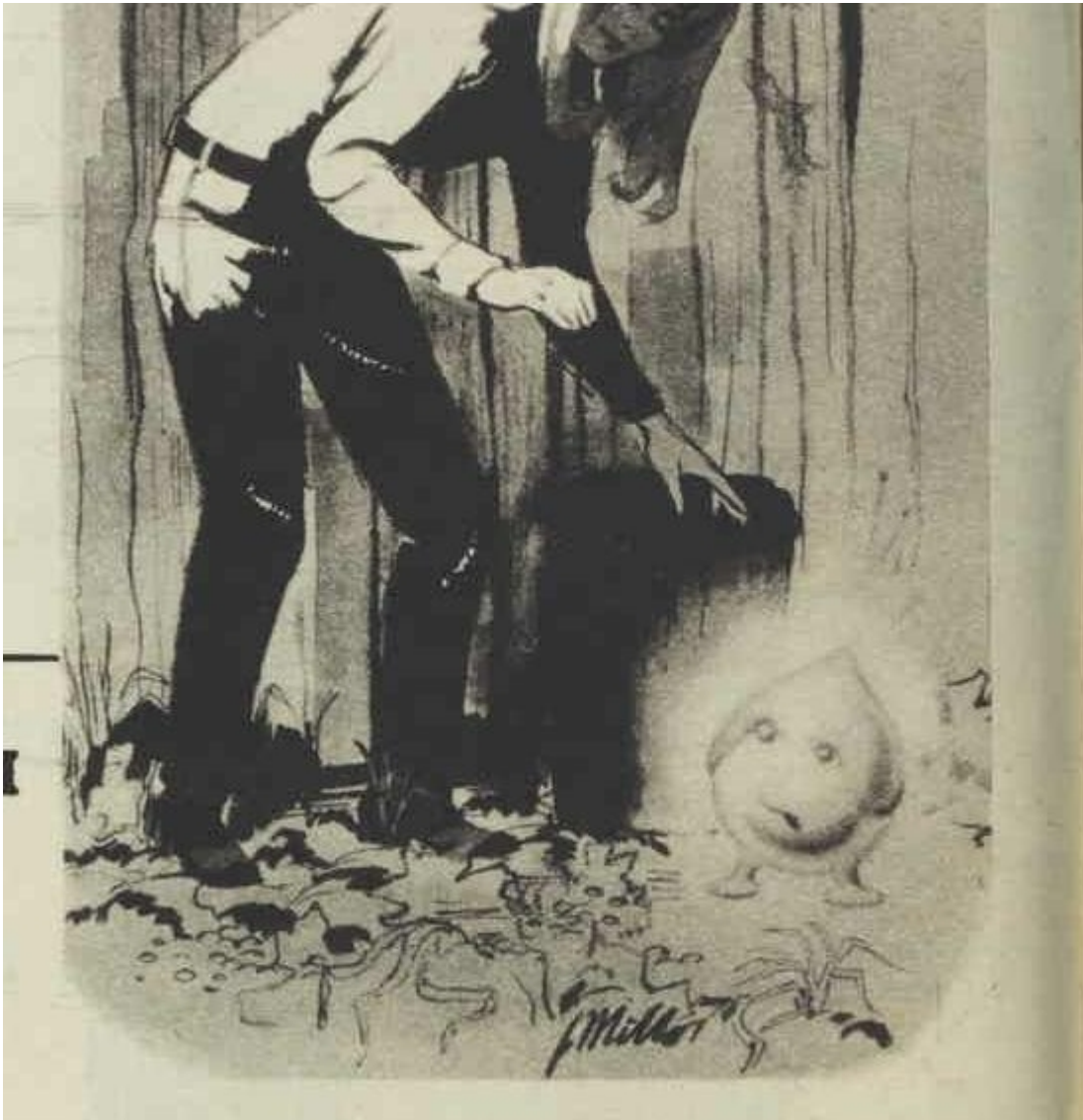


# THERE'S A UFO AT THE BOTTOM OF MY GARDEN

By **PAULA GOLDSMITH**





I SAID to my neighbor, "There's a thing like a plastic bubble in our right-of-way at the back. It wanders to and fro between your place and mine. It looks as if it's lost and wanting to rejoin its flying saucer. Is it yours?"

"No."

"I think our cats move it around a bit when they visit each other — but they don't play with it, which is odd. If it were really only a plastic bubble, the younger ones wouldn't be able to

the younger ones wouldn't be able to resist it, but I don't think it is . . . it's more like something from outer space.

"It leads a lonely life out there among the dustbins and ladders and looks at me sort of reproachfully every time I go to stick some rubbish in the bin. What should we do with it?"

"We could ask around the neighbors, I suppose," she said, doubtfully, not wanting any more than I did to pick up the Creature and tote it from door to door. "Or we could put it out of its misery and then dump it in the dustbin."

"Yes," I said, "that's what I'll do. I'll just poke it with a knife and flatten it, and throw it away."

Even as I said it, I knew I couldn't kill the bubble. It would sigh as it expired and I wouldn't be able to bear the sound. Also, what if the saucer were circling invisibly up there, trying to reach the poor thing, and not being able to lower itself into our narrow three-foot lane?

If the other plastic bubbles saw me advance on it, plunge the kitchen knife into it, squash it flat, and stuff it into the garbage bin, what dreadful radioactive revenge would they inflict on me or my cats or my potplants? I pictured us all laid out side by side, crisped up like french-fried potatoes.

Sometimes in the dead of night, I would wake up and think of the Creature outside, slowly, slowly rolling itself to and fro, gazing plastically up into the night, searching vainly for its UFO, agonisingly

searching vainly for its UFO, agonisingly lonely in an alien lane, and probably starving to death because there's nothing there a creature could get its gums into, unless it cares for flowerpots or old rusty galvanised iron . . . or snails! I didn't like that thought.

The snails are nice, quiet little things, chewing away on my waxplants and minding their own business. Why should they have to sustain a Creature which had absolutely no business there. anyway?

Somenow, I didn't want to pat the Creature, which again is odd, because I am a compulsive patter, unable to pass a dog or cat the way some people can't pass a pub or ice-cream shop, and yet I felt I should make a friendly gesture to it, just in case They were up there . . . watching.

One day, when I rushed out to the bin with a parcel of peelings, there it was as usual, looking like a small colorless cushion, custom-built for a leprechaun. It leaned, glum and listless, against the

bin and watched me moodily as I lifted the lid and did my customary battle with the rubbish, trying to squeeze in just one more parcel.

The desolate aura of the Creature ~~moved~~ me to pat it at last, and very slowly and tentatively I lowered my hand toward it, as one might to a shy puppy. Equally slowly, it rolled away and cowered against a half-buried lampshade frame.

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Well, that's it, I thought. I've tried to be friendly and it won't work. I'm just never going to get through to it. So it's got to go. This lane just isn't big enough for both of us.

I took my problem to the only person in the whole wide world who could help me get a plastic Creature out of the back lane without looking at me sideways and saying something like, "You're looking a little tired lately, love . . . Don't you think you need a holiday?"

"Fred," I said, when he answered the phone. "There's this little plastic globe in the back lane. I think it's dropped out of a UFO and they can't get it back because the lane's too narrow for them to land. It looks so lonely, but it rolls away from me every time I go near it — although I feel positive it would like to tell me something.

"I think it might be starving to death and I wake up every night, wondering what its doing out there, all by itself . . . Fred, honey . . . help!"

So last week he drove up from the coast and came with me to the lane. It was there glinting in the moonlight and rocking from side to side. Dear Fred was all sympathy and brave as a lion. Even when the Creature backed away, Fred wasn't afraid.

He picked it up and carried it carefully out to his car. The Creature settled itself morosely on the back seat and we drove up to the park. The hard part was taking it out and walking across the street with it.

the street with it.

I kept on looking furtively over my shoulder in case a policeman should see us entering the park. I was all ready with my speech: "It's nothing, really, Officer . . . just a tiny little Creature from outer space we were taking to rejoin its saucer . . ."

We left it there, right in the middle of a clearing which we judged quite big enough for any saucer to land on and pick up its Creature. I looked back as we walked away, and swear I saw it go into a joyful spin.

I'm not going back to see if the saucer landed. There's enough to worry about in the world without taking on outer space, too. I've done what I could for the Thing and its up to Them now to look after Their own.

All I ask is that next time They're circling around, if They're careless enough to drop another Creature, it lands in someone else's back lane.

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