

New Leg

What mattered most of all was the possibility. He didn't care if he never got there, if the end result forever eluded him. But knowing there was a chance, a slight hope, a long shot coming in at a hundred to one. That was enough.

He liked to tell his friends he was going for a drive. Then when the car was out of sight, totally clear of the neighborhood, he would pull into a crowded parking lot and travel by foot. It took hours to get there that way. He never hitchhiked or asked for a ride or in any way made it evident he was missing a leg. He believed it would grow back from pretending it was there.

Jeremiah's destination was a UFO landing pad outside of town. He had heard rumors somewhere about the effects of radioactivity, how it produced birth defects, in particular extra limbs. He reasoned that extra limbs and restored limbs were not really that different, that maybe if they were, the aliens could work something out for him anyway. In his imagination he saw a boy born with a third leg and a secret ceremony inside a ship by which the leg became his.

Until then he used a prosthetic. He never hobbled on it or tripped, but took long loping strides that turned his body to a compass, swinging a wide arc outside a firm central point. He practically glided like a swan. He was the one patient in rehab who could make the therapists physically envious of him. But this effect owed as much to his roguish good looks and sculpted physique as much as his graceful recovery.

The injury occurred on a job site, hauling cinder blocks. The strap for the crane snapped and a pallet of them flattened his knee and ankle. The damage was too severe to save the outlying tissue. Jeremiah woke up in a hospital bed and immediately rolled to the side, as if no time had passed, the bricks were still in the air. He fell out of the bed and crashed heavily to the floor.

The sight of his missing leg stunned Jeremiah into silence. He became wistful without saying a word, looking down at the empty space below his thigh, the fine black lines subdividing the white linoleum beneath him where his leg ought to be. He counted three white squares outlined in black.

"I'm missing three squares," he eventually said as two male nurses lifted him under the arms and put him back in bed. They never knew what he was talking about, assumed he was delirious from blood loss and drugs.

No one thought that again. Jeremiah refused all further painkillers and performed two vigorous daily workouts in his room, using chairs and his bed frame as equipment until his face burned bright red from his exertions. By the end of each session his hands were like fire, visibly throbbing. He could melt ice cubes in them so quickly that the ward began calling him Torch.

But his secret pastime, and perhaps the true or at least secondary purpose of this regimen, was to sneak his hot hands into his hospital gown and massage the empty space where his leg used to be. Or in his mind, still was. He could feel its every contour and crevice. How it responded to each massage. How the ankle and knee were slowly repairing themselves, the bones knitting back together. It was even a pleasure to splay his toes with his fingers and grip

his foot from above, rolling it around, the only motion at which he occasionally moaned and risked blowing his cover.

Had Jeremiah been caught or observed at these moments, it is possible he might have accepted his leg wasn't there. Who can say would that outcome have helped him or hurt him, have been better or worse? The human imagination is a powerful ally, give or take its illusions. Jeremiah imagined the presence of the leg. And when the prosthetic replaced it, he imagined the leg without a body, leaping forward in his thoughts on a mysterious journey with an unknown destination. Either way, the leg was never gone in his opinion, never a part of the past.

He searched everywhere for it before concluding the aliens had it. He resisted the conclusion as long as he could. He disliked the outlandishness of it, was never fond of occultism or unexplained mysteries. He preferred mundane facts, frequently thought in terms equivalent to dry wall and bricks, like any former construction worker might. He drove his thoughts in like eight-penny nails, not fanciful flowers. He didn't nurture and grow them like plants.

But the first saucer was incontestable. It hovered outside his window, silently spinning, and the area where his kneecap once was began vibrating very pleasantly. The second saucer was shaped like a cigar. There were two of them the next night. In the first instance, the lower portion of Jeremiah's femur slid into view like an extending antenna. In the second, his tibia and fibula spun and spun like a DNA helix. Yet all these bones were officially missing.

“The aliens have them,” he admitted, strapping on his prosthetic and pacing the room. There was no other conclusion. They were trying to tell him. He had never seen UFOs before. They were obviously purposeful and cautious, two adjectives Jeremiah loved about himself before the accident, but hated after. He did not draw this connection or otherwise consider it.

The day the aliens took him he was wearing the prosthetic on his head like a periscope, the upended foot as a viewfinder. He showed off to the aliens that he was able to do a handstand and then pull his arms free to stand solely on the foot, his whole body upside down. They seemed to like that performance and applauded wildly until their coarse skin audibly scraped. Then they invited Jeremiah on board and showed him the machine that would restore him. They told him the only price was that no one could know; he would have to pretend to be injured for the rest of his life, would have to keep up the farce of pursuing the limb’s restoration, for instance coming to this field every day for at least one more year. When he agreed, they took him out of Earth’s atmosphere to before the cinder blocks fell.