

The Unknown Substance

by Jane Hammons

Mama's good at finding things, but hardly ever what she's looking for. When we had to move out of town, she found us this little trailer so far off the highway we can't even hear the semis at night. We can barely see their lights.

Apaches used to live here. We dig their stuff up. Pottery shards, flint, arrowheads, and bones. Sometimes a whole bowl or grinding stone. When we find something good Mama sells it to her friend Clyde who has a little museum in his gas station at the edge of town. He says the dried-up girl locked in the glass case is a mummy. He took her from a basket at a burial ground.

When she's down in the dirt, what Mama really wants to find is a scrap of boot or a sparkly spur that belonged to Billy the Kid. I tell her that cowboys didn't leave things behind the way Indians did and how would she know if it was his anyway? He's buried over in Ft. Sumner, not that far from here. In the picture postcard she has taped to the fridge, he's slumped over looking dumb. Mama says back in history people didn't turn out the way they really were because of how cameras used to be.

I have a camera, but I have to use all my film taking pictures of nothing in the sky. Late at night when it's almost morning, Mama comes into my room smelling like her favorite perfume. It comes from a bottle that wears a little straw hat. Her breath is always fresh with a mint.

Bright lights in the sky. Get your camera, she says.

If I don't she'll crawl into my bed and tell me about how when she was a little girl a flying saucer crashed over by Corona. She lies and says she was there. We sit on the cold metal steps of our tiny trailer

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and snap pictures of the morning star all night long. By the time we're done, I have to get ready for school and ride my bike a mile to catch the bus at the gate of H-Bar-Y Ranch. Kids live there, but they go to boarding school. The bus comes just for me.

One day after school I'm riding my bike home, and I see Mama running toward me down the dirt road. She's wrapped up in something shiny and almost clear. She says she found it out by the windmill. I can see Mama's bosoms and her dark hair down there. For the first time I'm glad we live way out here.

It's the unknown substance, she says.

When we get home, she gets out her book on UFOs and reads to me about when the flying saucer crashed and the aliens left their unknown substance behind. It looked like tin foil and snapped back into shape like it was alive. She takes a corner of her substance that looks just like a silky weather balloon I saw in science class and crumples it. She sees what she wants to see. I'd call Clyde, but the phone's turned off, so I eat crackers and go to bed.

For days Mama wears nothing but the unknown substance. She stinks like Clyde's bathroom when she slips into my bed and snuggles with me.

They'll be here soon, she says, her rotten breath warm in my ear.

They're here now, I tell her. You better get ready.

She is smiling at the window like she can see what's coming. I pull the filthy substance up over her head and wrap it tight until she looks like the kind of mummy you see in the movies. She doesn't fight me; she doesn't even care that she can't breathe. When she's done, I wait another day just to make sure she isn't going anywhere. Then I get on my bike and ride.

