

CARBON-BASED

I never thought, until very late, that there was anything odd about Robbie's little imaginary friend. I mean, everyone has them at some point. I myself had one, a boy my age, who lived behind the glass greenhouse and liked to eat tomatoes. He also liked to throw rocks at the glasshouse, and when my father came to see what happened, my chicken of a friend scrambled and left me to take the heat.

So when Robbie was almost six, and asked me to add an extra plate for his friend, I thought nothing of it. "Would you like him to sit next to you?" I asked, and set another rabbit plate beside Robbie's when he nodded. He'd eat his oatmeal in solemn silence, every once in a while glancing over to his little friend's empty plate. I guess he imagined oatmeal on it too.

"What's his name?" I asked to make conversation. Robbie answered with a strange set of phonemes – I thought it started with a K, and it had some r's and many vowels. The pitch also varied a lot, and he sounded shrill when he said it.

"That's a funny name," I said, and looked out of the window, past the farm, and into the endless wheat fields beyond. Robbie had always been odd in a way, precocious, born old as my father said when Robbie finally started to speak. It was late for him to do that, his cousins were younger than he was, and yakked away already at two.

So, both me and Rick felt elated when he began to talk at four and a half. He bypassed the one word stage and went for carefully crafted sentences right off the bat. It amused my father no end. "We'll see someone get away from this farm yet," he said just before he died.

I knew Rick was out on the fields, beyond my sight, but I missed him nevertheless. Running the household alone was a chore, even if the older boys were already independent and sometimes even able to help. Having Robbie's imaginary friend on my back all the time was no help either. He'd ask a million things before lunch, and another three million by nightfall.

Robbie never slept more than four hours. That, added to the loss of sleep caused by running a farm, drove our marriage to the edge. When he turned seven, I didn't fret over it anymore, since he could read. But when he was five and began his endless quest for information, I could have strangled him, so help me God.

At first it was just regular kid stuff. "Mommy, how can a cow make milk out of hay?", or "Mommy, why does beef turn brown in the oven?", or "Daddy, what makes a car run?" We answered as best we could, at a rate of a question a minute. I remember being very tired, especially when he began to ask the astronomical questions. "Mommy? Is the Moon like the Sun, but only in the night? Then why don't it make me sweat?" or "Daddy, how much time does it take to drive to Venus with our car?"

When I asked him instead, where did he get the questions, he just said, Kyxrryy made him ask. We'd taken to calling his little friend Kyxrryy. It wasn't really like his name, but we

couldn't figure out what it was. And when Robbie learned to write, I asked him to write Kyxrryy's name; he picked up the pen and made thirteen strange marks on the page. Not one of them was a letter of the alphabet.

"What's that? Why don't you use normal letters," his father asked.

"These are normal letters there in Kyxrryy's language," Robbie said and looked at me. I could see he was not lying. "He has taught me how to write his name."

Rick and I exchanged one of those 'here we go again' glances. Rick took his jacket and cap and left. When the tractor started and zoomed down the field road, I sat down with Robbie. "Honey, I'm a bit worried about you and Kyxrryy. It seems you think he is real, like Dad and me and you, and little cousin Dupree. But you should understand that there's a difference between him and the rest of us. We're real, and he's not."

Robbie pulled himself away from me. "Kyxrryy is real, just like you and me. You just can't see him." He began to sulk.

"Robbie, there'll be the day when Kyxrryy doesn't come to visit anymore. I know, I had a friend just like him when I was a little girl. His name was Adam. He lived behind the greenhouse, and I played with him every day. Then one day I waited for him all day, and he didn't show up. Nor the next day, or the next. That was when I knew that I was just a bit bigger again, on my way to becoming a big girl."

Robbie stood up. "That's not how it goes with Kyxrryy. First of all, he only comes in at night, and he doesn't play with me. We talk about things, and have conversations. So there." He went to the window and peered into the descending darkness.

I was at loss what to do so I thought, let time run its course. Kyxrryy will eventually evaporate, as all of the imaginary friends do.

With time it became evident that Kyxrryy was not going away. Instead, he made Robbie ask all the more questions, and all the harder too. One morning, while I was making breakfast for him, he had another go. "Mommy," he said, "what is a solar system? Are there other solar systems in the world?" Now, I flunked out of high school, and never was any good in science, but this was one question I did have an answer for.

"Yes, dear, there are many millions of solar systems. Basically it means a sun and its planets, and out there in the universe, there's many more solar systems, but the only one that has life is this little system we live in." I smiled at him.

"That's not true. Kyxrryy is from a different system so there must be at least one more star that has planets that have life."

So this little imaginary friend wasn't from behind the glass greenhouse. It had to be from a different planet even. I sat down with him and put my arm around him. "Robbie, sweetheart, you need to start letting go of Kyxrryy. You're growing up fast, and you just can't keep imagining things."

Robbie threw down his napkin and pushed his half-eaten breakfast plate to the center of the table. "I'm not imagining. He's real, just like you and me."

"Then why can't I see him?" I asked.

"Because you're asleep at four in the morning when he comes to see me. Besides, he doesn't want to show himself to you because he's mad at you. He's heard what you think of him." I didn't want to make Robbie mad at me before going to school, so I tried anew.

"Okay, okay – I believe you. But we'd like to see Kyxrryy, so next time he comes around, wake me up, okay?" I smiled and he smiled.

"Okay. Now I've got to go to school. See you!" And he was off with his backpack and favorite cap and the red jacket that was too small for him already, but he would not consider throwing away.

Three nights later I woke up in the dead of the night. Robbie was standing next to me and gave me a royal fright, just standing there and looking at me and not saying a word. "Robbie? What is it? Jesus, what time is it?" I shouted, waking Rick up too. He was belligerent from the start.

"What's this noise? Can't we just sleep, for God's sake! Robbie, get to your bed already and let us sleep," he shouted, then buried his head under the pillow.

"But Mom, you said I should get you when Kyxrryy comes around next time," Robbie said. I got out of bed, put on my slippers and grabbed my robe. Robbie led me to his room. The window was slightly open, and Robbie's toys had been cleared from the center of the room. There was an odd scent in the room; I could not really make out what it was, it was so faint. Short circuits smell like that.

"Why have you pushed all your stuff to the edges of the room?" I asked him. Robbie climbed on his bed and put his arms on the footboard.

"This is how we talk. I sit here and Kyxrryy tells me stuff, and he needs lots of space so he doesn't knock things over when he moves around. Tonight he was telling me of galaxies, and he needed extra space, and then I thought I'd go and get you so you'd learn something too."

"So where is he?"

"He must have left while I was getting you. Next time, I'll make sure he stays until you get here."

"Thanks," I said and hauled my sorry self to my bed upon which I collapsed and slept immediately.

In the morning Rick told me to go see a doctor with Robbie. "It's not normal anymore. This Kicks character – " "Kyxrryy," I put in – "is not normal. I mean, these little friends are supposed to do practical jokes and little mischief here and there and take the blame for breaking things, but talking about galaxies in the middle of the freaking night? Sheesh!" He went to the door to go and bale the hay.

I had to agree. "I'll see Doctor Weiss about this. As soon as possible. See you for lunch," I said, and he was gone. I called Dr Weiss's office right away and got an appointment for the coming Friday, after school.

Dr Weiss, our family doctor since the stone age, was more than happy to discuss Kyxrry with Robbie. While they were in his office, I had to choose between an ancient *Readers' Digest* and a surprisingly recent *Sky and Telescope*, from July 1979. I went for the one I could understand, and then paced around the waiting room and bit my fingernails to the bone. Dr Weiss spoke with him for an hour and a quarter, then came out to greet me. "Robbie, have a seat here while I have a word with Mommy, okay? Good seeing you," he said, and guided me into his office.

I did not know what to expect. "Rosemary, I think you're just worrying too much. Robbie is clearly a very intelligent boy, and if he gets a good science teacher, he will go places. He knows an awful lot of many things, and astronomy especially. I mean, I'm an amateur astronomer myself, and could not explain the difference between a true binary star and an optical binary star better than Robbie. You must have bought him tons of astronomy books, but consider that an investment in the future," he said and smiled the perennial family doctor smile.

I did not tell him we had not bought a single book. The only thing was, we let him watch *Nova* on PBS. That was also the only thing on TV that ever interested him.

Back in the waiting room, Dr Weiss stopped by the table. "If I were you, I'd get him one of these telescope kits," Dr Weiss said and picked up the magazine. He scanned through it and found the ad he wanted at the back. "I believe Robbie would benefit from having a telescope like this, and it also might help pull him away from this Kicks character that's following him around. Mind you – I think a little father and son activity would work in that sense too." Dr Weiss gave the magazine to me, and took his leave. Robbie and I drove home in silence.

That night, as we were going to bed, I took it up with Rick. "199 dollars? We can't afford that," he said. "The combine works now, but when we go into harvest for real, I'm sure the main drive belts will snap and they alone cost that much. Besides, the ball bearings in the thresher sounded mighty bad already last year, and they may freeze any day now, and that's a thousand bucks."

I put up the spaniel smile I know he can't resist. "Honey, we need to think of Robbie. Dr Weiss said it'd get his attention of Kyxrry and help him focus on the real world. I'm sure he would benefit from having your attention too. You know, he needs his father. You don't spend any time with him, but if you had this project, you'd see just what a wonderful kid he is."

Rick thought it over for a while, then turned away from me and turned his light off. "Okay... but if the belts snap, you go to your parents for money, not me to mine."

I smiled in the dark.

The telescope kit arrived two weeks later. I did not tell Robbie I had ordered it, because I wanted to see his face when it was delivered. When Rick pulled the box off the flatbed, and

Robbie saw the StarTracker Telescope Company logo on it, he smiled, for the first time in months.

Rick and Robbie put the telescope together in a couple of hectic evenings. When darkness fell and they hauled it out to the far corner of the yard, I looked at them with a glimmer of hope; maybe this'd all work out and Robbie would become a normal kid with a burning interest in science. I watched them carry the telescope out to the far corner of the yard, and align it to the North Star. For two hours they pointed at the sky and swiveled the telescope and talked and peeked in the eyepiece. I felt happy.

But just a couple of days later, Rick came in from the dark night and said, "That kid drives me nuts. All he wants to look at is this one star, Sirius. And it's just a goddamn star, I mean, if you look in the eyepiece, it's a little pinprick of light, and he keeps claiming it is a binary star. Well, I don't see no second star there, just a bright blue one. Sheesh... 200 bucks down the drain." And he was off to bed. I looked out of the window and there Robbie was, standing on a box to reach the eyepiece, peering out into the universe. My heart sank.

It must have been a couple weeks after that when Robbie came to me. "Mommy? What is an admimi... amidni... administerative error?"

I put the casserole in the oven and looked at him. "Administrative error? What do you mean, dear?"

"Kyxrryy says I am administrative error."

I stood up and went to him and hugged him. "No, dear, Kyxrryy has it all wrong now. You're not an error. You're our son and we deliberately wanted to have you, and administration has nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?"

I felt a chill all over me, when I looked in his eyes. There was a mixture of emotions there; part of him wanted so hard to believe me, and part of him was sure Kyxrryy had it right, and he was not supposed to be here at all.

And then he put the weirdest question of all to me. "What does carbon-based mean, Mommy? Kyxrryy says I am carbon-based, but I should be silicon-based like he is."

I had absolutely no answer to this question. I had never heard anything being carbon-based or silicon-based. "Honey, I need to find it out for you. I'll call Dr Weiss and see if he has an answer."

When Robbie went to school, I called Dr Weiss, and broke down completely on the phone. I wailed and wept and let it all hang out about Robbie's weird questions and his astronomy quest, and his studies of the star Sirius. Dr Weiss listened patiently and then told me to come see him again with Robbie.

This session lasted only half an hour. When they came out of his office, I could see the worry in his face. When Robbie was out of hearing range, he said, "I'm not going to beat about the bush. I think Robbie is one very smart young man, but he's also a troubled one. I believe

he's in need of a psychiatric assessment. I've never seen anyone get schizophrenia at that early age, but I know it has happened, and I want you to go to the University Hospital for a thorough neurological check-up. I can't do more than this here, but they'll know what to do. I'll refer you to a friend of mine."

I had to tell him we could not afford anything like that. He said he was going to take us to Denver himself, and that we need not worry about the costs. Two days later we were in his car, driven to the University Hospital Juvenile Psychiatric Ward, where Dr Weiss introduced us to his old friend, one Dr Mason. Together they entered the ward with Robbie, and I was left in the lobby. With a heavy heart I went and got a room at a motel close to the hospital, and waited.

Dr Weiss and Dr Mason would not tell me anything until four days later. Dr Mason bought me coffee and we sat down in the lobby. "Robbie is unlike anything I've seen," he started. "He's clearly very intelligent, and his concentration and attention span are superior to any other child I've seen. His knowledge of astronomy is beyond my understanding. But this imaginary character of his is also something I've never seen; I asked him to draw a picture of this creature, and this is what he gave me."

Dr Mason pulled out a picture and showed it to me. It was definitely not a person, and it looked like no animal I knew. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was a glass turtle with porcupine spikes along a ridge on his back. "What's this?" I asked.

"We have no idea. But he insists it is some other life form, not from Earth. Which is why we do think he's in need of extensive therapy."

When we were driving back home in the night, Robbie sleeping snug under my arm, I wondered about the future. We could not pay for his therapy, and Dr Weiss was not capable of providing it in any case. And if Kyxrryy stayed on, and did not leave Robbie, what would happen then? I fell asleep myself but had no rest at all, and then Dr Weiss woke us up at our farm.

Rick signed off completely when he heard of Robbie's need of therapy. He barely talked to me anymore, and Robbie, sensing his irritation, stayed out of sight; he went to school and did well, but spent all his time in his room, or if it was clear, at the telescope. He'd taken to packing sandwiches with him so he could stay there longer, but he always came in by midnight.

That Monday evening he packed more than usual. Besides six sandwiches, he took three apples and a bar of chocolate. "Staying out long tonight?" I asked.

He looked at me and said, "Yes, I plan to observe Sirius with Kyxrryy. He tells me there's something new to see tonight, something that will move in the sky."

I said, "That's nice, but be home before midnight," even if I wanted to scream out, 'Kick that character out of our lives!'

Robbie grabbed his lunch box and the apple bag, put the chocolate bar in his jacket pocket, and put on his cap. "Goodbye, Mommy. Say hi to Daddy for me." Then he went out and I could see his red flashlight shining by the telescope. I sat on the sofa, and checked up on him every now and again, but then I fell asleep in front of the TV.

The morning came, cloudy and dull and windy and just like any morning in my dreary life. I woke up, surprised about having slept all night on the sofa. Then I made breakfast and called for Robbie, but he didn't answer me. I went to his room. His bed had not been slept in. I ran downstairs, grabbed the car keys, and drove like mad to Rick who was fixing a fence on the north side. "Robbie's gone!" I yelled from the moving car, then stopped in a cloud of red dust. "Robbie's not home! He hasn't come in last night. I have no idea where he is!"

Rick got in the tractor. "You go home and call the sheriff! I'll go and get the guys for a search party. Meet you home!" And he sped off. I drove home as fast as I could, then called the sheriff.

He was at our farm in half an hour and left the blue lights of the patrol car blinking in the bleak morning. He listened to my story, nodding, taking notes, asking questions, and calming me down. "I've already sent for Stan Peters, he has the best bloodhound in the whole state. We will find him. Do you have any idea where he might have gone?" he asked.

"No... he's always home, never goes far. He has been using his telescope lately but he always came in by midnight." The situation was grinding me to a pulp inside my head.

The sheriff's radio crackled to life. "Boss, we got another situation for you," the inharmonious voice said in inside brackets of static. "We just got a call from old McMahon. Seems someone tried to torch his field last night."

The sheriff looked annoyed. "You take care of him. I got a runaway kid to find now. Out."

"No can do, Boss. You know McMahon, he won't talk to us, he wants you on the site pronto. It's kinda weird he tells us, there's like black charred areas on the ground. Big'uns, like forty-fifty feet in diameter. You gotta come and see, over," and the voice turned into that vicious hiss again.

"Where is it? Over," the sheriff said, making faces at me.

"Ah, it's... sort of in the southwest corner of his farm."

The sheriff turned to me. "Isn't your farm to the south of old McMahon's?"

I said yes. At the same time another police car came in and out of it came a man and a droopy-eared bloodhound. The dog took in the smellscape by putting his nose as high as he could, then sneezed.

The sheriff looked pleased. "Tell you what Gary, Stan's here with the dog. Lemme start the search here an I'll get back to you in ten okay? Over!"

"Ten-four."

We went to the yard, and I handed Robbie's favorite sweater to the sheriff. He shoved it in the dog's face, and the dog let out a yelp. Then he started turning like a compass needle, and stuck his nose in the ground. A few seconds later, another yelp. Then he started pulling like mad towards the northeast.

“Atta boy!” said Stan. “He’s got the scent! Don’t you worry, Rosemary, we’ll have him in a few minutes. Go, Mohawk! Go!” he egged the dog on. With his nose on the ground, and the antenna-like tail pointing up, the dog made a beeline towards the trees in the northeast. We ran after him, jumping over ditches and fallen trees and brambles.

“Oh Mary, Mother of God, please don’t let it be what I fear it is,” I thought as I ran.

Our farm is on a slight rise from McMahan’s, so after we’d covered the half mile or so from our house, we came to the edge of the wood and saw out to the lower plain of McMahan’s. The dog started down the hill, but turned back and sat down behind Stan, whimpering.

Out there, just a hundred yards away from us, we saw three circles on the ground, burned black. They were like at the ends of a triangle; the circles had smaller circles in them, concentric, and alternately light and dark. The three big circles were connected by straight lines, maybe a foot wide, also burned to cinders.

There, in the center of the entire triangle-circle system, were the molten remains of Robbie’s lunch box.