

When I was a kid I read everything I could get my hands on about UFOs. One of the most interesting books was The Mothman Prophecies by John Keel; what struck me was Keel's contention that UFOs tend to appear in the same areas where Bigfoot and ghosts are sighted. But instead of imagining that this was due to some creepy government conspiracy (as The X-Files did after this story came out), I wondered: what if there were some previously unrecognized force at work here? A law of nature that manifests by breaking all the other laws . . .

"Hopscotch" was nominated for the 1993 Aurora Award; ironically, another story of mine, "The Toy Mill," written with David Nickle, won the award instead.

Originally published in On Spec magazine (Summer 1992), "Hopscotch" was reprinted in On Spec: The First Five Years, Tesseract Books, 1995.

* * H O P S C O T C H * *

It was raining fish.

Linda gave a whoop of triumph which made him jump. Alan clutched the dashboard and stared. An absurd thought came to him: *lucky we're parked.*

The vista of marshlands outside was drawn in thatches of yellow grass under a perfectly blue sky. Yet, out of the clarity a steady downpour of fish was falling. They were no more than six to eight inches long, silvery and seemingly alive. Three were already flopping on the gold hood of the Honda.

"I don't know my fish," mumbled Alan.

"What?" Linda, bouncing in her seat, turned to him. "Get the camera. It's in the glove compartment under the maps."

". . . what kind they are," he half-finished. He was reaching for the glove compartment when she opened her door.

Alan dragged her back and Linda fell across the stickshift. "Ow! What are you doing?"

"Don't go out there! It's crazy."

"The camera! The camera!" She fought past (knocking him in the chin with her bony shoulder) to get it. He made sure he had a good grip on her arm.

"You're not going out there."

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“Let go of me.” She hastily rolled down the window, and began snapping shots.

“Lens-cap!”

“Yeah-yeah.” She popped it off and kept shooting

Thud. Some little mackerel or minnow or other left a smear of ocean on the windshield. He watched it slide down over the wiper. “Jesus, this is weird, you know? I mean, *really* weird.”

“I told you I expected it. What did you think, I was crazy?” He shrugged and she, not seeing it, looked back. “You like that in women?”

He gave her a shit-eating grin. Then he sprawled against the door with one arm along the seat-back. “You told me. People tell me a lot of stuff I don’t believe.”

“Good for you.” She poked her head out. “It’s slackening off.” Before he could react she had the door open and hopped out. He followed with a curse.

Man killed by falling fish. “Christ, Linda. Get in the car. You’ll be brained or something.”

“Wow! Look at this!” She craned back to take a photo straight up. He banged the roof in frustration.

Then he did look around, and the reality of it finally hit him: the marsh flats, surprised birds huddling in the grass, and everywhere fish, flapping, bloody or dead, lying like the sticks of some fortune-telling operation thrown but never read.

He reached out to touch one of the fish which lay on the roof. It was very cold, with the slick feel of decay. He snatched his hand back. For a moment he was very afraid of Linda, as if she’d just *done* this or something, to impress him.

“We’re on the trail of it, you know Alan? The big *it*, the nameless dread everybody blames when something really *off* happens. We got its scent.”

“Yeah.” He tried to smile. “Like a fish market.”

Later when they were driving back to town, his right leg started to hurt badly, mostly in the calf and knee. It took a bit of thought before he realized that, for a few moments when it all started, he had been pushing at the floor of the car with that foot, like he was trying to put on the brakes.

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He lay with his face buried in her hair. Linda was asleep. He was on the comfortable side of awake, most likely to join her. He couldn't stop thinking, though.

About fish, for one thing. About the blank spaces on his bank statement where there should be numbers. About the way summer liked to fall into autumn suddenly, just when he was getting used to things. And about Linda, whom he might never get used to.

Linda was always zipping off in ten different directions at once. Always talking, always thinking even during sex. He tended to be passive except when inspired, so together they evened out, he calming her down, she revving him up.

She was terrified of conforming. "If I got a normal job, Al, settled down, had kids . . . I'd disappear. Gone. Faded into the background. There's four billion people in the world, and maybe a couple hundred stick out." So she was on a constant hunt for the outré. She'd pore over the headlines of some lurid tabloid and crow when she found a particularly strange title. "Rhinceros delivers woman's baby in zoo!" or "Apparition of Elvis appears on bingo cards."

She'd get all excited: "What if it were *true*, Al! Say the universe is more twisted than we thought? No one's ever scientifically studied the really weird. Maybe it's real—like it's the natural equivalent of the Big Lie. Think about it!"

Well, he tried. They had met because they shared a love of practical jokes. He'd concluded lately that his jokes were just been an attention-getting

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device. Her nonconformism went deeper than he could follow. Ultimately he still dreamed of a big house, a fast car and a gorgeous wife. Linda wanted to pop out of what she called the “programmed world” like a bubble, unique. He figured it was because her parents had started out as hippies and ended up as right-wing stock-brokers. That would confuse anybody.

Everything she experienced, she tried to re-experience in a new way, as different from the ordinary. They’d seen some kids playing hopscotch once. “That game is three thousand years old,” she said as they walked past. “Each square represents a stage on your way to Egyptian heaven or hell. When you play it you’re practicing for the afterlife.” Simple as that, then she was pointing out the way the windows of the Faculty Club caught the evening light in rose squares, while he gawked back over his shoulder and the kids posed like storks.

But he was broke now and it was august. Linda had her grants and bursaries; whatever she did she was really good at it. Alan hadn’t yet told her he didn’t have the money to go back to school. The fact was, he was sponging off her, had been all summer. And he no longer wanted to be an engineer.

Linda had this grant and was doing her Ph.D. on statistical studies of irreproducible phenomena. He’d known in a vague sort of way that it had to do with UFOs but he didn’t believe in them and couldn’t believe she would. When she said why didn’t he come along for a couple of weeks while she went into the field, he’d jumped at it.

She went to strange places. Never holiday spots. But the fields in Ohio in July were surreal, faced by soft mists with the faint factory smell of distant cities, and they’d made love there to the buzz of insects and sigh of big trees. The Atlantic, in Maine, was unimpressive, slate gray, somehow unbelievable but he was paying more attention to her than it and even it got pretty romantic.

Alan was prepared to admit he was in love, but love was one of those things Linda didn’t believe in—it was another “program”—so he didn’t know what to say to her. Yes, she cared for him, but she thought it was

some kind of betrayal to express love in the normal fashion. While she believed they were freer this way, her attitude was coming between them; and his lack of money was also, and then this afternoon the thing with the fish, was like a wedge to pry her away from him.

He didn't know where that had come from. Really. What was she up to? He didn't know and if he didn't know the really basic things about her, why she was here, how she could be looking for miracles and finding them, while he drowsed and whittled wood on the hood of the car . . . then, they weren't making it.

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"You have to tell me how you're doing this."

In the car again. Hell. And it was dark this time. Linda draped herself over the wheel, staring across a cabbage field at a black line of trees. They had the windows open and a cooler of beer in the back but it didn't help. He was hot.

"Statistics."

"You say we're gonna see a UFO tonight?"

She brightened. "If I'm right."

"Like we've graduated from falling fish?"

"Not exactly."

"So explain."

Annoyed, she turned to him, resting her cheek on the wheel. "You never asked before."

"Well I'm asking now. Getting whacked by a mackerel from space got my attention, okay?"

She chuckled. "Sure. Anyway, I didn't want to talk about it because it was so off the wall and probably wrong.

"The thing is UFOs and things like that've been around since Moses. They're all part of one big stew—UFOs, apparitions of the Virgin Mary,

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Bigfoot, poltergeists, even visitations by Liberace. You see, all these things appear in the same places, sometimes at the same time. And, say in 1880, they saw dirigibles, not flying saucers. When *we* build flying saucers, we'll be seeing something different, something new."

"How?"

She squinted at him. "Most people ask *why*, you know. They get obsessed with the details. When a UFO lands and gives somebody a starmap, it sets them off for years. But the guy from the UFO is just as likely to give you a plate of pancakes." He laughed, but she sat up and shook her head. "It happens. Scouts honor. The point is, these things are like TV. All form, no content. All picture with no message to it. Try and figure out the *meaning* as a way of getting at origins, and you're fucked. So I'm doing it differently."

"Shit. You really are chasing the things, aren't you?"

"You saw. Alan, you *saw* the fish." Uneasy, he was silent. She had that look in her eye again. "It's a matter of correlating the data on when and where, and ignoring the details of the individual events," she went on. "So I've been doing that. And I found an equation that matched up the incidences of things. I found a *pattern*."

"Like you know where they're from? Venus, or something?"

"No, that's not what I'm looking for, if it was I wouldn't have got this far. It's the raw pattern I was after. When fish fall in Virginia, something else is going to happen along a sort of line, a space-time line, a measurable distance away. You do the statistics, follow that line through space and time, and, in this case, it winds up here."

"Here. How do you know it's gonna be a UFO?"

"I checked the literature. They've never had fish falls here, but they do see flying saucers every now and then."

"Simple as that? No reasons, no clue why?"

"Who cares?" She beamed at him. "That's the beauty of it. Like quantum mechanics, it lets you describe the workings of something without

having to deal with the plain impossibility of what you're describing. It's crazy, but it works. A way of getting a handle on all of this without having to believe in the divinity of Liberace. See?"

Fireflies were coming off the fields. He stared at them. "Huh. An equation to catch Elvis? Flying tortillas and little-girl poltergeists? Ha!" He sat back, seeing nothing but the humor in it. He started to laugh.

"Alan!" Oh there she went, pissed off again. But Linda grabbed his arm and pointed, and there, rising behind the black line of trees across the field, was the mother of all fireflies.

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And *bang*, she was out of the car again. Him still sitting with his jaw down.

But there, that vision of her as a silhouette, too thin, with this green light like an umbrella over the forest all seen past the rearview, the fly-specked glass and the hood; it froze him up. So she was twenty feet away before he could cut his hand finding the door handle and run after.

Cabbages everywhere. "Get back to the car! Get back to the car, God-damn it! Now!" but she ran away. Had the camera again. Alan went after but wanted to run the other way; he couldn't look at that big light or he'd stop dead. She was trying to take pictures and run at the same time so she tripped over a cabbage. Great. He did a dog-pile fall on her.

"Get off! Get off!" she shrieked.

Alan found the adrenaline rush astonishing. He was terrified and he'd never been before. She elbowed him in the stomach but he didn't even feel it. "You're not going in those trees," he shouted. "Get back!"

They rolled over and over and then she was up and on her way again. He caught snatches of words: "—see it, right up close—got to get close, catch it—"

It was all the places she was going where he couldn't follow. It was the University, and the corners of her mind where he couldn't fit, all in

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this green thing so maybe he was just as pissed off as scared now. He was jealous of it.

Wild idea. Funny what you thought when terrified.

He caught her again near the woods and they went down. This time they were both silent but he had her good. Now he was aware of a kind of hiss, more silent like the memory of a sound, but definitely there. They both looked up, her head under his. *We must look pretty stupid*, he thought, floundering in cabbage.

The light went out like it was blown out by a wind; it flickered away over the trees in shreds. For a long time they lay in the dirt, not speaking or even moving. Then she said, "You're heavy."

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At a diner under a huge neon Stetson, she fidgeted over a sundae and he glared at the camera. "Think you got it?" he asked at last.

"I don't know." She was pissed off but trying not to be. She looked at him, resigned. "You didn't have to knock me down."

"Just trying to keep you from getting killed."

"They're not dangerous."

"How the hell do you know? It's like the nineteen fifties: 'a little radiation never hurt nobody!' None of the people who said that are around anymore, are they?"

"Get this straight," she said tightly. "I know what I'm doing. I'm a scientist, and I'm trying to learn objectively about a phenomenon of nature."

"Nature, hell! We were in gunsights back there!"

She shook her head quickly. "No gunsights. No little green men. Oh, yeah, maybe there would have been some. But they're not *real* aliens. They're real like the virgin Mary and Liberace. You honestly think Elvis lives in a UFO? Come on." She tapped her spoon on the table. "Christ, I need a cigarette."

“Then what was it, if it wasn’t aliens?”

“I . . .” She stopped. “Don’t know. Don’t want to know. That’s the point, isn’t it? We can’t lose our objectivity. Can’t go flying off the handle like you did. Like you were Rambo versus the space gooks.”

“Come on.” But he bit back on the rest of his retort because he remembered so clearly the wild look in her eye when he had her down. Reason gone.

“You ran after it,” he accused. “Like it *was* something.”

Linda acted casual. “I wanted to get as close as I could. Doesn’t that make sense? Have to study it.”

“You wanted—” he stopped again. He didn’t want to argue; this was where she drew the line, he knew. She would never admit to what she really wanted, and he couldn’t think how to stop her wanting it.

But he was sure she’d wanted to be taken up in that flying saucer, if only so she could argue with the aliens.

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The old man droned on over the tape recorder. Linda couldn’t still be listening and Alan hadn’t started out interested anyway. He was too busy thinking about the big two-letter word *us*. There were all these contradictory impulses he wanted to follow, most of them stupid and what she wouldn’t laugh at she’d be insulted by.

Hell. He poked at the plastic over the window of this seething hot trailer, and glanced back at the old man, who was telling some incoherent story about hurricanes and walking radio towers. Linda had her eyes on the old guy so Allan’s gaze drifted to her and stayed, locked.

A lot of men stayed away from her because she was “too intense.” At moments like this she sure looked it, with all her attention going to something he’d given up on already. It was this *focus* that was scary.

It was great when you were the one focused on, and he’d thought that, fundamentally, it was him. But right now she had her eyes fixed like

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searchlights on the old man, or rather on what the old man was telling her, and Alan was somewhere in the penumbra of shadow around her.

Originally he'd been able to get her attention back, with tricks and humor. Not any more. In fact, it would feel kind of like cheating to have to be dragging her back with neon signs, instead of letting her go where ever her quick blade of intellect cut.

Later at the car, while Linda unlocked the doors, Alan picked at the weather-stripping on the window then said, "I'm tired."

"Yeah, we're done. Let's go back to the hotel."

"No, I mean tired of all this. This . . . weirdness. What are you trying to do, anyway?"

She paused, continued unlocking and got in. He half-expected her not to unlock his side but she did. She watched him get in.

"You're scared."

"Bullshit."

"That bit with the UFO scared you. Admit it. It's okay to be scared."

"I'm *not* scared." He hopped a bit in the seat, waving his hands to start talking, getting nowhere. "It's—just—" Brainlock set in. He slumped back. "Just . . . not what I signed up for."

She stared out stonily, started the engine. "I think you're doing exactly what you keep telling me not to. You're acting out a script of some kind you've made up. 'Daring researcher makes blinding breakthrough,' You're thinking in headlines. Admit it."

"What?" She was getting heated up. "I *know* what I'm doing. I'm the first person to have a handle on this stuff! I've found the answer, this could be as big as discovering electricity, bigger than going to the moon!"

"Sure." He held up his hands. "Sure. You . . . got the figures. But I think you're turning it into a crusade. I saw you running after the UFO. You've fallen for the mythology, you're not just doing statistics now. You want to *get* the thing behind all this. I mean you believe there is something behind it now, don't you? And you want it."

Linda drove silently for a bit. Then she said, "What do *you* want?"

"I'm just an ordinary guy. I don't want to know what I want. It gets too complicated that way."

Despite herself, she smiled, glanced at him and jiggled her eyebrow. "Everytime you say something like that, you guarantee you'll never be 'ordinary,'" She turned her eyes back to the road, pensive.

"What are you going to do next?"

"I know where the next anomaly will appear," she said. "Michigan. Are you coming?"

He thought it over. "No. It's not what I came for."

"Fine. I'll draw you a map, in case you change your mind." Her voice had gotten cold. "You want me to drop you off somewhere?"

"Don't chase it, Linda. That's what everybody else does, you said so yourself."

"You want me to drop you off somewhere?"

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He wanted to kill something. Killing off a few beer was no substitute. Alan kicked about his friend Murray's apartment for a couple of days. The map she'd drawn, with her calculated date for the next appearance, lay on the kitchen counter. Murray was not happy about having guests, especially non-paying ones. Alan had two hundred in the bank and no idea where more might come from.

Of course, after a couple of days he decided it had been a stupid idea to run off the way he'd done. She needed him now more than ever. Now that things were happening. But she was such a pig-headed, insensitive bitch sometimes, when she got notions in her head . . . And this latest stuff was way out of his league. He'd drag her away from it if he just knew how. But it was too strange, he couldn't get a handle on it.

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She pretended to be so objective. Ha. He'd held her when she cried over the stupidity of life, when they'd talked about what it would be like to win a lottery, just *make it* some day. She always came down on him for being too unimaginative, for plotting out his life and his relationships according to simple models he got from TV and movies. Linda went too far the other way; she thought she could keep it all up in the air, and some treasure would rain down on her someday. Like the fish . . .

Drunk and watching something safe—*Dallas*—he was worrying again about what might be waiting for her in Michigan, feeling futile about being unable to even *know* that, when he remembered something she'd told him. He got up to pace.

She'd said she knew the Ohio thing was going to be a UFO because UFOs had been seen in that area before. Bet she knew the fish would be fish for the same reason. He knew where she did her newspaper-morgue research, had seen her at it. That must be how she knew.

If he just knew what it was going to be, he'd feel better. He kicked the TV off and headed for the door, just as Murray came in.

"Christ, can't you do the dishes for a change?" said Murray.

"When I get back."

"Oh, you're coming back?"

He took the bus down to the newspaper. He hated buses, but they were it from now on. At least till he had a job. He didn't want to get onto that train of thought, better think about something more fun . . . like the fields at night, and the blanket she kept in the back of the Honda.

Shit. It hurt to remember.

They let him into the morgue and he sat down, feeling useless, at a microfiche of headlines. Thousands of them, fading away in a kind of miniature landscape he cruised over. After an hour or two of blue-gray figure and ground, he was getting nowhere, but somehow felt like he was doing something and so kept at it. It was late afternoon, they were going to kick him out soon, but maybe he'd be back tomorrow. Nothing else to do.

Then the headline popped out at him. The place was right. He stared.
MAN VANISHES BEFORE WITNESSES.

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The Honda sat in the middle of a broken, tilted concrete lot. Some ex-gas station, he figured as he drove up. This was the middle of nowhere. He couldn't see her at first and felt a pulse of anxiety. He got out of his rented car.

Linda had been checking her tires. She stood up from behind the Honda, surprised. For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then she sort of smiled, and tried to frown at the same time. "I was hoping you'd come, you know. And I was afraid you'd show up right now, just when things should start happening."

He went over. They embraced okay, just like before, and he started to relax. "You're crazy to go for this one," he said, and felt her tense. "Sorry. I was just remembering you're crazy all the time, so why should I object."

"Thanks. I'm glad you're here." She broke from the embrace and went to rifle the car for something. She came up with a battered notebook. "The numbers say a disappearance should happen. So I'm going to keep an eye on *you*."

"It's scary. That's all. I'd feel safer if you gave this one a miss."

"Can't. I won't know if I'm on the wrong track unless I verify this one." She scribbled something in the notebook.

Alan thought about it. "I don't buy that. If somebody vanishes, first off it probably won't be noticeable for days, and second it'll eventually make the papers. So you don't have to be here."

"Sure I do. This is science in action, Al."

"Now that is bullshit. You're hunting again, that's all. You want to actually be there when it happens. You want to catch the gremlins in the act."

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She frowned at the notebook, squinted up at him, and shrugged. “So?”

“Aha! You admit it! You’ve fallen for the whole paranormal schtick after all.”

“That’s not it at all,” she said hotly. “It’s something else. It’s something bigger than just ‘psychic.’ So okay, I admit I want to find out what. Why not? I’ve taken the first step. I’ve proven it exists. And this is something I have to do for *me*. Because I know you, and I know you don’t believe in any of it. Despite what you’ve seen. When you left I was thinking all kinds of things, things to say or do to make you stay. But I kept coming back to: *he doesn’t believe me. Even after what he’s seen.* So I let you go.” She put a hand to her forehead quickly like a soap queen, and looked at him under it. “You see what I’m saying?”

Alan opened the driver’s door and sat down on the edge. Heat wafted off the concrete. He smelled hot vinyl. She went around and opened the hatch of the Honda, and rooted around in the back of the car. He stared into the hazy distance.

“It’s not you I don’t believe in,” he said slowly. “It’s the idea that you’re unlocking the secrets of the universe.”

“Maybe that’s what I’m doing,” she said, her voice muffled. “You wouldn’t believe it even if it were true. You have to play the role of the ‘rational man,’ So you’re blind to the things I’m seeing. You don’t really see me. Maybe I can’t see your way either. We’re different, Al. I guess we’ll never see eye to eye.”

Alan stared at his hands, depressed. “Playing roles,” he said. “Like by falling in love. And worrying. And things like that?” He shook his head. “We all do that. We can’t not do it. You do it too, you’re doing it now with your obsession with these stupid incidents. There’s only a few ways to live. I have to follow the way my life is laid out. Even if it’s been done a million times before. I’m conventional and I think conventionally, I feel conventionally. You have to see that.”

The sounds from the back had stopped. He looked over again but didn't see her. "You can't just break out and look down at yourself," he said more loudly, "to see what's really you and what isn't.—That's what you really want to do. Isn't it?"

But she didn't answer, and he stood up and walked around the car, and found she was really gone. Stepped through some door while he'd been looking the other way.

He walked the big square slabs of concrete calling her name, until it started to get dark. And then he sat down on the hood of her Honda and cried.