

# *Promises*

## LEWIS SHINER

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Full formatting, spell check and read-through still required.

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"Now look, Bobby" the alien said. "If you promise not to tell anybody about this, we can do a lot of neat stuff for you."

"You don't have to talk down to me" Bobby said. "I'm almost eight." Bobby tried hard to look right at the alien's eyes and not let him know how scared he was. The alien looked just like anybody else, except for a weird greenish glow around him, kind of like an oil slick. His *aura*, the alien called it.

"I'm sorry," the alien said. "But it's true. We can do a lot for you."

"Like what?"

"Clothes. Your own TV. Stuff like that. What do you want?"

Bobby shrugged. "I don't know. Not clothes." He shook his head at the alien's lime-green leisure suit. "What are you—" He started to say "people," but that wasn't right. He couldn't think of another word, so he just left a blank in the sentence. "—doing here, anyway?"

"Well," the alien said, "it's a long story." The alien crouched down to be at Bobby's level, which only made Bobby nervous. It was something grown-ups did when they were about to try to con you. "We had to come here. We don't have any place to live anymore. We hoped we could come here and live in peace and nobody would notice us."

Another alien came over and asked the first one, "What is the problem?"

Now Bobby was really getting scared. He would never have been out here in the park this close to sunset except that his parents were still on vacation, and he'd felt like walking after school. Then he'd seen the alien and followed him, and now here he was.

He had the feeling he was in big trouble.

"It's the kid" the first alien said. "You know that aura problem they warned us about?" He stuck his thumb out toward Bobby. "They weren't kidding."

"So what do we do? Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah, but it's no good. And if there's one like him, there could be a lot more. I don't know, Sam. I just don't like it. I think maybe we ought to pull up stakes and try somewhere else."

"You mean ... you'll leave us alone?" Bobby said. He thought he'd seen something like a wink pass between the two aliens, but he couldn't be sure.

"It may be the best thing, kid," the second alien said. "But you'd have to promise us."

"What?"

"Promise not to tell anybody what you saw today. Promise, and we'll go."

Bobby thought for a second. His parents had always told him how important promises were, and this one didn't seem right. It was like when they had promised to bring him back a sea shell from their trip. They wouldn't forget something like that, and Bobby knew that if he promised he would have to stand by it.

"How do I know you'll go?" he asked.

They glanced at each other, then back at Bobby. "We'll show you the ship. You can watch us take off."

"Where is it?"

"Over here." They turned and walked across the grassy slope to a stand of trees. Bobby followed, and when he got right up to the edge of the woods, he saw something silvery back in the shadows. Bobby stared at it and made out the shape of a flying saucer, just like they had in the old movies on TV.

"Remember, kid," the second alien said. "You promised." The two of them slipped into the woods, and a few seconds later Bobby saw the machine rise into the darkening sky.

Bobby ran all the way home.

When he was halfway down the last block, he saw a familiar station wagon in the driveway and knew that his folks were back.

"Guess what!" he shouted as he ran in the door. "You'll never guess what happened to me today!"

"What's that, Bobby?" said his father, standing in the doorway to the living room. For just a second he had the light behind him, and Bobby thought he saw a greenish glow around him.

"Nothing," Bobby mumbled. "How was your trip?"

"Fine, Tiring. You wash up, and we'll tell you all about it at dinner."

"Okay." He started to turn away, then said, "Dad? Did you ... did you bring me anything?"

"HmMMM. What do you mean?"

"Never mind," Bobby said.

"Is something wrong?" Bobby's father stared at him, real hard, and Bobby felt his throat swell up so he could hardly swallow.

"No," Bobby said, and went back to his room.

He closed the door and opened the curtains and looked out at the stars. He kept thinking he would see one of them move, but of course none of them did. That would have been too easy, and Bobby suddenly knew that nothing was going to be easy anymore.

"I never promised," he said to the night sky. "I never promised."