

An Alien Feeling

by

Anna Stewart

"Are yi gonnae tell them about the aliens Lynne?"

They all laugh. It hurts, him saying that in front o his pals, when I told him in confidence, and I only told him because it wis true. It wis a few weeks ago now, and if it had been someone else I suppose I'd laugh the same, but it's no something yi forget, and I find it hard tae see the funny side. It's strange coz sometimes I'd ask tae be taken away, but I thought it wis God I wis asking, and I thought it wis something mair o the spirit that would come fir me those times I couldnae sleep. It happened right across fae the house, in the field by the cliffs. Do yi believe me? *Could* yi believe that something like that could happen here? I'd been walking oor dog Lugs – we called him Lugs coz o his big ears flapping aw ower his eyes and the broo o his nose, especially when he wis excited. I liked rubbing them between my fingers and pressing his fur against my cheek, the smell o the ootside on him: rain and auld earth and a sharpness that comes fae meat.

These fowk here tonight annoy the life oot o me: Fat Karen and Ray, Chris and his new bird I cannae mind the name o. They're aw laughing and no even thinking about Lugs, no even thinking any o it might matter. Ali loves it – thinks it's great havin them ower – aw the beer, and the making fun o me. He thinks I've gone doolally since it happened. And I cannae say I've no felt any different. I've no really been the same – it's hard fir me tae concentrate, and I cannae mindo things. I forgot my ain birthday the other day.

I wis restless the night I lost Lugs, and I suppose that's how I lost him, coz I'd

been tempted tae walk in the field. I wis lying in bed, looking oot the windae at it, how it moved wi the wind, the oilseed rape that gies me migraines in the summer, and I thought I saw a light. I decided tae walk oot there, right intae a sneezing fit so's I could wrap my brain roond tight wi a wall o heidache, just so's I could feel something. Suppose everybody gets a need fir something tae lay its hands on yi sometimes, even if it is just yirself – just yir ain body.

It wis about 2a.m., long efter closing, but when Ali had stayed in toon at Ray's again, or so he'd said, it wis because we'd argued earlier in the day. That's when he likes a drink. I pulled my coat on and took Lugs across the road. I followed the wee path that cuts through the middle o the field towards the cliffs and headed fir the light. And that wis us: me and Lugs on oor last walk thegither. He breathed a kindo quick breath while he wis pulling at the lead, heading for this glow above the rape. And when we got closer I couldnae see properly, it wis that bright. Lugs barked and I heard a piercing sound, beyond a high note fae the sea, like a dog whistle I could hear, and my ears popped. Then Lugs pulled hard on the lead and the leather burnt my skin so I lost hud o him.

Awthing moved then: the light, the shadow o the yella plants fae the field – it aw flipped and wrapped itself up tae make a space fir this long thing, like a coat wi a heid.

The long thing held oot its arms and they bent a shape whar it couldnae o had any bones. I put my hand oot and felt something. It's hard tae describe what it felt like. Raw meat underwater maybe – soft but made hard coz o pressure. It stretched its fingers tae touch me back, but they wirnae really fingers – mair like tools I suppose. I could feel them boring intae me, leaving tiny marks; I can see them

now when I close my eyes, wee red dots wi meaning I cannae imagine, a rash burning my brain fae the inside oot.

I wis able tae look through the light and see aw around the thing efter it marked me like that. That's when I saw these bags full o creatures – rows and rows o them wi their eyes sewn shut: still, but floating. I reached tae touch them, and they began tae move. They minded me o new born bairns.

I dinnae ken whar Lugs went in that moment – I couldnae see him anymair. I could hear him though, in the distance: his bark on a loop. I wis scared o it, that long thing that looked like a coat. But I got a good feeling too, and I wanted tae stay wi it; I wanted it tae take me. And then it happened, I shot right up, I wis weightless fir a moment, and Lugs flashed in front o my face, his mooth a snarl, his teeth gnashing; he looked in pain, he looked at me fir help and I couldnae, I couldnae reach him coz I wis floating, I wis suspended. I wis still and floating, like in water. And the thing wisnae hurting me, it wis hurting Lugs instead. Then I dropped to the ground and he wis gone, and the wee moving things in bags seemed tae have maybe no existed. Maybe they never were there? Except, I could see this vapour – I could see this wee dust in dots floating above the field, falling doon in a tiny spray, a kindo ash landing in the dark on the yella o the oilseed rape. I touched it efter I got up and felt they tiny bits o something that had been burned up. It smelled o nothing at all and evaporated fae my fingers quicker than water ever would. I wonder if that's because this ash wis a dead thing, and water is a living thing? Do yi think that's what that means?

But anyway Lugs wis gone, and that wis that – I wis alone. See, when I think about it now, I think it's when yi cannae understand who yi are anymair – when yi

dinnae even ken *what* yi are – that's when yir right fir being abducted.

I ken what fowk think – I'm a daft wifey that's mistook a coat fir an alien. I ken that's what Ray and Fat Karen, and Chris and his new bird think o me. That's how I'm no getting sucked intae conversation on it, no matter how much they're goading uz. Dinnae get sucked in just coz yi want tae prove it happened; dinnae let them badger yi coz Ali thinks it's funny. But he tells them aw anyway – he tells them so they'll laugh at me. I drink my wine in silence. He made me pick a dear bottle earlier when we went tae the shops. It wis my wee treat he says, and he kens I like red wine. I suppose that wis nice o him, but mair than likely he wis just trying tae impress this lot wi a fancy bottle. I try tae focus on my wine tae droon oot their laughing, I like its fullness in my mooth; I like learning the taste o it. I swirl it and watch it move, how it leaves those legs efter I drink it doon. I take another sip and see it again, red tentacles on glass falling intae a shiny liquid, moving coz o my hand, building up tae spill ower the side, any minute. But I don't let it. Instead, I say, "What about the dog?"

Ali says, "Aye what about my dog, Lynne? Whar is he!"

I can feel myself scream the words, but it sounds muffled in my ears. I ken what I'm saying though – *I've awready telt yi what happened; I've awready telt yi.*

My throat feels raw efter it, so I ken it wis loud.

The room gets embarrassed and so do I. Chris's new lassie makes an excuse and goes tae the loo. Ali tells me tae tone it doon. I say I'm awa tae bed, then Fat Karen pipes up, "What did they want?"

I turn tae look at her and she asks again, this time like she believes uz, "The aliens – what did they want?"

"I dinnae ken what they wanted," I say, "but they kept Lugs."

I go upstairs. I've made awbody feel bad. Ali'll tell me tomorrow I've ruined everyone's night wi my daft story about aliens, forgetting that it wis him that brought it up. He likes asking what happened tae Lugs because he wants tae remind me to feel the pain o it.

It isnae true that I didnae ken what the alien wanted. I know it's watching all the time now, watching through my eyes, collecting information about how I live. And there's wee things I hae tae do – signals: I flash a torch in the sky at night, I count one...two...three, I blink during the day, three quick blinks looking up to the clouds so they know I'm watching back. It's for when they come fir uz again, so they'll know I'm ready. I cannae wait fir them tae come back; I cannae wait tae feel that way again, like yir suspended, like aw yir muscles are relaxed and there's liquid flowing through yir body, a giant release like yiv needed a pee fir ages and finally yi get one, but it's yir whole body – yir whole self. And tae see Lugs – I want tae see Lugs again.

Ali comes tearing up the stairs and near takes the door aff its hinges. His mates have aw left, he says, and it's because o me. I'm a total embarrassment, embarrassing him like that. He knocks uz ontae the bed wi his fist, I kindo bounce back up, and I laugh, so he hooks uz again in the same place on my jaw. It's never that sair when he hits uz; it's just I cannae get up and I'm trapped. That's the worst feeling – being scared in case there's something worse tae come; no haein the strength tae get oot fae under him.

We look at each other, me on the bed huddin ma jaw and him standing ower uz. But I know: all he wants tae do is crawl inside and see what I see. That's why he

does it – coz he cannae get inside o me like he wants to. I'll never let him in, no in that way. Does that make me sound cold?

He goes oot the room. I hear him going doonstair, and I rest my head on the pillow. I feel my jaw oot o line. I keep pushing it, fiddling wi it. It's no sair, just a wee bit like it might unlock itself fae my face. We've been married a lot o years. When yiv been married aw that time, it's inevitable that these kindo arguments will happen. These kindo scuffles.

I lie there and think aboot oor bairn, the one he knocked oot o me aw those years ago. I ay think aboot her efter this kindo thing happens, coz he reminds me when he does this o how I lost her. I've a picture in my heid o what she'd be like now, as a young wumman. Every year I add a year. Yi cannae keep them as bairns forever – they've got tae grow up, even if it's just in yir heid, even just in there, so they're no wasted. I wonder what a bairn o mine and his would've liked, what kindo things she'd have like tae do, what kindo places, what claes, what food, what games, what type o walk, kindo hands, what shape o eyes, colour o skin, o hair, the smell o her – like blood and salt and a see-through blue, I remember. Maybe she'd have been chatty? If she was, she wouldo been different fae me; I find I cannae talk that much tae other fowk, just in my heid is when it aw comes oot. We mighto had a laugh; we mighto laughed at him thegither. She mighto made him better.

Why did he do that? Why did he do that and then greet aboot it now when he's drunk, lying on the flair like he wants tae crawl into the groond, saying he's sorry ower and ower again. And then he does it again, like now – he makes that bad day happen ower and ower again, like how I'm feeling now. Like how he reminds me.

I hear him shifting aboot doonstair, and I get up and look oot the windae at

the field. The wind makes it move like a living thing, and I think I see that light again. I better flash my torch, blink my eyes, and I see they're watching because the light in the field blinks back. I listen and hear he's gone intae the kitchen, so that's my chance. I tiptoe doon the stairs and slip oot the front door. I dinnae even hae a jacket nearby tae grab hud o. I run across the road and crouch doon in the long grasses o the oilseed rape. I can feel my heid start tae tighten, my heart race.

I crawl slowly fir a long time so Ali doesnae see me, and I end up whar I wis that night I lost Lugs, heading oot towards the edge o the cliffs. The sea is louder, and fae the ground I can feel its rumble. I remember now: there wis these lights that I followed, then something weird happened – I had this funny-like dream even though I wis awake. I'm sure that's what happened the night I lost him. We'd had an argument, fought again that day, then what happened tae Lugs? I cannae mind. I ken he loves Lugs – loved that dog, treated that dog better than me because it wis soft and would let him in; would let him hold it and squeeze the life oot o it.

I flash my torch, looking and looking till I find the right place. Then I see a paw, stickin oot fae under the mud. It's got patches o black and white, and a wee black mole on the padded underside, just like Lugs used tae hae. I tear at the mud wi my nails till I get to the fur, and I start tae smell the stench o him, sharp and wet. I move mounds o earth till there's his nose, his eye, rotted awa, and the hair fae his lug, still furry and soft tae touch between the pads o my fingers. It's a lovely feeling. I bury my face in his fur, and when I finally lift my heid the light fae the moon's gone. How come I kent whar he wis?

That's when the long thing comes again, the coat wi a heid. And I think now it musto been guiding me. It has a light o its ain, and I recognise it fae the last time –

how its arms bend in a way that means it cannae hae bones, how it feels soft but hard at the same time. And now it lifts uz and I'm suspended, I'm released, able again, no broken up. That's what this alien does tae me. And I'm glad it's come into my life, this special thing, this extraterrestrial asking me what it feels tae be human. What is life? What is death? Because he tells me they dinnae exist, and I believe in him.

Across the road my front door opens and through a glow fae the bulb in the lobby I see Ali's shadow, looking oot, looking fir me: me standing in the field, mud on my nightie, up my arms, my hands, under my nails. My breek feels wet, and Lugs is hard tae carry coz he's heavy fae the weight o being so still. I see him looking fir me, this man I've spent my life wi, and I walk towards him, holding oor dog in my arms.

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A Scots Hoose production, 2019
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