

the north branch

by Sally Bahnsen

The little green men . . .

NORTH ADAMS
TO READ RE-
 I WAS DELIGHTED to read recently that UFOs have been sighted in Berkshire County. As I read the account of a sighting in Lanesboro, I tried to visualize what had been seen and to imagine what must have gone through the mind of the man who saw the unidentified flying object and then had the courage to go public.

The story said that Mr. R. was not a fan of science fiction. I can imagine his conversation with police and reporters, the chortling that must have gone on among the bearers of the tale (perhaps almost silently). I can imagine a police officer or a reporter asking if Mr. R. is a reader of science fiction. ("Does this frigate believe in this kind of thing? Has he. I bet he reads science fiction. I bet he's seeing science fiction right now.")

That, once upon a time, might have been my reaction to such a story. These days I simply wonder what it was that Mr. R. saw that night in the skies over Berkshire County. All it takes, you see, to move one from the company of giggling disbelievers into the company of the genuinely curious is to have seen a UFO of one's own.

It was a spring evening in Tucson, Ariz., some years ago, not too many months after I had laughed at another

UFO-sighter. (I still laugh at that one, however, because he claimed to have talked to the little green men from a spaceship that landed in the woods outside Tucson. There were no woods outside Tucson). On the evening of my conversation, I was taking a stroll near my apartment, enjoying the colors of the sky, when suddenly my UFOs appeared. They were a small cluster of lights — at first I thought they were stars, but they moved erratically, "reeling" this way and that, sometimes slowly, at other times with a sudden burst of speed. They were following no set direction, no pattern. No noise accompanied the motion. They were clearly no aircraft of any kind I had ever seen.

Suddenly, one by one, the UFOs disappeared in little bursts of light. I searched the skies, but the strange formation was nowhere to be seen. The realization dawned quickly, the realization that I was suddenly among the numbers of people who have seen a UFO. I hurried back to my apartment filled with the thought that I must call someone, let someone know and have someone find out what strange things were out in the skies over the Arizona desert on a spring night.

Whom does one first call in the event of dire emergency? The police, of course. And the police of Tucson, Ariz., were no

help at all that night.

"Yeah, lady? I tell you what. We don't do UFOs. We just take care of stuff down on the ground. Why don't you call the Air Force, and they can probably take care of it."

I could not hear any actual giggling in the background, but I could hear it in the mind of the policeman. Still, I had really seen something, and it seemed important to do my duty as a citizen and report it. So I called the Air Force base. The Air Force was more polite than the police.

"Yes, ma'am, the fellow on the phone said, "Now what time was that?" I told him. I described in detail what I had seen. He listened with seeming interest. At least he was reassuring. "We'll send out a squadron to check it out, ma'am. Thank you for calling," he said.

I went outside again. I watched the skies, and I never saw any squadron take flight. I saw no one looking for my UFOs. Still, I turned on the television news that night, but nothing was said about my UFOs. I went to sleep that night wondering.

The next morning I shared my adventures with my classmates at the university. They were not polite at all — they laughed. They laughed loud, bellowing laughs that filled the cafeteria. My feet-ings were hurt. They, at least, know me

to be a reasonably intelligent person who does not imagine strange things. I said so.

"Do you know what it was?" one asked. No, of course not, because if I did it would not be a UFO. "It's the students. Every spring some of them get weather balloons and they launch them with a little candle underneath instead of weather instruments," my classmate explained. "And when the balloon gets high enough the balloon expands and expands in the lower pressure and finally the candle sets off the balloon and the gas inside and it explodes. The students do it every spring. Everybody knows that."

Well, I hadn't known that. And if everybody knows it, why had the police not told me? Why had the Air Force not told me? Did the Air Force actually send out a squadron to check out a bunch of weather balloons?

My UFO had turned into a simple JO that morning. It had been exciting while it lasted, and it has changed my attitudes about people who see UFOs. As for Mr. R., he probably did really see something (he doesn't sound like the kind of person to make up such a story), but maybe the people who know what it was just aren't telling him.

On the other hand, maybe there are little green men from outer space . . .