

# LIVE NUDE ALIENS

*and other stories*

JD DELUZIO

SAMPLE

## Let There Be

When the baby died, we fed it to the Ghyel who lives in our attic. Athalie rarely sees the Ghyel, though my work can keep me up late, the lantern burning and the window unfastened to let in the moon. On those occasions the Ghyel would sometimes visit, sharing the light broth one takes before settling down. I found the Ghyel an agreeable sort, kind if a little gruff, and neither the magical helper nor the dark villain of childhood tales.

We inherited our Ghyel. It has lived in the building for some time. During the day we ignore its presence entirely, thinking of it only when we hear footsteps above our ceiling. These

usually fall near sunset or sunrise; the Ghyel otherwise seems a sound sleeper.

The Ghyel has taken interest in my workshop, set in an alcove off the parlor. I scabbled for the equipment, though my employer provided me with some of the items. They believe my work may one day prove beneficial, and I do it on my own time. This means I stay awake some nights, late enough that certain respectable folk would murmur, if they could do so without implicating themselves. I considered the matter with practical mind. My workshop contains substances corrosive and hot and dangerous. I could not keep such things safely in the home during the child's early days.

Those days will not come now—not for this first one, gone too soon even to have a name. I try but cannot stop myself from imagining lifemarks, the call of first words, the skip-skip of hesitant steps, the coming of color to his coat. But I know these things will still come, as Athalie and I are yet young. As for our Ghyel, that is a part of what must be. We should not upset our minds over what must be.

Two evenings before Athalie delivered the child, the Ghyel sat on the red mat reserved for guests—though being a Ghyel, I suppose it gave no significance to the colour. The Ghyel reached its hands back and spread its cloak in a fan. I showed it a weight on a thread, set into motion by forces generated in the glass container. Next I shut some of the lantern's doors to dim the light of its fire, and created a faint spark: the bottled lightning which can kill a Corb or set a severed animal limb a-kicking. My Athalie had been shocked when I'd shown her similar things. Her fear sprang from pious caution, of course, but also from tales she'd heard, even ones I'd told her. Careless experimenters had burned themselves with corrosive substances, and in at least one case, summoned a fatal strike of the bottled lightning.

My displays delighted the Ghyel, however, who expressed itself with a barely-audible cawing, far higher pitched than the guttural sounds that were its regular voice. "Such things I've heard tell of at mealtime talk," said the Ghyel, and I imagined I'd given the tall creature something its fellows would find entertaining. On their meals themselves, of course, I choose not to dwell.

I am curious about other matters pertaining to the Ghyel-folk, but not yet comfortable enough to ask. I do not even

know for certain if this Ghyel is male or female. Popular belief holds that Ghyel themselves rely mostly upon scent to know, but I imagine they look less alike to each other than we Corboran say. Some of the general opinion I observe to be correct. Ghyel males and females alike have the extended, flat crest, longer even than the most masculine of Corboran, and not nearly so pretty. I have observed more carefully than many the dark, bobble-textured skin, like ours when age and wasting disease causes it to lose its down. I grant the Ghyel look diseased, even when healthy, and their elongated snouts smell of their meals. They speak in grunted mutterings, but they can sing in honks and squeaks, sounds that echo through the night and invade the dreams of good Corboran.

I generated another spark in the bottle. The Ghyel shrieked again, quietly. Given their somber reputation, it gives me a strange pleasure to hear that joyful cry.

Most Corboran who have viewed displays such as mine consider them parlor tricks, when they consider them at all. Perhaps I flatter myself, but I see further. In the time before my child's birth, I stayed up as late as I dared, running the infant lightning through gaseous substances. I rediscovered and confirmed much but learned nothing new before the babe arrived. Still, on those nights when the Ghyel came to call, it would inquire after my progress. "We are a curious folk," it said. "Perhaps me more than most. These things you Corboran have done in recent times..." That thought the Ghyel left unfinished, stillborn.

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The cleric kept the ceremony short as befitted an infant. I had on my most formal cloak. Athalie of course wore the hooded cap of a female in mourning, dark as Ghyel-skin. The sun had settled over the horizon, and the Ghyel from upstairs waited in the appointed place, beside the ancient Ghyel who maintains the ossuary. I've never seen Ghyel garbed in anything other than the dark cloaks, and this pair, of course, had on their broad, asymmetrical headpieces. They do not go much for ceremonial garb; the headpieces we see at funerary rites, I've learned, are the same ones a Ghyel wears in the rain or on those remarkable occasions when one appears during daylight. The Ghyel stood calm, unchanging, in the vestibule. Their

crests did not move, and their snouts betrayed no feeling, and I told myself the ceremony progressed only as it needed to, like the movements of objects in the heavens, each in the appointed place at the appointed time.

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Though the Ghyel has sat in our parlor often, I saw its lodging for the first time that day, when I invited it to receive our child. The Ghyel's dark form had filled the door defensively, but it stepped back when I explained the reason for this visit, and took its headpiece from a peg on the wall. Though I grieved, I satisfied my curiosity regarding the place. One might expect to find more ornamentation in a cave, more colour in a cabinet. The room smelled of fungus and Ghyel-snout.

Below, on the main floor, Athalie sat and called in soft cries. Sometimes she stroked the body.

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## Live Nude Aliens

**E**oin Cornacchia was already drunk and pondering humanity's future by the time Chelsea helped Patti out of the car. Patti struck pavement with her weathered wooden walking stick, neither strictly necessary nor entirely an affectation. Her condition made her hobble, but had never stopped her from traversing point A and point B. Still, she could lose balance at times, falter. Movement can be affected by strong emotions, which explained in part why Patti avoided them when she could. An old woman sat against the wall. Her faded clothing, from another era and season, acted like camouflage against the damaged brick of the building. She looked up to them, exposing a sinewy throat. "Arrogant as ignorant," she mumbled. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall." She then began to babble something about her boy, her poor lost boy.

After they'd walked some ways, Chelsea whispered, "That has to be a sad tale."

"Everyone has a story."

"Did her son die? Was he taken away by Children's Aid?"

They turned the corner to fantasies on parade. People wandered in and out of realities, so that the worn patrons of an old man's bar stood out on the sidewalk smoking as a brightly-coloured Justice League walked by, one or the other group Obvious Photoshop. "Her son was the result of a secret experiment and was taken by the government." Patti adjusted her new glasses, old school black-framed cat eyes.

"Is he a hero or a villain now?" Patti shrugged and they walked down the line to the first shop, a comic and gaming place with the implausible name of LA Mood. Out front, a heavy, affable-looking man with a beard and a tricorn chatted up the crowd. Where the young women settled to wait a family of Jedi Knights exchanged costume tips with a couple dressed as rival Captain Marvels. "Oh! Is *boy*, like, I was thinking her son, but was it the guy she was dating? As in, boyfriend,

girlfriend?”

Someone staggered by, a young man wearing a cracked and ill-fitting plastic helmet, a dollar store knock-off of a *Star Wars* Stormtrooper. He jumped and twirled around and nearly fell off a lamp-post. “Eoin’s drunk!”

“Good for Eoin,” Patti said to Chelsea. The man dropped like an awkward kitten to the sidewalk and padded on. A few of the younger patrons laughed. An older woman shook her head.

They re-encountered Eoin in the parking lot behind the next shop, where a line snaked to get in and a group of cosplayers in SCA armor duked it out with foam-covered weapons. Having already acquired some free comics and purchased a graphic novel and, being more SF fans and nerds-at-large than comic book readers, they decided to skip this line and head for brunch. The city had other shops, events at the library, and a retrospective of a late, local cartoonist at a downtown gallery. As they looked for the best exit to the lot, Eoin loomed towards them. Seeing Patti’s hobble he deked to one side, losing his balance and falling, with little elegance, onto his ass. Chelsea asked him if he were okay. The helmet had fallen off, revealing a flushed face, young but worn, not unattractive, but looking somehow unloved.

“Other than being drunk,” Patti said.

“I have reasons!” Eoin arose, dusted himself off.

“But you’re okay?”

“For now. For now we’re okay.”

Chelsea picked up the helmet. It looked faded in a way she had not noticed in plastic before, and there was a serrated-edge piece taken out of it, from which the crack had grown. “Now *this* guy has a story,” she said.

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# Flying Whistle Stop

The Whistlers arrived the day Jordan was born. The evening they returned, she was sitting on a concrete block at the arse-end of Dundas, where a lot opened onto the alleyway. Behind them stood the rear entrance of the butcher's shop with painted ads like graffiti, things like *Box Legs Chicken* \$1.00. She and Mary were drinking Coca-Cola with whiskey despite the fact that Jordan didn't drink—hated the taste, in fact—and Mary's church held strict views about such things. However, Jordan hadn't talked to Mary, not really, in weeks, and she wanted to be sociable. So, Coke with whiskey in minute amounts. Anyway, exams were over and done with, and she could breathe a little. Maybe she should be cutting loose a bit—though she immediately blamed the whiskey for the thought. The sun hadn't set yet, but it was starting to disappear behind the old gray stone building with the green wood doors. Mr. Russo sat in his back yard, slouching back in his trousers and undershirt, reading the evening edition by the evening light. Mary asked about Jordan's plans for the summer, besides more science and math.

"I'm looking for a summer job."

"Don't you got all those scholarships?"

"I can always use money. And I have to build my resume."

"What about the Flying Whistle Stop?" She laughed. "Remember how much we wanted to go?" When they were middle schoolers, just seeing the movie of that first festival had been a liftoff. Nunzio Russo had impersonated James Brown the next week at recess, became as legendary in their schoolyard as the performance onscreen. Nunzio had since quit school and taken an apprenticeship in the butcher's shop. He might have painted those back-alley ads.

This year's tour, she knew, had the Spacefarers and Jimi Hendrix and Happy End and then a lot of lesser lights. The line-up always played like a radio broadcast, so you might have Miles Davis but also the Cowsill Family: the artist blowing

fusion, docking pop and cool, sharing space with the bubblegum boys who played clean riffs with Mom and little sister Sue. The girls would have jumped at that, four or five years ago. Mary would have all but peed her pants if she'd heard there was going to be a local stop at the Landing Dome, because back then there was no way they were going to be bussing to Toronto or Detroit or anywhere else to catch a concert, not on their parents' watch. The renewed enthusiasm reassured Jordan. Maybe Mary really *had* left the Unified Church. She was all about them for the last year or so and had thrown away all of her old records. They would not want her going to the Stop, and definitely not at the Dome. Good on Mary, Jordan thought. Those Unifields wouldn't approve of Jordan, either, with her coiled locs and *unwomanly* aspirations.

Or of either drinking underage like they were a pair of runaway wannabe heppies, which their end of Dundas was seeing more of now that summer had come. Ruefully, Jordan had to agree with them on *that*. She felt, just slightly, unsteady, and made a note to have no more whiskey, possibly ever.

About then a smallish blonde girl came riding by on a purple bicycle, an old-fashioned looking one with the slanted crossbar arranged for skirts, even though nobody biked in a skirt anymore, and a luggage rack in back.

"Hey, Baby Byrd," Jordan called. The girl looked skeptical but slowed down. Jordan's smile conveyed friendliness, and Baby Byrd finally turned and came around to where the older girls sat. "Hey, aren't you Barry Byrd's kid sister?"

"My name's Jacquie."

"Jacquie Byrd. Like the first president Kennedy's wife crossed with Johnson's first lady."

She shrugged. "My mom liked the name *Jacquie*."

"It's a good name to have. So I know you. Your brother's a friend of Ray Newsome."

"What's it to you?"

Mary snorted into her drink when she heard that. "Jordan's got a thing for your brother's friend."

"Jordan Vauxhall? You Jordan Vauxhall? Yeah, yeah. Hey, you're on Central's girls basketball team."

"We both were. Graduated now."

"Yeah. Ray talks about you sometimes."

"What's he say?" Mary asked the question.

"Ain't you one of those Academy kids? Yeah, yeah. Ray says

you're gonna go off to work in space."

"Maybe."

"I'm surprised."

Jordan raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Why's that surprising?"

Jacquie Byrd shrugged. "I don't see why an Academy girl would be interested in one of my jackass brother's friends." Jordan laughed, a little too loudly. "I mean, no offense. Ray's kinda cute."

Mary snorted again. "Baby Blonde Byrd here's already checking out our men."

"Hey, be nice. She's *Jacquie Byrd*." She paused a moment. "What about *Little Byrd*?"

"Barry's buddies call me that all the time. Better than 'Baby Byrd'."

"You know what those *lobots* are up to tonight? Ray and your brother?"

"What, I'm Barry's secretary now?" Jordan smiled and Jacquie smiled back. "The band was practising this afternoon, but who knows now? Probably at Dino's or the Arcade. Trying to score weed, maybe." A look crossed her face, one that lacked guile. "Hey, do you have booze in that Coke?"

About then Mrs. Russo burst through her back door, yelling something about a ship. "*Gesù e Maria*, it's the Whistlers," she said. "It has to be Whistlers."

The pop bottle Mary had been holding crashed against the blacktop.

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Jordan's mother went into labour the day the saucers landed. Strictly speaking, they weren't saucers; they were scalloped crescents. But people had been seeing the things since Kenneth Arnold first reported them in '47. Arnold said they moved *like* saucers skipping on water. The media dubbed them "flying saucers," and it was lenticular space-discs that landed on the drive-in movie screens. So a year after *Life* made "the case for interplanetary saucers," the headlines of even many august newspapers declared that saucers had landed. "The boomerangs have landed" does not have the same ring. *The New York Times* opted for "flying vehicles of unknown origin." The Chinese phrase translated as something like, "mystery ships," which carries a definite poetic quality. Jordan's mother, Irene, had no

idea about the ships. The Vauxhalls had bought a TV in '52, but it wasn't on when Aunt Martha, who was staying over during the late-term, called a cab and tried sending a message to Irene's husband Joe, who delivered mail and couldn't be easily reached.

Irene Vauxhall delivered her daughter in sweat and screaming and record time, staring at lights, white masks and hands and walls. Only later did she become aware of the nervousness, the feeling that the nurses were covering something, whispering covertly, keeping the patients in ignorance. A heavy nurse brought her water and she saw the woman's hand shaking. Yet when Irene looked with trepidation at her daughter she saw no defect. She saw, in fact, only intelligence in her brown eyes and hoped and prayed. Her great-great-grandfather had fled the United States but it's not like what they found north of the border was all sunshine and roses, not yet. She heard singing, faint, muffled by hospital windows shut against the March cold. A group from a downtown Baptist church paraded by on slushy sidewalks and sang:

*As I went down in the river to pray,  
Studying about that good old way,  
When you shall wear the starry crown,  
Good Lord, show me the way.*

Only when her husband finally arrived did Irene Vauxhall learn the truth.

*O pilgrims, let's go down, let's go down, let's go down,  
O pilgrims, let's go down,  
Down to the river Jordan!*

Across the world, humanity stared with fear and wonder into the eye-clusters of the Amalgamated Clowders of the First Place, which is how their name translated into English.

Forty-eight scalloped craft touched down that March morning. We later learned they came from an enormous sphere that hung in low-Earth orbit. Seven crescents landed at various points across South America. Eight landed in Africa. The shot of an alien craft at the pyramids instantly become iconic. One country might have interstellar craft setting down in its capital, as occurred in India and Thailand and Germany. But then Iceland's sole visitor decided on Reykjahlíð, an underpopulated hamlet in the north, then receiving hard-blowing snow. No one there was leaving the house needlessly that day for anything short of an extraterrestrial landing. Two ships settled in Korea,

terrifying both sides of an ongoing conflict that would quickly call a ceasefire. China played unexpected host to five scalloped ships, though one went undetected at first, as it had settled in a remote part of Gansu province. We likewise remained initially unaware that ships of a slightly different design had submerged themselves in the oceans. Generally, the visitors favoured sports stadiums, parks, and fields, but one group set down on the Moskvoretskaya Embankment in Moscow, snarling traffic for the rest of the day in a city still reeling from Stalin's death. They later apologized and relocated.

Some of North America's visitors landed in NYC and Washington, as people expected—in Sheep Meadow, Central Park, and on the Ellipse, facing the White House. Another chose the field at Wilson Junior High in Lubbock, Texas, and another, the Cabazon Indian Reservation in Coachella, CA. Mexico received two and St Lucia, one. A crescent landed in Vancouver, Canada and another at Tilley's Point near Gander's Bay, Newfoundland. These choices rankled some official Canadian noses, placed as Parliament was on neither coast. The closest the visitors got to that nation's capital was an unassuming city in southwestern Ontario. A crescent landed there in some fields off Wellington Road past Second Concession, a 15-minute drive from where Irene Vauxhall was birthing her daughter.

People had anticipated little green men with pointy ears and antennae. Others postulated ethereal humanoids bathed in light. The Whistlers of the First Place failed to check any of those boxes. At site after site, creatures with seven limbs emerged. They were tall, towering well over two metres.

They walked on three legs. Two of their arms resembled human arms, though with two elbows, and four-fingered hands that recalled cartoon characters. The second set of arms we initially called tentacles. They were, we later learned, more akin to elephant's trunks, with two fingers each. The ends of the trunks opened into mouths. The Whistlers ate with both, their breath-speech-singing unimpeded during meals.

What we could see of their skin, beneath their suits, ranged in colour from dull mauve to bright purple. The suits also ranged in colour—aesthetics on the First Place clearly trended towards garish. The Whistlers had two larger eyes and a cluster of smaller ones on what one might call a forehead. Where the head joined the body issued a series of whistles and mews and song, which then were broadcast in translation through some

unseen speakers in the ships themselves, but which carried the sound at roughly the same volume to everyone within several blocks of any given landing and on nearby radios. The translator voices ran a bewildering range, from local accents and drawls to those that recalled radio reporters and government bureaucrats. People in Central Park heard an accent that was half Bronx and half Brooklyn. Captured in full on news camera, it became the default broadcast in North America, multi-limbed giants flickering in grayscale as music trilled from a Whistler and a translated voice boomed forth, tone and intonation suggesting a hot dog vendor at Dodgers Stadium:

*On behalf of the Amalgamated Clowders of the First Place, we greet you and your planetary citizens. I am the First Violinist of the 28th sub-Clowder of the Greater Visiting Boat. You may call me [a theme of nine notes follows. It does not translate]. We will raise our primary and tertiary paws in greeting you and request with ground exploration and system exploration. Please give new a premiere league hours to ferry them. This situation portends no danger and you will not be harmed through intention and strive for the beneficence and learning of this encounter. May your clowder rest soundly during the hours of darkness.*

Variations repeated across the globe. Save for the ship that landed in Gansu and another that set down in Antarctica and had only penguins to address, each gave roughly the same introduction though with differing tunes as personal names and a diversity of titles that translated with reference to the local culture's musical instruments, like "Fourth Flautist Four Note Theme" or "Third Guzheng Five Note Theme," leaving humanity with the impression we were about to be colonized by a space orchestra.

The significance of the titles remained impenetrable. Leadership of any given grouping shifted according to patterns that surpassed human understanding. "In this instance," Second Viola Quaver Triplets might say, "I hold the First Position as regards this aspect."

What everyone knew was this: on March 15, 1953, human history changed forever.

Three months later, the Whistlers were gone, leaving behind film and audio and memories, photos at concerts and state dinners and weddings and Little League games, fleeting glimpses into areas of science we'd not yet imagined, a new

appreciation for base-12 mathematics, and clay-like instruments with multiple holes and tubes that could not easily be played, but which nevertheless found its way into human culture, from orchestras to Space Jazz and, later, the Beatles, who would use the Whistlers Flute after Beatle George starting taking lessons. That the instrument could be used to more-or-less duplicate the sounds made by the visitors we gleaned immediately. Mastering the skill eluded all but gifted musicians, and even they struggled with the role that pitch and tone played in the alien language, all whistles and trills, mews and rasps. No one learned more than a few phrases of the visitors' speech before they departed: *we greet you, this situation portends danger, where might we void bodily waste?* and *I hope that your clowder rests soundly on this night*. That last phrase, clearly important in Whistler culture, could, with one wrong tone, translate as *the moons rest in your orifices*. Apparently, this was the extraterrestrial equivalent of knee-slapping drollery. Certain phrases remained enigmatic, so that an otherwise straightforward observation on state-of-the-art Terran rocket physics might end with a Whistler narrowing eyes and saying, *through this filter, midnight burns with reverent verdancy*, and offering no further explanation.

The Beat poets loved it.

Eighteen years later, Jordan, Mary, and Jacquie joined the Russos around a portable TV on their back porch and watched the report. Echoes sounded from open windows as scalloped crescents dropped again to Earth.