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Roswell Daily Record, “The tinfoil, paper, tape, and sticks made a bundle about three feet long and seven or eight inches thick. Considerable scotch tape and some tape with flowers printed on it had been used in the construction.” This pile of debris was linked to local sightings of a flying disc, which the U.S. military later identified as a radar-tracking balloon.²⁴

The whole incident was forgotten for about three decades. Then, in February 1978, a former military officer named Jesse Marcel was quoted in the *National Enquirer* as saying that the debris constituted the remains of a wrecked spacecraft. In 1981 another tabloid, *The Globe*, ran a sensational story about a fellow named Oliver “Pappy” Henderson, who had found the cadavers of space aliens at the crash site and flown them to an air force base in Ohio. The escapade involving Henderson, who had since died, was reported by his elderly widow, Sappho.²⁵

The real media frenzy began in 1980 with the publication of *The Roswell Incident*, co-written by one of the authors of *The Bermuda Triangle*, a blend of myth, hearsay, and folklore which had been published in 1974 and sold five million copies. Among the many bizarre claims made in *The Roswell Incident* was that pieces of aliens had been seen among the debris. This was attested to “by more than seventy witnesses who had some knowledge of the event.”²⁶

Despite the fact that the evidence for a crashed spaceship and dead extraterrestrials was entirely anecdotal, consisting of first-hand reports from people who “wished to remain anonymous” and even more tenuous second- and third-hand reports (“So-and-So told What’s-His-Name, who told me that such-and-such really happened thirty years ago”), 65 percent of respondents to a 1997 poll said they thought that a spacecraft really had crashed in New

Mexico and that the government had engineered a cover-up. To this day, about 90,000 tourists a year trek to the dreary town of Roswell and pay good money to see the supposed crash site.²⁷

What seems undeniable is that the sky is a vast screen on which we project our expectations and anxieties. When we expect flying machines, we see them. When we worry about invasion, we see foreign missiles. When—after a rash of publicity—we expect saucers, we see saucers.

By the mid-1950s, there were several popular books on the market saying that the flying saucers so many people were spotting might actually be extraterrestrial in nature. *The Flying Saucers Are Real*, by retired Major Donald Keyhoe, which sold half a million copies, argued that the U.S. government was covering up the truth about the reality of extraterrestrials.²⁸ Frank Scully's *Behind the Flying Saucers*, which sold 60,000 copies, claimed that extraterrestrials from crashed saucers were being kept in a secret military installation.²⁹ In *The Riddle of the Flying Saucers: Is Another World Watching?* science writer Gerald Heard also advocated an ET hypothesis.³⁰ Moreover, there were countless media reports of UFO sightings, big Hollywood movies about aliens, and a growing number of popular-magazine articles about aliens—all of which contributed to and reflected a growing social interest in the topic.

When did the American imagination begin putting all of this together into a single plot? When did people first “recover memories” of small gray beings with large black eyes and big heads who were abducting humans for medical and sexual experimentation?

It all seems to have started in 1964, during a series of hypnosis sessions involving a married couple, Betty and Barney Hill, and a Boston psychiatrist named Benjamin Simon. The alien-abduction experiences that the Hills recalled under hypnosis provided a template for all the abductions that followed. Theirs was the first

abduction story of the modern genre. And they remembered it twelve days after ABC aired the “Bellerophon Shield” episode of *The Outer Limits*.³¹

Betty and Barney Hill were a middle-aged, interracial couple from New Hampshire. She was a social worker, and he had a job with the postal service. One night in 1961 they had been driving in the White Mountains. Betty had spotted a bright “star-like” object that seemed to be pursuing them. Nervous, they had turned off the main highway onto narrow mountain roads, arriving home two hours later than expected.

Soon after this experience, Betty had nightmares in which she and Barney were abducted and taken aboard the UFO. This is not so odd if you consider one important fact: Betty was a long-time believer. Or as Barney put it, “Yes, Betty did believe in flying saucers.” He himself was not so certain. “I believe Betty is trying to make me think I saw a flying saucer.” In addition, Betty was a fan of science fiction movies featuring aliens (she had seen *Invaders from Mars*) and had already read Donald Keyhoe’s *Flying Saucers Are Real*. She wrote to Keyhoe at the research organization listed in the book, and soon received an answer: he suggested that her nightmares might have a basis in reality and that she ought to read Coral Lorazen’s *Great Flying Saucer Hoax*, which included accounts of saucer-shaped UFOs that trailed cars along lonely country roads.

Within a year, Betty had started giving local talks about her UFO sighting and her bad dreams. Sometime around 1963 she and Barney were advised to undergo hypnosis, in order to determine whether, as she firmly suspected, they had been abducted. Keep in mind that a number of popular movies (such as *Killers from Space*; 1954) had already used the motif of reversible amnesia.

In 1964, in the course of four months of hypnotherapy, the

couple separately filled in details of what had happened during what they now believed were their “missing” two hours. It took a number of sessions for a coherent narrative to emerge. They had watched the UFO land on the highway, and had been taken, partly immobilized, inside the spacecraft. Gray humanoid creatures with big eyes had subjected them to unconventional medical examinations, which had included the insertion of a needle into Betty’s navel. Remember that Betty had seen *Invaders from Mars*, in which the aliens were gray humanoids with big eyes, a female abductee was poked and prodded by the creatures, and needles were inserted into her neck and navel.

Betty and Barney’s experiences were shared with the world in *The Interrupted Journey*, by John Fuller, a bestseller published in 1966. But their story as presented in the book bears only a faint resemblance to the version recorded in the transcripts of their hypnosis sessions—also included in Fuller’s book.

Here is how the event was initially described by Barney under hypnosis:³²

“I was sitting out there on that mountain road at night. I could actually see what I described as the Cheshire cat. This glowing, one-beam eye staring at me—or rather, not staring at me but right through me. . . . One alien person looks friendly to me; he’s friendly-looking. And he’s looking at me over his right shoulder, and he’s smiling.”

“What does the face make you think of?” asks the hypnotist.

“It was round. I think of . . . a red-headed Irishman,” says Barney.

But later on in the session, the alien has an “evil face. . . . He looks like a German Nazi. He has a black scarf around his neck, dangling over his right shoulder . . . Oh! I feel like a rabbit!”

“Why do you feel like a rabbit?” Dr. Simon asks.

"I was hunting for rabbits in Virginia. And this cute little bunny went into a bush that was not very big. . . . And the poor little bunny thought he was safe. . . . He was just hiding behind a little stalk which meant security to him, when I pounced on him, and captured the poor little bunny who thought he was safe. Funny I thought of that. Right there out in the field. I felt like a rabbit."

In another regression session Barney tried to describe the alien "leader," who was wearing a "black shiny jacket and scarf. I've never seen eyes slanted like that. His eyes were slanted. Oh, his eyes were slanted—but not like a Chinese! They began round and went back like that, and like that, and they went up like this. . . . Please, can I draw it?"

"Yes, you can draw whatever you want," said the therapist—and the picture that Barney drew made alien-icon history. It was featured in the book, was used by special-effects artists for the 1975 TV movie about the couple's experience, and then was recycled by Steven Spielberg in his 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

The problem is that, contrary to what Barney said, he *had* seen eyes like that. "The Bellerro Shield," which had aired twelve days before his regression session, featured the same eyes.

Now here's Barney description of the aliens in John Fuller's book: "The men had rather odd-shaped heads, with a large cranium, diminishing in size as it got toward the chin. And the eyes continued around to the sides of their heads, so that it appeared that they could see several degrees beyond the lateral extent of our vision. . . . I didn't notice any hair—or headgear, for that matter. Also, I didn't notice any proboscis. There just seemed to be two slits that represented the nostrils. So it looked as if the mouth had almost no opening and as if they had no nose."

Here's a passage typical of what Betty Hill remembered under

hypnosis: “Oh—and then they take off my shoes and they look at my feet. And they look at my hands—they examine my hands all over. . . . And he takes something and he goes underneath my fingernail and then he—I don’t know, probably manicure scissors or something—and he cuts off a piece of my fingernail. . . . Then the doctor, the examiner, says he wants to do some tests; he wants to check my nervous system. And I am thinking, ‘I don’t know how our nervous systems are, but I hope we never have nerve enough to go around kidnapping people right off the highways, as he has done!’ And, oh, he tells me to take off my dress, and then, before I even have a chance hardly to stand up to do it, the examiner . . .”

Betty is interrupted by the hypnotist: “Does your dress have a zipper down the back?” Yes, it does.

“He unzips it, and so I slip my dress off. . . . I lie down on the table, on my back, and he brings over this—oh, how can I describe it? They’re like needles, a whole cluster of needles, and each needle has a wire going from it, to, uh . . . I think it’s something like a TV screen. You know—when the picture isn’t on and you get all kinds of lines. . . . He rolls me over on my back, and the examiner has a long needle in his hand. . . . It’s bigger than any needle that I’ve ever seen. . . . He says he just wants to put it in my navel; it’s just a simple test. . . . No, it will hurt! Don’t do it, don’t do it! . . . It’s hurting, it’s hurting! Take it out, take it out! . . . I don’t know why they put that needle into my navel. Because I told them they shouldn’t do it. . . . Why did they put that needle in my navel? And he said it was a pregnancy test.”

The abduction of Betty and Barney Hill became a media sensation. It was described in Fuller’s popular book and in a made-for-TV movie starring Estelle Parsons and James Earl Jones. The

movie was meretriciously presented as a sort of documentary, and its impact was immediate. “A rash of abduction reports followed in the wake of the NBC movie. A UFO organization compiled statistics showing that from 1947 to 1976 there were only fifty abduction reports, total [an average of two per year]. But in the two years following the broadcast, there were over a hundred cases—a 2,500 percent increase.” The conclusion of the skeptic who wrote this passage? “After viewing this movie, any person with a little imagination could now become an instant celebrity.”³³

One of those instant celebrities was Travis Walton. He was abducted two weeks after the movie aired, and he described the experience on national TV. It was quite similar to the Betty and Barney’s abduction, except for a few details. His “grays” were wearing orange overalls, and he also saw a beautiful alien couple with blond hair. He turned his account into a popular book called *The Walton Experience* (1978), which was made into a movie (1993), and then he spun it into another book called *Fire in the Sky* (1996).³⁴

The small gray alien with big wraparound eyes was quickly recycled for *The Andreasson Affair* (1979), a book about the abduction experience of a Massachusetts woman named Betty Andreasson. The author, Raymond Fowler, a hypnotist, freely acknowledged that what Andreasson recalled under hypnosis was remarkably similar to the “UFO abduction case involving Betty and Barney Hill that was described in John Fuller’s *The Interrupted Journey*.”³⁵

An excerpt from the Andreasson transcripts:

“And now they are going over there and talking. Oh boy, I’ll be glad when this is all over with! Now they are looking at me. They are coming over again. And they are saying they have to measure me for procreation. . . . They are getting ready to do something.

... They are down by my feet somewhere. They are doing something there. They are not touching me, but they are doing something. It must be something down there they are preparing. Now they are pulling something. That needle again, with a tube, like, on the end. They are pulling—it looks like he's going to put it in me. Oh! And he's opening up my shirt, and—he's going to put that thing in my navel. Ohhhh, I don't like this! ... I can feel them moving that thing around in my stomach, in my body. ... Oh! He's pushing that around again, feeling things. I don't like this! Feeling like he is going right through my stuff inside. ... Ohhhhh boy! He's stopped again. ... Ahhh ... He's starting to take the thing out. Ohhhhh. Ahhhhh. Thank you."

At another point, "They took those long silver needles—they were bendable—and they stuck one up my nose and into my head. ... They said they were awakening something. When they stuck that needle up my nose, I heard something break, like a membrane or a veil or something, like a piece of tissue or something they broke through."³⁶

This passage sounded awfully familiar to me. And it'll sound familiar to you, too: it's remarkably similar to a case in John Mack's *Abduction*—a transcript that I quoted from in Chapter 3: "He was looking at my nostril, and he put it in as far as it could go. I didn't like it, because I couldn't breathe very well. And then he hit something in the back and he just kind of pushed it, and he pushed it through whatever it was. [*Now sobbing*] I could feel something breaking in my head. ... I'm wondering what they broke."³⁷ Obviously, John Mack's subject had read or heard about Andreasson's experience.

Probably the most famous abductee was Whitley Strieber. His 1987 book *Communion* became a *New York Times* bestseller—the first book on alien abduction to achieve such a distinction. The

graphic content (a female alien wants to have sex with him, but he has difficulty getting an erection) may have had something to do with its success. Strieber describes one of his visitors as looking “not quite as naked as the creature that emerged in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.” He not only admits to having seen many films about aliens prior to his own encounter; he also says he’s “read thousands of pages of material about the whole ET and UFO phenomenon.”

When his hypnotist asks him to describe the female alien, “to look very hard at it,” Strieber replies: “She’s staring right back at me. She looks like a big bug. Really big, black eyes. . . . She’s thin. . . . The eyes are slanted more than an Oriental’s eyes.”

The hypnotist then asks, “Have you ever seen an image like this?” Whitley says no, despite having mentioned “reading something in *Look* magazine about the Betty and Barney Hill abduction.”

The hypnotist presses him. “Are you *sure* you haven’t seen an image like this? What about the book you have?”

And Strieber replies tellingly, “In our culture there’s just so much media around. It’s possible, but I don’t think so, because this is so damn real. . . . It seems impossible that it could be an image I picked up from somewhere.”³⁸

But Strieber was on to something. Abduction reports were being published at an ever-increasing rate. They seemed to feed on one another. Each new account absorbed details from previous accounts, leading to the “consistency” that so intrigues believers. Betty and Barney Hill got their ideas from books, movies, and TV. From then on, people got their ideas from books, movies, TV, and Betty and Barney Hill—and whoever the next media-star abductee happened to be.

Today, “there’s just so much media around” that we all know

what aliens look like and what they do. If you don't believe me, draw one. See? Now imagine being abducted. I can pretty much guarantee that under hypnosis you'd come out with the standard story—though afterward, of course, you probably wouldn't believe it was true. It would be embellished with your own details (what the aliens wore, what the purpose of the abduction was, why you were chosen, what specifically was done to you and how), but the *general plot* would be the same as in all the other accounts: "I was abducted by grayish aliens with big heads and big eyes who did things to my body."

Research substantiating this was done a long time ago. In 1978 scientists recruited volunteers claiming to have little interest in extraterrestrial life, and hypnotized them. They then told the subjects to imagine an alien encounter in which they saw a UFO, were taken aboard the craft, were given a physical exam, and so on. The data indicated that the hypnotically suggested reports were not much different from "real" reports by abductees.³⁹ It seems that after a surprisingly short time—only two years after Betty and Barney's story was presented on TV, only one year after Travis Walton's book was published, and only one year after Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was released—elements of the alien-contact narrative were circulating widely among the general public.

In 1994, Steven Jay Lynn extended Lawson's findings. He didn't even have to hypnotize people to extract a UFO encounter—he just had them simulate hypnotized people. But in response to hypnotists' suggestions, his role-playing subjects still reported UFO encounters involving gray aliens, medical experiments, and UFOs. Obviously, elements of the UFO script are part of our popular culture.

I tried something similar with my graduate students in Nicara-

gua: I asked them to draw pictures of space aliens. Nicaragua is a long way from Hollywood and from Betty and Barney Hill's New Hampshire. It's what the U.S. government calls a "hyper-indebted poor country." Nevertheless, my students drew macrocephalic gray waifs with wraparound eyes, and told me what these aliens did: they abducted you in order to experiment on you and "make babies with you."

Of course, those young Nicaraguans were well educated and generally attuned to Western cultural references. If I've focused on the United States in this book, it's because the abduction scenario hardly exists cross-culturally.⁴⁰ People in Brazil or Kenya or Vietnam may see weird things in the sky, but rarely anything that comes down and kidnaps them for medical or sexual purposes. John Mack himself noted that UFO abduction reports are more frequent in "Western countries or countries dominated by Western cultural values."⁴¹ This could change, though, as movies and TV shows like *The X-Files* get exported more widely. In May 2005 an Agence France-Presse correspondent based in Beijing noted that Chinese people have been reporting more alien encounters, perhaps because they have "lost their spiritual bearings" as Marxism has given way to materialism.⁴²

Certainly in the United States the image of the typical extraterrestrial is fixed in people's minds almost from the cradle. At the tender age of two and a half, my daughter knew what aliens looked like. I once watched a TV show with her—a kids' program about a little boy who would eat carrots, and then the things he imagined would become real (or something like that). In the episode we saw, he imagined going into space and meeting aliens. They looked just like aliens do, though more brightly colored. Later, I turned on *South Park*—an episode in which one of the characters was abducted. When my little girl saw the extraterrestrials,

she pointed excitedly: “Look, Mommy, aliens!” A toddler who couldn’t reliably tell the difference between a cat and a dog could identify an alien instantly. Clearly, she’d already watched too much TV.

After two years of intense alienography, this is what I conclude. Aliens are entirely and extremely human, the imaginative creations of people with ordinary emotional needs and desires. We don’t want to be alone. We feel helpless and vulnerable much of the time. We want to believe there’s something bigger and better than us out there. And we want to believe that whatever it is cares about us, or at least is paying attention to us. That they want us (sexually or otherwise). That we’re special. Being abducted by aliens is a culturally shaped manifestation of a universal human need.

As Carl Jung put it in *Flying Saucers: The Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, “The unconscious has to resort to particularly drastic measures in order to make its content perceived. It does this most vividly by projection, by extrapolating its content into an object, which then mirrors what had previously lay hidden in the unconscious. . . . They [flying saucers] are based essentially on an omnipresent emotional foundation, in this case a psychological situation common to all mankind.”⁴³

Jung has a point. Yet at the same time, doesn’t the alien-abduction experience portray a rather banal universe? If somehow the incredible odds against the evolution of intelligent life have been overcome elsewhere in the cosmos, and those aliens are so advanced that they can build technologically unimaginable spacecraft and travel light years with ease, why would they come visit *us*? And why, having done so, would they be interested in manually harvesting eggs and sperm with shiny metal devices on oper-

ating tables? Today is but a fleeting moment in the history of our species, and our history as a species is but a fleeting moment in the context of the universe. Wouldn't you think these mentally and technologically superior beings would have something more interesting to do (something quite possibly beyond the imagining of the human brain) than to hang around North America kidnapping its more creative and intuitive inhabitants, in order to do the same experiments over and over again? Why are these genius aliens so dim? After fifty years of abducting us, why are they are still taking the same bits and pieces? Don't they have freezers?

Not a single alien I have ever heard described is as fascinating and surprising as the average human child. The common features of the alien-abduction stories—the elements of the basic plot—are not evidence of validity. They are evidence that these stories have been contrived out of shared cultural knowledge and shared psychological fears, needs, hopes, and limitations.

Truly, the only interesting thing about alien-abduction narratives is the fact that they vary so idiosyncratically from person to person. I love to hear all the vivid, inventive details—the differences in clothing (track suits, orange overalls, flowing white robes, nothing except for cherry-red pubic hair), the various styles of conversation (rude, kind, regal, telepathic, none at all), the ways they take off your clothes (“They ripped them off like a bunch of horny teenagers. . . . By the time I was on the ship, I was wearing only my cowboy boots and my husband’s white T-shirt”), the particular method they use to extract your semen or your eggs (magnetic devices, suction tubes, long shiny pincers, ice-cream-cone-shaped tools where the ice-cream part was rotating really fast). As Carl Jung is reputed to have said, “When facts are few, speculations are most likely to represent individual psychology.”