

# GET IT OUT OF ME

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer



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She is lucky, Beth knows. Lucky to have been artificially inseminated, lucky to be part of the trial program, lucky to no longer be barren. But she doesn't feel lucky as she emerges from the examination room, where she catches her reflection in one of the mirrored columns of the waiting area and sees only frailty, qualmishness, infirmity.

Doctor Lairman talks as he escorts her out. He talks and talks, leaping from one subject to another like a bee pollinating summer dandelions. About human cloning and why it will never be an ethical nor practical solution to human infertility. About how it would require the sacrifice of too many failed embryos to achieve a single viable specimen. About the interior design of the clinic, which is too cold, he says—as they pass several other seated patients, all of them women—too sterile.

He escorts her all the way to her car, where she pauses before getting in, concerned that she isn't showing, even at 16 weeks. Her dog, Frodo, looks on, even as Dr. Lairman assures her that she will; that all tests are normal. They are distracted by a commotion at the door to the clinic: a little girl, exiting the building with her mother, wants to take a doll from the office. Her mother is saying: "No, no, sweetie. That doesn't belong to you. It belongs to them."

The girl runs up to Lairman and hands it to him. He examines it. "Oh, no. This won't do at all. This child is much too pretty." He hands the doll back. "She is clearly not ours. But I dare say, she looks a lot like you."

The little girl beams; her mother smiles. So does Beth, admiring Lairman. The mother and daughter leave as he greets an arriving patient, another woman of about thirty-five. As this woman is attractive, and Beth is attracted to Dr. Lairman, she makes special note of her.

Beth and Dr. Lairman say their goodbyes, and she drives off. She cannot help but glance in her rearview mirror as he puts a hand on the woman's shoulder and escorts her into the clinic. Then she drives past a guard post and a sign that reads: Nellis Air Force Base. And the desert swallows her.

THEY ZOOM ALONG THE deserted highway, Frodo sticking his head out the car's passenger window, Beth talking via cellphone with her mother—who does not approve of her daughter's decision to have a baby out of wedlock, even if doing so will benefit science.

"...what about Arnold?" she continues, hearing nothing Beth has said. "He seems like such a nice boy. What? Not loser enough for you? Or are you running for head of the misandrist club?"

The diamond-shaped novelty sign—BABY ON BOARD—swings from the rearview mirror, clicks against the plastic. Beth sighs. There are flashing lights ahead of them; they are approaching what appears to be a roadblock.

"I'm not a man-hater, mother. I just ... don't trust them. You were lucky enough to find a good one, that's all."

She slows to a halt, joining a long line of vehicles.

"And you think you can trust a woman just because she's a woman? *Ay Yai Yai.*"

They all wait in the sweltering sun as a State Trooper moves up their ranks. Frodo pants as Beth lights a cigarette—she is watching the trooper as he works his way toward her, allowing some vehicles to continue while redirecting others. Beth's mother says: "Was that a lighter I heard? Are you smoking again? You know that isn't good for the child."

The air shimmers with convection waves due to the heat and the idling cars. It appears many of the motorists are not happy with the trooper's directives.

"Are you stuck in the '50s?"

Beth doesn't say anything, only scans the area, noting a small car sitting nose-down in the ditch, covered with a tarp—as well as a large motorhome parked on the shoulder. A helicopter pounds past, leading her to notice other choppers in the distance, crossing each other's paths, flying in circles. There are men in what appear to be surgeon-green chemical suits spread all along the horizon.

The State Trooper, who is suddenly at her window, startles her. She hangs up on her mother. Composing herself, she asks him what on earth has happened. He explains that there's been a motor vehicle accident involving industrial chemicals, as well as a prison escape, and asks to see her driver's license.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No, ma'am. It's strictly routine."

He attaches her license to a clipboard, appearing to cross-reference it with something else. She groans and puts a hand to her stomach. He scribbles a few notes, glancing at her from under the brim of his Mountie hat. At last he hands her license back.

"You're good to go. Drive safely." An instant later he adds: "You're smoking for two, you know."

She looks at him, perplexed.

"Your sign," he says.

She nods and smiles uncomfortably, drives forward.

As she cruises past the ditched car its covering catches the wind and lifts, revealing that the vehicle's roof has been ripped clean off ... and that the rent metal is spattered with blood. A shorn lock of matted hair fidgets skittishly in the breeze. She gasps, continuing—passing the RV, the windows of which are tinted—then watches through the rear-view mirror as the roadblock shrinks away—shimmering like a mirage, blending back into the sand and scrub.

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DUSK, IN THE MIDDLE of nowhere. Beth pulls into a rest area and shuts off the engine. Helicopters can be heard in the distance; Frodo whimpers and whines. There is a drone of crickets as Beth leans against the wheel. The place is abandoned save for a single pickup and camper.

She sits back after a moment, stroking the dog's neck, and rolls her head to look at the truck. It sits silently in the twilight about a hundred feet away: quiet as a tomb, with no sign of a driver. She experiences a

wave of nausea—which sends her hurrying toward the restrooms—as the sound of the choppers rushes closer.

She collapses over the toilet, vomiting repeatedly, as the helicopters thunder overhead. The pounding of the rotors diminishes as she spits and wipes her mouth. At last she reaches up with trembling fingers and flushes the bowl, and the water swirls down, gurgling. She slowly catches her breath. The crickets drone and Frodo barks. She sits on the floor with her back against the cold cinderblocks—notices a shoe covered in green plastic just outside the stall.

She looks up. An eye is visible between the doorjamb and the wall. It blinks as she shrieks and suddenly disappears.

She shrinks against the cinderblocks, whimpering. Seconds pass as her breath comes and goes in fits. Finally, she eases forward on all fours and peeks beneath the door.

Nothing.

She opens the stall and creeps out. Cautiously, she inches her way outside, reemerging into the twilight. The pick-up is still there. She walks quickly toward her car, never taking her eyes off the camper. She gets in and slams her door, locks it.

She starts the engine, still looking at the camper, and revs it a little. A lamp turns on inside the rig. Seconds later an old man peers out the riveted window. She picks up her cellphone and points at it, smiling. He disappears for a moment— then reappears with his own phone. He nods and smiles innocently.

Beth flips him the bird and starts to tear from the parking lot, then backs up suddenly and jots down the man's plate number. He looks out at her from a different window, no longer smiling, as she peels out of the rest area. Then she is back on the road, dialing 9-1-1 as she drives, wondering if she saw what she thought she saw ... which wasn't just an eye but an eye staring out of a mask—stoic, featureless—its color that of turquoise surgical scrubs.

A DESK OFFICER ANSWERS and Beth explains to him what has just happened. The officer seems concerned, asks if she wrote down a license number. Yes, she says, and reads it to him. He puts her on hold.

She notices a bright light—or lights—further on up the road. She shakes a cigarette from her pack, proceeds to light it. The BABY ON BOARD sign flaps in the wind. She glances at it ... and lowers the lighter.

The desk officer returns to the line. He says they'll investigate but downplays the event's importance. "At worse he was just a dirty old man. At best, someone who thought you needed help. We'll send out a car, just to be safe."

Beth feels herself calm down considerably; indeed, a kind of post-stress euphoria seems to have set in. "You can't very well send the helicopters for every Peeping Tom, can you?" She laughs.

"No, ma'am. You have a good evening now. And drive safely." There is something familiar about the desk officer's voice.

As she draws closer, she realizes that the bright lights are a combination of police lights and construction floods. Tragically, there appears to have been yet another accident. She slows to a crawl as she arrives at the scene ... is waved around it by a state trooper, at which point she observes a small truck spun around on the shoulder—with a tarp draped over it—and a group of men garbed in green chemical suits, their faces hidden from view just outside the light. They are huddled around something on the ground, which is obscured by their legs, something blackish and twisted, small. She slows way down as a white sheet is lowered over it and is quickly stained through with red. The program on her car's radio has broken for the top-of-the-hour news; the announcer is talking about human torsos found in the rubble of a building in Syria. It is at this instant that she recognizes the shoes of the surrounding men—shoes covered in green plastic—and nearly stops.

"Move along, move along," prompts the trooper—whom Beth realizes is the same one from earlier in the day. "Remember to drive safely," he adds with a wave.



She faces forward again—and sees the motor home from the first accident. It is parked on the shoulder, just as before. Apparently, it was involved in this incident too. For the first time she notices the small parabolic antennae mounted atop its roof.

Frodo whimpers and collects his own spit; Beth shakes her head. "You can say that again, kiddo."

And then they are clear and picking up speed, the accident quickly vanishing to a point of light behind them, and it isn't until she has begun nodding off at the wheel that she realizes the state trooper's voice and the desk officer's voice were one in the very same.

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A NEON SIGN: VACANCY. Beth pulls into the lot of a ramshackle roadside motel. She shuts off the engine and gets out, starts walking toward the door to the office—and pauses. She looks around the lot.

The wind has picked up considerably. A section of newspaper skitters past ... a styrofoam cup bounces serendipitously across the pavement. The VACANCY sign buzzes. Beth's car is the only one there. She goes in, finding the little office to be silent as a tomb, and rings the bell.

Waiting, she glances at a magazine lying on the counter. Its cover boasts a photo of bright lights on the desert horizon. Its caption reads: "Nevada's Area 51: What Exactly Are They Doing Out There?"

A two-way radio seated in a battery-charger on the counter suddenly squawks to life, and Beth jumps. She catches bits and pieces of a broken transmission—something about having "secured grid 12" and "Zebra Base confirms I.A.C. entering grid 7"—before an old woman snatches it up, turning it off, and apologizes for the noise.

The two women quickly warm to each other as Beth pays for a room and is given a key. The old clerk encourages her to use the pool before "Andy" closes it for the night. Beth says she will, indeed.

As she leaves, the woman asks, "How's it feel?"

Beth just looks at her. "I'm sorry?"

"Your bundle of joy, there. How's it feel?"

Beth is taken aback. "But I'm not even showing!"

The old woman smiles. "It shows in your eyes. Your face."

"It's terrifying," Beth says at last. "Being an expectant mother ... isn't at all like what I expected."

The woman seems to think about this. "Nothing ever is. And nothing's ever easy, or cheap. But make no mistake: that's a gift from above you got there."

Beth smiles, then leaves, colliding with Andy in the doorway. He is clearly smitten by her. He is also clearly developmentally disabled. The old woman tells him that Beth will be using the pool before closing time, "so be sure to have it open for her." Andy, excitedly, assures her that he will.

Inside her room, Beth dials Dr. Lairman, but only gets his answering service. She leaves him a rather desperate message, pleading that he call her as soon as possible. Sitting at the edge of the bed, she turns on the radio and pets Frodo absently.

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SHE IS STANDING BEFORE the bathroom mirror. Untying the belt of her bathrobe, she allows her garments to slide to the floor, revealing a white bikini, then weighs herself: 115 lbs. She gives her smallish breasts a gentle heft; she is most definitely not showing. The phone rings and she rushes toward it.

"So, do you get a charge out hanging up on your poor mother like that?"

Beth exhales, then explains to her what has been going on. Her mother is horrified. There is the sound of helicopters in the distance, which grows louder and louder as they talk, ultimately making the conversation impossible. At last Beth promises to call her tomorrow and hangs up.

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SHE DIVES INTO THE water and surfaces, wearing swimming goggles and nose plugs, then does the backstroke down the length of the pool, gazing at the clear night sky. She turns her head slightly to one side—sees Andy at the edge of the water. Staring at her.

She quickly hides her body beneath the surface, looks up at him.

He asks her if she knows what that luminous band across the sky is. She shakes her head.

"It's the Milky Way," he says. "It's where we live. There's less light pollution out here, that's all. So we can see it."

Beth calms down and looks at the starry sky. "Anybody out there, you think?"

He nods absently. "Not us."

She stares up at him through the goggles and he stares back. "'Not Us?'" she asks.

He shrugs his shoulders and looks back to the sky, then wanders off. Beth watches him go, then looks to the sky herself.

A moment later she jumps off the diving board and penetrates the water like a knife. She swims below the surface, passing the round portal-lights which burn eerily in the haze, then rolls around onto her back.

A figure is standing at the edge of the pool, watching her. It is not Andy. The cone-headed shape is clothed in surgeon-green plastic and is wearing a stoic-faced mask of the same color. There are two others accompanying it, one to each side so that together they form a triad. Beth cries out beneath the water and surfaces.

The figure is gone. She coughs and gasps, then paddles toward the edge of the pool. There is a sound of helicopters in the distance, which grows louder by the instant. She gazes at the sky as she bumps against the edge.

Andy taps her on the shoulder and she spins around.

"*Them*," he says. "I've got to close the pool now."

SHE LIES BACK IN BED, staring at the ceiling, as a low-flying chopper rattles the panes. She isn't feeling well at all. Frodo lies on the floor, whimpering and whining. The sound of the choppers continues as she places a hand over her stomach, groaning, until at last the helicopters pound into the distance and she bursts into tears.

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IT IS THE NEXT DAY. It is gray out. She is on the road again, listening to an AM talk show as she drives along. Frodo hangs his head out the window, tongue dangling. She is feeling better. She passes a sign that reads: OPEN RANGE, NEXT 10 MILES.

The topic of the radio program concerns human cloning and the problem of needing so many hosts to achieve a single successful embryo. As she drives along, listening, she passes a dead cow off to the side of the road. Through her rearview mirror, she watches it disappear behind her as the talk show continues: "I mean, where is this all going? Are we going to just keep birthing mutated babies until we finally see something we like? What of all the rejects? Do we just truck 'em to the baby dump?" She shifts her gaze back to the road.

There is a human body there.

She cries out, yanking the wheel. The tires of her car barely miss the body as she careens off the road and stalls. She collapses against the wheel. The radio program drones on.

Finally, she gets out, and Frodo follows. He meanders into the desert as she walks slowly toward the body, the breeze blowing her hair across her face—draws steadily toward the nude, broken corpse of a twentysomething-year-old woman, lying face down in the gravel.

She looks after Frodo; he is out toward the horizon, sniffing at something on the ground. She halts near—but not too near—the cadaver.

It lies there in the gray light, flies buzzing all about it, its flesh bluish-white, its hair black and matted. It is bent back upon itself like a ragdoll.

Beth peers both directions along the length of the highway, seeking help, but is utterly alone. The only sound is that of the flies.

Cautiously, she nudges the body over with the tip of her shoe.

The woman has been gutted of her reproductive organs—which causes Beth to leap back, clasp her mouth. Frodo barks in the distance as Beth realizes that she recognizes the woman. It is the attractive gal from the doctor's office. It is the woman she'd made special note of.

She glances toward the dog as he excitedly trots up. He has an umbilical cord in his jaws. He is dragging along a human fetus.

Beth screams as he drops it at her feet and it spins like a top. The fetus is horribly mutated and appears to be only partly human. She backs toward her car, horrified, as he picks it up again and runs toward her. She screams at him, getting in the car, then starts the engine, causing the dog to drop the fetus and leap inside. She tears away from the scene.

Inside the moving car, Frodo immediately gives her a big sloppy kiss. She curses and hits him, hard, then shoves him into the backseat. He lies down, whimpering and whining, eyeing her dolefully.

She zooms down the road like a maniac, gasping and crying. Frodo suddenly sits up, staring up through the windshield, snapping and growling. Beth, still hysterical, swats him down. But the dog persists.

"Stop it! What is the matter with you?" She follows the direction of his gaze.

There is a huge, black, triangular-shaped *thing* outside; it is above the car. It is keeping pace with her. She suddenly grunts and doubles over, as though kicked in the stomach. Although she is in excruciating pain, she glances upward again: the shape is gone. She careens about the road, then swerves onto an off-ramp.

She zigzags up to a truck stop and shudders to a halt, then collapses against the wheel as a handful of patrons rush to help. She holds her stomach desperately.

SHE IS SITTING AT WHAT seems like the world's longest bar, her hand trembling on her drink, causing it to slosh and spill, her face pale as the dead. A handful of patrons—regulars, she thinks—are grouped at the end, talking amongst themselves, glancing at her from time to time, their gaze making her increasingly uncomfortable. At length the waitress reappears.

"Ambulance is tied up elsewhere, hon. Big accident out along 1-5. State Patrol are on their way, though. How do you feel?"

"Better, slightly." She stares at her drink. "How can there be so many accidents when there's no one on the road?"

The waitress stares at her sweetly. "That's exactly the perception that causes them out here, hon." She pats her hand. "You holler if you need anything."

At last Beth takes out her phone and dials Dr. Lairman—there is no answer. She hangs up and dials her mother. She gets the operator instead: "We're sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this message in error, please try again."

She hears the sound of helicopters in the distance, very faintly. And something else: military jets.

She tries the number again—gets the same message. Then again, dialing extra carefully. Same message. She glances at the newspaper on the counter as she listens. Its headline reads: **AUTHORITIES LIED ABOUT RADIATION DANGER.**

She looks down the bar at the others, a few of whom stare back. She quickly takes out a few bills and lays them on the counter, stands. The military jets fly exceedingly close as she moves toward the exit, the roar of their engines rattling the panes. "Ah, go ahead an' blow us up!" someone calls.

She exits the diner just as a jet passes over. Peering up at it against the gloomy sky, she has a brief flashback of the *shape* outside her windshield, and reasons that what she saw was indeed a jet. She moves toward her car

... and realizes that its hood is up. Concerned and a little angry, she continues walking toward it, finds a mechanic toiling away.

"What are you doing?"

The man looks up, startled, and wipes his hands on his pants. "After the way you careened in here? Giving you a safety check. Don't worry, it's all on the house."

"A safety check," she says, mostly to herself. "But I ... no, I'm sure I don't need one of those. Why would you—"

"No, no, I insist," says the mechanic, ignoring her. "Your own safety's one thing, but you've got a baby to think about. Says so right there on your—"

*"I said I don't need one!"* And she unloads on him, telling him to get the hell away from there. She looks up in mid-tirade to find the waitress and most the patrons gathered in the door of the café, staring at her.

She looks at the mechanic, who seems genuinely hurt, and a wave of guilt washes over her. At last she drops the hood and climbs in, starts the engine. The mechanic joins the others, still wiping his hands.

And they watch her drive away.

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SHE ZOOMS DOWN THE highway into a thickening fog. Frodo hangs his head out the window; he's watching the gloom-shrouded landscape pass. They come to a railway stop just as the flashing arms lower into position. As the train roars past she realizes it's a long one, and settles in. The *clackity-clack* of the rail cars is all she can hear. Fog swirls ominously.

Beth waits, peering intently through the gaps in the cars; there is nothing but darkness on the other side. As she waits, lights appear behind her. She watches them through her rearview mirror as they approach, resolving into the headlights of a small pick-up truck, pulling a travel trailer, which slows to a halt behind her—mere inches, it seems, from her bumper. Uncomfortable with this, she locks her doors and rolls

both windows up to within a few inches of the moldings. She shakes out a cigarette and places it to her lips, holding up her lighter, then glances at the BABY ON BOARD sign. She lights it anyway.

As she takes a drag and exhales she notices another set of lights approaching from the opposite side of the train. The rail cars, meanwhile, are beginning to slow, shrieking and groaning. Beth smokes as the lights on the opposite side slow to a halt. They are extraordinarily bright—a big truck, perhaps?

Beth glances behind her; she is not at all comfortable with being so boxed-in.

The headlights of the vehicle on her bumper suddenly go black. The rail cars are moving very slowly now, as if they might stop altogether. She watches the pickup like a hawk, until its driver's-side door pops open abruptly, and she stiffens.

A woman climbs out and lifts the truck's hood; Beth breathes a sigh of relief. She glances at the bright lights on the opposite side of the tracks—they remain on, bright as ever.

The train grinds to a complete stop as Beth stares at the rail car directly in front of her. Its side door, which is closed, boasts a crude illustration of a UFO, and has been tagged with the words, THEY'RE HERE. She turns her attention back to the woman. Watching, Beth feels torn between getting out and helping—or staying put.

She decides on the former, and opens her door, telling Frodo to stay put. She moves toward the woman, who is bent over the pickup's engine. As the stranger's back is turned toward her, she cannot see the woman's face. "Excuse me, Miss?"

The rail cars suddenly jolt and shudder, and Beth jumps. The woman apparently hasn't heard her. Beth repeats herself: "Excuse me, Miss?"

The woman turns and looks at her. She smiles sweetly. "Oh, hello."

"Need a hand there?"

"No, that's okay. I know what it is. But thanks."

"Okay."



The fog is very thick now. Beth turns and walks back to her car, gets in. Frodo whimpers and whines. Beth pets him, comforts him. She glances at the rail car in front of her: the door with the graffiti on it is now open. She can see clean through the boxcar to the blazing white lights on the other side. She sits back, not sure what to make of this, and looks out her side window.

A masked figure clothed in surgery green is right outside the glass, peering in. It reaches through the partially open window and grabs her by the hair. Beth shrieks. Frodo goes berserk, snapping and barking. The figure wrestles with Beth violently; it is trying to *inject* her with something—a syringe full of yellow fluid. Suddenly another figure is at the passenger-side window, reaching through the gap, groping for the door handle. Frodo attacks its arm savagely, bloodying it, and it quickly withdraws. Beth puts the car into reverse, starts backing up—collides with the vehicle behind her. The tires of her car spin wildly; they are hopelessly pinned. There is a crash as the passenger-side window is smashed out. Another figure reaches in, zapping Frodo with a taser, debilitating him. The commotion distracts Beth just long enough so that the figure with the syringe is able to inject her. She grunts and moans in pain.

A gunshot splits the night and the figure with the taser falls into the car. It grasps at the seat as blood pours from the eyelets of its mask, then crumples to the ground outside—presumably dead.

There is a grizzled, rancher-type standing in the doorway of the boxcar, aiming a rifle. He is backlit by the glare of his headlights; the door of his truck hangs open behind him. The figure with the syringe glares at him and stands erect.

The rancher says: "Now I want you to listen, *very* carefully. First, drop whatever it is you got there. And kick it toward me. Second—"

The figure starts walking toward him, slowly but deliberately. The rancher fires at him, hitting him in the chest. The figure is knocked back—but keeps coming. The rancher fires again, hitting him in the shoulder. Again, the figure keeps coming. The rancher fires again. The

figure keeps coming. The figure is now merely yards away from him. He repositions his rifle. "I'm aiming at your head."

The figure stops, cold.

"Okay, you son of a bitch. I don't know what kind of vest you're wearing, and I don't care. But start backing up—right ... now.

The figure stares at him through the eyelets of its mask.

"I'll take it clean off," warns the rancher.

A green-clad figure appears behind him suddenly. It clasps his forehead and draws a scalpel across his neck. Blood jets out, splatters the assailant's mask. Beth screams.

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EVERYTHING BECOMES like a dream—it is the injection, of course—and she is dimly aware of getting into the pickup behind her and putting it into neutral. Then she is back in her car and reversing, pushing the truck clear, before peeling away from the scene with one of the green men riding the hood—like TJ Hooker. She swerves about the road like a mad woman until he falls off, then slams on the breaks and backs over him, just to be sure.

She zooms back the way she came, careening against the guardrail, dialing Dr. Lairman, leaving a message telling him that she is coming back. When she passes the truck stop from earlier she notices that it's gone completely dark.

*The motel*, she thinks, incoherently. *The old woman. Andy. They'll help.*

That's when she sees the Shape again. Sees it through the shattered passenger window—silhouetted against a flash of lightning, approaching over the desert hills, maneuvering impossibly.

"No ..." she whimpers, as Frodo barks and howls.

Then a horn sounds and she faces forward—in time to avoid a head-on collision by mere seconds.

By the time she skids to a stop on the shoulder of the road, a man is running up to her, apologetic, out of breath, asking if she is okay. She gets out, shrieking and gesturing with her arms, completely hysterical.

"Did you see it? *Did you see it?*"

He catches her wrists in his hands and holds them—an overly intimate gesture she could be offended by, but isn't.

"I saw a jet," he says, staring into her eyes, continuing to hold her hands. "A jet—they're everywhere out here today. They must be doing maneuvers or something. It's okay, all right? *You're okay.*"

She begins to calm down at last, however slightly. There's something about him, something about his mild eyes and soft but firm hands, his shock of dark hair, his soothing voice. She senses something and looks up, sees a fighter jet flying right over the top of them—low enough that she can make out the rivets in its fuselage. It is there and gone before its sharp-edged whine even cuts the air.

"See?" he says, releasing her hands. "Just a jet."

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BY THE TIME HE RETURNS to his car and drives off, giving her a friendly little beep of the horn as he goes, she is something approaching sane again. And yet, while she knows they stood and talked for a considerable amount of time, she cannot remember what they talked about. Only that she liked him, trusted him. And she wishes, as she moves to start her car and finds it completely non-responsive, that she would have kept him around. Why didn't she keep him around?

*Because you liked him, she admits to herself at last. Because keeping him around would have let the cat out of the bag. Because you are now certifiably insane, and there's nothing he or anyone else—no one who isn't already a little crazy—can do for you.*

*Andy. Them.*

*The motel.*

And then she is walking, having retrieved her travel bag from the backseat, walking with Frodo—the sun dipping below the horizon as the stars slowly wink on, the pain in her abdomen multiplying with each mile, the vespertine dark threatening to swallow her—while the sound of choppers and jets echoes in the distance ... and searchlights sweep back and forth.

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SHE IS BACK AT THE motel, having almost no idea how she got there. They found her, she thinks—Andy and the old woman—passed out in a pool of vomit in the parking lot, after which she vaguely recalls being brought in and put to bed. Now she is lying next to Frodo, nude, in what, she is certain, is the same room as before. And she is sick, sicker than she has ever been in her life, so sick that she throws off the covers—forcing Frodo off the bed—and rushes to the bathroom, where she vomits a seemingly endless spew of green bile into the surprisingly clean toilet—atop which sits a cellphone, plugged into the wall and fully charged, *her* cellphone, which begins ringing as she coughs and spits and flushes it all away.

She answers it, her hands trembling.

"Beth? Dr. Lairman. How are you doing, kiddo? I just got your—"

"I—I need to know what you've done to me," she says, feeling suddenly cold, as though she might tremble out of her skin. "To all of us. Just ... start talking. I'm listening."

"Beth, first you've got to settle down. Can you do that for me? Just count to ten slowly. The important thing for you to know right now is that you're going to be all right. We're—we're on our way. And know this also: your baby is going to be fine."

"But there ... there is no baby. There never was—was there? I just ... I need to know."

"But there *is* a baby. A very, *very* special one. And you'll be seeing it soon. Beth, listen to me: You mustn't trust your senses right now, do you understand?"

"My mother ..."

"Your mother is fine. I spoke with her just a few hours ago."

"I—I killed someone."

"No, you didn't. You're having a psychotic episode."

"But the green men ..."

"There are no green men."

"And the helicopters ..."

"There are no helicopters, Beth. We're on our way. Stay where you are."

• • • •

WHEN SHE PEEKS BETWEEN the blinds she sees that police vehicles have begun arriving and that helicopters have begun to circle the motel. But there's more: the motor home from the day before—the one with the parabolic antennae on top—has pulled in behind the patrol cars, followed by the pickup and travel-trailer from the train incident.

"Frodo, stay, please," she says, before slipping through the bathroom window and escaping into the rainy dark—a dark full of searching helicopters and reflected police lights—until she trips over something while crossing the empty field behind the motel and realizes with horror that it is another human body. Then she is sliding and tumbling down a muddy bank and into a pool of fetid water, which swallows her and spits her back out, at which instant, while gasping for air, she realizes something is bobbing in the pool next to her—a mutated fetus, its head lolling, a white eye staring. So, too, does she feel a sudden heaviness about her, a fullness; it is not just the water, and when she climbs from the basin she realizes her stomach has become grotesquely distended in the space of mere seconds.

She sees a rotting, roofless barn not fifty feet away and runs for it—staggering and weaving, crying, screaming—as a helicopter lands nearby and men in green scrubs and green masks start piling out. The motor home and the other vehicles follow her across the field. She runs until she can run no more, collapsing at last in a stall full of hay, as the men, the *people*, surround her—shining lights upon her, pointing recording devices.

The men in green begin taking off their masks even as the others, the cops and the people from the RV, emerge into her field of vision. They are all there: Dr. Lairman, who drops his mask to the ground, the State Trooper, the woman whose truck broke down by the train—nearly everyone she has had contact with since being swallowed by the desert the day before.

"Looks like the gang's all here," says Lairman, adding, "I trust security can manage to keep any errant fucking farmers away this time." There's some muted laughter until at last he addresses Beth directly: "It's okay ... let it come. Let it come so that *they* may come."

But they *have* come, she realizes, as a shadow falls over them all. They are above them right now. And everything happens at once as she convulses violently and something slips between her legs—something about a foot long and covered in blood, something shaped like a gigantic maggot—which sprouts arms and legs amidst the jumble of hay and opens its black, oval eyes ... even as the deltoid above them begins to glow like a burner on high and to emit electrical currents, which strike everyone but her, causing them to shrink and implode upon themselves, so that in the end they look like so many shriveled fetuses spread out upon the ground. And then the maggot, the alien, the thing, her son, is being lifted via invisible wires into the Shape ... until the craft itself begins rising and finally disappears—and the only thing Beth can feel is Frodo lapping at her face, slathering her with saliva, elated at having found her, happy just to be near.

WHEN SHE AWAKENS IT is daylight and the people from the night before have become mere piles of ash ... which swirls on the breeze as she clothes herself in a blanket from the barn, and finally spreads away to nothing.

They walk, she and Frodo, back to the highway and along its shoulder, where, after several moments, a familiar-looking car rattles to a stop ahead of them. She hurries to catch up to it, realizing, as she stoops to look into its passenger window, that it is being driven by the man with the soft but firm hands and the soothing voice and the shock of dark hair.

"Hey, baby ... going my way?" he asks, grinning broadly, then quickly adds: "Don't worry. I'm not even going to ask."

She just stares at him—even as Frodo leaps into the car, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

"Well, maybe that's a sign, " she says at last, and gets in.

And then they are away, no questions asked, and no answers given.

The End

