

1. California Woman Risks Fate of Entire Human Race

“Secrets of Immortality Gleaned from Alien Remains,” trumpeted *The New York Times* on page 1, sounding like the tabloids.

Yeah, those were the aliens they dug up from my property up along the California coast near Bodega Bay. And yes, I admit it, I was the one who had buried them, with the help of my friends. Had to. They were dead, and we didn’t have enough freezer space to hold them.

Also, we wanted to honor them, and NOT let the government cut them up to learn their secrets. But they did that anyway. And they took the spaceship from me.

Yet there was another who survived, and it’s her story I want to share with you.

My fans have been clamoring for the real story. I’m Selena M – named “Songstress of the Year” by *Time Magazine* not that long ago. Even if you’re not familiar with my music, you’ve no doubt seen my name in the tabloids lately. “She’s a ditzy chick, and in way over her head!” just for starters. There’s been so much baloney issuing from the media meat grinder. I’ve resisted telling the whole truth because it doesn’t make me look too good. But that’s over. I want to give it to you straight, right from the beginning.

Selena means “of the moon.” But despite what some media rags say, I never claimed to be a moon maiden. I’m French, or at least French Californian. You sometimes see my name as Berthe, which alas is what my parents named me.

My name for the alien who survived was Breadbox – which she never really understood, even though we had spent the long days of her convalescence learning each other’s language and stories.

She was such an odd-shaped entity, kind of like a cross between a squid and a centipede with a head shaped like a parking meter sticking out the top, and an ever-changing number of pseudopods instead of feet and fingers. And a band of metal around her middle. I told Sheriff Jim that she was bigger than a breadbox, and the name stuck. “Bigger than a breadbox” is a throwback to my Gran’s time, from a show called Twenty Questions, where everything in the world is either bigger or smaller than a breadbox.

Her name for me was Agate. She called me her gem of agate among all the infinitesimal grains of sand on the unnamed beaches of the cosmos. I was moved to tears, because I see myself as no more than an insignificant bit on the cosmic shore.

I am so sorry that she was not able to return to her own people and home world. And I miss her more than I can say.

But let’s go back to the beginning.

* * *

Clay and me and the Osbornes were sitting on my deck watching the sun set out over the Pacific Ocean – magnificent, brilliant oranges, lavenders and greens. My neighbor Meg Osborne – Sheriff Jim’s wife – was expounding on the green flash, when there was, indeed, a large flash behind the fogbank, low over the horizon. What could it be? Lightning? A missile test? As an inveterate weather watcher, I automatically started counting seconds until the thunder arrived. I got up to sixty before I gave up, figuring that little sound would travel more than twelve miles.

Perhaps another minute later came the distant spreading boom, rolling at us across the surface, echoing off the hills behind, then off the higher cloud layers. It was a very large boom of some sort. And then, whistling over us, something hit the old cypress tree with a thwack, strong enough to knock the dead limb off, which fell directly onto my artichoke patch. I was up like a shot, and ran back there, almost jumping over the fence in my haste.

"What the heck flew here?" I wondered aloud, as I looked back toward the sea. "Was it related to the off-shore explosion we just heard?" I gingerly lifted the dead limb from my artichoke plants to survey the damage, and to find the cause—and there it was. As I lifted the limb, the culprit unwound and fell off onto the ground. I saw a little chain with an amulet of some piece of dull metal on it. The chain was very fine and woven. I picked it up, then dropped it. Wow, hot! I got a stick and picked up the chain, and noticed it was quite heavy, like a piece of lead—or even heavier. Uranium? Yikes! Maybe it's radioactive! I dropped it. My friends were gawking timidly as if they were watching the bomb squad at work.

"Clay!" I called out. "Do you still have the radiation meter? You know, the one we used to see if we had any radon leaking in my crawlspace?"

"You are one crazy woman," he responded. "You should leave that thing alone." But he did what I requested, as usual. Clay knows where everything is at my house, even though he can't find anything in his own place. He produced the meter right away, and we held the sampler by this amulet. No reading. Batteries dead? We gave it a test, and it looked like everything was working well. It read the background radiation okay. But no reading from this. Apparently it's not radioactive. But it's sure heavy.

"Heavier than a lead sinker of that size, I'd say," said Clay thoughtfully, as he rolled it in his fingers.

"I thought lead sinkers were illegal," said Meg.

"Well, I've got a lifetime supply, and the hell with the fish. I can't catch 'em anyway."

I touched it. The cylinder was cooling down, still warm. I picked it up. It was a stubby cylinder, maybe a half an inch in diameter and an inch long. In the fading dusk light it appeared to be a plain, indistinguishable gray. We took it inside, shined the Maglite on it. The plain gray transformed into subtle colors, like a pigeon's wing in bright sunlight.

"What is this thing?" asked Jim Osborne. He's a Sonoma County deputy sheriff. "Was there an aircraft that crashed or exploded, and this is something worn by one of the passengers?"

"Well, if someone had it around their neck the chain must have sliced their head off," opined Clay with a grimace. "But I don't see any sign of blood."

"I'm sorry, folks," said Jim, stretching, shaking off the chardonnay. "I guess I'd better mosey back to the station and get in pre-disaster mode. Something's surely gonna hit the fan tonight with this." We could already hear the radio squawking from his car in my driveway, and then his cell started chirping. "Meg, no need for me to drag you off," he said to his wife as he crunched across my gravel drive.

But that was pretty much the end of our little party.

Later that night I was lying in bed, reliving the night's events. Something bothered me. I couldn't put them out of my mind. We had listened to the radio and TV for reports of a crash at sea, and there was nothing. I called Sheriff Jim again, and he said they'd received a number of reports and presumed it was a sonic boom. Yet it still bothered me. Something was incomplete here.

That night I dreamed of lying on my lounge in the back yard as I often do, looking up at the blue sky. A fly buzzed lazily across my field of vision, a couple of feet above my eyes. Just at that moment, a small plane also flew across my field of vision—perhaps several thousand feet up. The fly appeared to be the same size, moving at the same speed as the airplane. They were two equivalent objects for a moment. I sat bolt upright in bed, instantly awake, shivering. That was it! There had been two objects, one close by that hit our tree, and another one higher, whooshing through the air.

I could scarcely wait till dawn. At first light I loaded my thermal cup with high-test coffee, climbed up on my roof, and looked east to see where a whoosh might have carried something larger and higher. Up on the hills behind my house are wild acres of scrub, a few trees, and lots of poison oak. Might be on my land, or it might be on Farmer Jed's up behind me. Whatever "it" was. Fired up the Jeep, took off up the hill, put it in low-low four-wheel drive, chugged over the rocks. Got up to the top and could see nothing, nothing at all. Got out, walked around, and looked down at my house to see where something might have gone. It might have been much higher – maybe it went clear over the ridge and on east into the redwoods. Or maybe it was my imagination.

"Whoa! There it is!" I yelled out. Oh, Lord, it *was* an aircraft, crashed down there in the least accessible place, clear back at the deep end of Poison Oak Gulch, up under the old oak tree. I had waged war against this poison oak ever since I'd moved up here, so that I could get back to the spring at the head of the gulch without turning into one huge rash. So I had carved out a pathway down there.

I bounded down the narrow path, avoiding the insidious bright-green leaves that were everywhere, ready to grasp me if I veered off course. One slip would plunge me into Poison Oak Hell. There it was – the tangled wreckage. What the heck was it? It was no aircraft I could remember seeing – maybe it was just a piece of one. I edged on down, around the big boulder. Oh, this was only a fragment. Look up there, another whole piece. It looks like half an airliner, but dark gray like a military plane. No sign of smoke or of life. I approached it warily.

Bigger than it looked. It had skidded through several hundred feet of poison oak and chaparral. I saw a huge tear in the side. I looked in. Dark. No windows. Smelled very funky. I had my flashlight, but naturally it was way back up at the Jeep. Stuck my head in, breathing through my mouth on the theory that if I couldn't smell it, it wouldn't hurt me. My eyes got used to the gloom. It was cool and dim within. It looked more like a space shuttle. Were there bodies?

Something was alive here! There was a tiny cry, a whimper, like a baby raccoon makes after it's been chastised by its mother. A movement and a sigh. I edged closer. There, hanging from the ceiling, was somebody, something. No, things were upside down, so a live being was hanging from the floor, in some harness. Not a person. It looked more like an octopus or a squid, but a stubby one. It was shivering and sighing. I bolted out through the opening, ran back to my Jeep. The hell with the poison oak – got to get that flashlight.

I was back in no time with the big heavy-duty flashlight that had seen me through many storm crises. With it I lit up the interior of this thing, and there before me was a tableau out of this world. I mean literally. It was a live being, but not a human being. Nor animal. It sure wasn't an escapee from any Earth zoo. I had stumbled into a crashed flying saucer, apparently. This being looked to be in bad shape. It was amazing it wasn't dead, but it looked badly injured. A puddle of blood or other bodily fluids grew beneath it.

It saw me, too, with two big eyes opening and closing on the ends of quivering stalks. What did it think of me? That I was there to do it in? What should I think of it? Was it going to attack me the first chance it got? Huh! Hanging there upside down like a truncated octopus, it didn't look particularly threatening.

It took me a minute to sort out what was live being and what was instrument or uniform. I noted a breathing orifice at the base of what looked like a neck. Its skin was mottled gray – dark with lighter gray splotches. Skin looked loose and saggy, like a puppy about to grow. It opened an eye, looked at me. Then a second eye on a stalk. They were truly like the eyes of an octopus. The eyes regarded me. Solemnly? With terror? With malevolence? How the hell would I know?

When I think back on this event, what I did was incredibly foolhardy. Outside of this thing's conscious intentions, who knows what kind of disease I could have caught from it. Or unleashed on humanity. But I didn't even think of all that. Here I was, in the presence of a being not from Earth, which had arrived via some kind of vessel, apparently a spaceship. It was hurt; it needed my help.

Besides, I was looking for the next thing in life. I was tired of my same ole, same ole; I had all the money I needed; my so-called music career was fine, but it wasn't an all-consuming passion. If you must know, I was feeling bored with it. I needed something new in my life. What better to do than to get involved with an injured alien bug-eyed monster?

So there I was, going through every cliché of old science fiction movies – gesturing friendship, “I'm a friend, peace, I mean you no harm.” Since it probably didn't speak English, I spoke slowly and loudly, as if it were a foreigner. I waved and pointed. But what do gestures mean? I might as well have flipped it the finger. It twittered in response, an incredibly sad song, a bit like a mourning dove. The sound broke my heart.

I did have the presence of mind to look around, to see if it had any Godzilla-type allies. But no. This compartment was quite small. There was one other similar chair or harness, but the other apparatus was empty.

I went over to this being and tried to communicate through gestures that I would be willing to help it down and out of the harness and put it on the floor, or whatever was beneath my feet here. I gestured, kind of removing straps and harnesses and lowering it gently downward. It responded by repeating “Ooww, oooww, oooww.” Did that mean yes, please; don't touch me, you brute; or I'm hungry and you look really tasty?

Being a softhearted idiot, I went for the first option. I described through gestures what I was going to do, one move at a time, and then I did it. The strap release was not difficult at all. I figured I'd probably release the straps and whatever the thing was would fall to the floor and kill itself. So I stood beneath it to brace the fall, then carefully loosened one clasp at a time. It watched what I was doing, and pointed out with one of its little finger-like pseudopods which strap to do next.

When I had finally released it from all the straps, the alien fell on me. It was as heavy as a dead pony. The poor creature looked up at me, raised two pseudopods, two stubby tentacles, waved them in an intricate pattern, and crooned in a way that looked just like the pattern it was signing – if you can understand that. It was lying there, and gestured to me then to turn it right side up, I guess – and put its pseudopods down. Which I did. More crooning and waving.

Then the alien pointed, made some more sounds, and a little corkscrew motion with the end of its tentacle or whatever – which now looked more like a long finger. I went over to what it was pointing at, and there was a compartment to open. By twisting the latch in the way the creature had indicated with its corkscrew motion, the storage compartment opened. I could see that it was full of supplies.

The alien said words to me, which naturally I could not understand. But they were recognizable as words, not moans or croons. I looked at it blankly. It picked up instantly that I didn't understand, and reverted to croons and gestures. English and French, baby, that is all I understand – I'm weak on Martian.

It gestured for me to haul things over to it, so I brought stuff out of this compartment. It pointed to a particular thing; I held it up; it looked like some sort of first-aid pad. The being and I together spread this over this huge gash in its side, which was no longer bleeding – or whatever passes for blood – but clearly looked as life-threatening a gash as one could imagine.

My alien started croaking for something else, which I couldn't understand. It was pointing back toward a part of the vessel that was greatly damaged, and making excited noises. I went back and looked. I would point to things, then look back at it. Clearly, I wasn't getting what it wanted.

The poor thing made a little "boop" sound, pointed at me, and I went back over. It was pointing at my face, tracing out a line down my face. What? I didn't get it. Then a gesture, using several tentacles. Like a hula dancer's hands. Waves. Then a downward cascade. Over and over again. Then it pointed at my face, tracing a line, almost touching me. What the . . . Sweat running down my face! Water! H₂O. It was thirsty. Hanging upside down from a harness after a near-fatal crash, and it was thirsty. Where's the canteen?

I looked around. The enormity of what was happening hit me. My knees buckled. Here I was communicating with an alien being, an entity from a different planet. Maybe a different solar system (most likely). Crashed. At my mercy (hopefully).

No canteen, but I had my cell phone, right in my jacket pocket. Should I call NASA? The tabloids? The sheriff? The government? My lawyer? My publicist? Holy shit! I could be famous. Or eaten. Or else, I could be the person who brought the plague to Earth.

I looked at this poor thing huddled on the floor at my feet, whimpering for water. I could flick it the sweat off my brow. Snatches of sci-fi movies flashed through my mind. Government scientists carving up alien beings to learn the secrets of their metabolism. In the end, the aliens were always killed. They were either hostile or misunderstood.

Then there was the genre of alien abductions. People were snatched off the face of the Earth by flying saucers; weird sexual experiments took place. And then they were returned to Earth to tell an unbelieving reporter from *Newsweek*.

Well, this one had apparently flown in too low, and kaboom! So sexual experiments were out of the question for the time being. But what should I do? What should I do *right now*? If you wanted to inform the U.S. government or the United Nations that an alien had just crashed on your property, who should you call? INS? It was Sunday – they wouldn't be there anyway. So I called my buddy Clay. Got out my cell phone, called him. The beast was clearly interested in this show of technology. I got his voice mail. "Clay, if you're there, pick this damn thing up right now – I don't care what you're doing. It's me." Clay picked up his phone. "What's up?"

"Clay, listen carefully. Something extraordinary has happened, and I need your help."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I don't want to go into detail over the phone. You know where Poison Oak Gulch is?"

"Yeah, I been there."

"Get your ass up here right now. Bring with you a bottle of purified water. You got that?"

"Yeah, I guess I can."

"Bring your little videocam, and make sure you bring an extra power pack and some flashlights. You know where those are?"

"Sure, in your place I do."

"Well then, bring mine. But get up here fast, and don't let anybody else know about this."

"Anybody can be listening over a cell line."

"Well, so get your ass up here. And Clay, keep your phone handy. I might think of some other things and need to call you in the next few minutes."

"Yes, ma'am. Whatever you say, boss."

"Call me if you absolutely have to, but mainly just get here. Come up the left side of the cut. You'll see my Jeep parked up at the north lip. On that side, you can get here without having to wade through all the poison oak."

"Gotcha. So what'd ya find there?"

"Just come. You'll be glad you did. "



Clay, high school teacher

2. Dead and Dying Aliens

*I've been a sweet stuff singer
All my girlie years
Airy, frothy little ditties
Full of love and tears*

From "Cotton Candy Lovin'" on *Inner-Galactic Journey* album by Selena M

What do you do with three aliens who crash-land on your back hillside? Yeah, there were three. One alive; two dead – killed in the crash – their bodies bashed and smashed in their harnesses. The living one badly injured.

After Clay got there and saw what I had there in my poison oak patch, for the first five minutes all he could say was, "Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit!" It wasn't until he calmed down and we poked around in the rest of vessel, clambering over the strewn debris of equipment, that we found the two dead crewmembers.

The living one, whom later I called Breadbox, but right now was just the non-dead alien, we decided our top goal was to keep her alive. I figured out how to give her some water, by pouring it into a loose piece of material that was vaguely saucer shaped, and holding it up to her. (Why did I call her a "she" from the very beginning? It turned out I was right, but I had no way of knowing then.) She needed a doctor. An ambulance. We should bring in Dr. Ellmon, and maybe the coroner, what's his name.

Let me tell you what we didn't do. We didn't inform the authorities. Why not, you might ask? Aliens, biggest story in history. Advanced technology. Possible public health threat, worldwide pandemic caused by germs from across the galaxy. A smart person, a good citizen, would have called the government so they could take charge and do the right thing.

Well, it's like this. Among my friends in the city, I'm known as the hard-hearted conservative. I own a rifle. But up here, with my friends along the coast, I'm thought of as the bleeding-heart liberal. These folks, and this includes our sheriff Jim, do not trust the government at all. They all have gun racks in the back windows of their pickup trucks. To them, the purpose of guns is to protect ourselves from our own government, or from invasions by the United Nations. So when we discussed what to do, the option of calling in the Feds never even came up. We knew what would happen. We'd all seen *ET* and *The X-Files*.

So we couldn't bring in our local doctor, Old Man Ellmon (we call him "Old Man" even though he's younger than me), because he's a damn liberal, and a stickler for regulations. He'd turn us in. Instead we called in the vet, who doesn't want me to use his name. (I'll call him Doc.) He's head of the local chapter of Sons of American Freedom, but he's done great work on Clay's horses and my old dog Buddy after he tangled with a coyote – rest his soul. (Buddy, not the coyote. I tracked that varmint down and shot him, for killing a member of my family.)

Two dead aliens, one still alive, barely. So what *are* we going to do with them?

Let's back up a bit. After Clay got there and stopped hyperventilating, we sat in stunned silence and stared around us. It was all so . . . alien! Yet at the same time recognizable. We could look at things and kind of figure out what they were for – even though the crew of this vessel had been so different. It's as if there's a law of convergent evolution for aircraft and space vessels regardless of where they come from. They all have to be able to handle the same functions. I must say, however, that this cabin was much less cluttered than photos of the space shuttle I've seen. But equally tight and claustrophobic.

Speaking of claustrophobia, it's Clay who hates caves. To explore this vessel, which was obviously lying upside down – and totally dark – we had to crawl through a passageway that was like tight underground caves I've been in. I had to creep forward on hands and knees, holding the big flashlight in one hand, and peer around. Clay, the big, brave manly man, couldn't handle this at all. So I did it. Plus, I fit better in skinny places than Clay's six-foot-four frame.

That's when I found the two dead crewmembers. It was terrible. They looked – and smelled – like road kill. Mangled, torn bodies in the same kind of harnesses. Dripping the juices of their former lives. I just lost it. I trembled and shrieked and upchucked last night's dinner. Clay had to crawl back there with me, despite his fear.

Wow! How do we tell the remaining one that her comrades are dead? She's marooned all alone on an alien world.

She kept looking and pointing toward the rear, where her fellow crewmembers had been. We had to let her know: I crawled back there, and brought out artifacts from each.

The tough work always comes down to the woman, right? I communicated the best I could. At last she got it. I could tell by her reaction – she trembled and twitched and shuddered. A tiny mewling sound. Seemed like crying to me. So I joined her, broke down and bawled. I held her, as best I could. Like trying to hug a twitchy microwave oven.

Clay was so embarrassed to see me crying. I was embarrassed, too. "Don't you dare tell," I growled. "I'll rip your heart out!"

Clay fumbled for his handkerchief, handed it to me, and mumbled, "If we're going to do anything, we've got to bring in Doc." Clay called him by cell. I let him explain the whole dang situation. It took Doc a long time to get past thinking it was a big joke. Finally, Clay convinced him to take it seriously, keep his mouth shut, and come help us. "Better bring a couple of body bags." After a second, he added, "Maybe three."

When Doc got there, with his bag of magic tricks for big animals like horses, he started checking her over with no hesitation.

What amazed me about Doc, knowing how worked up he can get about people with certain political opinions, is how matter-of-fact he was. He may have his problems with human foibles, but he is truly a healer of animals. Doc saw this poor alien as a beastie in need, so he went into full vet mode.

We then had the conversation about what to do next. Clay and Doc and me. I did not want her to be carried away by men in white coats.

Doc said, "Maybe we should put it out of its misery. Looks close to death. I've had to put down many animals."

"No way!" I pleaded. "Let me nurse her back to health!"

"Bad idea!" Doc shot back. "You can't do this by yourself! Even if it doesn't die."

"So help me out."

Doc grimaced and huffed, but relented: "Okay, but if this one dies, we're calling in help."

"Should we tell Sheriff Jim?" asked Clay.

Doc scoffed. "How would we keep it a secret from him?"

"I'll do the deed." I called Jim on my cell, but could only leave a message.

We had to somehow retrieve the dead crewmembers. Couldn't leave them there.

We managed to get the two dead ones into the body bags and drag them out through the narrow, dark passageway, past the survivor and out the gash in the hull.

What to do with two dead aliens? We'd have to freeze them or bury them. Nobody had the freezer space, so we buried them, right near their craft. No caskets, but in the body bags from Doc.

Clay dug two small graves, using the spade I keep in the back of my Jeep. Thank goodness the soil is deep and soft here along the creek. But still, he dug only a couple of feet deep. We held an impromptu funeral, with a combo of fundamentalist and atheist platitudes. Doc was thankfully forgiving of my cynical secular philosophy.

Later, I put flowers on their graves, and made grave markers with a couple of extra flagstones from behind my shed. I used a permanent marker, but I didn't know what to say, least of all their names, so I just wrote down the date of the crash.

We stood there in the afternoon sun, reflecting on this amazing event. Clay asked the thing we were all wondering about: "Where did they come from?"

Doc's brow furrowed, "Don't think they came from the Moon. Mars, maybe."

Clay shook his head. "Naw, we got our rovers crawling all over Mars, and they've never found anything like this."

"Maybe they've been in hiding, waiting for us to show up so they can follow us home." That seemed too preposterous even for Doc. "How do we know they're not from somewhere on Earth? The Chinese or Russkies, cooked up in some lab. Or the North Koreans." For Doc, every cloud has a silver conspiracy lining.

"Must be one of the other planets," mused Clay vaguely.

I shook my head. "Nothing like this ship came from Jupiter or Uranus or Saturn. They're just big frozen gas balls. You've seen the documentaries."

Even with our level of cosmic ignorance, we saw that if they didn't originate from any other planet in our solar system, they had to have come from somewhere else. We knew all the possibilities from seeing various sci-fi flicks over the years. This would be a voyage of many lifetimes. Had they traveled in suspended animation? Maybe they were like androids – machines that were in essence immortal. No, those broken bodies were definitely flesh and blood, or something quite similar.

Did they have some kind of warp speed? Clay, who is a high school teacher, pointed out repeatedly that this violated the universal laws of physics. But I wasn't so sure. When you're confronted with undeniable facts that contradict your theories, what gives?

Doc confessed that this whole thing troubled him because he couldn't reconcile it with Bible teachings. These beings couldn't be made in the image of God. But the same shift in perception was happening with him. You could see his wheels grinding – flesh and blood facts confronting deeply held beliefs.

Our remaining alien was shaking and trembling and drawing into a fetal position. Seemed to be shriveling. "She's not long for this world," I said softly, shaking my head. I gave her more water. What else could we do for her? Alas, not much.

Doc's phone blurted out the beginning of Stars and Stripes Forever. "Gotta take this. Yeah, what's up?" Frown, then, "I better go. Three goats got into some bad garbage. Belly aches. And that's something for a goat. Communal farm up on the ridge, those damn hippies. I'll bring some more stuff when I come back."

"I'm sticking here with you," Clay said protectively.

"I know you've got choir practice this evening, Clay. I'll be all right here." He protested, but I knew he had to go; he's the choir director. I pushed him outside. "She probably won't last out the night. I'm staying here with her so she doesn't die utterly alone."

"I'll be back afterward." Then he added over his shoulder as he headed out, "It's an it, not a she. Better not personalize it. Just a dying alien being. Don't let yourself get attached." Easy for a man to say.

I hurried back to my house and gathered up a few essentials. I hadn't had anything to eat all day, so I made myself a humongous sandwich, and gulped it down with a beer. Not very ladylike, I know. But on my concert tours, hopping from city to city, sandwich gulping is what keeps me going.

What else would I need overnight? I brought back my down sleeping bag and an inflatable pad — my joints aren't as limber as they used to be.

By the time I got back it was dusk, hardly twenty-four hours since the crash. I looked in. She hadn't moved. I spread out my bag and curled up near her as the last light faded away.

Doc and Clay both got delayed, and ended up not returning, but they did check in by phone. You don't suppose these two strong men were afraid of the dark, with alien ghosts rising from the ground?

Then Sheriff Jim called back. I dreaded his call. Even though he's a good friend, I always get a bit nervous when I'm being questioned by The Law. Part of me assumes I'm guilty of dastardly crimes. Especially when he started out in his "Just the facts, Ma'am" voice. It was during this conversation that I first referred to my visitor as "Breadbox." Sheriff's deputies on this coastline get to see a lot of weird stuff, so hearing about an alien in a flying saucer didn't faze him as much as I expected.

I lay there in the dark talking to her. I asked her questions. Where are you from? Why did you come here? What happened? What was your life like? How old are you? I got no response, of course. Wasn't sure she was still alive.

I told her my entire life story. I confessed many things that I'd never revealed to anyone else. Including myself.

How I was strong and self-assured on the outside, but inside? Not so much. How I'd come to the road less traveled, but had stayed on the freeway.

How I had dumped the only guy I'd ever truly loved because of my stupid music career, and all my tours. How I often studied myself in the mirror, standing sideways, wondering if I should bother trying to keep myself slim and in shape, or whether I should let it all go and enjoy my cheeseburgers. How I knew I could never go for Clay, even though I knew he had a big crush on me, and he'd be a damn good catch for an aging chick like me.

How I'd never even tried to publish the songs that were the most important to me because I didn't think they were marketable, and instead churned out all these maudlin ballads. Which of course made me a shitload of money, and allowed me to buy my dream property here on the coast, psychically as far as possible from La La Land. But which left me with this empty hole here near the core of my being.

I began to hum this one melody I'd written years before, and had never performed in public. It was my internal anthem — the music for my secret self.

My alien companion, lying in the dark covered by a horse blanket, in a tiny, squeaky voice, hummed along with me.