

Talking UFOs

By Robert Spiegel

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** Not science fiction, but an insightful postmodernist group portrait of urban angst in which characters define themselves more through 'states of feeling' than actions and words, feelings that reflect a deeper disquiet smoldering beneath the surface: something that reminds us of novelist Anne Beattie. The UFO is a symbol of engagement but also the storm center in a conflicted deteriorating relationship. Spiegel's understated prose, convincing voice and perfect pacing make this story a stand-out. Neophytes should be taking notes when it comes to his dialogue. Quote: 'They're around us all the time. We see them when something inside us becomes sensitive, sensitized. It's more like we uncover them. When we're ready to see, the veil begins to lift. It's a slow process. It can take years before you finally understand what you're seeing'.*

Jean had always been crazy – crazy in the way most women are crazy. But recently things had started to unwind. She was convinced she had seen a UFO and maybe she had made contact with those inside – not all at once, but in stages.

It began like an affair. She told you, “I met this guy.” Innocent words on the surface, but every man cringes when he hears them. Trouble has arrived.

“I met this guy at Toastmasters. You’d like him.”

The words, “You’d like him” finish the set-up. She probably has no idea how these words act like a virus, infecting the relationship. Add to it: “He’s really smart” or “He has some really interesting ideas.”

You’re a dead man. You can count the days till she says you don’t understand her, that she needs some time alone, which of course is never “alone.” If you object to her new interest, you shorten the time till she goes. It’s a dreadful ride.

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The guy, of course, is tuned into UFOs. These days, UFOs aren't what they used to be. They're not simply UFOs. There is a mystical component. Contact with a UFO is a spiritual experience. Decades have passed since UFOs were imagined to be a bumbling species looking for life or rare minerals on a far-away planet.

UFO sightings are now a deep, near-religious experience. They're often accompanied by a budding interest in healing herbs and scented oils designed to combat the poison in our systems that comes from processed food and too many hours watching the code that is embedded in TV commercials. Dial soap will have to go – it leads to brain damage.

Jean wanted to give you a spiritual makeover based on the things Ralph was talking to her about over coffee. First, it was coffee after Toastmasters, but soon it was coffee two or three times a week. She focused her new interest on changing you. This is always the first stage of the affair. She turns her new ideas on you out of habit. You're still her number-one intimacy. When that doesn't work – and it can't work even if you want it to – she will turn all her attention to “this guy I met.” After that, it's only a matter of weeks.

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Jean had been gaining new confidence in the weeks leading up to Ralph and the UFO sightings. New confidence is never a good sign, but you have to go along with it, support it, praise it. If you don't, you'll get swept away almost immediately. You'll eventually get swept away anyway, but you can stall the process by supporting her “growth.” It buys time.

There's an odd chemistry in this. Her new confidence becomes a powerful hook. Not that she becomes necessarily more attractive as her interests expand, but she becomes someone who could actually outgrow you and leave. That shifts the power, and power shifts are a hook. Once she starts growing, you're stuck for the ride.

“I'd like to have Ralph over for dinner next week,” she declares.

“Sure,” you answer positively. You have to go along. Faltering here would set off an unpleasant series of deadly conflicts.

“How about Friday?”

You agree. “Friday would be fine.”

You know it's going to be horrible. You're going to have to watch her hang on his every word. Trapped. And Ralph – with his secret knowledge of UFOs and their related spirituality – will condescend to you while focusing most of his attention on his new smart-student, Jean. He'll share inside jokes and allude to her budding insight. It's all bullshit, but there's nothing you can do about it. Challenging him would confirm you're an ignorant dupe who is defensive about new ideas and an impediment to her growth.

A few days before Friday, Jean comes to bed saying she saw something in the sky while she was out in the backyard just now.

“The colors were unbelievable. Purple with green flaring out,” she explains excitedly.

She wants to share it with you. That's the kicker.

“It was right in the middle of Orion's belt.”

You nod. She's looking for more enthusiasm from you. You don't have it to give, and faking it would seem a betrayal to simple honesty.

She continues without your enthusiasm. “Do you know what that means?”

You shake your head politely.

“That means there will be contacted soon.”

Of course it does. You nod. There's no way you can give her what she wants. If you tried, it would just be pathetic. She'd see through it anyway.

“I have to tell Ralph,” she says, perking up. She dials his number on her cell and walks out of the room. You try to sleep. You know she'll be on the phone for the next two hours as he explains the significance of green with purple flares on Orion's belt.

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You have been with Jean for four years. She wants kids, while you're not so sure. You would love to have kids, but you are not convinced Jean is the right partner. For the past year, you have considered breaking things off. That idea ended when she said, “I met this guy.” Suddenly you have to reconsider everything. You start to notice she's very attractive and getting more attractive by the day. Funny. You hadn't noticed that in years.

Now there's no way you can let go. You find yourself thinking kids with Jean might be a good idea. You distrust this new thought, but you can't deny how striking Jean seems all of a

sudden, her warm chestnut hair, the bangs she flicks out of her eyes – they bring out the beauty of her face. Plus, she has a nearly perfect body. You hadn't noticed this in forever. Funny how two months ago she seemed somewhat annoying.

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The day before Ralph comes over for dinner, Jean initiates lovemaking. You go along and it's enjoyable, particularly because it's so different from the usual. It's more oral. She ordinarily shies away from oral, but tonight she's very enthusiastic. You can't shake the sinking feeling, though. You know there are only two possible reasons for this exuberant display. Either she's teetering and wants to gauge whether she has tipped over completely toward Ralph, or she has already tipped over completely and wants to be in practice for a new lover who is undoubtedly more advanced than you. She wants to have her licks down.

When you first made love to her four years earlier, she was quite wild. But as the months and years wore on, she grew fussy, settling into a fairly narrow space that consistently brought her to orgasm but didn't stretch. When questioned, she insisted she couldn't get to orgasm any other way, so that ended any experimentation except on special occasions such as your birthday – or the night before Ralph was coming over for dinner.

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Ralph wasn't nearly as impressive as you expected him to be. He is just a guy, a bit older than you, clearly intelligent, somewhat quirky. He is someone you would know and be friends with under other circumstances. But not these circumstances.

Oh, come off it. You're being too generous. He is pompous and boring. If it hadn't been for Jean's infatuation, you wouldn't have spent two minutes with him.

Before dinner, you have to go out for wine. Just to be polite, you ask Ralph to come along. Unfortunately, he says, "Sure."

In the car, you start out with the usual, "What kind of work did you do?" You know he is retired and now just tracks UFOs. Turns out he was a design engineer in the automotive industry

for 30 years. Now he makes a few extra bucks selling scents, oils and supplements, all for the purpose of spiritual alignment. He, of course, asks you nothing about yourself.

You were planning to get a bottle for the three of you, but after a few minutes with Ralph, you decide to get three bottles, just in case you get particularly thirsty during dinner.

Once home, Jean is putting out an assortment of cheeses. Ordinarily you do the cooking, but for this dinner you had decided not to volunteer. You figured if Ralph was investing his spirituality in UFOs, chances are, he was going to be weird about food. You didn't think it would be a good idea to risk a homemade meal on the possibility that Ralph would quietly announce he can't eat this food. You had suggested to Jean that she prepare the meal. You knew she would, because after all, this was Ralph. She made dinner by shopping at Whole Foods for organic vegan dishes that she transferred to serving bowls.

When you are all seated, you pour three glasses of wine. You had picked a decent cabernet, deep cherry with an undertone of dark chocolate. The first glass goes down easy and quick, at least for you. Jean and Ralph barely touch theirs. You pour yourself another.

After the three of you have picked through the cheeses, Jean passes around the plates of food. Even though it isn't homemade, it is actually quite good – curried tofu on rice with a variety of chopped veggies, a side of spicy lentil soup.

“When do you think you'll see another UFO?” Jean asks as we graze.

“A lot of that depends on when I'm ready again. Or maybe it depends on when I need to see one again.”

You struggle to keep from rolling your eyes. Jean and Ralph don't seem to read your implicit skepticism. Time for another glass of wine.

“Do you think I saw one the other night? Do you think that was a UFO I saw?”

Ralph nods sagely and takes a sip of wine. “I'm beginning to think you did. I think you're close to ready. The oils and herbs are helping you to prepare.”

They were acting as though you are not even present.

“How can you be ready to see a UFO?” you ask. “You either see one or you don't, right?”

Ralph turns to you with all the patience of an elementary school teacher. “They're around us all the time. We see them when something inside us becomes sensitive, sensitized. It's more like we uncover them. When we're ready to see, the veil begins to lift. It's a slow process. It can take years before you really understand what you're seeing.”

Jean looks at you like she's thinking, "Careful, now, don't get rude."

You find Ralph's comments just amusing enough to push on.

"What on earth do UFOs have to do with spirituality?" You try not to sound antagonistic, but the wine is rushing through your system, so it's hard to judge.

Ralph is a pro. He's been through this a hundred times. He matches you cool-for-cool. He takes a slow sip of wine. He is in no hurry. "The aliens are traveling here to make spiritual contact."

"They're not here for our minerals?" I do my best to sound inoffensive.

Jean seems calm now. She had apparently given up trying to control you. Either that or she trusts you. Maybe she just has confidence in Ralph's ability to handle anything you can throw at him.

You take a deep drink of wine as Ralph continues. "That's a common misperception. They are not miners. They have outgrown the need for individual materials. They can create the materials they need from existing mater. They seek instead spiritual communion."

"What on earth do we have to offer them? We don't do well with spirituality down here."

He smiles. Nearly a smirk. "They're far ahead of us. They don't need our spirituality. They've come to help us. They've been coming here for centuries."

"So why didn't we hear about them centuries ago?"

"We were too ignorant to see them. Most of us anyway. That's changing. That's why there are more sightings. We're becoming ready."

Jean asks Ralph how they appeared in centuries past. He recites a litany of appearances to aboriginal populations, explaining how the aliens were depicted in primitive paintings and stories.

The haze of the cabernet is beginning to give you a rosy view. As Ralph talks about the depth of UFP spirituality, Jean listens intently. Oddly, you find a gentle river of calm in the warm wine. While it is common for anger to rush up when alcohol was poured over emotional upset, for some reason you find yourself reflective, thoughtful. Your jealousy goes fluid and begins to leak away. You are floating, now, and you're thankful for the relative peace.

From your warm-wine distance, you can listen to Jean and Ralph and enjoy what you hear. Emboldened by this strange liberty, you decide to be of service. You clear the table, refill each of the wine glasses, and put out the dessert that Jean had bought earlier. It is some kind of

chocolate-on-chocolate presentation – cake smothered in mousse, dribbled with thin dark chocolate swirls, a perfect match for the cabernet.

Jean smiles at your helpfulness. You return an affectionate look that lets her know she doesn't have to worry. Things are fine.

You are not sure whether your ease is simply a pause before a new phase of conflict, a darker path. For now, you can taste the full flavor of the wine, each sip beginning in the front of the mouth and swishing slowly to the back of the throat. Earlier, the wine was a getaway tool to help you to sink and vanish in the face of Ralph and everything he might come to mean in your life.

Now you can see that Jean is ravishing. Ralph is gentle and patient. You are free for the first time in weeks. You are immune to all the negative feelings. It comes about for absolutely no reason. You look kindly on everything.

You clear the dessert dishes and serve up coffee and tea for Jean and Ralph while you stay with the wine, sipping it slowly enough that it doesn't lose its luster and doesn't get you inebriated. You excuse yourself and walk out into the backyard. The summer evening is cool and the stars are bright.

You leave the door open. You can hear the soft dining-room chat like quiet music, reassuring of all things. Maybe you can learn to love Jean again. Or, maybe she will leave you for Ralph. It doesn't matter. That's the best of all – it no longer matters.

You look up at the stars. Though the city lights reduce their shine, you can still see your favorites, the Big Dipper, Orion's belt, and then Orion himself. You also notice something odd, some unusual lights that are purple and green.

Purple and green are a strange and confident pairing. Like plane lights, they are distinct from stars and planets. You take a full sip of wine, swishing it in your mouth to get the full spectrum of flavor. The lights are clearly in a rectangular pattern of green with a circle of purple that blinks as the circle rotates around the green rectangle. They seem to be drawing closer to you.

You walk back into the house to refill your glass of wine. Jean and Ralph are sitting next to each other and Ralph seems to be going over some chart. He is deep in explanation.

“Um, could I ask a quick question, Ralph?”

Ralph looks up. “Certainly.”

“When UFOs show up, you see their lights, right?”

“Yes,” says Ralph looking helpful.

“What colors?”

“Pardon?”

“What colors are the UFOs?”

“During the day they appear behind clouds – you can’t really see them. At night, well they’re usually green and purple.”

You nod and say thanks. You wander back outside and the green and purple lights are still drawing closer. So close, now, you can see through what seems to be windows and into the ship, if indeed that’s what it is. You sense there is something gentle inside, not that your senses can be trusted. It comes even closer. You feel a rush of acceptance and, perhaps, love. It’s stronger than the wine. Then poof, it disappears.

You go back inside and sit at the table as Jean and Ralph continue talking. Now Ralph is explaining supplements and how they prepare you for new ways of experiencing the world. You’re calm. Some of the peace you felt while watching the UFO – if that’s what it was – lingers. You sip the wine and enjoy the good choice you made, both in the quality of the wine and the quantity of bottles. Jean’s and Ralph’s voices are comforting.

After about another hour, Ralph announces he better be going. You go through the usual goodbyes, Ralph’s thanks the two of you for the wonderful food and company. You’re relieved by how easy it is now. You even accept a quick hug from Ralph.

Once he’s gone, you start to clean up. Jean pitches in and you say, “It’s OK, I got it covered.”

Jean smiles, appreciatively. She gives you a long deep hug and announces she’s going to bed. She can’t thank you enough for helping to make this a wonderful evening.

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When you slip into bed she is sound asleep. You give her a whisper kiss on the cheek. She offers a slight contented sigh. All is at peace.

You accept the obvious. You’ve been with her for the wrong reasons for years. You know there are probably no right reasons. You accept there is little that you can do to keep her, and that’s OK. You know one thing: you’re going to miss her when she’s gone.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: *'Talking UFO's' unfortunately, is mostly true. Yet it's not quite memoir. My intention was to capture the sickening feeling of a deteriorating relationship while also showing its humor. The ending of love is usually bumpy even if it's needed. And for influences, it's George Saunders, Sue Monk Kidd, TC Boyle, Joyce Carol Oates and every one of the hundreds of short story writers I've read in the last 20 years. I've been guided by the notion that voice is paramount. I believe in letting the plot flow naturally from the voice.*

BIO: Robert Spiegel is a writer living in New Mexico. He serves as senior editor for the trade magazine *Design News*. In addition, he is widely published in fiction, poetry and drama. His work has appeared in such diverse publications as *Rolling Stone* and *True Confessions*.