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Fallow Earth

The spaceship crashed through the tree tops, splintering the boughs of a gangly locust, and landed in the Olentangy River on top of Mr Joyce, which was okay with Nick and me, since Mr Joyce was drunk most of the time and liked to flick matches at Nick when we waited for the bus.

Nick looked up from his pile of skipping rocks, then back down again. I dropped my reel, tossed my ponytail over my shoulder, and watched the six-inch wave slide down the river. Splinters of wood spun through the air, while steam rose from beneath the spaceship.

It was built to resemble an old Volkswagen Beetle. The paint job was good; they'd even added rust around the wheel wells. If I hadn't seen the vapor trail and heard the sizzling as it sliced through the atmosphere and crashed on top of Mr Joyce, I'd have thought it was some old car Harry and Egan had rolled down the hill below the Case Road bridge.

I slipped down the slope to the bank where Nick was piling his skipping rocks. I followed the bank upriver to within fifty feet of the ship, then I had to step into the deep part of the river. I heard Mama's voice in my head, and I felt her husband Ernie's swat on my butt as my shoes sank into the mud of the Olentangy. They'd have a fit if I tracked dirt into the trailer.

The Olentangy was a broad, slow river. I could walk it from the trailer park to the reservoir dam, two miles north, stepping from flat rock to flat rock without getting the tops of my knees wet. Up by the spillway was where the sporting fishermen cast, catching the occasional walleye. Down here by the trailer park, we got mostly small bass and bluegills.

The water hissed from beneath the Volkswagen spaceship. Its single occupant, a figure slumped over the steering column, looked like a man. He had a head with hair, not at all what an alien should have looked like.

Dirt swirled in the water, masking the river bottom, and I flung my arms out to balance myself, finally grabbing the doorframe of the Beetle. I saw Mr Joyce on the other side, face-up in the river. The ship hadn't landed on him after all, just near enough to the old drunk to knock him down and out. He hadn't drowned because he'd landed on his back on a wide, slimy stone.

The window of the Bug was open. I peered in and caught the odor of old vinyl. The alien's Volkswagen was well made. I popped the lock and pulled the door open.

The driver was dressed in tan slacks and a light tan jacket. He had on Nike shoes and a black belt. Horn-rimmed glasses, like the ones my real dad used to wear when he was young, were tilted across his face.

I leaned him back and noted where the skin had fallen away from his face to reveal red flesh. An alien, as I suspected.

What the hell was that?

I recognized Harry's voice up the slope, heard the rustle of brush as he and Egan came to investigate. Harry was fifteen, a year older than me, but because he'd flunked the fifth grade he was going to be a freshman just like me in the fall. Harry had started some nasty rumors about me because I let him touch my breast during truth-or-dare the summer before. That wasn't the only reason I hated him. I sure didn't

want him finding the alien. Harry had once forced three younger kids to hollow out a pile of concrete blocks; he'd threatened to beat the kids up unless they spent the day hauling rock for him. They'd done it too. Harry was a user, with no conscience. I decided to help the alien out, at least until he could take care of himself. Maybe I could help him with his mission or something. This was the most interesting thing that had happened all summer, and I wasn't going to let Harry spoil it.

Come on, fella, I said, tugging at the alien's arm. Let's get you outta here. I didn't want to see the alien cited for hit-and-run. He needed to be someplace safe until we could clear this all up, get him back to the mother ship.

He groaned, but he moved, his eyes half-open. His legs splashed in the water and he nearly fell, but he leaned on me and we managed to stumble away from the spaceship.

Nick watched us for a moment, then returned to piling the skipping stones. We called them skipping stones, not that he'd ever throw them; he just collected them. He'd had me throw one once. I slung a beauty, fifteen skips at least before it sank to the bottom of the Olentangy. But then he became angry when he realized it was gone. I'd had to wade in and find a stone that looked reasonably close to the original. Now, we didn't throw them at all. He made piles.

I dragged the alien onto the bank, where he slumped onto the muddy sand. From the other shore, I heard voices. Harry was just beyond the tree line. I saw his red-and-white middle school jacket between the vines and short maples.

Nick, help me get this guy up the bank, I said.

Nick didn't look at me, but I knew he heard. He can fool Ernie, but I know him too well. I kicked him on the butt with my wet tennis shoe.

He grunted. Help me, I said.

Together we rolled the alien up the gentle slope and over its far side. When the river was high, it would flow around the little peninsula where I liked to fish. On the far side were rocky puddles where a few crayfish lived.

What the hell?

Harry was wading into the river toward the car. I picked up my pole and cast a line into the river.

Harry circled the spaceship while Egan sat on the shore tossing rocks onto its hood. Harry peered into the front seat. He reached in and touched his finger against something on the steering wheel: blood.

Then he looked around and saw me.

What happened, Priscilla? Did Mr Joyce drive his car into the river?

Dunno, Hairy. He knew I was mispronouncing his name, though I didn't say it any differently. When he'd started those rumors, I'd made sure everyone knew what I thought of him. Egan snorted.

Cars don't just fall outta the sky, Cilly, he said. He took a step toward me.

I reeled in my line and didn't reply.

Where's the driver? He took another step.

Dunno, Hairy, I said and cast my line toward him. He jerked as the red-and-white bobber fluttered in the

river a few yards from him. After our truth-or-dare adventures, he'd tried to press his advantage down by the river. My hook had caught his cheek just under the eye. He still had a puckered, pink scar where I'd yanked it out.

Screw you, Cilly, he said.

The alien was sitting up. He had smoothed the skin back into place, and there was no mark where the cut had been. He smiled brightly and I would have been convinced that he was some ugly guy who'd driven his Volkswagen into the Olentangy if I hadn't seen his gnarly red flesh.

There were other things that marked him as an alien. His face was lumpy below the cheeks and his neck seemed to be thicker at the top than the bottom. He looked human enough, and you'd just think he was ugly if you passed him on the street.

Thank you, little boy,

Save it for the Galactic Council, I said. I know what you are.

What do you mean, young man? he said.

I'm a girl, you dork. Any human male would know that.

His shoulders fell. Oh.

Yeah. So, you might as well 'fess up. You here for First Contact?

No. I'm on Earth illegally.

I refrained from the pun. If I'd said it at the dinner table, Mama would have snorted milk out her nose and then Ernie would have choked on his pork chop and then Nick would have started laughing because everyone else was.

So, there's no take-me-to-your-leader thing that you have to do?

No, I need to talk with your scientists. I need to redirect ... He was staring over my shoulder. For a second, I was worried that Harry had snuck back to spy on me, but it was just Nick. He was piling his rocks next to the limp elm that had rooted itself on the peninsula.

Hey. Redirect what?

Is ... is ... he *broken*?

I stared at him, unsure what he meant, until I realized. Yeah, Nick is slow. So what?

I knew about ... I just never ...

Don't you have retarded aliens? I was getting annoyed with this guy. I figured that a representative from an advanced civilization would know how to behave around someone like Nick. I expect Harry and his friends to make fun of the little yellow school bus, but from aliens I guess I expected a little more.

No, of course not. I'm sorry. I ...

Nick wasn't paying too much attention to the alien. But the alien was all eyes for Nick. I snapped my fingers.

So what are you doing here? You need to talk with Earth's scientists. You need to warn us about a supernova? Help us stop war? What?

No, nothing like that. I've got to change the direction of Earth's research.

Are you bringing high-tech gadgets that will give us cold fusion, nanotechnology, quantum computers? My real dad had given me one gift in the past ten years, but it was the best gift ever: a subscription to *Discover*. I'd been paying for the subscription myself for the past three years, but I still thought of it as Dad's gift. If it weren't for him, the deadbeat bastard, I'd never have gotten into the magnet school.

That's exactly the sort of technology I need to steer you *away* from!

What sort of alien are you, anyway?

I'm a ... teacher.

I glanced over at the Beetle. You get shot down?

Yes.

Air Force? NATO?

The ... farmers tried to stop me.

Farmers. I sat back on my heels. I had the image of Hubert Erskine taking a pot shot at Herbie as it sailed over his soybean fields. You mean something else than what I think farmer means.

Yes. Earth's protectors.

Uh huh, I said. My alien had run a blockade to get here. Interesting, but still a little lame. I was half-tempted to put him back in his car and let Harry find him. So, what exactly is it you want to do here on Earth?

I need to write anonymous letters to leading scientists, asking certain questions that will direct their thoughts toward key areas.

I looked him up and down. It was a slow summer, and this seemed like a pretty good diversion.

So you'll need a place to hole up.

Yes. And stamps.

The Mingo Concrete company had a factory about a mile from the trailer park. It was a small factory where they cast sewer segments, six feet long and interconnecting.

Some time ago, lost in local kid history, someone stole a steel wire reinforcement cylinder from the factory. They'd rolled it away from the factory site and into the woods, in what must have been a daring feat. Then they'd put it on its end and used plywood and plastic to build a two-level fort. These kids had grown up, left for college, and the fort had become overrun with thorn bushes, until you couldn't tell it was there.

Now it was Nick's and my fort. Maybe other kids knew about it, but I never saw anyone else there. We'd found it when I'd first got the Boy Scout handaxe I'd sent away for; it had cost twelve bucks, which was half a summer's worth of lemonade stands, lawn-mowing for Nick (under my guidance), and dog-walking. I'd used Nick's name on the order form since I wasn't sure about the correctness of a girl

buying a Boy Scout gadget. When it came, we were eager to chop something down, anything, and had set out for the woods.

We'd found a maple with a trunk three inches in diameter and set to chopping. It was harder work than we'd thought and we got only a quarter way through before we gave up. We decided to look for something easier, and, seeing the thorn patch, we started blazing a trail. Unfortunately, the bushes were as hearty as the maple, not coming off in instant bails, but leaning against each other with clasped thorns.

After we cut a few bushes and pulled their carcasses out, I spotted the shape of the fort. We suddenly had a destination for our trail. The work became a little easier.

The fort was rusted, moldy, but instantly desirable.

We cleared the orange shag carpet, limp, moldy *Playboys*, and Rolling Rock bottles out, and made it over into our own place, with a nine-volt radio, a homemade telescope, and sporks from KFC.

It seemed to suit the alien too. We gave him paper, pen, envelopes, and a roll of stamps I stole from Ernie's night stand. We borrowed our sleeping bag for him to sleep in. He used the lower, darker level for sleeping, and the upper, cramped level for his correspondence.

Each day, he wrote out long letters on a legal pad, with tight print. We collected them and left them in our mailbox for pickup.

He wrote a lot of letters. To MIT, Caltech, Harvard, and Princeton. We had to get airmail envelopes for his letters to Cambridge and the University of Tokyo. When he wasn't writing, he'd talk with me. He never spoke to Nick. We learned his name was Bert. He liked classic TV, especially *Gilligan's Island*, because he used the show to teach the futility of organized action among classist herds. He was one of a long, well-known line of aliens. He liked warmer weather. He didn't agree with the Farmers.

So why did the Farmers shoot you down?

The Earth is our restricted planet.

Your restricted planet? No one told us.

It's one of the fallow planets for this portion of the galaxy.

Which means you ignore us.

Oh no, Bert said. We do not ignore you. How do you think I know English? It's our common language.

English is the galaxy's common language? Wouldn't Mrs Moore, my composition teacher, be surprised.

Just a small part of it. You're our source for a lot of things.

Beer? Cows? Women? What could we humans provide that these aliens didn't already have? Comedy. It must be comedy.

Bert looked at me flatly. No, it wasn't comedy. He licked the envelope with his too thin tongue and handed it to me. Tomorrow's post, please. I handed the letter to Nick, and Bert recoiled as if it hurt him that something he'd touched had then been touched by something broken. He never looked at Nick, never talked to him, not even out of politeness.

Don't you have slow people where you're from?

He shook his head.

Must be nice to be from an alien society.

He seemed to recognize my sarcasm. It's not like that. We have problems. That's why I'm here.

What problems could you possibly have? I considered a world where Nick was whole.

Bert was more animated than I'd ever seen him. We are all the same! We have everything we need and no cares for our own survival. There is no drive for growth, no need to create. We are as dead as he is. He pointed at Nick.

Fuck you! I yelled. Nick is alive. You may wish he was dead, but he's alive!

He blinked at me, then looked down. I am sorry.

Yeah, see ya tomorrow. I'd seen a lot of reactions to Nick, but the alien's was something new.

When Ernie came to live in the trailer with Mama, he never called Nick any names. He didn't ignore him; he sorta looked at him as a toy. He'd hold out his hand and say, Slap me five. When Nick would try, Ernie'd pull his hand away. Nick would laugh every time, until Ernie said, Now you hold out your hand. Nick didn't have the sense to move his hand from the snake-like strike. He'd smile a little, then look at me as he rubbed his hand. Hold out your hand, Nick, Ernie would say again, and I'd have to distract them, somehow.

Hey, Ernie, I think NASCAR is on, or Nick, is that the school bus? or You guys want another Coke? I hated thinking about what happened when I wasn't there.

I'd mailed about a dozen letters over a week's time when the Farmers showed up. You'd think they were insurance men or Jehovah's Witnesses, but I knew what to look for. Their cheeks were bumpy in the wrong place like Bert's, and their necks were too wide at the top.

I was coming out of our trailer, down the black metal stair specked with rust, when I heard Harry say, That's her, there. The two Farmers fastened their gaze on me, and I stood like a statue. I hated Harry more, which I'd thought was impossible.

We understand you saw the car land in the river, one of them said.

Nope. The gravel of the driveway seemed to poke through my shoes.

Yes, she did, Harry said.

Nope.

We're looking for the driver, said the first alien.

To ask him some questions, added the second.

Or her, I said. Coulda been a woman driver. Them being the worst type of drivers. They faced me with blank stares. No senses of humor, just like Bert.

We're very interested in what you saw.

Nothing, I said, but they were crowding close.

Could you talk with us in our car, please? The second took my arm. We can offer a cash reward.

Just then, Nick clomped down the stairs of the trailer, and I slipped free. This is my brother, Nick. Have you met him yet? I shoved Nick into them, and his arms came up around his head. They didn't like it either, once they realized they were dealing with a broken human. They couldn't tell a boy from a girl, but they spotted a broken human right away.

We're sorry, they said as they backed off.

Nick and I watched them get into their car and drive down the stone gravel road. I gave Harry the finger.

I know you know something, Cilly.

That'd be the only thing you do know, pudd'n head.

He sauntered off.

That day, the Farmers hired Bubba's to tow the car. We watched from the woods. Bubba'd brought the smaller truck, the one with the tilting flatbed. The Farmers must not have explained it to him, since he started cursing when he saw the VW in the middle of the river. He cursed the whole time he waded across the river.

Harry and Egan watched from across the river. Harry had his eyes on the Farmers. I wondered if he could see the oddly shaped necks, the too high cheekbones? Probably not. Harry was keen on the weaknesses of others but nothing else.

Well, that wasn't true. Once we'd worked on a project together, Harry and I and a group of people. We'd been in the sixth grade, and we'd gone over to the USDA facility and used their electron microscope to look at spores. We'd made a couple of trips into the woods to find samples, and Harry, off by himself, had found the best ferns, long, arcing, feathery plants, like green fire. He was brushing the back of them gently with a collection tray, intent, when I walked up. He turned, saw me watching, smirked, capped the sample, and tossed it to me. He'd thrown it so hard, I'd juggled it, and almost dropped it. He pretended he didn't care about it, but I'd seen how he'd carefully gathered the spores.

That was a long time ago, long before the truth-or-dare incident. Harry had changed since then. I watched him watching the Farmers, scheming. Mr Joyce was there too, pestering the Farmers about his back pain after the Volkswagen had fallen on him. The spaceship hadn't caused his problems; cheap bottles of Mad Dog 20/20 had done his back in, as well as the rest of him.

Farmers came to look for you. And they towed your spaceship.

Bert nodded. I knew they would. But I'm safe here, I think.

Yeah, they don't like retards either.

You're being purposefully cruel. I knew it was possible among outsiders, but not those of your own family.

He's my brother, and I can do what I want with him. Nick was below, piling his skipping stones. He'd carried two jeans pockets full of them from the river.

Bert frowned, then returned to writing his latest letter.

What're you writing? I'd asked before, but he wouldn't show me.

A letter to Doctor Robert Cutter at Vanderbilt University.

What are you talking about in your letter?

He didn't respond at first. I'm asking questions that will expand his research into key areas.

What areas?

I can't explain.

You're writing a long enough letter to Doctor Cutter. How come you can't explain it to me?

He said nothing.

What's wrong with where we're going now? Robots, computers, nanotechnology. What's wrong with that direction?

We already *have* advances in those areas, Bert said. We need advances in other areas.

What other areas?

He folded his sheets of paper into an envelope, sealed it, and handed it to me.

I come from a tightly woven family. We have a long lineage, well-known for our teaching, he said. When I was young, I lost my father. This is not a common thing. We have long lives, made longer and safer by technology. We should have lived long lives together, son, father, father's father, and several generations, in a chain. This is how our people live.

When I was just a student, an accident severed the chain. Certain rites did not occur. Certain things did not happen because of his death. Our culture is more ritualized than yours.

Like graduation? We'd had a small graduation ceremony at middle school in June. They'd played music and made us walk in line with a double half step instead of a full step.

Yes. Everyday is like graduation. The grandfathers tried to make do, but I felt my father's absence strongly. Each father is a bridge to the past. My link was sundered.

I came here ... to find help.

I looked at the letter in my hands, confused. There's no help here for that.

His eyes were fierce and glassy. Yes, I know there is hope, and my hope is here on this fertile, fallow planet. He pulled out his legal pad and began addressing a new letter.

Come on, Nick, I said.

Bert had such faith in human technology. He believed that we could solve his father's death. But we couldn't solve death. Mama took us to church sometimes, but I could see that was hogwash. What god would allow a person like Nick to exist? None that I cared to worship.

We passed the tree that we had once tried to chop down. It was brown, dead. We'd severed the trunk enough to kill it; it stood leafless while the trees around it were emerald green and full. Nick pressed his hand into the grey mouth we had cut.

I slapped the letter against my palm. How could we help Bert? What did he think we could do for his

father now?

Halfway to the trailer, I opened the letter. I was so engrossed as I read it, that I must not have noticed Harry.

What the hell is this?

I stood on the ladder leading to the upper level of the fort. Bert looked at me blankly. I'd scrambled through the briars to get there, and there was a huge thorn poking through my jeans into my shin. I ignored it as I waved the letter in his face.

Those are my private correspondences with leading scientists of your world.

My mouth wouldn't work, I was so angry. Finally, I held the paper in front of my face and read, I respectfully ask how one might gauge the magnitude of spiritual manifestation based on ganglion density in the cortex? Clearly a dog has less ghostly presence than a human. Is it tied to brain size? Is it linear? Is it related to some other parameter, such as sexual audacity or emphatic quotient? Find attached a chart of data that I have compiled. What the hell is this? What do you think scientists will do with this crap?

I hope to direct their thoughts toward areas of fertile research.

You'd rather have them studying ghosts than computers?

We already have computers.

What about medicine?

Bert looked away. That has no impact on us.

Then do your *own* research! Let us alone! Why use us for this crap? This won't help us.

We can't do our research. We're ... sterile, while your planet is not bound by our culture, by our ritual. We have medical advances. We have nanotechnology. We have no disease or ... retardation. And we pay for that in stagnation. You're wild, alive. You have no bounds, no millennia of civilization to bind your minds.

When one of us wants something, we ask for it and it is given to us by machines that care for themselves and us. If you want something, you have to build it. You have drive, while we have stasis. You have—

Nick had stopped playing with his skipping stones. He moaned softly, peering out the door. A thorn had grazed his cheek as he'd lunged after me through the gateway.

I saw a shape moving beyond the thorn bushes.

Cilly ... I know you're in there.

To Bert, I said, Hide. To Harry, I shouted, Beat it, you sack of goat vomit!

What're you hiding in there? he sing-songed.

Your penis, but it was so small I lost it in a thimble.

Egan and he were crawling on their bellies toward the fort. We got you now, Cilly. You can't hide your friend any longer. His face was stretched up, grinning.

Back off, Hairy, I said, glancing around. I couldn't run without leaving Nick and Bert alone. Bert I didn't care about anymore, but Nick was no match for cruelty. And there was no easy way through the thorn bushes, except for the way Harry was coming.

Leave us be, young men, Bert said.

I told you to hide, you freak! I said.

Is that the driver of the car? Harry asked. Why are you hiding him here? He was almost to the point where he could stand up.

He's an alien spiritualist, I said.

Yeah, right. I don't care what he is. Those guys said they'd give us a hundred bucks if we brought him to them.

You can't count to a hundred, I said.

Keep talking, Cilly, he said, standing, pulling a knife out of his belt.

Behind me Nick, or maybe Bert, was keening.

Something whizzed by my head, and Harry yelped. He dropped the knife and reached for his forehead where a red welt had appeared. Another rock flew at him, and he ducked.

Ouch!

I turned as Nick flung another skipping stone at Harry. The sharp edge caught his wrist and he shrieked like a kid. He turned and dived on Egan, trying to evade the rocks.

Nick threw one at Egan and caught the corner of his eye. Egan buried his face in his hands and started scrambling back the way he'd come. The two of them disappeared into the brambles, then ran when they could stand.

Nick threw rock after rock until I knocked the pile of stones away from him.

I screamed at him, Those are skipping stones, you retard! And then I dove through the thorn bushes, ignoring the thorns, and ran for the trailer.

Ernie and Mama shared a pull-out bed in the living room. Nick and I shared the bedroom in the back. Above the door in our room was a small storage alcove that you could reach from the top bunk. I threw the box of old games onto the floor and climbed into the space, hunching my shoulders.

Screw Hairy, screw Bert, and screw Nick, I thought as I jammed my knees into my chin. Screw the goddamn Farmers. And screw me for believing in ... what?

Fairy godmothers. I was on my own. Just like the whole Earth was. We were some Amazon rainforest to be mined for valuable technology. An Amazon brain forest. And they wanted us to invest in studying ghosts.

They lived where Nick could never happen, like gods. Then they came here to have us look for ghosts instead of doing medical research that could help our own.

I wasn't any happier in my hiding place. I was just angrier. I slid down, walked around back of the trailer to the train tracks. Every night at two in the morning, a freight train barreled down the tracks, headed for

Columbus. I could sleep right through it, without a twitch. They probably didn't have loud trains on Bert's planet.

I followed the tracks, stepping from tie to tie until I reached the trestle. Graffiti stretched across the iron I-beams and concrete pylons to every spot reachable by a spray can and an outstretched arm. In the shade of the trestle down by the river, Harry and Egan lounged.

Harry pressed a tissue to his forehead.

I dropped down, hanging by my arms from the trestle, and landed between them.

What the hell do you want?

Those guys give you their number?

He looked at me, then said, Yeah. So?

Give it to me.

No.

I picked up a skipping stone, prepared to throw it. Nick had done this same thing — threatened someone with a rock — and I had yelled at him. I felt disgust. The stone slipped out of my hand, and I turned to go. It was time to find Nick, tell him I was sorry, and get him home for dinner.

Wait, Harry said. Why do you want it? He's worth a hundred to us.

I said, I'll split it with you.

Harry looked at me a moment longer, then nodded at Egan. He handed me a card with a handwritten number.

We called from the bait shop.

Egan had to cut out for dinner, but Harry stayed with me until the two Farmers showed up. Their black Lincoln raised a white cloud of dust as they entered the trailer park.

You have information regarding the driver? one asked Harry.

I do, I said. I can hand him over to you.

Where is he, little boy? he asked.

I'm a girl, you moron.

Of course, he said.

Come on, I said, and we led the pair into the woods near the casting factory.

They balked at crawling under the thorns, their bodies too stiff to bend, but finally they got on their bellies and shrugged their black suits through the dirt. Nick and Bert were standing at the front of the fort, both with the same blank expression.

The Farmers are here, I said.

Bert nodded.

They stood without dusting themselves off, staring at Bert. One motioned at Bert. He stepped forward like a fish on a hook. They turned to crawl back out.

Hold on, I said.

Yes?

There was a reward, I said.

One of the Farmers pulled out a wallet and reached toward me with a smooth hundred dollar bill.

No. I want more.

The alien's arm stopped, frozen. Bert looked at me.

Little girl, the agreed amount—

You made a deal with *him*, I said, nodding toward Harry. And I know what you are.

They didn't reply.

I know what *he* is. I know all about what you're doing to us.

Give her two hundred, the other said.

No, I said. I know you're Farmers. I know our world is fallow.

They just stared at me, but Bert's face had the start of a smile.

I know your secret, and my silence is expensive. What do *we* get out of this arrangement? Short lives, poverty, mental retardation. Did we choose this? Don't we deserve the same lives as you? Doesn't *Nick*?

I pointed at my brother. He stood watching the aliens. Sometimes there was something behind his brown eyes. Sometimes he understood, and it all made sense to him. It was like looking into the center of the sun with the Ray-Bans melting off your face, and then it was dark again. Empty, like there'd never even been a spark. But sometimes ...

The aliens' gazes touched him and turned away.

Nick wouldn't exist in your world. There's no broken things, and you take all our best ideas. My throat was hoarse. You don't even pay the price! I shouted. We pay the price and we have all the costs! You owe us! You owe *me*!

I poked Bert in the chest. You can't use us for your own ends and not pay.

We're sorry, Bert said.

Yes, aliens are very advanced in the field of apologies, I replied.

We stood for several minutes, silent, even Harry, until they nodded.

How much for your silence? one said.

A million, I whispered, so Harry couldn't hear, snatching the two hundred dollar bills from his hand. I gave one to Harry.

Agreed. I watched as they led Bert through the brush.

Harry looked at me, then at the bill in his hands. Those were aliens, he said. He'd never understand, I thought, as I took Nick's arm and dragged him home for dinner.

It's hard for a fourteen-year-old to explain several hundred pounds of gold, so Nick and I slipped away after burying most of the thin sheets of metal under the fort.

The aliens hadn't bought my silence. They couldn't take away the fact that I knew they were there. Nick didn't care, or maybe he did. He got on well in the programs I could now afford. I let him be. I wanted to be his protector, but I knew he'd have to make his own way.

I wrote letters of my own, to all the people Bert had sent them to, and others, undoing the damage. Maybe they thought I was a crackpot too, but I think I changed some course of thought. Somewhere.

And if not someone else's mind, my own was changed. It was our field to plant, ours to harvest — no matter who was looking over our shoulders.