

ENCOUNTER 432

A Short Story by Paul Lambrecht

When the aliens took Violet away, Tom cried. They'd been taking her in her sleep for years. He would wake up in a tear and look over at the rumpled empty side of the bed. But his limbs were paralyzed and then his eyes slowly blacked over, and he was off in sweet sleep again. And they always returned Violet, except for this last time.

Tom sat at his kitchen table in the gathering gloom of the evening, his face resting in his hands. This was not fair. Holy cats, no.

Violet had endured these abductions with grit and occasional sarcasm. She had grown cautious of falling asleep at all. She naively figured that if she didn't sleep, they couldn't take her, but a woman can only fight

her eyelids for so long. They had discussed moving, but this inevitably brought on a deep malaise. Something in them denied the abductions were taking place. And besides, if the aliens were that attracted to Violet, they surely would have no trouble trailing her to the new house.

On the ship they made Violet shower. These details only recurred to her in snippets, as if from erotic dreams. Then they put her on a cold slab and poked and prodded her, and probed of course. This emasculated Tom. He cursed the perverse extraterrestrials who usurped his marriage, his bed.

The night before Violet was absconded with, she had paused in front of a painting of the Last Supper. She had touched the print with her hand. Then she had complained of a headache and taken a pill. Lastly, with her head on the pillow and a compress on her forehead, she had repeated a phone number to herself. Twice.

The next morning, Tom woke up feeling completely rested. He had not awoke in the middle of the night, and Violet's side of the bed was still ruffled. Usually in the morning it was pristine, as if her side of the bed had been made silently. It was therefore with growing alarm, the way in which he descended the stairs, as if he wouldn't find her in the kitchen making breakfast. Alas, there was no coffee, no toast, and no eggs on the table. And no Violet.

The aliens were very technologically advanced, Violet had said once, and nice enough on most occasions, but they needed our air and minerals, she said. They hoped we could help with that.

This bothered Tom for some reason. Fuck those heeby-jeebies. He didn't like to think of his wife as mediating some form of apocalyptic message, but he went along with it. Seemed like just the thing a bored housewife would

come up with, but Tom couldn't deny that the abductions were taking place. That part made sense, so he guessed it stood to reason they would have some type of message for her; some role for her to perform. Tom really honestly resented that.

He had been on the ship once, he thought--and had seen many women showering in stalls. They didn't even appear to be aware what they were doing. Tom felt guilty staring at the women's naked bodies for any length of time, so he remembered running around the corner as if being pursued by his conscience wielding a bloody bludgeon--and there was another bank of shower stalls with showering naked women in them. That is all he remembered about the alien ship. It was kind of like a giant girls' locker room floating in outer space.

Violet had been a looker in 1972 when they had met. She had suffered from terrible headaches at the time, but

she seemed to like him, and six weeks after they met, they were married.

They pretty much stopped having sex after a year of marriage, and the year after that, the disappearances had started. They happened about once a month after that point.

Tom looked up from his hands at the clock on the wall, mounted in a nautical steering wheel. 9:06 p.m.

When Tom looked at the clock and noticed the ruffled side of the bed and that Violet was missing, it invariably read 5:23 a.m.

The phone was ringing but Tom didn't answer it. Then he thought it might be Violet so he ran to the handset and looked at the flashing caller ID. The phone number looked familiar. His heart pounding, he dialed the number.

The number that Violet had twice repeated the previous night was for a warehouse in New Jersey. In an office on

the second floor perimeter of the warehouse was a **little phone** on a desk, a desk blotter, several chairs, a file cabinet, a safe, and a map of Newark. The **little phone** was ringing.

The file cabinet was open to a thick sheaf of paper poking out of a manila folder with the legend, Gary Gygax on it. There was a pounding noise originating from the safe.

Gary Gygax had been a scientist but had been erased by the CIA. The CIA had rifled through the office of Gary's business partner, Harry Wheaton, and finding the warehouse abandoned except for a cat, had put the poor beast in the safe as a surprise for Harry.

Harry Wheaton had a theory that aliens were already living among us, and were subtly convincing world leaders to make the Earth an inviting toxic soup for our ET overlords.

Harry Wheaton's **little phone** seemed to have a mind of its own. It would appear to make and receive calls of its own accord.

Tom let the phone ring six times before he put it back in the cradle, and breathed a sigh of relief. Then the phone rang three times before he could answer it.

"Hello," he said.

"Yes," said a voice on the other end, finally.

"Where's my wife?" he asked.

"Violet is home, now."

Tom's knuckles had turned white, and his tone was clipped--tamping down the rage he felt.

"You are calling Violet's home right now. Now please return her," he said, measuring out the syllables, in a calm silky voice.

"Violet is a good woman. We need her help."

"Listen you alien bastards, I don't care what you do with this planet. You couldn't do any worse than those morons in Washington DC, but Violet is just a wife, mother, and a civilian. She can't be that great a help to you."

Tom pictured the voice on the other end of the line considering this, but realized his attempts to reason were most likely futile.

"If you want your wife to return to you, then kill Harry Wheaton when you see him."

Then the voice hung up on Tom as he was just about to ask, "Who in thunder is Harry Wheaton?"

Then there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by two more.

"Who is it?" asked Tom, his voice shaking, and then breaking off.

"It's the CIA, can you let us in? We need to talk."

Tom answered the door and let two men into the house, both dressed in Hawaiian shirts and khaki shorts.

They all sat at the lamp-lit kitchen table.

Agent Matt Dross began.

"Sir, I regret to inform you that your wife is dead."

"I know," said Tom, dropping his head forward again.

"Her body was found with this man's," Dross said, holding up a picture of Harry Wheaton.

"His name is Gary Gygax," continued Dross. "They were having an affair."

Tom stared at Dross, and then the other agent, in disbelief.

"Now you hold on a cotton-pickin' moment."

"Now, Mr. Adams, I know you may have heard something else, but I assure you, we are telling you the truth."

"You're working with them."

The other agent shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

"With whom?" asked Dross, sympathetically.

"With the aliens."

Dross laughed but the other agent scowled.

"Aliens! Have you been drinking?"

"Maybe that's why your wife was out there looking," piped in the other mean-tempered agent.

Tom stared him in his spiteful eye. He looked on the verge of doing something.

Then the phone rang again.

Tom rose to his feet.

"Don't answer it," said Dross.

The other agent rose up and picked up the phone.

"This is Tom Adams," he said muffling his voice with his hand.

"Yes, Harry, I'd love to meet you."

He signaled Dross for a paper and a pen, and then proceeded to write for about five minutes, filling up half the page with microscopic handwriting, then he hung up the phone, and nodding to Dross, walked right out the door.

"Come on Dross," he said gruffly.

Dross looked at Tom.

"Tom, I'm sorry for your loss. My advice to you is to keep your nose out of this."

When Dross had left, Tom quickly fished his jacket out of the closet, and as quietly, swiftly, and surreptitiously as possible, he snuck out the door--and hearing the voices of the agents trailing down the street, he followed.

They walked to a beige car parked a block down and around the corner. Here they looked around obviously and without real regard, and then got into the car. The car sped off, though each streetlight it passed glowed bright for a moment, and then was just as quickly extinguished.

Tom could hear a strange whirring noise, like a can-opener, and looking above he saw an opaque mass slowly heading in the direction the car went. The border between the object in the air and the surrounding darkness was nearly imperceptible. It was so large that Tom could keep pace with it just by walking.

He had walked a few miles before he noticed the large object had stopped. It was hovering over an enormous glass building. Tom recognized the beige station wagon in an arcade next to the building. Beyond it he could see in the gloom two men in Hawaiian shirts speaking with a dark figure in a white linen suit.

Tom reached in his pocket for the familiar weight of the military-issue handgun he carried around since being harried and harassed by unearthly visitors.

He snuck as close as he could to the meeting. "Why, it's Gary Gygax. He's not dead," thought Tom, remembering the red herring photograph.

Harry Wheaton aka Gygax looked worried. Then suddenly, Dross and the other agent pulled their guns out and pointed them at Wheaton. Tom, not thinking, blasted them away in the back.

Harry Wheaton looked over to him in shock.

"Are you Tom Adams?" he asked.

"I am. Are you Gary Gygax?" Tom asked cocking his gun...

"No, I'm Harry Wheaton. Gary Gygax was my business partner."

Tom allowed himself to be puzzled for only a second.

"Well, I hate to tell you this, but I'm going to have to kill you. It's the only way I can hope to see my wife again."

"Wait," said Tom, in an authoritative voice, "Who is your wife?"

"Violet Adams."

"And where is she? Who said you had to kill me?"

Tom pointed upwards at the dark blob in the sky.

"Them."

"If you kill me, they will prevail. I was going to take this story to the media. Your wife was going to help me. I was trying to get a hold of you, because the evidence is in your house. Your wife made a recording of herself the last time she was up on the ship."

A cellphone rang in Wheaton's pocket.

"Excuse me," he said, reaching in and answering the phone.

Tom looked wistfully up at the ship, and then as if torn apart by two giant magnets, back over to Harry.

"Yes, NBC, I have the lady's husband here now. We'll have the tapes in thirty minutes."

"She was keeping them in my office, so I would have them to break the story at the optimal time, but I couldn't trust Gygax, so I gave them back to her," Harry explained to Tom.

"And what was the nature of Gygax's relationship with my wife?" asked Tom.

"Violet was a peach," said Harry, patting him on the shoulder.

"That she was, Harry," said Tom, emptying the clip into the man's chest.

The blob overhead made another whirring noise, and descended.

Tom walked into the building towards the elevator. In his head he could hear Violet's voice calling to him.

"Come home, Tom," she said.

"Baby, I'm coming," said Tom.

END.