

Conversation Pieces
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The XY Conspiracy

by
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*For my mother: your long-time subscriptions to Science News
and Chemical and Engineering News are surely partly to
blame for this.*

And for April and Simone.

San Francisco

It took a moment after I stepped off the platform for my eyes to adjust from the white-hot glare of stage lights to the dusky red glow that saturated the rest of the club. I thought to myself, as always, “more carrots,” and for some reason that made me smile. I let my smile cover the temporary blindness as I strode into the wilderness of thick carpet, alcohol and sweat, aftershave and hair grease, and twenties thick with ink and grime. After I could see more than blurry shadows, I searched for my next table-dance mark. Over in the corner, someone was having a bachelor party. A good bet.

Just another day at the office.

My particular office is called Catwalk, and it’s a mid-level strip club in San Francisco. I’ve been here a year. No longer fresh meat, but I make book regularly enough. Before I was here, I worked other clubs. I’ll work another club when I get tired of this one, when the girls get mean or the management gets petty or I just need a change of scene.

I’ve seen a million faces, and I’ve taken tips from them all, tucked into my hovering cleavage (what there is of it). Ground my ass in tented crotches. Smiled until my cheeks threatened to lock up. Smearred lipstick on their collars. Smoothed their sweaty bills between my sweaty palms.

The bachelor party pooled their funds to buy a dance from me. They weren't too drunk at that point and remembered to keep their hands to themselves. The guest of honor was quiet and pale when I leaned over and dragged the hair of my wig across his face. I whispered, "your wife's going to be a lucky woman" in his ear, swirled my hips above his lap, and left a kiss on his cheek. His buddies sat right next to him, cheering me on. One of them called me "kimchee mama." I refused to look at him, much less bother to correct him. At least he didn't try speaking Korean in an attempt to impress me.

I caught sight of a man sitting at one of the back tables. He was wearing a suit, a solid black suit that didn't fit him well, or he wasn't comfortable in it, I couldn't really tell—it was dark, and there was nothing wrong with the fit or drape, but something was off just the same.

Also, he was wearing sunglasses. Indoors, in a dimly-lit strip club.

I avoided his table. I couldn't tell if he was watching me, but my skin crawled just the same. I took note when he waved off one of the other dancers. Apparently he didn't like blondes. The drink on the cocktail table in front of him was full and starting to sweat.

I started to sweat, too.

So there's a weirdo in the club, I told myself as I waved at the bachelor party, still in force, and scanned the room for another mark. No one on the horizon; I headed toward the bar. The man in the suit shook off another dancer. I sipped a club soda until it was my turn onstage.

I shook my ass to The Gossip's "Drugstore Diamond." I was the diamond, a priceless jewel in a cheap setting. My moves were slow and inviting. Shine me up and show me off.

The man in the suit never came to the rail to offer me a tip. But when I stepped off the stage, I could see him

sitting forward in his chair, his hands placed palm-down on his thighs. His drink was still sweating, still untouched.

He sat at his table for the rest of my shift. I tried not to make it obvious that I was watching him, too. Watching him wave off every dancer who came to his table. Watching to see if his lips ever touched the rim of his glass. They didn't. Not once.

The night was winding down. It must have been close to closing time. The man in the suit still sat there, still wearing glasses, drink still untouched. I took my last turn on the pole and then headed backstage. No lingering. Brisk. I took off my wig, packed up my locker, and flagged down the house manager.

"I've got a stalker," I said.

"I'll get you an escort," she replied.

It only took her a moment to find a security guard to walk me to my car.



It wasn't until I got home and told my roommate Charleine about the incident that it sank in. She was the one who put the pieces together first.

"Oh my God, Jyn," she said. "You know who that was. I mean, what that was. That was an MIB." She covered her mouth when she said it.

My hands suddenly felt cold.

Stripping is my day job. UFO hunting is my real vocation. Unfortunately, there isn't any place that will pay you full-time to chase down rumors, evidence, and accounts of sightings, and I've got to pay the bills somehow. Stripping provides flexible hours and lots of free time, plus the extra cash to fund my research. I figure it's a better investment than furs or plastic surgery.

I've made connections in the UFO world, carried on some correspondence, had some letters published here

and there. I write a blog that gets a respectable number of hits. Nothing fancy. Nothing I thought would really attract much attention under normal circumstances.

Forget what you learned in the movies about MIBs, OK? Remember: movies are fiction. They make things up. Let me give you the real lowdown.

Normally, I would dismiss the Men in Black as just another hysteria-induced non-phenomenon. When you're a serious UFO hunter, you run into a lot of this sort of stuff. And so many of the reports are just too outlandish—like the ones where the MIBs wear heavy pancake makeup and lipstick, or seem to run down like they were wind-up toys.

But more sober reports of their existence seem too persistent to dismiss entirely. OK. Maybe they're government agents or something. I could buy that. Except for one thing that's always bugged me.

There are never any real-life reports of any Women in Black. Not a single one.

This observation is really where all of it began.

If the MIBs were just government operatives trying to intimidate UFO researchers as part of some cover-up, don't you think that by now, in the 21st century, they would have hired at least one woman?

I knew from the moment Char said it that she was right. We had a genuine MIB sighting on our hands.

But why would they be after me? Sure, I'd posted a few things on various message boards, and, like everyone else these days, I had a blog and a mailing list that I was supposed to send monthly newsletters to, except it was more like quarterly. My correspondents didn't know about the day job, though. How had they found me? Why did they care?

Unless I was on to something? Unless I was right? My theories aren't entirely orthodox within the UFO com-

munity, after all. Maybe I had accidentally stumbled on something a little too hot, a little too close to closely-held secrets that I'm not supposed to question or examine.

I know this is what every UFO hunter believes. But not every UFO hunter has a Man in Black walk into her office unannounced.

Char was spooked. "Jyn, maybe you should take a vacation. Hide out somewhere for a while."

I could barely keep still that first night. I must have spent an hour pacing the long hall of our San Francisco Victorian flat. OK, maybe the pot of coffee Char fixed for the both of us didn't help. But I decided I couldn't just hide. I needed to do something. Go somewhere.

My car was in decent shape. I could trade off my shifts until I was ready to come home. I could get away from the Man in Black, even if he turned out to be a shabby corporate stalker of the more mundane type. I could have a little adventure. A road trip. I could pick up shifts at titty bars across the country, work my way through the flatlands, make some side trips and do a little professional UFO tourism. Maybe I'd find something, a clue, a lead.

Char went into the bathroom and emptied out a couple drawers for me. "Just remember to leave me a check for the rent," she said, and then she hugged me. "And try to get some sleep before you go."

"Oh, fuck, Char, I forgot it's a school night for you! Go to bed, I'll pack in the morning."

"You'd better write me," she said just before she shut her bedroom door. "Otherwise I'm sending the National Guard out after you."

"I'll send you a postcard every week. If you don't get one..." I had to stifle a giggle. "I guess you'll have to call the FBI."

“So they can send out another MIB? Just tell me where to bail you out, Jyn, and I’ll drive out there myself. Vacation hours or no vacation hours.” Suddenly she seemed to sober up. “We’ll talk in the morning. Call me at work. I know we’re probably both being paranoid, but just in case—I want a back-up plan, Jyn. I want you to make it back safe.”



I wasted way too much time in the morning packing. Char wandered in with coffee mug in hand, still rubbing her eyes, hair uncombed and falling in front of her face. “Postcards are cute,” she announced without preamble. “But I expect you to call once in a while. You’ve got a cell phone. And you’ve got my number in there, right?”

“Sure,” I said, then added, “But they might be able to track me via the GPS.”

“Take it, then, but turn it off. Keep it off. Save it for emergencies,” she said. Then she left to hog the bathroom for the next forty-five minutes.

Meanwhile, I stuffed full two entire suitcases. One with my work clothes, and one with everything else.

I have a lot of work clothes, and I wasn’t in a good state of mind to be particularly discerning, but fortunately, stripper costumes tend to pack down, simply because they’re so flimsy. I can shove my load of stretchy gowns and minidresses, bikini sets, thongs and g-strings, plus a couple of garters for tips into any old spare duffel, and I’m good to go.

The shoes and beauty supplies are another story. I whittled them down to four pairs of stilettos, three pairs of platforms, and a couple good pairs of sexy boots. Plus a manicure and pedicure set, razors and shaving cream, the full makeup kit, extra false eyelashes and nail polish colors, body glitter, concealer, bobby pins, safety

pins, tissues and swabs, tweezers, shea butter, and God knows what else I just packed in there blindly.

And then there were the mandatory road trip supplies. A Swiss army knife. Sunscreen and sunglasses. All the stomach and cold remedies in the medicine cabinet (after Char finally left for work), vitamins. A lighter. My digital camera. Road music. No time to dwell on the perfect mix.

I want you to know, road music isn't just a luxury. I've been out in the center of the country enough times to know that there are places where you can't get anything useful on the radio. And there was that one six-hour drive with a former girlfriend where we listened to Tori Amos and *Little Earthquakes* on infinite repeat. I still can't stand that album. (The girlfriend went her own way soon after.)

I like my road music hard and driving. Actually, I like my dancing music the same way. I grabbed two handfuls of CDs, just in case. I didn't even bother to look at the cases.

And last but not least, my notes. I hated the idea of keeping track of a laptop on the road, but that's what motel safes are for, I guess. I tossed in my Plain Jane composition books, too, filled with clippings and scribbles and photos and names. It was all a jumble, but would have to do.



It was only a few years ago that I actually saw my first UFO.

I wasn't alone. In fact, there were enough eyewitnesses that that sighting made the local newspaper—the *San Francisco Chronicle* carried a short item about lights in the sky over the Bay, shimmering in the late autumn

atmosphere. Air force bases denied any rocket launches or tests, but then again they always do.

Two days later, the paper ran a slightly longer story quoting an astronomer or two about how it was really just Mars and Venus in the sky, appearing unusually bright due to various obscure factors.

A day later they ran a very small correction retracting the claim about Venus, but failing to further clarify what that second light really was.

And that was that.

They also never explained why the lights didn't appear the next night, or the night after that, or the night after that. Only one night, only a few hours at most.

I knew better than to believe the official story.

The XY stuff came later. That, I had to figure out for myself.



Sometimes, it seems like California is so big, people ran out of place names and had to start recycling. There are at least two Pebble Beaches that I know of, and two Redondos. There's Eureka and Yreka. Oakland, Oakdale, and Oakhurst. Mount Shasta, Lake Shasta, and Shasta Lake.

I managed to reach Redding, in the shadow of the mountains, by sundown. I didn't choose anything fancier than a Super 8 to bed down in.

On the one hand, the Sacramento Valley is considered possibly the most boring part of the entire state of California. On the other hand, it is chock full of UFO sightings.

Most of them aren't worth going into detail about. Nothing famous or unusual—no abductions or scorch marks on the ground or alien artifacts left behind. No

radio disruptions, no lost time, nothing like that. Just a lot of unexplained lights in the sky.

I spent a little while outside in the parking lot with my binoculars, but nothing was on display. Oh well. I knew it was a long shot. I think I was just hoping for a sign.

Tomorrow, Oregon.