

"Our silver sausage had shot across the universe"

THE UFO ufoed off into the Sunday twilight and we drove out of the lay-by on the Honiton bypass and back into another week of work and school and living.

It had been a perfectly ordinary Sunday until we saw the silver sausage hovering above the bypass. We had eaten a joint with the grandparents, walked by the sea and skimmed pebbles, lazed in the garden,

eaten Marmite sandwiches for tea, and then climbed into the car to drive home.

The children were snoozing in the back and we were listening to an old tape of *Sergeant Pepper* when Tony suddenly said, "Look!" and there was the sausage, glinting and waiting, sitting too high and too still to be a plane or anything to do with the weather forecast. We turned into the lay-by to watch. The children woke up

and we pointed it out to them. Jane was delighted and excited; Harriet was appalled and terrified.

We sat there for 20 minutes until, without any warning or sound or acceleration, it suddenly elongated into a fish-shape and shot across the evening sky at a ridiculous and impossible speed, leaving us spellbound and earthbound in our lay-by on the Honiton bypass.

The phone was ringing as I stuck the key into the front door lock. Roger Jenkins, the farmer from up the road, sounded exhausted and triumphant. "Susie's just had a boy!" he roared. "When?" I asked. "Half an hour ago," said Roger. Half an hour ago, while we were sausage-gazing, Susie Jenkins had grunted and panted and shoved a new life into the world. And I suppose, during that same half-hour, other people must have grunted and

panted and shoved their way out of life. I went upstairs to tuck the children into bed and draw their curtains. Harriet made me promise that the silver sausage was only a lost balloon and Jane made me promise that it really was a flying saucer and a sign of life from another planet. Across the street from Harriet's room I could see old Mrs Nicholson knitting something wide and porridge-coloured while her television glimmered in the corner of the living room. She'd probably been knitting all the time that Susie was in labour half a mile away and we were UFO-spotting and someone else was busy dying. It's like that poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* by W H Auden which begins:

"About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening
a window or just walking dully along."

And later it says,

"In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how
everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the
ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important
failure."

Icarus had fallen out of the sky, terrified and screaming, his wings on fire, and had plunged into the sea. The ploughman had turned away because his furrow was more important to him. The "expensive, delicate ship" which must have seen Icarus fall, sailed calmly on. Our silver sausage had shot away across the universe, people had lived through hope and tragedy, Susie Jenkins had had a baby and we had driven home to bedtime and old Mrs Nicholson's knitting.

Harriet had a nightmare at two o'clock in the morning and I climbed into her bed and cuddled her, squinting between the curtains in case our UFO might be coming back. It wasn't and the street was dark. I thought about Susie Jenkins who was probably wide awake and feeding her new baby. Headlights hit the street and a car drew up outside our wall. The radio was playing, then it stopped and the lights went out and the two dim shadows inside the car moved close together. The windows began to steam up. Auden was right. Suffering goes on all the time, but so does happiness and so does ordinary living. Some people are born and some people die while some people gaze through windows or make love in cars or get up in the night to ward off their children's nightmares.

And then, because I know I turn away from so many tragedies, because it's impossible to suffer with all of them all the time, I thought, "If ever I find myself lying on my deathbed feeling rather important and pathetic, I'll try to stop dying for a minute and remember that somebody somewhere is knitting a porridge-coloured shape while somebody else is panting and pushing through the second stage of labour. And somewhere else, maybe in a lay-by on the Honiton bypass, a family is watching a flying saucer sitting high up in the sky while a couple make love in the back seat of another car. And none of them will be the least bit interested in me and what I'm doing because their lovemaking and their child-bearing and their knitting and their UFO watching will be rightly much more important to them."

And I hope I'll have enough *savoir vivre* left to wish them luck before I whizz away across the universe like an elongated silver sausage. ♦

By SARA VERNON

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