

That Thing

SUSAN TAYLOR CHEHAK

My pap's eyes are bad. It's not the books or the computer, not the peering at small letters on a page or on a screen. And it isn't just a consequence of age either. His peepers went bad a long time ago, when he was young. Not a child, but a teenager. Sixteen years old, to be precise. The world began to blur then, and now it's just getting worse, fading from him even though he's really not so very old. Says he still needs his eyes. Still needs to see what's what. He can't be counting on me all the time, he says, though I'd drive him, and happily so, if he asked. Wherever he wants to go. He's a good man, my pap. I'll take care of him, just like he took care of me.

But there it is anyway. He flunked his eye test down at the DMV, even though he was prepared to cheat. I'd warned him and then piped up again and warned the DMV lady at the counter, too, that he'd try to cheat, which brought forth a stern warning from the DMV lady herself—a heavy girl in a big denim dress, or maybe she was pregnant. Hormones run amok. Pimples on her chin and a scowl on her face that deepened when my pap played it straight and had to admit he couldn't make out the letters, even with his glasses on, and he smiled and asked, "Could I please try again?" because of course he had them memorized. But the DMV lady was on to him and she changed them or...I don't know. Only that he failed and lost his license.

Or maybe it had more to do with the drinking. Damned patrolman who tracked him at fifteen miles over the speed limit and .01 points

over the lowest bar for intoxication, but he insisted he wasn't going to hurt anyone. Said he knew what he was doing. Explained that he's driven that stretch of road so many times in his life, he knows it by heart. Besides, whatever the numbers said, he was not impaired. But, "Tell that to the judge," the patrolman said. And, "I know who you are, sir." Pap couldn't see the smirk, though most likely he could feel it.

You can find accounts of what first made my pap famous around here in some of the old newspapers that they've got archived online. In those stories he's a sixteen-year-old boy with 20/20 vision, minding his own business on his father's farm. He goes outside after supper to check on the horses. It's twilight time in the early fall. He shivers, pulls up his collar, stuffs his hands into his pockets. But of course the horses are just fine. That's only an excuse for him to be with his own thoughts, as it were. Because Pap is in love, not with a girl, but with his teacher, who's too old to be anything serious for him, but young enough to set off a spark in his heart that's burning hot enough to make him want to do something about it.

He's leaning on the fence, feeling the chill and watching the sharpness of the stars coming out in the black sky. He hears the horses stamping and snuffling like they do. He's smoking a cigarette and looking over his shoulder at his mam's figure at the sink, where she's washing up after supper. A light blooms on in the window of his sis's room upstairs.

He moves away from the fence and into the shadows behind the barn. Taking a leak there, probably. Innocent enough, but when he looks up, he sees a glowing in the trees. Like sunrise it is, almost. He's thinking there should be some kind of sound to go with that light,

and just when he thinks this, he hears it too. Humming, or some such as that. And he realizes he's been hearing it for a while, after all. He squints through the smoke from his cigarette, clenched in his bared teeth the way he's seen the TV cowboys do. The light spreads until he can make out a shape with a definite curve to it, twenty feet maybe, from one end to the other and a dazzle of blue, red, and orange lights flickering there along the sides. It's hovering above the ground about the same height as his sis is from head to toe, he thinks. He looks back to the house to see if she's there at the window maybe. Or if anybody else inside can see what he sees, but now the kitchen lights are off and the curtains upstairs are drawn. When he turns back for another look, the thing has begun to shine at its base, and then it lifts up and spins away with a whirring sound. The glow is so intense now that poor dumb Pap is temporarily blinded by it and will never get his eyesight back the way it was before; in fact it will only worsen over the years that pass for him between then and now.

In the newspaper story about all this, he says his eyes were on fire, and his mind was swirling, and his heart was hammering in his chest. He stumbled back to the house, running, falling, slamming his shoulder on the corner of the barn as he came around too quickly into the innocent yellow glow of the yard light. There was a truck passing on the highway at the long end of the drive, and the dog was at the back door barking at him, and his mam's birds were flapping in their cages when he barreled inside, hollering for help. When he saw his own pap's look of alarm and heard his mam's frightened cry, he turned right back around again, knowing they were going to follow him. His mam says she and his pap found him on the porch, pointing at something up

high, above the tallest trees. Pretty soon his sis tumbled out the door and then there was the whole family and the dog too, gaping at the glowing in the sky.

Pap's pap says he went back into the house for a flashlight, which he gave to Pap to hold, and Pap then led the way around back of the barn, where his cigarette butts were piled up and scattered along the path, the evidence of his guilty pleasures, but never mind that. He went on into the trees where he'd stood before, where he'd seen the mystery for himself.

"That Thing" was what they all came to call it, never daring to say the words: saucer, spaceship, UFO. My pap's delusion, his sis insisted. Her brother's cracked skull. And pretty soon she was denying all of it. Shaking her head. Telling the reporter that she didn't see anything. It never happened. Her brother is crazy and so are you if you believe anything he says.

His own pap took another stance though. Champing on a toothpick, head tilted, hands on his hips, considering the situation. Pap's pap was a canny one, and he was already calculating how he might be able to make some money on That Thing. A swagger of greed was already glinting in his grin as he hoisted up his pants, crossed his arms over his chest, and rolled that toothpick this way and that with his tongue.

Only my pap's mam was drawn past her own calculations and expectations into an honest belief in what she'd seen. She separated from her family—the boy with his burning eyes, the girl with her cynical sneer, the man with his whiskey squint—and crept all on her own toward the white circle in the grass. When she got there she

stepped right into it, just like that. Ashes dusted up at her feet as ever so slowly she bent her knees and squatted there, her skirt flowering out around her, and put her palm to the ground, pressed her fingers to it, felt the heat and came away with a small mound of what looked like sugar crystals in the pocket of her palm.

Her fingers were numb for days afterward, and she never did get the feeling back into them completely. Eventually, over the years until she died, that hand would gnarl up and knot into a painful arthritic fist that she held clenched against her belly, as if cradling something precious there, a secret she held tightly to herself, kept close, for no one else to know or see.

Not long afterward, my pap was suffering too. His head was plagued by pain, headaches that were like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Eventually a doctor told him they were migraines, as they were always preceded by a kind of effervescence behind his eyes that, to his mind, were like the sparkle of the lights on That Thing, whatever it was. And his eyesight was weakening too, as if sand had been kicked in them. Itching and watering so that at school it was assumed he'd been crying, though no one knew or bothered to ask why. Just, a bigger boy stepped forward, breaking away from a clot of those halfwit kids from town, and gave my pap a shove while the others called him baby and pussy and girlie and all like that. His head wasn't just throbbing, it felt stabbed, as if someone had plunged a knife into his brain, straight through the eyebrow just above his left eye. And not long after that, he took to stammering and couldn't say what he meant to, couldn't find the words. Embarrassed and ashamed, he hid out in his room, taking some comfort from the shadows there, as light of day and school and the world only made everything all that much worse.

When he slept he dreamed of bloody hands and broken bones. Blindfolds and handcuffs. Long hallways, dimly lit. Red doors and broken teeth. Wild horses. Snakes and flapping bats. He woke thrashing. Sometimes screaming. Sometimes out loud but mostly in silence, inside his head. The house around him creaked the way old houses do. His pap's snores rose and fell from the bedroom down the hall. Soon his mam was there to cool him down with a healing poultice pressed against his brow.

My pap knew who was calling before his pap picked up the phone, sometimes before he'd even heard it ring. He understood that his grandmam was ailing even before that phone call came. He looked at his sis and could tell her the name of the boy she'd kissed last night. He knew about the money his pap had taken from the cash register at work. It wasn't much, not enough for anybody else to notice, and they didn't. He spent it on drink. He took a woman outside to his truck and laid her down on her back. Her name was Genie. Her husband was from Michigan.

All this information popped into my pap's head and left him knowing everything about everybody, excluding whatever it was he was supposed to be learning from that attractive young teacher at the school. It was like there wasn't any room left in him for all that anymore. And so the pink slips and the phone calls started coming. And his pap gave him a slap on the face, told him to straighten up, or else.

For a while my pap got to thinking maybe he could just leave. Run away and join the circus. Open a tent and tell people their own secrets. Earn a real living that way. It was a talent, after all. A gift that he could use. He'd been given this and it was his. So as his pap

hollered and slapped and shoved him around, my pap stood strong and firm and heard the cries of that Genie woman in the truck and his pap whimpering in her arms.

While my pap suffered thus, his pap was scheming up a way to make some money of his own off what had happened to them. That Thing, he called it. He looked at the wild woods that had grown up near the creek and the little clearing that had come from cutting for firewood one year, a parcel that had been of no use to anyone for as long as Pap's pap could remember, and now suddenly he could see the value in it all right. He envisioned a sign in the yard, a listing in the local tourist books—such as they were—close enough to the interstate that he'd be able to bring in the curious folks, he was sure of it, and charge a fee for his trouble too, if only a donation. Not greedy, just practical, he told his wife, my pap's mam, with her clenched fist.

Pap's pap sat there at the kitchen table long into the night, thinking it all through. Then in the morning he made the phone calls, starting with the town paper. He also stopped for breakfast at the coffee shop and mentioned there the fact that he and his family had been paid a visit the other night and asking around, "Did you folks see that light in the sky?" He knew the tall waitress—that Genie with the big tits—liked a little mystery, and that this story was right up her alley. And sure enough she took the bait and ran with it. Jaw dropped: "Is that what that was? Well, my oh my, I did wonder, I did. I thought it was a fire somewhere in those woods, glowing. Or my own imagination." She looked at him. They shared a secret after all.

And he said, "Sure was something and not just any woods, but my woods."

And so the story came out, and everybody in town heard of it, and it spread far enough to catch the attention of a doctor by the name of Martin Goode, whose profession was the study of such phenomena as flying saucers and aliens and whatever else might be out there in galaxies other than our own. He was a certified ufologist, Pap's pap explained to his family: his wincing son, his wide-eyed daughter, his weeping wife. And this Dr. Goode, he was coming to have a look at that clearing for himself, which Pap's pap was sure was all it was going to take to convince him this was the real thing. Once he'd seen the withered trees and sampled the glassy soil and written up his report, then the rest of the plan would fall right into place and the looky-loos would come flocking.

"You can bet on that," Pap's pap exclaimed. There was money in it, he insisted. Good money and plenty of it. He pounded his fist firm on the table, while his family cringed away.

And sure enough, this Dr. Martin Goode pulled up into the driveway in a long black car. He was with another man, younger, wearing glasses with thick lenses and his hair in a crew cut. Together they took their equipment out of the trunk and trudged along after Pap's pap to that patch of woods behind the barn, which Pap's pap had made Pap clean up—the cigarette butts and the beer bottles, a pair of blue panties, soiled, and other whatnot left out there by the boy being a boy. Dr. Goode and this assistant of his stood together at the edge of the clearing with their hands on their hips. They looked around at the trees and the damaged branches. They eyed my pap and his pap, assessing their sincerity, before they set to work.

It was clear they'd done this before. They knew what they were doing and they knew what they wanted. They wouldn't let on what

they were thinking, just kept on thinking it as they poked around the dirt, scooping samples of it up into little plastic vials with rubber tops. This and that they gathered up and carried off.

“We’ll be in touch,” the younger man said, and then they both nodded at Pap’s pap and slapped my pap on the shoulder before they climbed back into their black car, which then disappeared in a cloud of dust, up the gravel drive to the highway and on out to the interstate and gone.

My pap shook his head. He knew what they were going to say, but he didn’t want to say it to his pap himself. And sure enough, three weeks later there was a letter in the mailbox. Folded over twice and slipped into a yellow envelope. It said the soil had been tested by seven different laboratories, and these tests revealed the presence of an unidentified fungus, but no proof of having been altered by the landing of an alien craft.

Pap’s pap shook his fist at that and exclaimed: “Unidentified! See! I knew it!” And from there he took the high road and insisted it didn’t matter what they thought anyway. Clearly they were lying. It was a conspiracy. Obviously they had something they were desperate to hide.

But Pap’s pap and my pap both knew the truth, and so did his sis and his mam. They’d all seen what they saw with their own eight eyes, and that ought to be proof enough for anybody with any imagination. Pap’s pap went right back to work setting up his tourist attraction, including a sign in the yard that he hoped would be temptation enough for the local folks who passed it every day, at least. Red on yellow: UFO LANDING SITE. And, more practically, another, smaller sign close by, advertising in plain old black and white the eggs and jelly and fresh produce from Pap’s mam’s garden on the far other side of the yard.

There were some looky-loos who stopped by, all right. But all in all the customers were scarce at first and scarcer still as time went on. The believers wouldn't buy the garden goods, fearing they might be contaminated or radioactive or somehow dangerous on account of their association with aliens from outer space, and the nonbelievers wouldn't stop in at all.

Pretty soon the whole thing was forgotten, and Pap's pap's signs were left to go to ruin in the yard. Pap's mam's fingers still tingled, and she got used to that until the tremors came, but that was something else altogether and no connection to an alien sighting that any doctor would take seriously. The one she consulted only raised his eyebrows when she explained it and smiled patiently, indulging her, shook his head, and gave her the proper bad news.

Meanwhile Pap's pap wasn't getting any younger either, and he'd started sinking into himself, spending more and more of his time alone out there in the barn with the horses and an office he'd set up for himself in the hayloft. No time for any Genies anymore, he had work to do. He had a desk made out of a cedarwood door that spanned the space between a pair of metal filing cabinets and an old manual typewriter, along with reams of paper and all kinds of notes and diagrams and suchlike on the walls. He was going to tell the story, he said. He planned to write it all down, but the truth was that mostly he just sat in his chair, throwing back his pints and then fifths and then half gallons of whiskey, or stood at the open loft door and stared out at those ruined woods and the tainted creek and the promise of the starry sky, unmoving and unmoved overhead.

And that should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. Not for my pap anyway, and not for me either. He kept on knowing things

he had no business knowing and hearing things and seeing things no one else could hear or see. The headaches came and went, but he was well enough to take a job with a construction crew in the summers while he was finishing school. They were widening the highway that ran past the farm and on through town, in one end and out the other side, and my pap was the kid flipping the stop/slow sign, smiling at the irritated drivers who had to wait and waving at them as they went on by. His mam was failing, and his pap was losing his mind, and his sis had married a boyfriend and left town altogether, so my pap moved out of the house and into the trailer he had set up on blocks in those same old woods behind the barn, which is where I grew up into who I've become too. He felt safe there, he said. His mind was blank and he wasn't bothered by the headaches or the visions or the endless cacophony of other people's thoughts.

And so that was how his first sighting of me came about.

My pap's original impression was that what he was looking at was a stray dog. Or maybe a coyote. Or a fox. His eyesight was bad, after all. So he didn't pay me much mind, not until I showed up a second time and then again a third. I was crouched there at the edge of the clearing, making a study of him. He was tall and thin by then, full grown, almost, and handsome in his way. I was short and stooped. My hair was all wild and matted on my ovaloid skull. My bare skin gleamed in the moonlight, shiny wet like I'd just been birthed out of some gelatinous womb. I watched him watching me, then turned, quickly, to scutter off into the brush on all fours, as I was wont to do.

Later there would be some folks who said my pap had somehow heard about all the other little goblins who were being spotted here

and there at that time and that this was what was behind what he was seeing, whether because of suggestion or telepathy or dishonesty or what have you. It didn't matter though, because any way you looked at it, my arrival in his world was calling into question his whole being. Either he was deluded or he was psychic or he was a crook, but my pap was none of that. He was a solitary young man on his own in the woods, lonely, aloof, plagued by headaches, going blind, hearing voices, and okay, then maybe that was crazy, but he could accept it for whatever it was before he would admit to any fraud or such like that. He was at the mercy of his own pap, people said. He was his mam's son, losing his own mind as she was doing just then with hers too.

But none of what was behind what they were guessing was true. My pap only found out later that there were others. Goblins, that is. This wasn't That Thing—the spaceship, alien craft, UFO, or whatever you want to call it. Many people had seen, and would continue to see, those all over the world at that time, and there are plenty of explanations for them too, some reasonable and some not, to this very day.

But me, I was something else altogether. And the puzzle was: how was this sighting related to the other or were they connected at all? Was it simply a random coincidence and nothing with any meaning in it? Just two different strangenesses right there on that particular little farm, in those particular dark woods. Three, if you wanted to include my clairvoyant pap himself as one of them, I guess. Four, if you wanted to throw in his mam for good measure too.

And so it all escalated from there. That is, my pap wasn't alone anymore. For all that everyone was thinking—and some were saying

he was crazy—still there were others, too, who had seen the lights that one night and now were seeing me out there as well. That July at least four people in and around town reported sightings of a bare-naked child of about preschool age, with matted blond hair and filthy feet, hiding in the woods or running through the brush beyond the fences of their backyards. One woman said she found me on her back porch in the early morning, crouched on all fours and eating out of the dog bowl, while the dog just stood back and watched, curling his lip, to which I curled mine right back and growled, so the dog backed away, and the woman, fearful, called the police.

By the time they showed up though, I was gone. They took a report but couldn't be sure whether to believe what they were hearing. Talk around the taverns in town was that this was Pap's pap scheming again, working up a fuss to get some interest back into his UFO LANDING SITE. Some were even thinking maybe it was my pap himself who was behind it. Maybe his clairvoyance was working the other way, creating hallucinations in the minds of others, including himself. And it was true, although his eyesight had been permanently damaged, the headaches had pretty much left him by then, and he felt such a relief, as if his mind was suddenly freed, emptied out, like the plug removed in a sink and all the water goes swirling down the drain.

And then this lady—her name was Miss Lange, and she taught the first graders at the elementary school, children close to the same age as I appeared to be myself—she called in to the police to say she'd had a face-to-face encounter with a poor little child sitting on a picnic table inside the shed at the back of the vacant lot across the street from her house. There by the alleyway where she took her evening walks. She

couldn't say whether it was male or female, just that it was naked and its private parts were hidden from her view. It was definitely human, though, she was pretty sure of that. She said it had big black eyes and an oddly shaped head and overly large ears and that it made a gurgling sound. Not a growl, exactly. More like a big cat's purr. And when it saw her in the doorway, it jumped from the table to the floor and slipped off by way of a broken board in the wall of the shed.

Miss Lange and her neighbor—who had come to meet her at that spot for what turned out to be a regular rendezvous, mentioned only later and a subsequent embarrassment to them both—searched the area and said they'd seen it again and approached it with all good intentions, getting close enough, in fact, for me to scratch them both. Miss Lange on the chest and her neighbor on the face in such a way that she was left with a scar that crawled up her cheek from the corner of her mouth to the lobe of her ear, forever after that.

Someone called in later and reported they had me trapped in a garage, but before the police could get there, a crowd had gathered, and when they broke down the door and tore the place apart, there was nothing to see and not even any trace that maybe there ever had been anyone there.

A lot of folks cried hoax, though they never could find a way to pin it on anyone specific, not even Pap's pap. Wild imagination was all it was. A story flowing through them, passed from one to another like a case of the flu or a bad winter cold. Flaring up now and then, only to die away again after a while.

You can look this all up, if you don't believe me. And if you do, if you dig in deep enough, then along with the whole story I'm telling

you here, you're going to find a snapshot of my pap's pap and my pap standing there by the fence out back behind the barn, next to the clearing that was a landing site for a saucer from outer space before it became the graveyard where my pap's pap lies now and where my pap's mam is buried too, along with his sis, who lost her life to drugs somewhere along the way, and where my pap will be buried one day, at the edge of his good-for-nothing family's sorry patch of otherwise worthless woods. Pap's pap is in the overalls he always wore, with a dirty white T-shirt underneath, and he's got a shovel over his shoulder, and he's wearing a floppy hat on his head that shadows his face like he's got some kind of a secret he's doing his best to hide.

No matter how close you look though, you won't see the little old trailer there on its blocks in the thickest shadows of the trees, where I grew up. And you won't see me inside it either, holding on for dear life to my pap's saving grace. □