

Paradise

by Ron Teachworth

At the south end of Cache Valley, nestled against the Wasatch Mountain Range, the small town of Paradise was hidden away from the larger cities of Ogden and Salt Lake City. Less than 1,000 people made a rural living in the Valley, mostly farmers and ranchers. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known casually as LDS, or simply the Mormon Church, had settled it. Some of the Valley's residents drove north to Logan for their employment, while others went south to Salt Lake City or Hill Air Force Base at Ogden.

A long-established testing facility, Hill Air Force Base was the home of the F-35 stealth fighter, the most advanced weapon in the Air Force arsenal. Lieutenant Commander Robert Shellburn was training that day in the Lightning II, the latest generation of the F-35 line. He was cruising at 10,000 feet over Bear River Bay when his headset crackled a transmission.

"AFB Hill tower to FS Shellburn, radar is picking up a low flying formation of what might be birds traveling north east over the Great Salt Lake, coordinates provided. Identify and confirm."

"Roger that, tower. I see them on radar or I should I say, I saw them on radar. Weird, I am tracking airspeed at 1,500 miles an hour. Over."

"Lieutenant... that must be a glitch. Have your instruments checked after landing? Did you get a visual? Over. "

"I saw something small and white, maybe seagulls? About thirty or so...they set down just off Fremont Island. I am in my approach and will be landing in a few minutes. I grabbed an image. FS Shellburn out."

As she walked down her dirt driveway to the mailbox to get the afternoon mail and newspaper, Risa Evans looked skyward at an Air

Force jet settle into its usual landing pattern at the base not ten miles away.

When she looked back down, she saw a dark blue-black Starling lying in the weeds on its back with its stiff legs straight up. That's odd she thought. She kneeled down to observe the dead bird close up and caught a whiff of the stench. She waved off the flies to get a closer look. She noticed an irregular ring of blood in each eye, and the mouth of the bird was wide open as if it had had a sudden seizure.

As a bio major in the pre-med program at Utah State University, and always curious, she had access to the biology lab and thought she might be able to perform an autopsy. Her professor, Dr. Kingman, might be interested. So when she returned to the house, she got a plastic zip-lock bag, put on some latex gloves and went back out to collect the bird.

Risa had grown up in Paradise, Utah. She and her sister had attended public schools and were raised in a ward of the LDS Church as Mormons. It was on her recent mission to El Salvador that Risa was assigned to work in a small rural community a hundred miles north of San Salvador in the shadow of a looming volcano. There she met Sister Jilia, a tall, middle-aged native woman who worked twelve hours a day to serve the people in and around the community and served in a supportive role at the Catholic parish with Father Manuel Martinez. Fluent in English and educated in the states, Jilia was a certified nurse practitioner, the closest thing to a doctor for miles.

The mission was founded and operated by the Maryknoll Order of religious nuns. There was a memorial in front of the chapel that was dedicated to the four nuns who were captured and killed in 1980 by a death squad.

This was Risa's first introduction to Catholicism. She was amazed by the services the mission staff brought to the local people. There was a small medical clinic, a soup kitchen, an elementary school and a chapel for religious services.

Risa had always accepted her faith in the Mormon Church without question, but her experience in El Salvador began to introduce her to ideas of faith she had never experienced. One morning after Mass, she asked Sister Jilia about the ceremony of Baptism that had just been performed after the service.

"Sister, your Baptism has a different purpose than in the Mormon church. To Mormons, baptism is for the remission of sins but occurs later in life, around ten years old. They call it the age of accountability and it is official membership into the Church. It signals a kind of entrance into our faith. But you just baptized this newborn baby who has no sins."

Jilia looked into Risa's eyes and paused before speaking. "Baptism in Catholicism is a sacrament and frees the infant from original sin. Baptism serves as the gift of the Holy Spirit from God to the newborn child, a blessing they will have forever. There are differences in Christian faiths. I am sure you will have more questions as you observe life here in the parish."

Risa responded, "I was taught that the transgression of Adam and Eve brought death into the world and made all mortals subject to temptation, suffering, and weakness, but it denies that any fault is automatically transmitted to Adam and Eve's offspring."

Jilia turned to her and spoke with authority, "The doctrine of original sin states that, due to the Fall of Adam, infants are born with actual sin. All people, according to this doctrine, except the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, inherit an actual, existing personal guilt. The corollary is the doctrine of infant baptism, holding that infants are to be baptized to remove this sin because those who die without baptism remain unsanctified and forever excluded from heaven and the presence of God."

That brief exchange was the beginning of what was to become a long process of learning about something very new to her: the Catholic Church. Risa was on mission with her companion Rachel, which required them to do everything together. Over her next year of service, this became a major challenge. Risa would slip away to attend Mass, gradually becoming more and more attracted to the

sacraments. Eventually, Sister Jilia had invited Risa to attend a Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that was just beginning, designed for local adults who were never properly catechized. She told Rachel she babysitting for Sister Jilia's brother, to avoid suspicion. During that time she studied the history of the church that went back 2,000 years and provided the authority that began when Christ said to Peter, "Upon this rock, build my church." Risa especially looked forward to the class visits by Fr. Martinez, who went into detail on Baptism, The Rite of Confirmation, and Communion.

He spoke to the students in a soft voice. "The Holy Eucharist will complete your initiation into Christianity during Easter where you experience the mystery of faith through transubstantiation, where the priest transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ."

Risa was familiar with faith and her years of attending the LDS Church in Paradise, but something happened during her stay in El Salvador. Something ancient and authentic that drew her closer to the Catholic teachings of Jesus Christ.

Commander Shellburn's jet taxied to the hangar where technicians were waiting for the F-35 fighter jet and its pilot. They had already received his request for a system instrument check and had everything ready for the procedure. As the roar of the engines subsided, Shellburn spotted his friend Bruce among the techs.

"Hey, Bruce. I had a radar anomaly on the speed of some moving objects I saw over the big lake. I think they were birds. Can you check that out?"

"No problem sir, we will go over everything. There is a call waiting for you in the flight office."

The pilot climbed down the ladder that had been rolled to the cockpit.

"And check the camera for images. I snapped a few. Thanks, Bruce." Shellburn walked quickly to the office where the receptionist handed him the phone.

"Shellburn here."

"Dad, can you pick me up after my violin lesson?" Jayden asked.
"Mom's busy with a last-minute Temple meeting."

"Sure. What time?"

"About an hour. I'll be waiting out front."

"See you there."

Bruce had come in and was standing at the printer where he had plugged in a thumb drive from the plane's cameras and was printing out an image. He grabbed the print and walked over to Shellburn with a perplexed look on his face.

"Here is your photo, sir."

They both stood at the table looking at a group of thirty white objects in the formation of a perfect triangle. The tiny white ovals were small and almost impossible to make out clearly.

Shellburn squinted. "What the hell is that?"

"I have no idea, sir. They're too small to recognize and you're some distance from the formation. I suppose they could be small birds."

Shellburn rubbed his forehead with his hand, "Alright Bruce, put the photo in the folder with the flight papers and I will show the Commander. He's got more hours in air than I do, maybe he can tell us what it is. Did you check the radar?"

"It checked out. Speed calculator seems to be working fine. Maybe there was a distortion in the atmosphere."

Bob Shellburn's son, Jayden, was a junior at Brigham Young University majoring in chemistry. His long brown hair was often tied back in a ponytail, and his wire-rimmed glasses framed a square face that was nearly always lit up with a pleasant smile.

His parents were hard-working and placed rigorous expectations on their son's academic and artistic achievements. He had started studying violin at age seven and now performed in the college symphony where he had worked his way up to first chair. His taste in music was eclectic: Baroque, especially Vivaldi and Bach, early jazz, Louis Armstrong and west coast hip-hop artists like Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dogg. On campus, Jayden would always be seen wearing a hoody over with ear bud wires dripping out or studying Chemistry. His family was casual members of the LDS Church and attended Sunday services at the South Street Ward in downtown Paradise.

Jayden was standing in front of the music building when his father pulled up in his Jeep Cherokee.

Jayden opened the door, threw his backpack and violin case in the backseat and pulled out his ear buds.

Bob Shellburn laughed. "Do you live with those things in your ears?"

"Pretty much. Thanks for picking me up. I'm starved. Did you talk with mom? What's for dinner?"

"She texted me a list of things to pick up on our way home. What's going on with you?"

"Studying, practicing...the usual. There's a concert this Saturday night at UTC Theater, part of the International Festival. You and mom should come."

The following week in the Utah State University Science building Jayden saw Risa heading for the biology lab. They knew each other from high school in Paradise, and both were taking science classes to fulfill their respective majors. Jayden caught up with her as she turned into the lab.

"Hey Risa," he said softly. "What's going on?" She turned to see him in the doorway.

"Hi, Jay. You going to help me with biology today, or did you forget where the chem labs are?" she teased.

He grinned. "If chemistry weren't intimately tied to biology I might take offense at that."

Risa sighed. "Good point." She turned back to the lab, "I'm looking for Dr. Kingman. I found a dead bird near my house and I thought she might help me run a simple autopsy, take a blood sample. C'mon. Let's see if she's in her office."

They found the professor working at her desk amongst piles of books, papers, and various measuring instruments.

"Well hello to two of my favorite students. What brings you guys here this time of day? You should be out and about on such a beautiful day."

Risa slipped off her backpack, unzipped the top and pulled out a plastic sealed baggy containing the dead starling. "I found this near my house yesterday and it seems weird. There are these tiny irregular rings of blood around the bird's pupils. I was wondering if we could do a simple necropsy on this little fellow."

Dr. Kingman stood up and grabbed her glasses and her lab coat, before walking over for a closer look.

"Let's get some light on it and see what we have." Kingman slipped on latex gloves, pinned the bird to a cutting board and picked up a magnifying instrument to get a closer look at the bird's eyes. She could now see the irregular blood ring around its eyes and stiff open mouth.

"Whew, this thing stinks. We can cut it open if you like, but it looks like it had a seizure. Could have been a bacterial disease or some dramatic change in air pressure. My guess is that it was a natural occurrence in the environment, maybe even a lightning strike. Let's sample the soft tissue and blood. That should tell us a thing or two. But I have to leave for an appointment. You two get the samples and put them in the fridge. We'll do the analysis over the next couple of days. How's that sound?"

With that, Dr. Kingman exchanged her lab coat for a light jacket, grabbed her bag and left the lab looking at her watch. Risa closed the fridge door and walked back into the lab where Jayden was looking at some plants growing in pods near the windows. With the

light streaming in on his face like that she suddenly realized how attractive he was. His shoulder length hair was back in the usual ponytail, and his wire-rimmed glasses refracted the sunlight into a spectrum of colors on the white tile floor. "Thanks for helping out, Jay."

"I didn't do anything. It's your experiment. I'm just here for moral support. Do you think anything will come of this? The Starling with the Bloody Eyes?" He wagged his eyebrows mischievously.

"I have no idea. Like Dr. Kingman said, it's probably just a freak accident caused by the weather. But when I saw the bird, I felt like...I don't know like something abnormal caused these anomalies."

There was a long pause before Jayden piped up, "Do you know Overlook Park up by Mill Creek, where the sun sets over the big Lake?"

Risa's eyes opened a bit wider. "No, why?"

"There's this little park carved out of the mountain where people can camp and have picnics. You can see the whole valley and I hear the sunset across the lake is, well, practically spiritual. Do you want to take a hike up there? Say tomorrow evening?"

Risa was taken aback. Jayden was always so nice and a good friend, but she never thought he would ask her out.

"Yes," she said, hopefully not too quickly.

The lab was now filling up with students coming in from the hallway for their next class.

"Great," he said. "I'll pick you up around 8. That'll get us there in time to catch the sunset. Wear hiking boots."

Risa nodded, smiling. She didn't trust her voice to speak.

She watched him cross the lab full of students and continued to stare at the door through which he'd disappeared for a long while. Finally, one of the students got her attention.

"Where's Dr. Kingman?"

Risa shook herself out of it. "Oh, she had an appointment. She'll be back shortly."

She tried to concentrate on getting the samples from the starling. Mostly, she was thinking about what to wear on the hike other than the specified hiking boots. And what would she do with her hair?

Commander Shellburn was back on base the next morning, checking the logs to see if anyone else was in the air around the same time he saw the objects. He looked closely at the photograph, but it was impossible to make out any detail of the tiny shapes. All he could make out a triangular formation. He had photographed bird formations in the past, but they were much closer and usually larger. The readings on the printout along the edge of the image estimated the objects were a mile away when he snapped the photo and then they left his sight. He called the tower to see what other air traffic was going on yesterday afternoon."

"It was pretty quiet Commander. You were the only one out. No other aircraft in the vicinity around that time, sir."

Shellburn mulled that over for a few moments, "Did you see any birds on radar?"

"Birds, Sir?"

"Yeah, like a group of seagulls flying at around 2,000 feet before landing in the lake? Something like that?"

"We don't pick up birds, Sir. California Seagulls, Snowy Plover, Avocets, American White Pelicans, and Starlings...they are everywhere. This is where they breed. Our instruments are designed to screen out avians."

"Okay, just checking." Shellburn walked towards the parking lot looking up in the sky where a large flock of American Avocets was headed for the Islands in the Great Salt Lake. The whole thing was probably just an anomaly, but it bothered him.

Overlook Park was up the mountain about 4,200 feet above sea level. Jayden parked the Jeep Cherokee in a small lot just off the

highway, half way up the mountain. He pulled and past the signage and parked close to the trail entrance. Risa got out and grabbed her backpack. She was wearing jeans and a white, short-sleeved blouse; her long dark hair was pulled back in a handcrafted silver clip.

"We made good time, it's only 8:30. Did you say you've been here before?"

"Yeah, my dad brought me here a few times, mostly to watch his squadron do maneuvers over the lake. It's a beautiful spot. Wait until you see the lookout spot. The Park Service must have bull-dozed a section out of the mountain to make the picnic area." Jay gazed into the sky, "We're going to see a great sunset. It's so clear."

The warm air was still and heavy with moisture from a recent rain shower. They began the steep trek up the mountainside toward the picnic area less than a ½ mile up the narrow trail. The trail had been filled with gravel to keep down the weeds. Jay grabbed Risa's hand several times, especially at the steep upper parts of the trail. At one point she looked over the edge of the path and could see a wide stream about 200 feet down at the bottom of a ravine with white water rushing south. The mountain runoff fed the stream that fed into the Great Salt Lake.

Jay chided her gently, "Yeah, but keep your eyes on the trail, especially up ahead here through this steep climb. Good thing you wore boots."

They reached the clearing, breathing a little hard, and could see the four picnic tables and a sign that read Utah Park Service, Overlook Park. There were no cars parked down below, so they figured they would be alone.

Walking out towards the edge of the plateau, they were stunned by the view of the entire valley that stretched from Spring Bay to Farnsworth Peak and beyond. The sun was now about 5 degrees off the horizon and the bending light formed a soft red glow at the horizon, graduating upward to pink, orange, light blue and finally a darker blue. They walked over to a picnic table and sat on top, resting their feet on the seat planks. They got out their phones and

took pictures of what turned out to be a spectacular sunset over the Great Salt Lake.

"Shooting star!" Risa said, pointing to a light that glimmered in the upper sky and dissipated into the atmosphere before reaching the ground, then added, "What's that Jay?"

She was pointing at a high white cloud. Jay followed the trajectory of her pointing finger and saw a group of tiny, white objects in a triangular formation, heading towards the lake."

Risa grabbed his arm, "What on earth...?"

The oval-shaped, pearl-white objects shimmered soundlessly in the warm sunlight. Suddenly one object veered off and headed towards them stopping to hover not twenty feet away. Suddenly their phones vibrated simultaneously. They both looked at their message screens.

"Don't fear me. We are peaceful and here for a very short time. We are here to extract and replenish sodium for just the second time in the last five hundred years."

Risa replied to the text, "Where are you from?"

"We come from what your astronomers describe as z8 GND 5296, more commonly referred to as Eridani, about ten light years away. Our life forms had begun a million of years before your beings evolved."

Jay typed, "Why do you need salt?"

"The sodium deposits in the lake region are in the highest concentrations in the universe and plentiful beyond any planet we have visited. These deposits are vast and valuable to us beyond your current knowledge base. We use the lake water to cool our small reactors."

Risa watched in amazement as the white object glowed with a slight blue halo around the edge, filled with specs of red and green. She typed, "Have you made contact with others here on Earth?"

"We have done our work without notice, except for small avians who get caught in our slip stream."

Risa followed up, "Do you mean birds?"

"The speed at which we travel creates a sonic distortion in the atmospheric pressure. If an avian is close by, the pressure causes a seizure. I am being called back now. Peace be with you."

With that, the object moved at what seemed like the speed of light and entered the lake surface like the others had, without any noticeable disturbance to the water's surface. Risa and Jay sat back down on the picnic table as the sun slipped below the horizon. They both remained silent for a long while before Jay finally spoke.

"It was so beautiful. The blue halo, the way it shimmered."

Risa added, "And so advanced it could instantly create a text on our phones?"

Her comment made them look at their screens. The texts were gone. They looked at each other silently, as if to confirm they had both actually seen the texts before.

"Why would they need salt? Risa mused.

"Why would a whole planet need a constant supply of salt?"

They kept analyzing the experience and asking themselves questions until it was dark. Finally, Jay said, "It's getting late, we'd better get home. That trail is tricky enough in daylight." He took Risa's hand as they began the trek down the trail towards the parking lot. On their way down, they kept asking each other questions about the experience.

"Jay, we can't tell anyone. We don't have any proof, not even a photo."

"Let's come back tomorrow at the same time and try to make contact... maybe get some video. What do you think? Are you busy?"

"I was, but I'll cancel that. This is like a Star Trek episode or a... close encounter... like in the movie."

They kept talking as Jay led the way down the steep path, using the flashlights on their phones to help them see the trail.

They were almost at the bottom when suddenly Jay slipped on the loose gravel and went down on one knee. Risa tightened her grip on his hand. "Are you alright?"

Jay got up and brushed off his knee. "I'm good. We'll slow down a bit. We're almost to the parking area."

Before long they were off the trail and walking towards the Jeep. Jay rested his hand lightly on the small of Risa's back as he opened the passenger door for her. The dome light caught a twinkle of gold at her throat, a small gold crucifix on a thin chain around her neck. He touched it lightly with the tip of a finger.

"That's not something a Mormon would wear. What's that about?"

"It's kinda complicated," she said, more aware of the touch of his finger at her throat than anything else. "I don't wear it around the house or when I go out.

He'd dropped his hand to fit the curve of her hip. "I like stories," he whispered and kissed her softly on the forehead, then her cheek, and then her mouth. She put her arms around him and pulled him closer. It was a comfort and an emotional release for both of them after the shocking experience. The moonlight cast shadows across the parking lot as they held each other.

On the drive back to Paradise, Jay asked her, "How about that story now?"

Risa sighed. "Here's the executive summary: On my Mormon Mission to El Salvador, unbeknownst to my companion, I converted to Catholicism. I did it quietly and privately."

Jay turned to her briefly, surprised.

Risa asked nervously, "Does that freak you out?"

"Freak out, no. Shocked, yes. I mean I've seen you in Church since elementary school. I'd say that's ironic...doing missionary work on behalf of one religious institution and converting to another one along the way."

"I know," Risa said. "We worked closely with a Catholic parish in the community where I served, and while attending their Mass, I became interested in their ways, especially their Sacraments...and then taking Communion."

"Wow, I don't know anything about Catholicism. Is it that different? I mean, we're all Christians, aren't we?"

"Sort of," Risa said, "although I'm not sure Mormons are really Christians. I learned that Christianity began in the first century just after the Crucifixion of Christ and from that point on there has been

a Catholic Church. It's so beautiful, Jay. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the true meaning of Baptism."

Jay scratched his head. "How's that so different from Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon?"

"Good question. I secretly attended six months of classes to figure that out. Basically, Joseph Smith created the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints movement in the north part of New York State. The Doctrines, Covenants, Plural Marriage, and the 'Great Awakening' all came from Smith's 'visions.' He added his visions and theology to the Bible. There is more, like Exaltation, Celestial marriage, United Order, and the Adam-God Teachings of Brigham Young. The whole thing is way too contrived, convoluted and confusing for me."

Jay was stunned. He had been born and raised in the Mormon Church. For him, it was a way of life. "What did your parents say?"

"It was hard for them, but my mother was willing to give me whatever time and space I needed to figure this out. Little does she know, I figured this out while I was on Mission, long before I returned to Paradise. Even harder was telling my ward Bishop, that I had converted to Catholicism. He blew a gasket and seemed upset for weeks. He even talked with my mother, but she stood her ground."

"You're kidding!"

"No. Pretty extreme, huh?"

They pulled up in front of Risa's house, and Jay turned off the engine. Risa's mother peeked through curtains from her bedroom window and saw them talking in the car. Jay looked at Risa.

"So are we on for tomorrow night at *Overlook*?"

"Absolutely," Risa said. She paused, then continued, "I don't think we should say anything to anyone else, though. We have nothing to back up our story, not even a text or photo. Let's return tomorrow night, like you said, at the same exact time, in case that's the only time they're active. How's the video app on your phone? Mine's pretty decent. If that works, we'll have something to show. What do you think?"

Jay leaned close to her and kissed her cheek. "Sounds like a plan. I'll call you tomorrow."

Risa lay on her bed looking out the window at the night's sky, watching for the small objects in their triangular formation. She replayed the experience at Overlook Park over and over, while Jay was up late on his computer searching for UFO sightings and the various uses of table salt. Eventually, they fell asleep to dreams of discs and small object with blue halos. Other than that, everything was peaceful in Paradise

A full moon lit up the Great Salt Lake and made it look like a skating pond. The small disc-like objects from the distant planet Eridani, worked through the night transporting sodium deposits to their mother ship far beyond Earth's geostationary orbit. Risa and Jay did not know the discs were actually work drones being controlled by alien beings back on the space carrier designed for bulk transport. It was less than 18 hours before their mission would be complete and they would return to their home planet with enough sodium to fuel their nuclear reactors for hundreds of years.

The next day went quickly with school, classes and aloof, distracted communication with family members, largely because Jay and Risa were mentally pre-occupied with their plan. After dinner, Jay drove over to Risa's house as she sat waiting anxiously on the porch wearing her hiking boots and checking the time incessantly. Jay arrived exactly at 8:00, as planned.

Risa ran out to the Jeep and hopped in.

Risa held up her phone in video mode and filmed Jay's smile.

Jay said, grinning. " Good Idea, my dad's an Air Force pilot, so he always taught me to do a systems check."

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into the parking area and parked near the trailhead. Once again, theirs was the only vehicle around. The night was warm and clear, almost identical to the night before. The walk was a slow go and Risa brought a bottle of water

and a sandwich to share. As they walked, they both kept looking into the sky for the objects but saw nothing.

When they finally reached the picnic area Jay set Risa's iPhone to the video setting, placed the lens to wide angle and propped it on top of the park sign a little above his head. He pressed the record button and checked to make sure the camera was recording. Then they waited.

Jay kept looking at his watch as the hands approached the same time as the appearance occurred the night before. "I hope this works," he said.

"Yeah, me too. Should I type out a text?"

"To who?" he asked, smiling.

"Very funny," she said. "But if I text you something like, here we are, waiting... Maybe they'll pick up on the communication and break in."

Just then the formation swooped down from behind a huge white cloud, clustered in the same triangular shape as it headed for the lake's surface."

"Start texting!" Risa whispered excitedly

They both started texting, "Hello, we are here...Hello, over here."

And then, exactly as it had done the night before, a single disc peeled off from the formation and came close hovering about ten feet in front of them. There was no text on their phones. Then through the warm air came a voice that could be male or female, soft, speaking perfect English.

"You don't have to use your text device. We can communicate using voice commands. I should have thought of that last night, but I thought you preferred texting."

Risa whispered to Jay, "Does he have a sense of humor?"

Jay laughed and said, "Thank you, that is much easier for us. May we ask more questions?"

"Of course."

Risa focused on the blue glow around the periphery of the disc. "You said you are almost finished mining, or harvesting, or whatever? When will that be?"

"Our mission will be complete in 6 hours, 10 minutes and 47 seconds. Our carrier is nearly at capacity."

Jay had prepared a list of questions and spoke as he fumbled with his papers. "Why are you mining salt from the lake?"

"Our energy source is based on liquid sodium metal to cool our nuclear reactors. These small reactors produce low levels of waste that can be recycled, a technology you have just started to discover. The carbon-free production of energy is safe for our planet."

"Would it be safe for use here on Earth?" Jay asked.

"Yes. You could easily employ this method. The problem is not your intellect nor your research, but your politics."

"Have you visited Earth before?" asked Risa.

"Many times. We have been here for reconnaissance, research, mining, and to make sure you don't destroy yourselves. We have seeded your intelligence. I notice you are recording this encounter. Beware. Your species is not ready for this kind of encounter."

Risa quickly followed up, "Do you...have a religion? A faith? Like our God?"

"All planets with intelligent life forms believe in a creator. The force that creates life controls everything, but your species is still early in development. In your short time, you have developed greatness. With six major religions, you have made outstanding accomplishments in spirituality and the arts, but you still struggle with aggressive violent behavior, synthetic chemicals, human greed, and politics. Excuse me, my time is short."

Jay glanced at his list, "Wait! How can your life form be so small? You look more like a light bulb than a living being."

"That's because I am not a being. Our species currently resides in the carrier ship, and it is they who are speaking to you through me. I am a worker unit, here to collect sodium for our nuclear energy stockpiles. We have a temporary base at the bottom of the lake. I am being called back."

Without a sound, the disc moved through the air and entered the surface of the Great Salt Lake without a ripple in the water.

Jay and Risa stood silent, staring at the lake. They could hardly believe what they had just experienced. Then Jay snapped his fingers, the sound so loud in the silence that Risa jumped. "Risa! The camera!"

He grabbed his phone from its perch on top of the sign. The small red LED light was blinking indicating that it was still recording. He touched play. Everything was recorded perfectly, and the audio was crystal clear. They had what might be the first recording of an extraterrestrial life form in the history of mankind. Jay tucked the phone carefully in Risa's bag for safekeeping. They were exhausted but exuberant as they exchanged impression.

By now the full moon was rising, giving them some light for their hike back to the car. This time they used Risa's phone as a flashlight to help guide their way. Half way down the trail, at a particularly steep switchback, Risa slipped in the loose gravel, lost her balance, fell and slid over the edge letting go of Jay's hand, before nearly pulling him with her.

The drop to the stream was 200 feet, but there was a protruding ledge just six feet down where she lay unconscious with a broken ankle. Part of her body rested on the edge of the rock shelf, while her legs hung over the edge. The drop to the bottom of the ravine would have killed her. Jay was in shock, and called out, "Risa, can you hear me?" There was no response.

Jayden was an intelligent young man whose mind was analytical and his thinking process high above normal. He reached for his cell phone to call 911, suddenly realizing he had no bar connectivity. He lay on his stomach and peeked over the edge of the cliff. There was no way down without risking his life. Stress out like never in his life, he went back to his cell phone, opened messages and started texting on his phone. SOS, Help, Risa has fallen and kept repeating the message until he looked up and saw a small disc hovering not ten feet away. "You're here; you got the text! Please, can you help me?" he asked.

The bright disc lowered itself over Risa's body and released a stream of light across her body. The light turned bright blue and

again crossed her body. She moaned and raised herself on her elbows.

Jay was on his knees peering over the edge of the trail. He called out, "Risa, don't move. You're getting help." Then from the small disc came an intense white light force that embraced her entire body and slowly raised her level to the trail, and then placing her gently next to him. Her eyes were wide open.

"Give her some time," the voice said. "You will be able to navigate back to your transport shortly."

Jay looked at the disc, "How did you do that?"

"It's a form of Nano-molecular technology that heals organic molecules on an atomic scale. In her case, it was a broken ankle and a minor concussion. It is a technology your kind will discover in about a hundred years. Her body is fine. Give her a few minutes to recuperate psychologically from the trauma. Peace be with you both."

Risa tugged at Jay's sleeve "Did I float just now?? Is this real? Am I alright?"

Jay smoothed a hand over her hair. "Just rest. You're going to be fine. We'll head down in a bit."

"My bag?" Risa said faintly. "Did you get my bag?"

"Your bag fell into the ravine."

"But...the video."

"Forget that now. Risa, you could have died."

They rested until Risa was finally able to get on her feet and walk with Jay's arm around her side. By the time they reached the car, she was feeling better, and Jay helped her into her seat.

Jay said, "When you fell, the first thing I thought of was calling 911, but the phone had no contact with a cell tower, so I tried random texting, and the disc appeared. The disc healed your ankle and levitated you back on the trail. I could never have reached you on my own. As far as your bag goes with our proof in it, well, remember the comment about how our species may not be ready for the encounter? They may be right."

Risa looked at Jay. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, away'," she said, quoting from the Book of Job. "Maybe some things are just meant not to be."

By the time Jay pulled up to her house, Risa was feeling better, the trauma of her fall had dissipated. He turned off the car and said, "Thank God you're alright."

She leaned across the seat and kissed him lightly. "Thank God we're both safe."

Jay grabbed her hand. "Rest. I'll call you tomorrow."

Risa got up early the next morning, showered, got dressed for school, and told her mother she was going to walk down to St. Henry's before catching the bus to campus. When she arrived, she walked about half way down the center aisle, entered a pew, pulled down the kneeler, crossed herself and began to pray.

Jay was up early and asked his father if he could borrow the Jeep.

Bob Shellburn couldn't remember the last time Jay needed the car for school.

"Something important today?" he asked.

"Yeah. I met a girl, and she needs some help. Chemistry."

Bob Shellburn smiled broadly. "Ah yes. Chemistry. That's what it's always about. The keys are in the kitchen."

Jay wanted to see Risa, talk some more and give her a ride to campus, so he swung by her house. Her mother told him Risa had walked down to the Church early that morning.

The sun was bright and cast low shadows across the rich green lawn at St. Henry's Catholic Church. Jay quietly opened the door and saw Risa kneeling with her head down. He walked down the aisle quietly and sat next to her, joining her in silent prayer. She felt his presence and was surprised, but so glad he was there. After some time together praying, she whispered to him,

Jay...Did you tell anyone?"

"No...Did you?" Jay whispered.

"No.... I listened to what *they* said."

Jay responded, "Are you afraid? Is that why you came here?"

Risa paused, "I am here to thank God a second time for making me feel so blessed. It's amazing the experiences He has brought me and... now to you.

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