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-- Création littéraire - Nouvelles --

Nouvelles



We are alone

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Ernest Wallace was in his car when he heard the news. Nellie had asked him to buy some milk and vegetables at the supermarket. He had protested, arguing that he was in the middle of correcting Stephen Greene's Ph.D. thesis. He had promised his ace student to proofread it before the end of the summer. It was already August 28th and he had only managed the first half, which represented a good 540 pages. All about the celestial metaphors in medieval Languedoc poetry.

-I am on the phone with Stacey, she had said and the supermarket closes in twenty minutes. There is no milk left for your coffee tomorrow morning and we have nothing to go with the T-bones tonight...

Stacey was their only daughter. She was in her last year of college and was obviously suffering some kind of nervous breakdown. For the past two months, she had called home almost every night, crying. In the beginning he had thought it would be best if he handled the situation, being an academic and all, but he soon realized that she only wanted to talk to her mother. He had suspected a break-up, then a pregnancy, then an abortion, but Nellie had told him that no, his daughter was just very unhappy right now. Then he started worrying about suicide, and still did, although he had said nothing to Nellie.

So he had reluctantly set his yellow HB pencil between the thesis's pages and walked out to the car. The late summer evening sky was a deep golden blue and he could hear an invisible bird chirp from one of the neighbours' gardens. His neck ached from too much reading and he thought that driving for ten minutes might help untighten his shoulder muscles. As always, he switched on the classical channel and Scriabin filled the car with its subtle notes.

The Supersave sign had just appeared when the speakers' voice came on, to read out the news. It came fourth, right after the new Wall Street crisis, the Moscow subway bombing and the first play-off results.

-Bad news for all of you UFO lovers, the speaker had said, in a jovial tone. The latest results of the Ptolemy space radiotelescope are confirmed: there are no other inhabitable planets in our galaxy. We are definitely alone.

Ernest had not reacted on the spot, but it suddenly struck him as he was about to pick up the milk in the supermarket. At first he thought he was having a stroke. His heart began to gallop a thousand miles a minute, sweat trickled down his back and a strange feeling of dizziness overwhelmed him. He had to set his two hands against on the refrigerated metallic case not to tip over, nose first, into the milk cartons. It took him a few seconds to straighten up, his breathing still short, his eyes watery and unfocused.

-Yes, folks, we are definitely alone, definitely alone, definitely alone.

The speaker's voice rang inside his head like a commercial jingle. Ernest grabbed the milk and put it down in the trolley, alongside the broccoli and green beans. He paid absent-mindedly and set the grocery bag on the passenger seat like an automat. Once behind the wheel, he lifted his arm to start the ignition and stopped in mid-air.

He felt so empty, all of sudden. As a kid, he had followed the Space Conquest with awe. The stories of the colonization of the Moon, then Mars had made him dream. The tragedy of the SS Armstrong, in which 24 young astronauts had lost their lives, had vividly struck him in his late teens and he had even written a song about it, which he had never showed anyone, but still kept in his personal archives somewhere. As a student of medieval literature, he had often thought about the ancient star maps and the poetic belief in astrology. The stars had always been part of his life, of his inner soul. As the secret hope of discovering new forms of life somewhere else. Like millions on earth, he thought. Millions like him, stranded here for good now.

-Broccoli, green beans, Nellie said appreciatingly. That's good. I'm surprised you didn't buy potatoes for once. I'm glad to see you're a big boy now.

Ernest smiled a weary smile and told Nellie he would be in his study, reading Stephen Greene's Ph.D. She waved him off as she checked the inside of the fridge.

The yellow HB pen was still stuck in the middle of the enormous manuscript. Ernest sat at his desk, looking at the evening sky slowly turning darker in the opposite window. He could see the

neighbour's bungalow, its lit-up windows staring at him like the Iron Man's eyes. He picked up the pencil, rolling it between his fingers.

No more Martians. No more Klingons, Vulcans or things from outer space. No more UFO scares or crop circles. Just humans, making their way through space like they had across the earth, but without natives, massacres and legends. Just humans, and the one God they had created, up to the limits of the Universe.

-We are so alone, he mumbled, looking at the dead stars rising slowly over the horizon.

Then he thought about Stacey and felt like calling her up. Right now, it seemed like she would be the only one to understand him. That was a first, he thought, and he sadly waved at himself, reflected in the darkening window, like the empty face of a powerless grey-haired God.