

# *We Have Met the Alien*

*by Nicola Griffith*

Anna lay on her back and watched moonlight snail-trail over the crucifix, down the wall, across the green cotton of her coverlet: light from the sun, a star on the other side of the world, streaming through space and bouncing down from bare rock. Onto her bed. No-one she had ever met cared about that; they smiled and said, All God's creations are miracles. They would all be asleep--her parents, the nuns, the girls at school--they slept half their lives away.

Nearly a year ago, she persuaded her father to drive her to an amateur astronomers' meeting. The people there knew the names of things but apart from that they were the same as everyone else; their minds never made the lightning leaps, the sudden oh! of wonder. She did not go again. The day after, for the first time, she stole from her mother's purse.

Out there, somewhere, there had to be one at least who understood. She looked at the crucifix. Not God. She had given up trying to talk to him a long time ago.

She pulled the bottle out from amongst her schoolbooks and drank.

Anna got up at six in the morning; she could not steal any more money for a while, her mother might notice.

She rubbed her palm over the cedarwood cabinet in the living room and curled down onto the carpet. She eased open the door.



Bottles clinked; minutes slinked by. She slipped her hand between the shapes on the shelf, stroking square-cut decanters, squat liqueurs, slim exotic spirits, seeking and pouring: apricot brandy, just enough to wet the bottom of her tonic bottle; a dribble of Irish whiskey; a fat slug of port and burble of cider; spikes and splashes of vodka, sherry, aquavit.

Three inches of hot honey heaven lay in her hand. She sniffed it and smiled; juices roiled in her stomach. She slid the bottle into her dressing gown pocket and stood: almost time to wake her parents.

At the breakfast table Anna endured every crunch of cereal, every rustle of the newspaper. The bottle was in her school bag. Soon.

Her father paused with a spoon halfway to his mouth. "Idiots."

"What is it, John."

"Just look at this."

Her mother looked. Anna did not bother. She knew what it would say: more UFO scares. Some editor had decided it was time to dust off Monsters From Outer Space. The Express had been following the story for the last two days.

"That paper gets more tabloid every day," her mother said, pouring tea. "We really should get something more educational. For Anna."

"She doesn't need anything more educational, do you love?" He smiled at Anna. "We'll get a good report from your teachers tomorrow night, won't we?"

"Yes," she said.

Anna breathed through her nose so no-one would smell the fumes curling down into all her empty spaces. The blackboard hummed; chalk dust vibrated gently over its surface; Sister Michael's hand glided along railing dates and places, kings and queens. A smile tugged at Anna's eyes, her throat. She could do anything: dabble her fingers in the black and chalk, tease out history like taffy and wrap herself in it. Anything. She was different, alien. She needed nobody.

Then it was Latin. The teacher talked.

Each sentence separated, solidified, shouldered upward: a sequoia cathedral. Anna ghosted through the trunks. She remembered the tabloid.

(Is anyone else there?) Her call glittered and sparkled as it burst up through the canopy.

(Yes.)

Joy burned inside her like a star: cold, and too far away to touch.

(Are you coming for me?)

(Yes.)

She drifted on, content.

Anna pulled down the toilet lid and sat on it. She took the bottle from her bag, hefting it in her hand. The weight reassured her. Cupping her lips around the neck she opened her throat to the Fist of God: a hand pushing down, coiling round heart, lungs, stomach. She breathed, drank again.

The door thundered. She put the bottle back in her bag.

"Where've you been?" Una pushed in, took a pack of cigarettes from her skirt pocket. "The prefects are everywhere today." She lit up, dragged deep. "Here."

Anna took it. Smoke chased fire down her throat. She blew, dragon-wise, at the door.

Una took the cigarette back. "You going to the disco Friday?"

Anna stared at the tiled floor. Girl-girl whispering, boy-boy horseplay, warm coke....

(Please. Come before Friday.)

"Maybe."

"Do you want to stay over? I can persuade Mum and Dad."

"I'll have to ask."

(Can you help me?)

"Here." Una blew smoke from the corner of her mouth, handed over the cigarette. "Parents' evening tomorrow, we better not be late for class."

Anna stared at the television. It pushed its way into every corner,

overwhelming her, filling the room with its noise. She fidgeted. The bottle in her bag was almost empty: only one lip and tongue and mouth full left until dawn. If only they would come.

"This is interesting, Anna." Her father sipped at his whiskey and nodded at the science programme on the screen. Her mother read. "But I suppose you know it all. Got it out of one of your books."

He took another sip. "You know, I'm very proud of you."

(Please come.)

(Soon.)

"Thank you," she said.

"So," he gestured at the screen, "what do you make of all this nonsense about reaching other planets?"

He stood up and refilled his glass. Her mother looked up, frowned, went back to her reading. He sat down again.

"I mean, do you think men'll ever be able to live on the surface of Mars?"

(Is it possible?) she asked them.

(Does it matter?)

"Yes," she said.

"But what would they do with their time? Be bored to death in six months."

Her mother laid aside her book. "And how would they worship?" she asked softly.

Anna lay rigid on her bed, feeling her bones trying to creep from her limbs. Did they have limbs? The moon smoked through the darkness: their great cosmic arlight.

(Please. Come for me now.)

She lifted her bottle and swallowed.

(Soon.)

The last mouthful wormed thinly under her tongue making her cry out for more: gulps, pourings, cascades of its wild lightning streaks to jag through the thick night of her head.

(I need you.)

She listened: nothing but hissing, llickering static. Gently, the

night took her ankles in its mouth, lipped its way to her knees, swallowing, swallowing.

Anna stopped in the doorway.

Her father rose from his chair by the cabinet. "Sorry love, didn't mean to startle you. I couldn't sleep."

Her hand clenched around the empty bottle in her dressing gown pocket.

(Help me.)

He moved over the where she still stood by the door.

(...may not be able...)

"Come on," he led her towards the kitchen, away from the cabinet, "let's make some coffee. We've got a while until breakfast."

The fork in Anna's hand quivered over the swollen stream of cafeteria noise. Without its hot living snake, her gut fluttered like cast skin.

(Please!) she called. (Where are you?)

Nothing. She tried to eat then laid her fork aside.

(What's happening?)

(Leaving...) Very faint.

Leaving. Leaving her alone again; empty, so very empty in her head, no-one to share with, no-one even knowing what she had lost.

(No!) She knocked her chair backwards. Several people stared. (Wait! Take me with you...)

She ran to get out under the sky. She ran and ran, knocking people aside, punching open doors with her knees, her hands, her hips. The air hollowed by, roaring. She came to stairs: too slow.

And then it was time, time to trust them: there was another way. Her toes curled over the edge of the top step, her calf muscles bunches. Now. The waiting was over; she was alien, like them. It was time to fly.

(I'm in your hands...)

And turning, diving, sliding through a carousel of flashinglight silentsound, she crashed.

"Anna..."

She lifted her head, saw Una's shoes.

"God, look at your arm."

Anna looked. Her wrist was swollen and blue.

(It's not mine. I'm flying.)

Anna lay on the floor, drifting with the music around the corners of her room. With her good hand she lifted the bottle; the snake slithered strong and muscular down her throat.

She heard her parents returning.

"Anna!" her father called up. "Are you coming down?"

Anna stared at the ceiling.

"Don't you want to hear all the good things your teachers had to say about your schoolwork?"

Anna drank again, her head sleek with silence.

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### *Story Notes*

*I wrote this story at Clarion, in 1988. I was getting very little sleep, I was in love and knew there was trouble ahead, I was drinking a lot of beer. I began to see my life differently. I realised, at age 27, that I'd started drinking as a fourteen year-old, at a Catholic girl's school, because I knew I was a dyke and I knew I couldn't let anyone know and that the best way of hiding myself was to simply not be there, to obliterate myself on some level. I did that successfully for two years. Then I found a girlfriend who was braver than I was, and I passed*  
*(cont'd)*

*my sixteenth birthday and therefore became invulnerable to family court proceedings. (It happened to my elder sister.) My drinking tapered off to normal crazy teenage social levels. Things turned out much better for me than for Anna.*

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