

Party Line

by Jane Hammons

We live in Midway. It's a place that isn't even a town. Midway between nothing and nowhere is what Mama says. We sell gas and groceries in a little store that sits on the highway by the railroad crossing. All around us are farms and down the road is Walker Air Force Base. That is where the government took the aliens from the flying saucer. Mama says they are in some kind of freezer there. We have a freezer here at the store. It has meat and popsicles in it.

Mama reads about UFOs in paperback books and newspapers with big cloudy pictures. Her girlfriends know about flying saucers, too. They get drunk at night and when they are sitting all alone in their living rooms because they are divorced or married to men who have run off or to farmers who are out bailing hay, they call each other up on the telephone. All I can hear is Mama's end of the conversation, but I know what they are talking about.

Cigar shaped.

They can get you pregnant.

She blows smoke out both nostrils. She picks a fleck of tobacco off her tongue with her long fingernails that are painted a cloudy color.

We have a party line. To get the other half of Mama's conversation, all I have to do is listen in on Mrs. Harold Day when she is pretending to plan a bridge party or a church supper, but what she is really doing is gossiping. I can only do this when Mama isn't looking, which is most of the time. She is either working up front in the store or lying around in our apartment at the back of the store with a sick headache.

Mrs. Harold Day thinks Mama and her friends are crazy. When she talks about Mama's friends, she doesn't call them Mrs. Jack Ransome, or Mrs. Buddy Smith the way they call her Mrs. Harold Day. She says that Cora Smith sees pink cigars in the sky and that Dixie Butler wakes up electrocuted by sex. She knows that Babs

Hanson calls the weather bureau at White Sands Missile Range so often that her name is on a list and that my Mama can't sleep.

And she knows about Dad, too. Dad calls from tracks in Florida and California and all around the country, even Chicago, where he says he goes to train horses but what he is really doing is gambling. When Dad ran off, he left me behind. I heard he had girl trouble, so he couldn't take me with him. But he took my brother Tommy. He promises to bring Tommy back real soon. Mama doesn't call the sheriff. Dad has been in jail before.

I don't sleep so good at night either. Some nights there are little lizard men whispering beneath my window. They want to electrocute me. Some mornings when it is still dark and Mama smells like an empty glass of whiskey, she wakes me up and we take off in the station wagon with its bald tires and whiney engine.

"Keep an eye out for the lights," Mama says. She taps the windshield with her fingernails that make a cloudy clickety click. But I keep my head down. We can't outrun a flying saucer.

One time Mama drove right into a bar ditch and screamed at me, "Look at the goddamned lights!" But the only thing I saw was the morning star. All summer long we wait for Dad to bring Tommy home and chase Venus into the dawn.

When school starts, I sit behind John Day. His clothes are so clean and stiff that he can't help but sit up straight. His crayons never wear down into dirty stumps. The last time my teacher rapped my knuckles for staring into space, I was right in the middle of figuring it all out.

Mama is not running away from flying saucers. She is running to them.

