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Email: jimmy@mammothcheese.ca

Web: <http://www.mammothcheese.ca>

MOONSHINE

James Gordon Bailie

A riverbank tree had been blown down in the storm. Robert and Douglas McKenzie had heard the crack and subsequent crash from their open bedroom window. The next day the brothers rode their bikes down the riverbank path and found the felled tree. It was one of the tallest in the wood, and obviously quite old and quite dead. The herbageous scent of the still-wet forest and the darker scent of exposed soil filled their nostrils. Under the giant knob of the tree's up-ended roots the brothers discovered a brownish rusted tank with a round opening in its middle. The boys put their heads through the aperture and discovered it led into a hollow saucer-shaped case, and further determined, to their great disappointment, that it contained no alien skeletons.

The brothers told everyone at their school about their spaceship and claimed it for their own under the ancient law of finders keepers, losers weepers. After school, they took a delegation of two boys to the riverbank to verify their discovery and silence the scoffers. This clinched it. The McKenzie brothers became schoolyard celebrities to the true believers, of a stature the scepticism, chuckling, and head-wagging of their teachers could not diminish. The boys had seen the spaceship with their own eyes, touched it with their own hands, smelt it, kicked it, and spat in it.

For several days afterward, Robert's imagination was alive with images of spaceships roaring across blue skies and crashing spectacularly into the ground. He worried about how badly the aliens had been injured. He wondered if they had died suddenly, or if they had died slowly, suffering from terrible wounds. Because the ship had been lodged under a tree, Douglas reasoned the ship must have crashed there before

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the tree had sprouted. The boys' parents smile at the dinner table when confronted with this indisputable logic.

"Sure sounds like an old storage tank to me," said their father.

"Maybe it was an alien storage tank," added their mother, diplomatically.

The exposed metal object remained visible to riverbank travelers for ten days. To the adults who passed it everyday in their jogging attire, the object was an ugly hunk of scrap metal. Indignant taxpayers called the city to repair the path, and the Public Utilities Commission dispatched a team to comply. The interior and the surrounding soil were examined for traces of contaminants. When the rusted container was declared safe to move, a path was cut through the woods down to the riverbank. Holes were burned into the metal, chains attached, and the rusted remains dragged to the side of the road. A crane-truck hauled the object away, while men with shovels and chainsaws cut-up the tree and filled-in the hole.

The recovery and disposal of the spaceship happened while the boys were in school. When they discovered the calumny of the Public Utilities Commission, Robert and Douglas were incensed. Like all their age, they waited restlessly for the day when the onerous restraints imposed upon their appetites by the adult world would be lifted, and the marvelous adventure could begin. The brothers longed to cross the frontier and live a grand drama, like those found in the science fiction movies and video games they loved. They longed to recklessly pilot fast spaceships with powerful laser-weapons, and to fire those laser-weapons at the spaceships of evil-doers, relishing the subsequent fiery explosions for their own sake as well as for the triumph of the just they represented.

The morning after it had been hauled away as junk, Douglas McKenzie became a doubter.

"It was just a storage tank, after all," he stated, as he walked to school with his brother.

"No," resisted Robert. "It was a spaceship, and the government took it away because they don't want us to know about the aliens because they're afraid we'd be afraid of them."

That was what they had agreed-on the night before.

"If it was a spaceship, it would have had engines," said Douglas.

"They might have been blown off, and that's why it crashed," countered Robert.

"There would have been computers inside, too."

"Oh," said Robert, crestfallen.

He felt betrayed by his brother's sudden opposition. After a minute's thought, he asserted, "Everything inside was burnt-up by lasers, and all that was left was the outside part."

Douglas ignored his brother and moved over to the gutter to kick stones down the road. Robert walked in sullen silence. He was smiling again by the time they reached the school, and ran behind his brother across the thick summer grass of the schoolyard.

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The brothers rode down the riverbank path into the swaying shadows of the leaf canopy, through the cooler air beneath the overhanging

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branches. They rode over the wide depression where the ship had been. They felt the sceptical adult world reach down to them through the wide track of broken plants and flattened young trees that now stretched up from this place to the road. They swung around with the bend in the river. The sun glinted off the green water and dazzled their eyes. The brothers rode up and down the rolling path and out into a grassy clearing, emerging from dappled shadow into blinding sunshine.

They let their bikes fall on the grass. Douglas lay down on his back, and folded his arms underneath his head. Robert copied his brother. The bumpy earth dug into their bodies.

"When I grow up, I'm going to be an astronaut," said Robert, "and I'm going to find the aliens."

"What aliens?" asked the newly-sceptical Douglas.

"The aliens who drive the UFOs."

"UFOs aren't real."

"Yes they are, and I'm going to prove it," said Robert.

"You can't prove something is real, if it isn't."

"Yes I can!"

An urge came over Robert, and he decided to let it have expression, despite foreseeing dire consequences. He clumsily punched Douglas in the side of the face, then jumped up and ran away. He stopped at the edge of the clearing to see how determined Douglas was to give chase. This allowed Douglas to catch up and grab his brother's shirt.

"Let go of me!" There was fear in Robert's voice.

Douglas pulled his brother off-balance and jumped on him, putting a knee on his chest.

"Ow!"

"Only babies believe in UFOs," Douglas declared, pushing his knee down for emphasis. This was a variation on what a teacher had told Douglas: only crackpots believe in UFOs, but he knew accusing his brother of being a baby would hurt him more.

"Get off of me!"

"No. Are you going to cry?"

"No," said Robert, as tears were pushed out of his eyes by the power of suggestion.

"Liar! You're a cry-baby!"

"I am not," sobbed Robert.

Satisfied that his brother was crying, Douglas got up and walked to his bike. He lifted it off the grass, put a leg over the seat and said, "I'm going home. I don't hang around with cry-babies."

Robert stopped crying immediately, sat up, and watched his brother ride away. He walked to his own bicycle and followed behind.

When Robert got to the depression in the ground where the ship had been, he stopped. The bicycle tire tracks cut deeper into the soil there than on the hard-packed path. Robert absent-mindedly pushed his bike back and forth with his feet and fantasized about growing-up and gaining power in some unspecified way which would allow him to humiliate Douglas until he cried. He looked up the cleared path to the road and saw cars go by. He looked up into the clear blue sky and wished the aliens would come down now and prove everyone wrong who doubted their existence. He rode home, pushing hard against the pedals to get there fast.

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When he reached the house, their mother stood at the front door. She was waiting for the pizza delivery person. She had seen the car with the pizza company's logo drive past the house, and had come outside to flag him down when he came back this way. Delivery people often had trouble finding the house because the street on which they lived connected to another with the same name. Theirs was a street, and a dead-end, while the other was a court.

"It's time for you to wash your hands for dinner, Robert," she said.

Their father was seated in his place, reading a newspaper. Douglas was setting the table. A large pitcher of ice water stood in the middle of the table. The boys' mother came to the table with two white pizza boxes.

"Dig in, guys," she said, setting them down.

"Here, Robert," Douglas offered, flipping open the top box. "Hold your plate up so I don't get stuff on the table."

Robert smiled and did as he was asked, while Douglas dragged two pieces of pizza onto the plate. The boys' mother took glasses and filled them with ice-water. Douglas took two slices of pizza for himself. Their father took two slices. The boys' mother took one. There was one left in the box.

"Here, Robert," Douglas said, lifting the last piece onto his brother's plate.

Robert smiled gleefully at his good fortune.

"Thanks," he said.

The boys' parents' eyes met, pleased with their son's kindness to his brother.

"The paper says your spaceship was actually part of an old still," the boys' father revealed.

"A still what?" asked Robert.

"Just a still. It's an apparatus for making hooch."

"What's hooch?"

"Booze," answered Douglas.

"Homemade whiskey," their father added.

"Oh," said Robert.

"Someone, a long time ago, made moonshine down by the river. This land wasn't part of the city back then, during prohibition."

"Cool," said Douglas.

"What's prohibition?" asked Robert.

"It was a time when it was illegal to sell alcohol. People made it and sold it secretly and made a lot of money."

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The dark mass hovered to a standstill over the two brothers. They gazed up at its underside and saw only shadow. A white dot appeared and began elongating into a crescent. The crescent waxed to a circle, and both brothers were lifted off the ground. Douglas grunted and growled. He thrashed his arms and legs in resistance, but Robert just stared up at the light as he rose.

Robert awoke suddenly. A full moon had turned the boys' bedroom silver. Douglas's bed was empty. The covers were pulled back. Robert panicked, believing Douglas had been abducted by the aliens in his dream. The house was silent.

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He got out of bed. The floor was cool against his bare feet. In the hallway, he heard faint sounds coming from the kitchen.

Douglas stood in the light of the open refrigerator, eating a slice of cold pizza. He turned to Robert.

"Hungry?"

Robert shook his head.

"Suit yourself. This one's Hawaiian. It's got pineapple and ham."

Robert advanced to see these phenomena for himself.

"Maybe I am hungry," he said.

Douglas opened the pizza box with his free hand. Robert broke a slice free from a pool of congealed cheese.

"Come on. We have to get back to bed before Mom and Dad hear us."

"Oh. I remember now! I just had a dream we were sucked-up into a spaceship. It was just like *Alien Armada*, only we were in the game, only it wasn't a game. It was real life!"

"It was just a dream, Robert. It wasn't real."

"I know. I'm saying it was for real in the dream. I know what's real and what isn't, you know. I'm not stupid."

"You're just a little kid," said Douglas, dismissively.

The boys rode their bikes down the rolling riverbank path, through the flickering shadows, until they came to an area of grass hidden behind bushes. There they unpacked the picnic lunch their mother had made for them. There was cold fried chicken and potato salad and apple juice.

They devoured their lunch in silence, throwing the chicken bones out into the green river. While they were thus happily occupied, a couple of kids came down the path from the opposite direction. The brothers could hear the newcomers passing and receding into the distance, but they did not see them.

When they had eaten their lunch, the light had changed. The sky above the two brothers was now bisected into a solid region of dark blue-grey raincloud and a region of clear blue sky.

"We should go home before it rains," Robert declared.

Douglas looked up at the sky. Without speaking to his brother, he turned and began parting the bushes heading back to their bikes. Robert followed behind. Douglas did not wait for his brother, but rode off ahead. Robert followed. The storm came upon them quicker than expected. Light rain began to fall. The forest canopy protected the boys from most of it. Then the rain quickened into a downpour, and the wood was alive with a confusion of pattering. The boys were soaked to the skin. The sun's light filtered through the storm in an imitation of twilight. Colors intensified. The shadows in the wood became silhouettes.

Douglas got far ahead of Robert. Robert stopped riding and stood there on his bike, awed by the spectacle of the storm and the transformed woods.

The rain soon dragged him out of his reverie. His clothes and hair were heavy. He reluctantly resumed pedaling, keeping his head down in order to see the path. Lightning lit the wood white for fractions of a

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second. Thunder cracked in response. The rain flowed down and mangled the world in Robert's eyes.