

# Dancing With Aliens

New Year's Eve supper was roast beef and mashed potatoes, all smothered in Ma's mushroom gravy, some awful asparagus, milk, and a slice of delicious homemade chocolate marble cake. After supper, Big, that's me, although I was only thirteen and not very big at all, and Jake, who wasn't exactly real but seemed real, got up on Barney and headed into the woods behind the farm.

There was moonlight on the snow.

We were going looking for aliens. Jake seemed a bit nervous. He was afraid of aliens, although he was maybe an alien himself, I was never sure, and it wasn't as if I could ask anyone's opinion about it. Nobody ever saw Jake except for me. He was too shy to leave the farm or to come into the house to meet the family, on account of you could kind of see right through him, like he didn't have any substance. Sometimes, when Jake got mad at me, I couldn't see him at all. I always teased Jake, saying he was a ghost, but I only did it because I knew it got him mad and because he was afraid of ghosts too, same as he was afraid of aliens, which I guess was a little bit weird. Myself, I wasn't afraid of ghosts, or aliens, either, or I wouldn't have had Jake for my best friend.

Barney was in his usual foul mood, he was always a bit of a pill. Sometimes, when his mane got tangled with burdock and I was combing them out and hit a snag and yanked, he'd swerve his head around really fast and bite me on the arm. I'd throw down my horse-comb and stomp back into the house, rubbing my arm, pony bites hurt, and he'd clomp around in his stall, indignant with how I could go away and leave him with all those burdock. He'd even get mad when I rode him and I had always to remind him he was a pony, my pony.

Barney didn't particularly like Jake. Barney insisted Jake wasn't real, but whenever Jake got up behind me on Barney, like the night I'm telling about, Barney would complain about having to carry two boys instead of one.

Go figure.

We went slowly up the trail, Barney always went slowly, like it was such an effort, and he got to razzing Jake, something else he did sometimes, when he was mad.

"Who's that sitting under the tree?" Barney said, a kind of sneering, toothy sing-along, like he was a mule instead of a pony. "Why, it's Jake and Charlotte under the tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

That always got Jake mad.

"I've never kissed Charlotte Mitchell," he said, "and I never will."

Charlotte Mitchell lived down the road from us. She was thirteen, same as Jake and me, and she always made fun of us, me because I was thirteen and with a talking pony and with a friend only I could see, Jake because she claimed he wasn't real, and both of us for being "dumb as a stick." What really rankled Jake was Charlotte talking to me like Jake wasn't there. Jake always said he'd

get even and tonight was his chance. Charlotte had made up this loopy story, how on New Year's Eve a spaceship was going to land in the back pasture and the aliens had invited her to their New Year's Eve dance.

She never would have guessed in a million years we'd have dared go up to the pasture to prove she was a liar.

Well, we arrived at the pasture and the moon got behind the clouds, and it was pretty dark and scary. We didn't go into the pasture. We stayed in the trees along the edge, looking, and the funny thing, there was something glowing in what should have been an empty pasture, like a silo not connected to a barn, except I never saw a silo with blinking red and green lights and with fins and decals. It was brightly lit inside and we heard fiddle music, laughter, and foot-stomping. Somebody was having a gay old time. We weren't saying anything and a guy went past us, so close we thought he must have seen us but he didn't.

He was twelve-feet tall and had lime-green skin, antennae like a grasshopper, and an elongated, sloped forehead, like Gramp's chess-set bishops. He was having a smoke, and after a few minutes, he went back inside. We saw there was a ramp so we snuck around and saw inside. There were control panels with blinking buttons, knobs and switches, all pushed aside to make room for the dancing. None of the dancers or fiddlers were regular folks, except for Charlotte. I was scared and wanted to get out of there but I was mesmerized too, seeing Charlotte, all dressed up pretty and getting twirled around by a slopey-headed boy. Jake was mad and saying how I needed to go in there and tell Charlotte she ought not to be dancing with aliens. Jake was adamant and with Barney siding with Jake, I finally walked up the ramp and into the ship. The music stopped, everyone was looking at me. Charlotte's hands were on her hips; her dancing partner, impossibly tall behind her, was smirking.

I lied to Charlotte:

“Your ma sent me to fetch you. She said it's time you were getting home.”

“It is getting late, isn't it,” Charlotte said.

She got her coat and hat, and going down the ramp, she squeezed my hand. I got up on Barney and helped Charlotte up behind me, and going along the trail, I expected she'd light into me. Instead, she said as how she figured I was lying about her mom but it was OK. She'd been nervous about getting out, not sure the spacemen would let her go, and I came along and rescued her.

Coming out of the woods behind the farm, we heard a rumbling from back up in the pasture and we felt the ground trembling beneath us. We looked up into the night sky and saw the lights of the spaceship, rising, fading, blinking out. Charlotte said it had been fun, sure, dancing with aliens, but she'd never want to do it again, and leaning the side of her face against my back and putting her arms around me and squeezing, sighing, she said how Earth boys were the best.

I took Charlotte home and I was almost home myself before I realized Jake was gone. I suppose it must have got to him, how I was nice to Charlotte, and how she was sweet back to me, and somewhere between the pasture and those goodnight kisses beneath Charlotte's porch light, he'd gone off somewhere to stew. That was Jake. Get him mad enough and he'd disappear, except this time

I never saw him again, and Barney? Obstinate to the end of his pony life, he never spoke another word to me.