in the thing's side. There was a light inside and for a brief second Amy could see tall silhouettes coming to the opening in the vessel. There were three of them and they were slender, gangly shadows maybe seven feet in height. There was a stiff, awkward quality to their movements as if they were trying out brand new bodies for the first time, and they had such a severe *seriousness* to them, a commanding presence. A hush came over the world as the beings perceived Amy and the rest of the Earth. She was holding in her own breath.

But the things just stared for a moment as if trying to understand. The people in the lot were alight with attention. They lined up as if they were in a queue to meet a rockstar. The woman was in front. They all started to enter the vessel and there were no sounds of conflict, no cries of pain, the darkness a comforting womb to sink into. Amy watched them with wide unblinking eyes, afraid to miss a thing. The door began to close as soon as the last one in line was inside, and the egg-shaped vessel lifted back off the ground, kicking up a fierce wind as if it were a storm. It sailed back into the sky and was gone, a blip against the faded stars and the blue-black canvass of the night.

Amy blinked and ran a hand through her hair. She felt all her clothes against her skin intensely. She felt the cool breeze of the night. All of the places in the strip mall seemed mundane and ordinary but also wonderful in some abstract way. She stood out there for a long time.