

The Sign

By T. E. Stazyk

The bell rang and the toast popped up. Christine Dennison stubbed out her second cigarette of the day and reached for the margarine. While she busied herself preparing her breakfast, she became aware of her son's presence in the room.

Something was wrong.

His limbs, as always, were moving to some unknown rhythm pulsing into his brain via his headphones. But his face, acne incipient and vacant as usual, lacked its usual dour malevolence. And his baseball hat was on the right way. "Guess he's in a good mood," thought Christine.

Capitalizing on the situation, Christine held a slab of buttered toast in front of his face. He opened his eyes while playing air drums on the table and pointed to the empty table in front of him.

"Put it there, mama," he said.

This isn't my Tyler. She decided to push her luck and sat down across the table from him, smiling. He interrupted his drumming long enough to wolf the toast. Christine pantomimed a conversation at him. Finally, he took off the headphones and stared at her.

"You talkin' to me?"

"You seem pretty happy today."

"Yeah."

"How's school?"

"Fine."

"Is this a bad time to ask you about your room?"

"Hey, lady. Whatever else, my room is mine. Chill. I've got it handled. You ain't got no right to go in there so don't worry."

“OK, OK, it’s just that we never talk.”

“Well, make an appointment with my secretary.”

“Tyler. Please. Pullllease don’t give me attitude this morning. You know I’ve got this big marketing meeting today. And you know that our home version of PowerPoint is out of synch with the office version. It’s going to take me an hour to reformat my work, so lighten up. And don’t call me lady.”

“Whatever,” he said, putting the headphones back on.

Christine got up and put the plates in the sink; she checked her makeup in the mirror by the door, picked up her purse, briefcase and laptop and headed out the door. As she walked to the garage she stopped. Sure, it had been a dry summer but she couldn’t understand why the grass was so burned. She decided the gardener must have applied too much weed killer and put an entry in her palm pilot to have her secretary talk to him about it.

Christine returned home at about 7 o’clock that evening. It had been a brutal day. As usual. She sorted through the mail. The usual. A letter from Tyler’s school caught her attention. It was a request from Tyler’s guidance counsellor for a meeting to talk about his grades. Christine threw it in the junk mail pile. Didn’t those people realize that Tyler’s grades were not her problem?

She made a salad for dinner, satisfied that Tyler had eaten based on the McDonald’s packaging strewn across the table. She ate her salad and sipped her Diet Coke, wondering what had gotten into him lately. Even for Tyler, his behavior was bizarre. Rather than his usual bipolar mood swings, he lately was showing real enthusiasm, rather than mania, and his lows were more like quiet contemplation than depression. Even Nick, her ex, who had never noticed anything from a dirty diaper to a case of appendicitis, mentioned the change. They had spoken the previous Sunday night when Nick dropped Tyler off after their weekend visit. He had said, “It’s really weird. The kid’s zoned out as usual, but he actually tried to talk to me.”

“Oh, that conversation must have pushed the envelope of Western thinking.”

“You want to hear this?”

“Sorry.”

“He wanted to talk about religion.”

“This is going to be good.”

“No, really. I told him he had been baptized and all. But that’s not what he wanted to know. He was asking me questions about Buddha and Mohammad and Zoroaster. I was clueless. Where is he learning this stuff?”

“I don’t know.”

“But on to more important things. I got his Visa bill the other day.”

“You agreed to pay it, why talk to me about it.”

“I’m just saying, keep an eye out. He’s bought like ten replacement headsets for his iPod. In two weeks. Now why would he do that?”

“Oh, Nick, you don’t think someone is bullying him and stealing his headsets? I’ll have to call the school. I won’t have him bullied. If he went Columbine it would ruin my career.”

“Who knows? Just seems strange. Why headphones?”

Her phone ringing interrupted Christine’s recollection of the conversation and brought her back to her dinner. It was Diane, her neighbor.

“Hi, babe.”

“Hi, how you doing, Diane?”

“Good, how was your day?”

“Really, really lousy, and yours?”

“So so. What did they do to you?”

“Oh, don’t ask. I had to do a presentation to the Executive Committee on our marketing strategy and it was a fiasco.”

“Bummer, what happened?”

“Well I was good. I could tell. But Jerry wasn’t happy as usual.”

“What was bothering the Boss from Hell today?”

“I don’t know. He gave me his ‘are you really up to the job’ lecture afterwards.” She imitated what she thought was the appropriately nasal timbre of Jerry’s voice, “‘You know the Company logo belongs on all your slides. You seem to have forgotten that.’ So I told him it was an internal presentation. ‘We do not have two standards here. All presentations must always be considered mission critical. You know our commitment to quality extends to every aspect of our business.’ What a jerk.”

“For sure.”

“Then I made the mistake of saying that if I had better staff support my slides would be better.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He freaked. I got the whole litany. Sometimes I think he has a pre-programmed list of things to say in various situations. I heard it all. ‘This company has been proactive in applying emerging technologies to business problems that enable our best and brightest to deliver leading edge customer service. You know that is one of our core values. I can’t understand, Christine. You got the Thought Leadership Innovation Award last quarter. You should appreciate the importance of these things. We all need to engage in provocative learning exchanges. And inferior visual aids are not an enabler.’”

“He said that?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. There was more. All about mapping the conceptual framework onto the innovative cultural organization and all. For penance, he wants me to make a presentation on mission critical innovation and sustainability at our next learning roundtable. When am I going to get any work done?”

“What did you tell him?”

“What could I say? I probably gave him a look like Tyler gives me when I complain to him about his room.”

“Hey, how is Mr. Sunshine?”

“The same. Nick says he’s noticed some changes. Maybe he’s right. He seems preoccupied as always, but on different things.”

“Maybe he’s in love.”

“Doubt it. He doesn’t have a twin or a clone.”

“You’re mean. See you at yoga tomorrow?”

“You got it, bye.”

2

Christine’s presentation at the next staff meeting entitled “Materializing Cultural Synergies Through Negotiation of the Technology/Innovation Nexus” was a great success and won back all of the goodwill she had lost from her previous presentation.

“Brilliant,” gushed Jerry. “I loved your use of animation. That always nails a presentation. And I liked the way you brought in the importance of Focused Dialogs and applied the concept to Networking Breakfasts and Innovation Ecologies. My only criticism is that your comments on collaborative innovation with technology enablement reminded me of your arguments for flexible hours and working from home and you know we can’t have that. But overall, great job.”

The good news at work made up for an alarming situation at home. Two days earlier she came home to find a message on the answering machine from Tyler’s school counsellor asking for a meeting.

“What is wrong with these people?” she asked herself. “Don’t they know I’m too busy?”

Usually calls from the school were about minor infractions of the rules or Tyler's overall attitude. If she ignored them, they usually went away.

Once, however, a month or so previously, they had insisted she come in and now she recalled her humiliation at the hands of the counsellor.

"Thank you for coming in Ms. Dennison," said Lindsey Perera.

Christine had asked her friend Diane to call her every ten minutes on her cell phone starting right after the ten o'clock start of the meeting, and before she had a chance to respond to Ms. Perera's greeting, the phone rang. After a short conversation during which Christine and Diane pretended to be discussing an office crisis that needed Christine's immediate attention, she apologized to Ms. Perera, "I'm sorry, it's just so hard for me to break away from the office."

"And I apologize for taking your time, but there is a rather serious problem with Tyler, I'm afraid."

"What is that," said Christine.

"You are aware, I'm sure Ms. Dennison, that many of the young people today have developed their own personal logos, which they use to decorate their belongings."

"Yes, and they also decorate a lot of things that aren't theirs. Like bus stops and store fronts."

"Ah, yes. But self-expression is so important for young people. Of course we discourage that sort of thing, but there is nothing the school can do. Graffiti is the property owner's problem, after all."

"I understand. What does this have to do with Tyler?" Christine asked, waiting for Diane's next call.

"Well, many of our young people develop logos stylised from their initials and that is what Tyler has done," said Ms. Perera, sliding a piece of tracing paper across the desk. The flimsy sheet had a bizarre embellishment of the initials 'TCD.'

Christine recognized it as Tyler's rendering of his name, Tyler Cody Dennison. He had planted it on most of his possessions, including their home garbage cans. As far as she could tell, that was the first time Tyler had touched them. "How did you get this?" she asked, hoping the phone would ring.

"We traced it off the frontispiece of the collected works of Shakespeare in the school library. We're so happy Tyler likes literature."

Right on schedule, Christine's phone rang, and after another staged conversation with Dianne, Christine turned to Ms. Perera and said, "Sorry. So you want me to replace the book?"

"No, that won't be necessary. The problem, you see, is the design of Tyler's logo."

"The design?"

"Yes. There have been complaints. You see the way he is using the T and the C? Some people think that looks like a swastika and there are strict rules against that sort of thing. It offends so many of our students. Others think they see a cross and you know that is also not allowed. There have also been complaints that it looks like the Boy Scout seal and that is also forbidden."

"I see."

"So the problem, Ms. Dennison, is that we must have Tyler redesign his logo so that it doesn't offend any one."

"Yes, clearly. What do you want me to do?"

"What we ask is two things. We would like to confiscate his backpack. It has the logo on it in several places and we feel that would be a good way to demonstrate the problem to him. In order to do that, we need you to, first, sign this release allowing us to do that and, second, you must agree to buy him a new backpack of equal or greater value."

"Sure, no problem."

That night she had offered to take Tyler to the mall to buy a new backpack.

“Naw, just gimme the money, I’ll do it myself.”

Within a week she noted that he was carrying a new backpack similar to his old one. But this one was festooned with a new logo. She could vaguely make out the TCD that formed the basis of the sign, but otherwise thought the artwork was extremely unusual and somehow vaguely disturbing. It also occurred to her that lately she had been seeing it everywhere she went. Not only did he scribble it on the TV Guide and scraps of paper around the house, she was also seeing it spray painted on mailboxes, fences and sides of buildings. She put a reminder in her palm pilot to tell Tyler to knock it off before someone complained.

It had been a month since Christine’s meeting with Ms. Perera and the calls from the school had started again. When they followed up with a second letter, Christine decided that the problem wasn’t going to go away. With her usual annoyance and previous arrangements with Diane, she drove out to the school to see Ms. Perera.

“It’s so good to see you again, Ms. Dennison,” she said with a warmth Christine didn’t think possible. This might be serious.

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, you know, so often these conferences are negative. There are issues to sort out and difficulties to overcome. But, I’m happy to say, that is not the case today.”

“What?” Christine asked, reaching into her purse to turn off her cell phone.

“Ms. Dennison, I don’t know how to explain it, but Tyler has undergone an incredible change in these past few weeks. Let’s see, you were here on April third regarding the logo problem. Starting at the beginning of May, he became a changed person. He is still rather uncommunicative in class but his work is absolutely amazing. He is doing A-plus work in all his classes and, forgive me

for putting it this way, but he has suddenly become very popular with the other students.”

“Really? Doesn’t sound like Tyler,” Christine chuckled.

“Yes. Usually when someone suddenly develops a larger circle of friends we watch for signs that they are into drugs or gangs. But Tyler shows none of those behaviors. The other students seem to really like and respect him.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say. This is very good news, thank you.”

“Yes, I wanted to ask you if there had been any significant changes at home that might explain this turnaround.”

“No, he seems like the same old Tyler. In fact, he seems to be spending more time than ever locked in his room. I didn’t know why, but I guess he must be studying. The only unusual thing is that his father mentioned that last time they were together Tyler wanted to talk about religion.”

“Ahh. Now we often see young people go through contemplative or philosophical phases. I wouldn’t worry. This is probably all tied together in his new side of him we are seeing. I’ll let you know if anything comes up.”

“Yes, thanks. So will I.”

3

With Tyler requiring less of her attention, Christine was able to focus more time on her career and things began to go more smoothly than ever. Jerry had complimented her on another one of her presentations and told her that her work showed that she was getting ready for advancement to Associate Team Enabler. Over after-work drinks one day, Christine was telling Diane about it. Diane, always effective at bursting her bubble, said, “You know, Associate Team Enabler. Ha. In a normal company that title would be Assistant Vice President.”

“Yeah, but Jerry believes in a flat organization and Naomi, the HR person thinks that titles can be elitist and patriarchal. I don’t care as long as I get Vice President’s pay.”

“Whatever. How’s it looking for the weekend?”

“So far, so good.”

“Great, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing, with any luck.”

In fact, Christine was desperately looking forward to the weekend. Nick had somehow cajoled Tyler into joining him for a weekend of fishing with some of Nick’s friends and their sons. Years ago Tyler loved those outings but lately had tried everything he could think of to avoid the ordeal. Tyler had come to hate trips with Nick because they required him to have sustained human contact for three days. Also, it was out of cell phone range, and in order to bond with their sons, the fathers enforced a no music policy. No fishing with headphones. Everyone was supposed to talk to each other and listen to the sounds of nature. As usual, Tyler initially threatened to boycott the event, but Nick managed to convince him to go along. Christine wondered what new technology asset Tyler had extorted from Nick in order to acquiesce to the trip. But none of that mattered. All she could think of was the glorious weekend alone she would have.

4

Friday afternoon, Christine got the call she had been waiting for. It was Nick, saying that he and Tyler were on their way up north and would see her Sunday night. When she got home she saw Tyler’s iPod and headphones on the kitchen table. She took that as evidence that he and Nick had argued about his taking it at the last minute and Nick had won.

Christine had every intention of indulging herself and made herself an extravagant dinner and watched a favorite movie while she ate. For some

reason, Tyler's iPod kept turning on and she couldn't shut it off. The unearthly squawks that emanated from the headphones irritated her but she couldn't figure out how to shut it off and finally wrapped it in a towel and put it in the garage figuring that eventually the battery would die.

After dinner, she decided to have a nice long soak in the tub, something she hadn't done for years. She found some ancient bubble bath, filled the tub, got a book she had been meaning to read, put her favorite Neil Diamond CD on "repeat" and settled into the tub with a glass and bottle of wine. She was having a fantastic time, relaxing completely.

Suddenly, she jerked awake. She must have been dozing because she had lost track of time. But it couldn't have been for long. She felt a cool breeze and looked up at the bathroom door. She stared and gasped. Then she screamed. Feeling completely vulnerable and helpless, she cowered in the tub, looking at the creatures standing in the doorway.

"Have no fear, Exalted Mother," said one of the creatures in a beautifully modulated voice, so perfect it had to be artificial. After all, it couldn't have come from *that*. "We are here to worship you, not to harm you. And we urgently need your help."

Christine looked at the wine bottle to see how much she had drunk. Not enough to explain this. Two talking, they could only be . . . aliens. They were short with silvery bodies, big heads, big almond shaped eyes, everything. *You've been working too hard.*

"Greetings Most Excellent," said the other alien. "You are not seeing us in our usual form. We find that we can control the way your people visualize things and if you see us this way it will help you understand."

Christine listened, wondering if she was supposed to say anything. *If I answer, does it mean I'm really crazy?* She found herself saying, "You mean, understand that you are not from earth?"

“Yes, Great One. All will be explained in due time. For now, we need your most urgent assistance.”

“What? I don’t understand. How could I possibly assist you? I don’t know who you are but I personally don’t believe in extraterrestrials. And if you are here to worship me, you wouldn’t barge in on me in the bathroom.”

“It makes no difference, Queen of the Stars. We see your essence, not your physical manifestation.”

“My essence? Prove to me you are aliens. Prove that I’m not crazy.”

“I am sorry, Glory of the Universe, we forgot that you would not recognize your children in this form.”

Children?

There was a sudden pulse of greenish light and a sound and smell Christine had never encountered. Two rapidly expanding and contracting pulsating spheres replaced the aliens. Christine no longer heard the lovely voice but felt the creatures’ thoughts in her mind.

“This is how we must communicate with you when we shed our shapes,” she felt in her head.

“Do you recognize us now?” It was the same sensation but slightly different modulation. Christine guessed it was the other alien communicating.

Christine didn’t answer. She couldn’t believe it. She must be dreaming but it was too real. So real that she didn’t feel comfortable about just getting out of the tub and walking past the creatures. However, the fact that they kept calling her ‘Great’ and ‘Queen’ convinced her they probably didn’t intend to harm her.

“Our crisis is urgent, Princess of All the Galaxies. We are unable to communicate with our Most Noble Lord. He has been taken from us and you must help us get him back.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I can’t help you.”

“But you must, Revered Mother. You must bring back our Great God Tyler.”

The sound of the aliens in her brain was overwhelming and she was seized by a sense of urgency approaching panic. She realized she was picking up the alien’s emotions as well as their thoughts. “Tyler? Tyler is with his father. Tyler is no god. He is a boy.”

“That is not correct, Exalted One. We are one of hundreds of teams sent out by our world to find our God. Eons ago, he found us unworthy and left us. Our priests decided that now is the time for us to seek him out and entreat him to return to us. And now, on this unlikely backwater world, we have found him and are learning from him. We are ready to prove we are worthy for him to return home where we can worship him properly. But we have lost contact with him and we are most distressed. You must help us. You know where he is and how we can find him.”

Christine was starting to relax. She was reasonably sure that the aliens presented no threat. They were more pathetic and irritating than frightening. But she had an uneasy feeling that the story made some sense. The fact that Tyler was without his iPod and the iPod was acting up tied in with the communication problem they seemed to be having. Plus it might explain all the burned out headphones. And the interest in religion. And maybe even the grades. It was just like Tyler to get them to do his schoolwork for him. Their story had a certain weird logic. “You mean you think that Tyler is your god?”

“Yes, Blessed Lady. And you are his Most Holy Mother. You will rule our world by his side when you return with us.”

“Oh, and what makes Tyler god?”

“It is the prophecy, Mighty One. Our blessed chronology tells us that our God abandoned us because we were unworthy. We must prove our worth by seeking him and his mother out in the cruel universe. We were to recognize him by his sign and her by her wisdom.”

“What sign?” Christine said.

“We rejoice because we found you both, but Lord Tyler has now disappeared and we beg you to bring him back.”

“And what sign told you that Tyler is your god?” she asked, a little roughly.

“Of course you know it, Queen of Heaven. We have searched the universe for it, planet by planet. We had almost given up on this planet when we found his sign in rich abundance in this sector. It is everywhere and proves the prophecy.”

Christine gasped as the alien displayed a holographic representation of Tyler’s newly designed logo. “*Why couldn’t he have kept the swastika?*” she thought.

“Of course you know the sign, Lady of the Stars.”

“Yes.” *Why, Tyler. Why do you do these things to me?*

“Our scanners found his Most Blessed Sign. We knew that he was ready for us because he had put it everywhere to guide us to him. That is the prophecy, too. We were sure he was The One but we only confirmed his identity when we heard your great wisdom, Oh Most Glorious Matriarch. Our prophesy states, ‘He shall rule you and His Mother shall teach you.’ We landed here three of your weeks ago. We have been observing you and attempting to understand your profound wisdom.”

The alien then played a holograph showing her and Diane in the bar. Christine was sarcastically repeating her boss Jerry’s quality improvement mantra. “We hope that when you and Lord Tyler return home you will organize us into quality circles and teach us the empowerment. We need to network better and negotiate the quality matrix. With you and Lord Tyler to guide us there is no limit to what our world can accomplish.”

“Uhhh?”

“So, please My Lady, can you get Lord Tyler so we can all return home and you two can receive the adoration you so rightly deserve?”

“I know where Tyler is, but I’m not sure why I should help you. What exactly will I have to do once we get to your planet?”

“Nothing, Light of the Universe. We must serve you. We will learn from you. Your mere presence is all that we crave. You will want for nothing and your power will be second only to Lord Tyler’s.”

“Well, that at least won’t be a change,” Christine thought. She looked around at the bathroom and beyond the aliens into the hall. Neil Diamond was singing *Holly Holy*. “Give me a minute to think,” she said.

“As you wish, Empress of the Vastness of Space.”

Christine closed her eyes and had a long talk with herself. She still wasn’t sure what exactly was happening or why, but she felt strangely comfortable about it. She opened her eyes and turned to the aliens and said, “Yes. I will bring Tyler and we will join you.”

A sense of emotional relief flooded through her as he felt rather than heard in her mind the words, “Many thanks, Oh Great One.”

As she reached for her cell phone and hit the speed dial number for Nick’s answering service she said to herself, “No more Associate Team Enabler.”

5

Two years later, people still talked about Christine Dennison. Nick, convinced that Christine and Tyler would someday return, had only recently been talked into selling the house. Dianne had looked after the house ever since that May night when Nick had brought Tyler home early from the fishing trip. She hadn’t seen anything, but about an hour after Nick left other neighbors reported a rumbling sound and several flashes of white and blue light. Some thought they saw a reddish column of dust and smoke extending from the house into the night sky.

The police were completely baffled. They discounted the accounts of lights and smoke but had no idea what had become of Christine and Tyler. There were no signs of forced entry, no signs of a struggle, and no evidence that they had taken anything with them. Christine's purse, cell phone and car were all left behind. The only thing Tyler seemed to have taken was his iPod.

If anyone at Christine's old company mentioned her name to Jerry, her former boss, he would embark on a lengthy lecture on reliability and loyalty to the company that inevitably ended up with him complaining about how Christine's disappearance made his life difficult. "I will never understand what happened to that woman. She was being groomed for great things in this organization. She was supposed to make a presentation at our Monday morning staff meeting and never showed up. And that was the day she was supposed to bring donuts, too. Talk about a career-limiting move. But the worst thing was the negative media attention she brought to the company. It just didn't look good and I as her immediate superior was the unfortunate focus of attention for a while. Especially when they found those e-mails on her system about how, er, unhappy she was with my, ah, management style. Most unfortunate. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say that her little vanishing act was a purposeful act on her part to ruin my career."

In fact, Jerry was correct when he speculated that Christine had hurt his prospects for advancement. But he was wrong when he thought that the damage had been done solely by the disappearance and the discovery of the e-mails. Because what he didn't know was that somewhere, on an unimaginably distant planet whose orbit varied with the pull of the members of a double star group, Christine watched his every move and sabotaged all of his presentations, made important files vanish and generally made him look like the idiot he was. On the other hand, Dianne had won the lottery and had found herself in the relationship of her dreams. Nick was generally having good luck unless he tried to date a younger woman.

Meanwhile, Christine and Tyler, surrounded by pulsating spheres, relaxed and ruled from their earth-like palace planet.