

# Unreliable Witness

By Jo Walton

15 January 2001

I don't know if this is the same tape as last time, because They keep moving things around and stealing them. I don't know who does it. It may be the staff here, or my own family when they come to visit, or the aliens, but somebody's always doing it -- taking my glasses, my tapes, my TV remote, anything I put down for a second. I don't think it's the other residents. I used to think that, but I don't think they're that organised. Some of them are a bit senile, to tell you the truth, can't remember what they're talking about, never mind that it's time to go and steal my biscuit. They're not methodical enough to plague me like that. Still and all, whoever it is, I've managed to get a blank tape and the machine at the same time. I tested it and heard my horrible quavery voice, but it works.

Straight in then, straight to it, who knows how much time I have left before somebody bothers me. My name is Katherine Whippleshaw, and I'm eighty-nine years old. Last week I was visited by an alien.

He said his name was Tom. I'd never seen him before. He looked years younger than anyone I've seen for months. He looked as if he was about twelve. He put his head around my door and said "Mrs. Whippleshaw? Can I talk to you?" I agreed, of course. It's very boring in here. People treat me as if I'm an idiot. It's not just stealing my things. I mean it's very annoying that anything gets stolen if I let it out of my hands for a second, but I've learned how to cope. I keep my handbag on my shoulder, and the remote in one hand all the time, even when I'm eating. Oh, and my glasses on a chain around my neck. That was Kim's idea. Kim's my granddaughter. She's very clever. She gave me the chain. I was disappointed at the time because it wasn't a book.

At one time, even after They'd got at all the other books in the world and made the print jump up and down, Kim could still find me books I could read. I remember the day even she couldn't find any any more, when she brought me a new Anthony Burgess and the lines were wriggling. I could have cried. Well, I did cry. I didn't behave well at all. I didn't even feel as bad as that when John died, as if there was nothing at all worth carrying on living for. I used words I've never used, words I'd heard men on the sites using, wasn't even sure what some of them meant, but I shouldn't have said them to Kim. Kim understood I was just upset and frustrated, but Janice was there, and Janice thought this was a sure sign I was losing my mind. Oh, wait until you're eighty-nine, my proper little daughter-in-law, wait until They're conspiring against you and taking your books away before you're so quick to judge.

Janice is part of the conspiracy, I think. She talks in code. She spells words out,

and speaks in French. I think this is a blind meant to put me off. Richard had the grace to look uncomfortable when they shuffled me into this place and stole my books. Oh, they'd already replaced them with ones with wriggling letters, all but the ones where the print was too small to read even with strong glasses. But I liked to have them around me. Kim understood. She picked out a pile of my favourites and brought them in for me when her parents weren't there. She brought me this tape-recorder and some books on tape. It's not the same, but by God, it's better than nothing. She's a good girl, and she knows what I like to read. That's more than Richard does. Dick Francis, he brought me. When did I ever read Dick Francis? All about horses. Well.

"I taught you to read myself," I said, "and now you're taking my books away."

"You won't have room for them, Mum," he said, looking down, sideways, anywhere but at me. "You'll have your television. You like your television."

Well, yes, television, good enough in its way. Full of rubbish but it doesn't talk to me as if I'm a three-year-old, or as if I've suddenly split into twins. "How are we today?" I can't bear that. At least it's something else, people talking, stories, and nobody's managed to steal it from me yet. They do steal the remote so that I'm stuck on a channel I don't want and miss *The X-Files*.

*The X-Files*. Yes. The alien. Tom. He pretended to be a kid at first, but I was suspicious straight away. As soon as I outright asked him if he was an alien he admitted it.

"How did you learn our language?" I asked him.

"From TV." He shrugged. He sounded sort of American, with an accent that didn't seem to come from anywhere in particular. "I never thought you'd guess," he said. "I thought it was a good disguise."

"You should have come as a doctor. We don't see kids in here often." At that time I thought it was a better disguise than it was, that his real shape was fifty foot high and green or something of that kind.

"Oh, but I could never have passed for an adult." When I looked sceptical, he added, "It's only the outside that's the disguise."

"I don't believe it." I looked straight at him. "You mean there are a race of aliens that look enough like us to pass? That's nonsense. I may look like a senile old woman but I'm not as ignorant as that. I've read science fiction. I know that the chance of that is like the chance of going to a random island in the Pacific and finding people who talk with a Bronx accent."

I thought he'd lie and say that the human shape is the evolutionary stable or something of that nature, I remember how people get round these things in books. In films they don't bother. At that point I thought he was a kid fooling, even though I'd seen right through that in the first five minutes. Instead he lifted up his T-shirt and showed me the other head he had underneath. Horrible thing, squirmy, not keeping still.

"Are you the one who's stealing my stuff?" I asked, keeping a very tight grip on the remote.

"No, Mrs. Whippleshaw. But I know who it is. If you'll tell me your secret, I'll tell you that." He pulled his T-shirt down again, thank God, I'd seen quite enough.

"What secret?"

"Why, the question I asked when I came in." I couldn't remember. That isn't senility, by the way, when someone can't remember something, or my daughter-in-law Janice has been senile since Richard first brought her home, and she was only nineteen then.

"I asked you what it is to be old," the alien prompted.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked.

"Well, our people don't do it. We live to breeding age, we have children, and then we die. We're much more intelligent than humanity, as a species; we have all sorts of things you don't have, technologically. We use singularities to travel between the stars. But we die at the equivalent of your age forty. So do all the other races we know, somewhere between twenty and fifty. We want to know the secret of longevity from you. If you don't mind I'd like to take a sample."

I held out my arm and he popped a little needle against it. I hardly felt it. "There isn't any secret," I said, as he was doing it. "Heart keeps on beating, you keep on living."

"But we don't." He sighed, and put the needle in his pocket. He didn't look like a kid at all when he sighed. "We don't have old age. We just die, our minds turn off our bodies when they've done breeding. That's what our animals do too. Everything in the galaxy, so far, except for humans. It's not good enough. We'd all like to live longer lives. We've been working on longevity for years, and then we find you. What makes you want to carry on living? I mean, here you are in this horrible place with yellow and brown wallpaper, eating tasteless mush, hardly seeing your family, never seeing your friends. I know it isn't your choice. But why don't you just give up and die? What makes your heart keep beating? Ours don't."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Poor little aliens who can go faster than light and just curl up and die.

"What's that noise you're making?" he asked. "I always thought it was interference on TV." I can see why he thought that too, horrible laugh tracks they have on some programs.

"Just laughing," I said. He looked puzzled.

"Maybe we live to be old because we laugh," I said. "But really we just do. There isn't any secret. There are plenty of times when if I could have just stopped my heart and died I would have." When John died. When They changed all my books. Christmas Day last year when They stole part two of the Robert Jordan tape Kim had brought me. They never gave it back either.

"I hope the sample helps," he said, shifting a little in a very alien way.

"Why did you pick me?" I asked. "And what if I tell everyone?"

"Nobody will believe you," he said. Then I heard the nurse coming down the corridor. He looked that way guiltily, and took a step away.

"Not so fast, young man," I said. "You told me you were going to tell me who's stealing my things."

"You didn't tell me your secret," he said. As if there was any secret. "But anyway, nobody is. You just think things are being stolen because you can't keep track of them."

He left then. Tom. He didn't keep his part of the bargain at all, just the same old lie I get from everyone about it. He just walked out of the door and didn't come back. I tried to tell people about him, but he was right about that, they didn't believe me.

"M-A-D," Janice said, signalling with her eyes to Richard. "Le Nutso. Le crack finale." She's the one who's mad if you ask me, thinking that Franglais would fool anyone. But I admit saying that an alien has been to visit me sounds odd. So I'm making this tape to explain it all.

And I have a new theory. I think the people who are stealing my stuff are trying to find out about the aliens. That's probably why They usually bring it back and scatter it about in different places. They're not stealing it because They want it, They're searching it for alien information. That doesn't explain why they take

some things so many times and other things only once, but perhaps They're not very bright. Perhaps they're the NSA, or another lot of aliens, I don't know. But if I leave this tape lying around, They'll find it, and take it. Then they'll know the truth, and maybe They'll leave me in peace for a while. If Tom comes back, or I meet any more aliens, I'll make another tape. So just leave everything alone except tapes marked with an X, all right? Do we have a deal? I'll tell you anything about any aliens that come to visit me, and you stop stealing my things.

Copyright © 2000 Jo Walton