

Alone in the Universe

By Jesse Kohn

Tell yourself as much as you want to that you don't believe in aliens, UFOs, or extraterrestrials, but until you've spent one night camping out in the desert near the airfield outside of Roswell, New Mexico, sleeping under an open sky so immense and glittering that the ground beneath you seems like little more than a speck of dust drifting through an auditorium, I won't believe you.

I certainly wasn't a 'believer.' I was in fifth grade, and our teacher took our whole class camping. Where he got the idea of Roswell, I'll never know. I knew this and that about Roswell, and considering what I knew, I wouldn't have opted to camp there if it was up to me.

My classmate Dillon, of course, disagreed. "The government doesn't want us to know," he whispered, "because the aliens want to give us special powers, and if we got special powers, well then, the government wouldn't be able to control our brains." We were in the back seat of the school bus, heading south.

"That's a bunch of bunk," said Dylan from the seat across the aisle.

Yes, there were two boys in my class with names that sounded the same, Dillon and Dylan. They were also both the best at playing sports and the two biggest boys in our class, and they both considered me, small as I was, a best friend. Strange as it was, that's just how it was with Dillon and Dylan and me.

Dillon said, "I bet you're just scared."

Dylan said, "I bet you're just gullible. There aren't any such things as aliens."

I remembered a TV show Dillon had once told me about. It was about a little girl who had woken up one night to find a ray of light brighter than the sun streaming through her window. She tried to scream, but she couldn't move her lips—her entire body was paralyzed. The ray of light lifted her right up out her bed, floated her through her window, and carried her into a flying saucer circling soundlessly outside her house. I didn't sleep for at least a week after Dillon told me that.

"Jesse?" said Dillon.

"Jesse?" said Dylan. "Hello? Earth to Jesse."

"Huh?" I said.

"Well, what do you think?" said both Dillon and Dylan at once.

"Aliens?" I said. "No way. I'm too old to believe in that kind of stuff."

We hiked the whole afternoon and cooked a big chili stew over a bonfire for dinner.

After dinner, Dillon, Dylan, and I climbed up on top of a ridge to watch the sun set while the rest of our class remained down below, digesting dinner. Along with the fading sunlight

faded my good humor. Night arrived, and with it my mounting terror of whatever might materialize in the expansive and star-speckled emptiness above us.

“How can you look out at all of that,” asked Dillon, “and honestly believe that there’s nothing out there that could still surprise us?”

“Not aliens again!” said Dylan.

I swallowed and said, “Are either of you scared by the idea of it at all?”

“Scared?” said both Dillon and Dylan at once. “Why would we be—?”

But neither Dillon nor Dylan finished that sentence—something was approaching from over the mountains. Though at first it was just a tiny speck of flashing light, no bigger than the stars around it, in a matter of seconds it was nearly right above us: a round disk, with orange and green lights rotating around it. I looked at Dillon and Dillon looked at Dylan and Dylan looked at me, and I’d never, in the seven years I’d known both of them, seen either of them looking so scared.

In that moment, I knew that we weren’t alone in the universe. When the UFO got closer, we all realized it was just a regular old airplane about to land in the nearby airfield. Well, even then I still knew we weren’t alone, and neither Dillon, Dylan, nor I—I can guarantee it—slept more than a moment during that long and memorable night.