

Our Very Own UFO

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We were fairly good kids, I suppose, more or less, but the country had gone UFO crazy and that brought out the crazy in us too. In government labs out west, there either were or were not alien bodies floating in formaldehyde. Silvery saucers darted across American skies and bony, big-eyed faces in the windows scanned our puny human accomplishments down below, or they didn't. But one thing was certain: our fellow citizens fretted about it on the news and, even better, screamed and ran, arms flailing through the streets fleeing for their lives on Saturdays in the TV movies. We were a nation that could really throw itself into hysteria, and my neighbor Jack and I thought this was great. We wanted a piece of that action. With the help of a dime store helium balloon, we planned to be the first ten-year-old boys in America to drive their hometown into UFO terror.

To get started, we offered our parents flimsy reasons for visiting the nearby shopping center. Our teacher Sister James Louise had taught us that by carefully leaving out key facts we could commit what was called a "sin of omission." So we didn't say, "Mom, Dad, we're going to buy the parts to assemble a realistic fake UFO that will thrust Samoa Drive into the headlines." Instead, we did what we had to do. We lied. Walking to the shopping center, Jack and I strategized about lightweight batteries and silver paint. We brainstormed about

constructing a working saucer out of things sold for next to nothing at Woolworth's. We counted our coins and our few wrinkled dollar bills. This thing just might work.

Up and down the aisles we walked, shopping for the hull of a UFO. At long last we spotted the clear plastic dome of a make-up kit. We bought two, one for the top of the UFO and one for the bottom. Outside the store, when the coast was clear, we threw away the make-up and tucked the two domes into our pockets. Back in the store again, we got up the nerve to order the largest, most babyish helium balloon they would make for us. At the cash register, afraid for our masculine reputations, we also asked the clerk for a bag. Carrying the huge, round, weightless bag through the shopping center seemed hilarious at the time.

After school each day, our work continued in earnest—painting the hull silver except for its windows, attaching batteries to light bulbs, and designing a way for the balloon to carry our flying saucer on fishing line and level far below. We tried to figure out how to get someone to spot its glowing windows in the darkness, without seeing the balloon soaring above it. We knew that we should not make the first report, and anyway, we had to be ready to reel in our mischievous device at a moment's notice. Solutions eluded us, and everything was made more difficult by our having to go to school.

That time is a blur to me now, but perhaps it was the third day when we rushed back from school to find the balloon on the floor, nodding quietly. Our UFO dreams were deflating. How many great adventures have been stillborn because young dreamers are stuck in school until the afternoon? Jack and I turned to other pastimes; we played board games and went out to look at stars. One night, sitting on his lawn, we saw two lights in strict formation zipping faster than any jet across the fabric of the stars. We could not explain what we had seen—do meteors travel in formation? In our minds, anyway, those two FOs remained deeply and ominously U. As I walked home that night past the dark shapes of neighborhood bushes and echo-y black stretches of lawn and lurking shadows, I worked myself up into quite a fright.