

P R O M I S E S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

“Now look, Bobby,” the alien said. “If you promise not to tell anybody about this, we can do a lot of neat stuff for you.”

“You don’t have to talk down to me,” Bobby said. “I’m almost ten.”

Bobby tried hard to look right at the alien’s eyes and not let him know how scared he was. The alien looked just like anybody else, except for a weird greenish glow around him, kind of like an oil slick in the air. His *aura*, the alien called it. .

“Okay, I’m sorry. But think about it. Clothes. Your own TV. Stuff like that. What would you want?”

“I don’t know. Not clothes.” Bobby turned his eyes away from the alien’s lime green leisure suit. “What are you doing here?”

“Well,” the alien said. “It’s a long story.” The alien crouched down to Bobby’s level. Bobby knew grownups did this when they were trying to con you. “We had to come here. We don’t have any place to live anymore. We hoped we could live in peace and nobody would notice us.”

Another alien came over. “What’s the problem, Fred?” Bobby started to get really scared. He would never have been out here in the park this close to sunset except that his parents were still on vacation and he’d felt like walking after school. Then he’d seen the alien and followed him, and now here he was. In big trouble.

“It’s the kid,” the first alien said. “You know that aura problem they warned us about? They weren’t kidding.”

“So what do we do? Did you talk to him?”

“Yeah, but it’s no good. And if there’s one like him, there could be more. I don’t know, Sam. I don’t like it. I think maybe we ought to pull up stakes and try somewhere else.”

“You mean ... you’ll leave us alone?” Bobby said. He thought he’d seen a wink pass between the two aliens, but he wasn’t sure.

“It may be the best thing, kid,” the second alien said.

“But you’d have to promise. Promise not tell anybody what you saw today. Promise, and we’ll go.”

Bobby’s parents had always told him how important promises were, and this one didn’t seem right. It wasn’t like when his parents had promised to bring him back a seashell from their vacation. They wouldn’t forget something like that, and Bobby knew if he promised he would have to stand by it.

“How do I know you’ll go?” he asked.

They glanced at each other, then back at Bobby.

“We’ll show you the ship. You can watch us take off.”

“Where is it?”

“Over here.” They led him toward a stand of trees.

When Bobby got right up to the edge of the woods he saw something silvery back in the shadows. It was shaped like the flying saucers he'd seen in old movies on T V .

"Remember kid," the second alien said. "You promised." The two of them slipped into the woods and a few seconds later Bobby saw the machine rise into the darkening sky.

Bobby ran all the way home. Halfway down the last block he saw a familiar station wagon in the driveway and knew his parents were home.

"Guess what!" he shouted as he ran in the door. "You'll never guess what happened today!"

"What's that, Bobby?" said his father, standing in the doorway to the living room. For just a second he had the light behind him, and Bobby thought he saw a greenish glow.

"Uh, nothing," Bobby mumbled. "How was your trip?"

"Fine. Tiring. You wash up, and we'll tell you all about it at dinner."

"Okay." He started to turn away, then said, "Dad? Did you ... bring me anything? From the seashore?"

"Hmmm? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," Bobby said.

"Is something wrong?" Bobby's father stared hard at him. Bobby felt his throat swell up so he could hardly swallow.

"No," Bobby said, and went back to his room.

He closed the door and opened the curtains and looked out at the stars. He kept thinking he would see one of them move, but of course none of them did. That would have been too easy. Bobby suddenly knew that nothing was going to be easy again.

"I never promised," he said to the night sky. "I never promised."