

Conversation Pieces
Volume 19

Aliens of the Heart

Short Fiction

by

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For Rhoda, from her biggest fan

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Lost Road

It was a dry year. Come June, the corn that should have been knee-high was stunted and papery in the fields; the pasture grass rustled, stiff as broom straw, in the constant wind. The topsoil had turned powdery, and you could see it blowing off the fields in clouds, making the sunsets red.

To Betty Lindstrom it seemed like her whole world was drying up and blowing away. She and Wayne had had to lease out the last 40 acres that spring to a man from the next county who was farming nearly all the land in their township. He'd taken out the fences and cut down the beech-tree windbreaks Betty's father had planted in the '30s, and now plowed fields came right up to the edge of the farmhouse yard on every side.

After supper one evening Betty took Chipper and walked out to the endless cornfield where her grandfather's original farmstead had been. She stood with the wind blowing strands of gray hair in her eyes, trying to trace the outline of the foundations. But they had been scraped away, planted over. Just like Wayne had been scraped away by the stroke, his wit and cheer dried up, powdered, and scoured in the wind.

Betty drove Wayne into the town of Lost Road every week, inching along in their 1978 Volare with Chipper in the back seat. She didn't like driving. Wayne had always done the driving before the stroke. Whenever she sat down behind the wheel with him to her right, it made her aware that the man she had married was gone and a stranger now shared her life. The county road blurred in front of her, a straight line meeting the horizon in a T. Every now and then another car would come along, and she would veer over onto the shoulder 'till it was safely by.

Their car was the only thing moving on the main street of Lost Road. The buildings were weathered, colorless, and spaced too far apart. A block off the main street the derelict shells of old grain elevators stood along what had once been a Soo Line feeder track. Around them the prairie had begun to reseed itself.

The gas station stood under an old Pure sign no one had ever bothered to take down. Its garage door was always open, revealing a cluttered, grease-stained interior. Betty had never been inside the garage; that was a man's world. She had been in the office a few times and remembered faded packs of gum under a glass counter frosted by a half-century of quarters passing over it. No one was around, so they helped themselves from the single pump, filling the car and the two five-gallon cans in the trunk for the generator. Wayne shuffled into the office, his overalls hanging loose on his stick-thin body, his visored cap saying CENEX. Dan Erickson would soon show up. They'd talk field hands and field goals, forward passes and tillage passes. Wayne would say, in that old-man way he had now, how hard farming

used to be and how glad he was to be out of it. And he would fool no one.

Betty drove on down to the corner store. Inside, the dusty windows cast a tired light on half-empty racks of drugstore sundries. Betty picked up some toilet paper, bread, bananas, and milk.

“How you getting through this dry weather?” Dot Meyers said when Betty brought her purchases to the counter.

“Oh, we’re okay,” Betty said.

“Didn’t see you at church last Sunday. We get kind of worried about you, you know, out there all alone in that farmhouse.”

“We’re doing just fine,” Betty said. It was none of Dot’s business anyhow. Wayne had always teased Betty about being a deadpan Swede who never let any troubles show. She probably was, and too late to change now.

“We had a big meeting about our Lost Road Days festival,” Dot said, taking a hand-printed sheet and sticking it in Betty’s grocery bag. “We’re looking for people to make things for the bake sale.”

Dot was always trying to organize things.

“I’ll think about it,” Betty said.

As she carried her bag out to the car where Chipper waited, Betty looked over Dot’s flyer. On the back it had a typed paragraph about the history of the town.

Lost Road was founded in the 1870s, when New York speculator Jeremiah Parker surveyed a road over his land holdings between the Yellow Medicine and Big Sioux rivers. Returning east, he published a map showing the road studded with towns. He induced several hundred settlers to buy land and move west.

But when they arrived they found none of the promised road, traffic, or towns. The hardy pioneers among them who survived the first winter called the fiasco “Parker’s Lost Road.”



As she started the car, Betty had a strange, reckless idea. What if she just turned east instead of west and drove off out of town? What if she just left Wayne at the gas station and didn’t come back? But deep down she knew she didn’t really want to get away from Wayne. He was a part of her, like arthritis. No point complaining.

They left town about 4:20, driving west. The sun glared into the windshield from a cloudless sky. Red-winged blackbirds flew up from the unmowed ditches as the car passed. Down the roadside, telephone poles marched in an endless procession. Every few miles they passed the remains of old driveways that used to lead to farmhouses. Every year the land was getting emptier. They said farming was a business now, not a way of life.

“We’ve got to go back,” Wayne said suddenly.

“Why?”

“We didn’t get the mail.”

“Yes, I did. It’s in the bag. Your magazine came.”

He didn’t turn to get it. Their daughter Alice had sent him the subscription, but he never read it.

“Alice hasn’t called for months,” Wayne said.

“She called just last Saturday,” Betty said.

“How come you didn’t tell me?”

“I did. You talked to her. You just don’t remember.”

Alice was off in the city having a life filled with events. A trip to Hawaii, a job reassignment, her daughter competing in a state tennis tournament. Betty couldn't remember events like that ever happening to her. Her life was more like the paper than the writing—the background you had to have in order to see the ink.

Betty realized she had been driving automatically, not seeing where she was going. “Did I miss the turnoff?” she asked. But Wayne just shrugged. Betty slowed down. She kept expecting to see their house ahead. Though she couldn't place just where they were, she knew they were close.

In all the landscape the only thing moving was a combine far away on the horizon, big as a factory on wheels. Betty's thoughts strayed back to those settlers who'd followed Jeremiah Parker's map out here, imagining towns and communities and finding only prairie and wind. She didn't think they were heroic at all. They'd been duped into believing legends. She could almost feel their bitterness and longing around her, as if their dust was in the air.

At last Betty decided she'd gone too far, and when they came to a dirt township road she turned around.

After half an hour the road ahead still looked exactly the same. Betty was puzzled; she had driven far enough to be all the way back in Lost Road by now. She pulled to the shoulder and stopped.

“What's the problem?” Wayne asked.

“Do you know where we are?” Betty said.

“I thought we were going home.”

Betty didn't want to say she couldn't find their house. She'd been driving this stretch all her life. "I guess it's a little farther on," she said, and started up again.

Everything looked familiar, just like *deja vu*. Before long she had convinced herself she was on Highway 35, driving parallel to the county road. No wonder she couldn't find their house. When she came to a township road she turned south.

"I've got to pee," Wayne said plaintively.

"Why didn't you go at the station?"

"I didn't have to then. We've been driving a long time."

When he had to go, he had to go. Betty pulled over. Wayne got out and shambled over to the grassy ditch. Betty got up to let the dog out, shoes crunching on gravel. Grasshoppers buzzed in the heat.

When she looked over to see if Wayne was done, he was staring fixedly out across the ditch. "What're those?" he said, pointing.

The low hill was dotted with uniform rows of gray cylinders lying on their sides. They were too big for oil drums, and they looked purposefully arranged, like manufactured artifacts. Betty squinted, searching for an explanation to quell her rising sense of the sinister.

Then she laughed. "Hay bales," she said. "They don't make them square any more, you know, Dad. They're all round like that these days."

But as she shooed Chipper back into the car, she felt fear at her own confusion. Why had they looked so strange for a second? They ought to be so familiar.

They drove on. The telephone poles by the road were casting long cross-shadows over the grassy banks,

and birds perched on the wires like silent notes of music. "This is the same road," Betty said. "The same road we were on before."

She speeded up, desperate to get somewhere, anywhere. She scanned the fields for the telltale groves of oak and elm, each with a clutch of white buildings nestled underneath. That was the landscape she recognized. But it wasn't here now. No warm, buttery light leaking out past gingham curtains, no dogs in the yard wagging a welcome, no noisy kitchens inviting them in. It was all just legends now.

The sun was on the horizon by the time she came to a deserted crossroad and stopped.

Wayne, who had fallen asleep, roused and looked around. "Where are we?" he asked.

"I don't know," Betty said.

"You mean we're lost?"

He took it very calmly. Matter-of-fact, as if this happened all the time. They sat together on the bumper of the car, eating bread and bananas and watching the sunset. Chipper nosed around in the roadside grass. Eventually he came up to beg, and Betty poured him some milk and gave him bread.

The wind had died down, and the only sound was the crickets. "I know where we are," Wayne said suddenly. "This is Brown's Corner."

Of course. Across the road was the spot where Brown's store had stood, and behind it the pasture where they used to show movies on a sheet strung between two phone poles. She could remember the grass parked full of Model Ts, and people from miles around sitting on plaid blankets. It had been a night just like

this, with a wide-open sky above, when she and Wayne had shared an ice cream and she'd decided he was the one she wanted to spend her life with.

“I chased you for ten years, you know,” she said.

“Yeah, I was Mr. Popularity back then. Remember how we used to go dancing? Glenn Miller. Now that was *music*.” He began humming. “Hey, I bet you still can dance.”

“Not me,” Betty said, smiling. He hadn't acted like this for ages.

He fell silent, and Betty gradually remembered that Brown's Corner was back in Blue Earth County where they'd grown up, not out here.

Wayne slept on the back seat that night. Betty lay awake in the front, listening to time pass.



She was wakened by the roar of a semi. She sat up in a daze to catch sight of the back of the truck disappearing down the highway. It was broad daylight. She woke Wayne, and they breakfasted on bread and milk. The sight of the semi had put her in good spirits. She was embarrassed to think of her confusion the evening before. Now she knew they would soon find a town and be home before noon.

And in fact they had only been driving for half an hour when grain elevators appeared on the horizon to the south. As they drew closer, Betty could make out the white steeple of a church and the roofs of houses. She kept expecting the road to veer toward the town, but instead it continued on west, straight as a ruler. Betty looked with fading hope for a crossroad leading

south. Somehow, she knew there would be none—and even if there were, it would not lead to the town.

She stopped the car and looked out across the fields. It was no more than a mile or two to walk, but Wayne could never make it, and she couldn't leave him alone in the hot car. She willed back the frustrated tears that filled her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to see a Safeway sign or a Rexall drug store. She wanted to call out across the fields, "Here I am!" But her voice was a thin, old-lady voice now. No one would hear her.

The road rolled by, familiar as ever. They crossed an Interstate, but there was no exit or entrance, and a tall chain-link fence kept them from the roadside. They stopped on the bridge and tried to signal cars to stop, but no one understood.

They drove on.

"Maybe we could signal an airplane," Wayne said as they sat resting by the roadside that afternoon.

Betty poured the last of the milk into Chipper's bowl, and he lapped it up thirstily. "You mean lay our clothes out on the ground in an SOS?" she asked.

"You want to take off your clothes?" he said. She looked at him in surprise; there was laughter in his eyes that hadn't been there for a year.

"Not me," she said.

"Then maybe we ought to just flash a mirror at them. You've got a mirror in your purse, don't you? You've got everything in there."

There was no mirror in her purse, so they decided to break the rear-view mirror off the windshield. They stood in the middle of the deserted road, trying to catch the sun in an SOS pattern. But all the planes

they saw were jets so high they were just specks in the cloudless sky. “They’ll never see,” Betty said.

That evening they stopped at a place where a railroad embankment crossed the road. Betty and Wayne strolled arm-in-arm up to the tracks, Chipper at their heels. Field mice skittered across the cindery railroad bed, and the smell of old creosote rose from the sun-baked ties. Betty stood gazing at the tracks curving off into the west. She felt sure these must be the old Northern Pacific tracks that went out to the coast.

“My brother Lars went away to work on this railroad when I was a kid,” she said to Wayne. She remembered standing just like this as a girl, when the tracks had been the golden road to Seattle and the Orient. Lars had brought her back a black enamel jewelry box with Chinese scenes painted on it in gold. She’d wanted then to follow the tracks off the farm, but never did it. And now the tracks didn’t really gleam any more; in fact, they looked rusty and unused.

“I know what our problem is,” she said suddenly. “We’re on the lost road. It’s got to be. Those old settlers imagined it so hard it just came to be. No wonder it doesn’t connect to anything.”

They drove aimlessly the next day. They put the extra gas into the tank, but even that gradually dwindled away. Betty felt tired and thirsty. She was sure there had to be some way off this imaginary road. When they turned on the radio the Marshall station came through just fine. They were so close.

As twilight fell, they spotted a homey light coming from curtained windows in a little grove far across the cornfields. It looked so warm and inviting Betty felt a

surge of desperation. She jerked the wheel to the side, and the car jolted over the shoulder and through the ditch. Its wheels spun a moment, then it lurched into the field.

“Whoa! What are you doing?” Wayne said.

“I’m leaving the road. I’m going to drive right over the field. Maybe that’s the answer.”

The car bounced over the corn rows, its bumper breaking off brittle stalks. Wayne looked aghast at the damage she was doing to the field. They were almost at the top of a rise when the back wheel sank into a deep trap of powdery soil. Betty put the car in reverse and tried to back out, but the wheel spun deeper. They were stuck.

Betty laid her head down against the wheel. The mad drive through the field had taken the last of her energy. She couldn’t cope any longer.

At last she said dully, “Well, that was pretty dumb.”

“I don’t know what there is left to do that’s very smart,” Wayne said. It was so like something the old Wayne would have said that tears came to her eyes. To hide them, she got out. She let the dog out of the back seat, then walked on to the top of the rise, hugging herself tight. When she got there she stood looking out over the broad, rolling landscape growing dark under the fading sky. There were no lights, no houses as far as the eye could see. So that window she’d seen had been another mirage, another disappointment. Well, she was used to that.

Chipper, sensing her distress, pressed against her leg. She heard the car door slam behind her, and Wayne’s footsteps. He stopped a few feet away.

“Don’t worry, Betty,” he said. “It’ll all be okay.”

Her throat was aching. He stepped closer and spoke softly, a little joking. “Hey, don’t worry, I’m still here. As long as we stick together, we got no problems we can’t solve.”

It was the old Wayne’s voice. The tears she’d been holding back for months suddenly came, rain on parched earth. She turned and hugged him, hugged him tighter than she ever had. “Don’t ever leave me again,” she said, her face pressed tight against his shoulder. “I’ve been lonelier than I thought I could be.”

“It’s okay,” he said, then just held her and patted her on the back. It took a long time for all the tears she hadn’t cried to come out. At last he gave her a hug and took her hand. “It’s okay,” he said again.

“Yeah,” she said, wiping her face. “I guess it is now.”

They walked back down the hill and sat in the dirt with their backs against the car and their arms around each other. Chipper lay down with his head on Betty’s ankle.

“Hey, I know what to do,” Wayne said.

He got up and switched on the car radio. A sweet old Glenn Miller song was playing. He sat back down beside her.

“I suppose we should have kept on following the road, wherever it went,” Betty said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Wayne. “I don’t think there was any right or wrong thing to do. You just do your best.”

Betty was gazing off toward the west. The horizon looked ruffled, like an unmade bed. “Wayne, look,” she said.

“What?”

“Clouds. There’s rain coming.”

“So there is.”

They sat there as night fell, watching the rain clouds sweep slowly toward them over the land.