

The Sign

by

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On most days, Christine was perfectly happy being Queen of the Universe. Her workload was light (her subjects only wanted her to be around; they didn't expect her to do anything), the pay was great (she had the wealth of several galaxies at her disposal) and, most importantly, in her spare time (which was plentiful) she was able to keep an eye on, and have a little fun with, her erstwhile friends, family and associates back on planet Earth.

Occasionally, her subjects asked her to adjudicate a controversy or settle a question, but because they were so agreeable and non-confrontational, that was very rare. She ruled a sophisticated and peaceful civilization which had amicably settled hundreds of star systems and worlds. Their science and culture were enlightened. Their worlds were as close to utopia as you could get; and as far as Christine could tell, they had only made two mistakes in their long history.

The first mistake happened so long ago that the details were shrouded in mystery. But the idea was ingrained in the culture. All of her subjects believed that eons ago, their ancestors had done something terribly wrong. No one knew what it was, but the legend held that as a result of this unnamed or unnamable transgression, their God had abandoned them. He found them unworthy and just left. Split.

Christine had always thought that was an interesting insight into the nature of her people. A belief that when their God found them unworthy he left and told them to come find Him when they were ready reflected the good-natured passivity of her subjects. She realized that most folks back on Earth would have wondered why an angry god wouldn't have kicked *them* off the planet, or vaporized them, or drowned them, or something a little more traditional.

But her people had gotten a second chance. For all of their recorded history they had kept the legend alive, cherishing the complex pictogram design that their God had promised to leave for them somewhere out in the universe. It would be a sign to guide them to Him when they were ready to seek Him out. They had worked the symbol into their art and architecture and every native knew it and worshipped it.

Eventually, they decided that it was time to seek out their God and ask Him to return. They were convinced that the heroic effort of scouring the universe would prove that they were worthy. They sent teams of scouts to search for the sign that would lead them to Him.

And that was when they made their second mistake.

You see, the arrival of the alien search team in orbit around planet Earth coincided with the flourishing of Christine's son Tyler's career as a budding graffiti artist. Most weekends he was out late, festooning the area with his personal logo. He spray-painted it on fences, buildings, storefronts, bus shelters and garbage bins. Christine had warned him to knock it off before someone complained. Nick, Christine's ex and Tyler's father, had told him that if he were caught, Tyler would pay for damages out of his own pocket, and even the policeman, who once caught Tyler in the act in the wee hours of the morning asked him not to do it again.

Tyler's school was also concerned. The vice-principal had called Christine to tell her that Tyler had defaced the frontispiece of the school library's copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* with a brazen, multi coloured version of his logo.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Christine. "I'll replace it."

"That won't be necessary. We're so delighted that Tyler likes literature. That's the important thing."

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your point of view, by some incredible coincidence, Tyler's personal logo was identical to the symbol that the

aliens had been searching the cosmos for. And when their scanners picked up Tyler's handiwork arrayed all over the neighbourhood, it looked to them like runway beacons and landing lights directing them to their goal. Ecstatically they messaged their home world, "Mission Accomplished," and set out making arrangements to effect the return of their God to His rightful place.

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It had been a long and challenging journey for the aliens. Captain (now Saint) Greck was the commander of the ship that found Tyler and his glorious mother. Greck's ship had been scanning a rather unpromising planet in a remote galaxy. Rough scans showed that the planet was overpopulated by a very unsophisticated sentient species that displayed a variety of antisocial and self-destructive behaviours. Greck's orders were to thoroughly scan the planet surface for signs of their God; and he needed to remind his crew of the strict search requirements when they repeatedly encouraged him to abandon the planet and search somewhere more promising. Their legends told them that their God would not make it easy to find Him, but they never expected Him to be hiding in such an unlikely place.

As a result, Greck's first reaction when the sensor alarms indicated a positive sighting of their God's sign was to assume that the instruments were malfunctioning. He ordered a diagnostic check. "All systems nominal. Repeat, multiple sightings confirmed," the flight engineer reported.

The crew was overjoyed, but they weren't sure exactly how to proceed. The legend, while detailed up to that point, was vague on what needed to be done once the symbol was found. They had found the symbol in abundance. But what exactly did that mean? They scrutinized the area, but found no further evidence that it might harbour their God. All they saw were scores of the planet's inhabitants. Greck called a meeting of his officers, "No one ever said that it would be easy. Our God is obviously testing us further."

The science officer responded, "I think he may have assumed the form of one of these beings. We must mingle with them and learn their habits. I'm sure that the natural excellence and wonder of our God would shine through, even if He were in the form of one of those creatures."

"I'm not sure I like that idea," said Greck. "They might become suspicious. Or frightened. We know how apt they are to resort to violence when gripped by fear."

Just then Greck was hailed by the communications technician. "Captain. Please report. Important developments."

Greck and his officers hurried to the bridge where they found the technician peering into a scanning scope. As they entered he looked up and spoke excitedly, his voice filled with awe. "I think I've found Him, sir. It's the mark. On His most holy person."

The crew watched as Greck leaned in to study the image in the viewer and immediately straightened up. The crew had never seen him look the way he did. They had expected him to be transfixed by the sight of their God, but instead he had a look of shock, disbelief and not a little of what looked like disgust. He turned to the technician and said, "I agree, the mark is there. But do you really think it's possible *that* could be Him?"

The other crew members took turns studying the viewer and all showed the same reactions. They observed a young being moving furtively down a darkened street. He was carrying a bag emblazoned with the Holy Sign in large black strokes. As if that were not proof enough, from time to time he stopped and inscribed the Sign on a wall or fence. It was as if their God were leading them to Himself. But it couldn't be. The creature was repellent even by the standards of the planet's beings. Like all of the scanning equipment on Greck's ship, this one could detect physical as well as emotional energies and the emotional reading showed an unusual combination of torpor and aggression.

“Maybe our instruments are unable to properly capture readings from our God,” the communications officer suggested. “His emotions and thinking are infinitely more complex than ours.”

“What should we do?”

“I say we go down and try to establish contact. Once He knows that we have found Him, I’m sure He will explain everything to us.”

“I volunteer,” said the science officer.

“And I,” said the ship’s theologian.

On their return, Greck said, “That didn’t take long. What happened?”

They were radiant, and barely able to speak. “It is another test, but it is most surely our God. We made contact. He acknowledged our presence. He spoke to us.”

The landing party had recorded the moment of contact. The recording would become one of the holiest icons of their civilization once they got back to their home planet. It showed two shimmering silvery beings with large heads and almond shaped eyes standing in front of a shocked and surprised teenager. The ship’s computers translated His words into their language, so they weren’t actually hearing the voice of their God, but at least they were hearing His words. When He first saw them, He started to run, but then the landing party said, “Hail O Most Holy One!”

He stopped, unused to being addressed that way, and confused because he actually heard their words through the earbuds of his phone. In English. He took a closer look and responded – the first words of greeting from their lost God--“Whoa, cool! Aliens, man.”

The theologian, overcome by emotion, was unable to speak, but the science officer said, “We rejoice that we have found you, Mighty One. What is your wish? May we conduct you to your home where your children await you?”

“Children? No way, dude. Like you got the wrong guy.”

“But King of the Universe, you left your sign for us. We have awaited this moment for generations. Your children want only to worship you.”

“Like, are you for real? I mean, aliens? No way.”

“Yes, Light of the Cosmos. We are your children. We have searched the universe for you and now we rejoice that we have found you. We only want you to return to your home planet with us.” Brazenly, the science officer suggested, “You must be tired of living in these conditions, Sublime Light of the Universe.”

“Hey, man. What’s with the names? My name’s Tyler. I’m happy here. Could use a new iPhone, but I’m cool. And I better get home.”

“Yes, Glory of the Heavens. We want to bring you home. And you will want for nothing there. May we conduct you to our ship?”

“So, OK. Let me get this straight. You *can* get me the latest iPhone?”

“Certainly, Prince of Eternity.”

“Cool. And you’re, like, from outer space?”

The science officer provided the coordinates of their home planet.

Tyler may have had a few vices, most of them secret, but he did not drink or take drugs. And he was much smarter than he looked. He knew he was experiencing reality and started to evaluate the implications of what he was hearing. Aliens, powerful enough to travel across space and talk through his phone, were calling him their God and asking to worship him. Plus, they’d offered to get him the newest iPhone. He considered the possibilities. “I am having trouble at school. Like, could you like help me with my homework?”

“It would be an honour, a privilege and our duty, Lord of the Galaxies. We are here to serve you.”

“Awesome. How can I call you when I need you?”

The science officer gestured overhead, “We hope you will join us on our ship so that we may all go home, Delight of the Constellations.”

“Naw, my mother will kill me if I stay out all night.”

The theologian, who had recovered slightly, gasped, "He speaks of the Holy Mother. It is the prophesy. This is our God!"

"Come back tomorrow same time, OK?" He turned and walked away.

Back on the ship the crew were ecstatic. They had succeeded. It only remained for them to complete the tests that their God Tyler would devise for them. He seemed to want them to know as much possible about the planet where he had hidden because he asked them to learn about its history, culture and science and then explain it to him. The theologian reminded them that again it was the prophesy, "And he shall teach us of his time in exile."

Greck counselled patience as the days passed and Tyler responded to their plaintive inquiries about returning to their home planet with "Whatever."

No matter what happened, however, they were convinced that they had indeed found their God. Tyler's imperious nature was an important clue, especially His apparent disdain for what appeared to be the normal trappings of the primitive civilization He had chosen to hide out in. Further, it was obvious that his mother worshipped Him and did His bidding without hesitation. And just as the legend said, she was truly a font of great knowledge. They recorded hours of her discourses with Her disciples. They *knew* they had found their God and His Mother.

While they attempted to get Tyler to join them on their ship, they observed Christine at work as a marketing consulting and saw her making client presentations. The aliens were enchanted by what they saw and hoped to have her train them to be "proactive in applying emerging technologies to enable our best and brightest," to help them "explore our core values," and to "exchange in provocative learning interfaces." They wanted to learn how to "map the conceptual framework onto the innovative cultural organization" and they wanted to know all about "metrics around mission critical innovation and sustainability." They especially enjoyed her presentation entitled "Materializing Cultural Synergies Through Negotiation of the Technology/Innovation Nexus,"

and eagerly discussed how they hoped she would help them roll out Knowledge Ecologies and Collaborative Innovation Modalities.

The most serious test for the aliens came when they suddenly lost contact with Tyler. One day, Nick, Tyler's father, took him on a male bonding weekend fishing trip and forbade Tyler to outfit himself with any of his usual technological life support systems, including his phone. The aliens, unable to contact Tyler, became desperate and after much debate as to the proper protocol, decided to visit his mother.

It was Friday night, and Christine, luxuriating in the warm glow of a Tyler-free weekend, had made herself an indulgent meal and ate it while watching a favourite movie. She then found some ancient bubble bath, filled the tub, got a book she had been meaning to read, put her favourite Neil Diamond CD on "repeat" and settled into the tub with a glass and bottle of wine. She found herself truly relaxing for the first time in months.

Suddenly, she jerked awake. She must have been dozing because she had lost track of time. She felt a breeze, looked up at the bathroom door, 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. "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 aliens. Actually, she was hearing them through the CD player.

"Greetings, Most Excellent," said the other.

Christine didn't answer. She wasn't sure exactly what was happening. At some primal level she was afraid, but the *attitude* of the aliens was so humble, and they were so respectful, that they didn't seem to be dangerous. *It must be the*

wine and the stress, she thought. *You've been working too hard.* She couldn't think of anything to say.

"Please, Queen of the Galaxies. Will you help us?"

Christine tried to sound stern. "What are you talking about? How could I possibly help you?" *Maybe I'm crazy. I'm talking to aliens. All this stress from work and from Tyler has finally driven me around the bend.* Attempting to regain some dignity, she added, "Anyway, I 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, Glory of the Universe. We see your essence not your physical manifestation."

Christine giggled. *I could get used to this. These guys treat me better than anyone down here.*

"Our crisis is urgent, Empress of the Vastness of Space. We are unable to communicate with our Most Noble Lord. You must help us find Him."

"I don't know what you are talking about. I can't help you." She picked up her book and opened it, thinking that a decisive return to reality would dispatch the aliens.

It didn't work. "But you must, Revered Mother. You must bring back our Great God Tyler, your son."

"Tyler?" Christine looked at the aliens over her reading glasses. "Tyler is no god. I assure you."

"May I dare to suggest you are in error, Exalted One. You see, Gift of the Cosmos, it is the prophesy. He has left us His sign." The aliens produced a glowing hologram of the tag Tyler had been painting all over the neighbourhood.

Christine gasped. *Oh, no! Tyler, why do you do these things to me?* It made sense in a bizarre way. These aliens were real. And they really thought that Tyler was their god. She refilled her glass as *Holly Holy* was playing in the background.

“And you are His Most Holy Mother. You will rule our world by His side. Our prophesy states, ‘He shall rule you and His Mother shall teach you.’ We have been observing you and attempting to understand your profound wisdom. Observe, Lady of the Stars.” Christine watched in horror as the alien played a holograph showing her and her best friend Diane in a bar having drinks after work. Christine was sarcastically mimicking Jerry, her boss, during her recent annual performance review, “You need to level set and crystallize your career objectives. With sufficient self-empowerment and networking, I’m sure you should be able to more effectively negotiate the quality service matrix.”

The aliens watched the clip adoringly and then said, “We have much to learn from you. We hope you will teach us The Empowerment. We hope you will show us how to be passionate imagineers. With you and our Lord to guide us there is no limit to what our worlds can accomplish.”

She held her head. “Tyler won’t be back for a couple of days. I don’t know how to reach him. You’ll just have to wait.”

The aliens sat down and appeared to go into a trance.

“Not here. Go away and come back in a few days.”

“Yes, Glory of the Cosmos. As you wish.”

The aliens vanished and Christine lay back in the tub. Her thoughts were pleasant as she imagined living as queen of the aliens. *No more Jerry.* Then she laughed, *poor aliens, how are we going to get rid of them and convince them they’ve made a mistake?*

Her reverie was shattered by the phone. It was Jerry. On a Friday night. He wanted her to come in on Saturday and Sunday to work on their latest presentation. “It’s urgent. The board just moved up the deadline. Our careers are riding on this one. I need you here first thing tomorrow morning. The board is watching and it’s your ass if we screw this one up.”

Christine found herself missing the aliens.

On Sunday night, having worked through the weekend she had thought was to be her time to herself, Christine was in a foul mood. She wasn't helped when Tyler returned from his trip. He, too, was in a shocking temper. "No more flatline fishing trips," he declared as he stormed to his room.

For the rest of the week, it seemed that all Christine was doing was arguing with Jerry and snapping at Tyler. Finally, she made a decision. She knocked on Tyler's door, braving the seismic bass pulsations that emanated from behind the door and could have dissolved kidney stones.

"Yah?"

"Tyler, we need to talk."

The music stopped and the door opened. "Like, you got an appointment?"

"I'm serious. Tell me the truth. Have you been talking to aliens?"

Tyler became immediately defensive. "Yeah, right. You think I'm nuts or what?"

Christine held up her hands. "It's OK if you are. They came to see me too." Tyler's body language told her that he was disappointed that she was in on the secret. "What have they been saying to you?"

"Lots of stuff."

"Have they talked about going away?"

"I guess so."

Christine and Tyler then had their longest and best conversation yet. They were like two rational adults discussing a very irrational issue. Tyler explained what the aliens had told him and shown him and Christine added her story. Christine wrapped it up by saying, "So, you want to try it?"

"Yeah. Sure. I've always wanted off this planet anyway."

The aliens, overwhelmed by being in the simultaneous presence of both Tyler and Christine, were barely coherent. In their excitement over Christine's announcement that they were ready to go 'home,' they even agreed to Christine's

escape clause, which would let them return to Earth if conditions were not satisfactory. Christine, unlike Tyler, worried what might happen if the aliens realized their mistake and she wanted a return ticket, so to speak. As they prepared for departure Tyler asked, "Mom, should we leave a note?"

Christine thought for a moment. "Naw."

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Two years later, people still talked about the strange disappearance of Christine and Tyler. The police considered it a cold case. Some of the neighbours had given vague and conflicting accounts of strange lights and noises on the night they disappeared, but they had no idea what had really happened. There were no signs of forced entry, no signs of a struggle, and no evidence that they had taken anything with them. The cops discounted claims of Tyler's former classmates that dealings with aliens had led to his sudden improvement in scholarship and the overnight disappearance of his acne. Christine's purse, cell phone and car were all left behind.

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 she was supposed to bring donuts, too. Talk about a career-limiting move. 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 her disappearance. 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 much younger woman.

Meanwhile, Christine and Tyler, surrounded by adoring aliens, relaxed and ruled from their earth-like palace planet. The aliens, content at last, basked in the good-natured glory of their rediscovered God and his Divine Mother, and the only time the tranquillity was disrupted was then Christine and Tyler would high five each other and cheer after teaching someone on Earth a lesson by correcting some small part of the lunacy that they observed from afar.