

Real

by Alison Wells

That was the start of it, the vigils. Every night at the foot of the Gilt Spears a group of people congregated in a housing estate to look up at the stars. Housewives with working away husbands, fractious toddlers hanging upside down in their grim grip, wailing at the night. Comic book men with costume fetishes, conspiracy theorists with tales of Area 51, young pensioners with an eye for travel, Agatha Burns' mother, Sandra and Karen (a hairdresser and a florist) and my father, congregating like they did the day of the total eclipse of the sun.

Nothing had ever surprised me more than when my father phoned me. In fact it was more surprising than what he rang to say. Over the years he had maintained an attitude of studied ignorance to my existence even as he indexed his Star Wars magazines. When my mother drew his attention to me, he often seemed taken aback as if he had no idea where I'd come from. And maybe that should have been a clue.

He was breathless — but that was normal by then. Roy spoke urgently into the phone. He said he had seen the lights. He said, 'we are not alone'. He said that he had heard music first, five notes on a scale and that he had made his way out to the back garden. Years before his first port of call would have been his telescope in the attic but his mobility was now poor. The world was travelling away from him; his feet could no longer find the floor, he constantly misheard, his near vision was almost gone. He had no trouble seeing the stars however, the further away the better. He drank champagne the night they announced Gliese 581g — the star closest in make up to ours, the Goldilocks planet that was just right for life.

He was even more bubbly there on the phone, he mentioned the music again, then the lights, three lights 'dancing' he said, 'dancing' It was a word I'd never heard him use, it was something I'd never seen him do although my mother was the kind of woman who should

have been whisked about the floor. But he was changed that day, his voice was honey bright, he went on, telling me. 'I watched the lights fall through the sky. They stopped and hovered over my head. Then they flicked and dipped like the tail of a fish. Then they disappeared, behind the Gilt Spears,' he said, referring to the hills nearby.

'Why me?' I said

'Come again?'

'Why ring me?'

'I thought you might like to know.'

Then he admitted he couldn't get Barry, that he'd left a message on his mobile. I think he'd forgotten that Barry was no longer talking to him.

Of course he didn't expect me to come, especially after the accident, it wasn't so easy for me to get round. I visited him the next evening after sundown. He helped me take the wheelchair from the car. People were congregating on the green. They were organised. Mrs Burns had made sandwiches and the two young women made hot chocolate for everyone.

That first night we saw nothing but there was a sense of optimism. I watched my father's face contain an alien happiness. He told jokes, he became considerate, draping a blanket over my legs to save me from the cold. After a couple of hours I went back into my father's house with him and he talked and talked, a great river of information, all the vital statistics that were necessary for understanding what might be about to happen.

But then in the onslaught he paused, he asked me a question and he listened. I heard myself talking, and I saw him taking notice and I became real.

Night after night for seven days I returned for the vigil. I never believed, but look what had been accomplished — every night talking with my father, repairing the old mottled cloth. On the sixth night, he took my hand and shed tears when talking about my accident. He'd never referred to it before. 'No one was on the look out for you.' He said.

The next night we looked up at the sky over towards the Gilt Spears. Again the residents standing with their mouths open and their breaths baited. 'Do you think there is anything out there?' said the lady called Karen. 'Might be, Sandra replied, biting into a marshmallow. Some of the group had given up, they were in front of their televisions watching repeats of Family Ties.

There was a sudden lull, like the bottom fell out of something. I looked up in the sky and I heard the music, the music that I seem to come from a long time ago from among the forest of chair legs as I sat underneath, the girl forgotten. I heard music but I saw nothing, nothing at all.

The people were oohing and swooning, shouting about the lights. 'Dancing,' called my father, pointing. When I looked there was nothing there but I heard above my head his perpetual humming, five notes from Close Encounters, this humming I had heard my lifetime through.

'Three lights!' he yelled, 'Look, Look.' But I couldn't see anything. Maybe I wasn't the daughter for him. My father clasped my hand, his tears illuminated in the street lamps.

'Do you see it?' he said.

'Yes!' I shouted. 'Yes, isn't it wonderful!'

He kissed my cheek. 'Gertie,' he said, his shoulders heaving. 'It's real isn't it?'

'Yes!' I said. He lent down. I placed my lips against the damp wool of his coat. My fingers were crossed.

