



OUTTAKES

OF A UFO

INVESTIGATOR

**DAVID
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Chapter 9: Rumor of War

JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1967

1.

"There's gonna be war," Leon said when he came to pick Danny up at his school.

Danny nodded. He'd learned over the past months that it was good policy to nod when Leon expressed his opinions, whether or not you agreed. Right now he didn't quite know what Leon was talking about. It was nearly midnight; Danny had dozed off during the last hour of the long bus ride back from Washington, and he was still pretty groggy. Of course there was going to be war. It had been going on in Vietnam for the past couple of years now, hadn't it? Why should anybody expect there wouldn't be more of it?

Even if the kids had wanted to forget that, and just enjoy their senior class trip to Washington, Sandra Gilbert wouldn't let them. She'd been going with a college boy all this past year, a Rutgers sophomore whom she'd met waitressing in a diner last summer. Her boyfriend was big into the peace movement, and now Sandra was too.

Her idea first had been that the school should shift the trip from Thursday and Friday of this week to Monday and Tuesday, so they'd be in Washington for Memorial Day and could go to the antiwar protests that were supposed to happen then. She circulated a petition but hardly anybody signed it, and the principal told her, forget it. Then she tried to get the kids interested in making signs and having their own demonstration outside the White House. Maybe LBJ would look out his big glass windows across his big green lawn and see them out there and know he'd better stop the bombing. But nobody wanted to do that.

Sandra and Danny had argued about the war during their free hour this morning, walking up Connecticut Avenue toward the bookstore both of them wanted to visit.

“What do you think?” Danny said to her. “We can just pull ourselves out and leave the people who trusted us, so the Viet Cong can do whatever they want to them?”

She was silent. She didn’t have an answer. Danny thought of the stories he’d read about the Viet Cong, how they impaled people on stakes and skinned them alive. He was going to tell her about that but he decided not to. They’d all had breakfast only an hour ago.

He lost his advantage, though, a minute or two later. She was starting in on how most of the South Vietnamese hate us anyway and the government is just lying about it, and he said that as far as he was concerned he’d rather take his own government’s word than anybody else’s.

She gave him one of her withering looks and said, “You’re pretty naive, aren’t you?”

He didn’t have anything to say to that. He felt like he wanted to cry. He knew he was naïve. Leon had told him that, and even his mother, whom he’d begun to imagine as having been unfailingly warm and loving and kind—even she, every now and then, had greeted some passionately expressed opinion of his with a hiss of amusement and a scornful, *Much you know!* He was glad he and Sandra were alone, with none of the other kids around to hear.

His face must have shown how bad he felt. Sandra said something like, “Well, you’re not the only one,” and let the subject of Vietnam drop, which she didn’t do very often. She was extra nice to him for the rest of the day.

2.

“I saved the New York *Times* for you,” said Leon, as they got into the car. “Yesterday’s and today’s. I don’t imagine you read the papers much while you were in Washington, did you?”

Of course Danny hadn’t read the newspapers. What did Leon think—kids go on their senior class trip and they spend the time reading the news? And if he had saved the papers, what was special about that? It took his father forever to throw

out newspapers. The little table in front of his mother's rocking chair still had the papers from last July. There were more recent piles on Leon's desk in the den.

"They kept us pretty busy," Danny said apologetically.

"Yeah, I imagine they did."

After a moment of silence, in the dark automobile, Leon asked Danny what-all they'd been doing the past two days. Danny told him whatever he could remember of the complicated itinerary. Mostly it had been sightseeing: the White House, the Washington Monument, the Capitol building. They hadn't given the kids any free time to explore the city on their own, until this morning.

Last night they all went to a movie.

"What movie?"

"*Barefoot in the Park*," said Danny.

Leon thought for a second or two. "That's with Jane Fonda, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. And Robert Redford."

"Must've been good. Wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"That Jane Fonda's *really* something," Leon said. "*Really* something."

Truth was, Danny hadn't much enjoyed "*Barefoot in the Park*." Its evocation of young love and carefree gaiety – neither of which had been part of his life so far, or seemed very likely to be – stirred in him an intense and painful yearning. On the heels of the yearning came an embittered grievance: for what he had missed, and what it was now too late for him ever to have. He tuned out of the movie about a third of the way through. He sat there, amid the laughter from the screen and the laughter from the audience, dreaming up imaginary speeches he might use to harangue the characters and show them the error of their ways.

It had been much nicer this morning, when he'd finally been able to go off by himself – or, as it turned out, with Sandra Gilbert – to explore the Washington bookstores.

He'd gone to the public phone in the hotel lobby right after breakfast, and started to dial the number of the National Aerial Phenomena Research Association, which had its headquarters in Washington and was the largest and most respected UFO group in the country. But then he stopped and pressed the hook back down. What would he say if NAPRA's director were to pick up the phone?

Hi, Mr. Tucker, this is Danny Shapiro; remember me? I wrote to you almost five years ago, when I was in the eighth grade, and I thought maybe I could be a member of your team and we could all solve the UFO mystery together. But you weren't much interested in writing to me, so I investigated UFOs all by myself for the next few years, the way I did pretty much everything all by myself, and I wrote a book on UFOs which Cloverleaf Press was going to publish, only I could never prove that the Scofield landing wasn't a hoax so the book never quite got finished –

And now my mother is dead –

He was still holding the receiver in his hand when Sandra Gilbert came into the lobby and saw him. Before he knew it they were out walking in the sunshine, trying to find a bookstore both of them had vaguely heard of, but neither knew quite where it might be.

3.

It turned out to be the biggest bookstore Danny'd ever been in. Bigger even than Eisenberg's in Tel Aviv, and here when you asked about UFO books you didn't get lectures about how UFOs were dumb and you were supposed to be *practical*. The clerk directed Danny to the occult section, where they had their books on ghosts and ESP and telling the future.

Once that would have made him mad. Once he'd have protested to the clerk that UFO books were *scientific*, and they ought to be shelved with astronomy and physics and space exploration. But now he didn't care very much. It had been months since he'd cared very much.

He mostly wanted to see who was publishing books on UFOs these days. In particular, he wanted to see if a certain *Basil Richard* had published a UFO book, and if that book should turn out by any chance to bear a strange resemblance to a manuscript the aforesaid Basil Richard had received last summer from a naïve and trusting boy named Danny Shapiro.

He was also scared. Of the grief, of the fury, of the sense of futility and desolation that would certainly come upon him. Most of all he was scared of knowing for sure what he already felt to be true: that Leon had been right about Basil and what a shit he was. That Leon had been right all along, about everything.

There was no book by Basil Richard about UFOs. But Basil did have a book of true-life ghost stories; and it was entitled, *Ghosts That Chirp, Ghosts That Mutter*.

My title, Danny thought, the bitterness rising in him as it often did these days. Which I handed him freebees, on a silver platter.

Sure enough, Basil had the epigraph from Isaiah at the beginning of his book, just as Danny had quoted it to him that night in the Stuyvesant Hotel coffee house.

They shall say to you, Seek unto the ghosts and the familiar spirits, that chirp and that mutter. Shall not a nation seek unto its gods, on behalf of the living unto the dead, for advice and for testimony?

Surely they will speak in this way, in which there is no light

Danny felt a pain so sharp he looked around for a chair, so he could sit and rest a moment. Achingly he remembered that eager and hopeful young boy, ridiculously sincere, who'd sat around a table with the Townsends and Glickman and Basil Richard, and drunk coffee with them—

He didn't deliberately turn to the "Acknowledgments" in search of his name. It was pure accident that he saw it:

—and to a very remarkable young man, Danny Shapiro, who provided the inspiration for the title—

He stood holding the book – not looking at it, just holding it – until Sandra found him and told him they'd better head back to the hotel. He thought how kind Basil had been, and how generous. How badly he'd misjudged Basil, and how unjustly he'd suspected him and how wretchedly he'd treated him, going along with Leon's lying and saying, *oh, sorry, Danny isn't home now*, when all of them knew he really was. He thought of how much he'd lost, how much he'd destroyed.

He'd been naive, all right. But not the way Leon was always saying.

4.

After lunch they took the kids to the Arlington National Cemetery. One of the teachers got up in the bus on the way there, to make sure everybody knew that what they were going to see was a very *solemn* place, a very *serious* place. All the more solemn and serious, in that young men not much older than themselves were arriving from Vietnam to be buried there nearly every day.

"Then we've got to stop the war!" Sandra yelled.

Nobody paid her any attention. They turned the radio on again, so the whole bus could listen for the umpteenth time to the hit songs about boys in love with girls and girls in love with boys, and the kids went back to laughing and talking.

Waste and desolation, Danny thought wearily. He tried to think of lines from T.S. Eliot, whose poetry he'd discovered in English class this year, and to let the sad, resonant words of decades past blot out the licentious drivel of this blasted year 1967. At last the bus stopped. They turned the radio off. Danny made ready to tour the graveyard.

5.

The house looked different when he and Leon got home that night, and Leon unlocked the door and turned on the lights and helped Danny get his suitcase inside.

"I hope you don't mind," Leon said apologetically. "I got rid of all those old newspapers that were lying around."

Why now? Danny felt a staggering weariness. For the moment it was exactly as it had been nine months ago, when he'd come home from a long trip and found the house looking and smelling the same and yet it was different, changed. He felt like he was in a spooky movie, where you unlock the door to a long-familiar home and bring in your suitcase, and have the chilling feeling that *it's all different*, and the scene fades and there you are again, unlocking the door and walking in all over again, and the scene fades again and so on endlessly.

"I saved yesterday's paper and today's for you," said Leon. "They're in your room, on your desk. The rest, I figured, heck, if you haven't read them by now, you're not going to read them. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, that's right." He was very tired, and wished his father would just stop talking.

"Meg is coming for lunch tomorrow," Leon said. "I told you that, didn't I?"

Danny looked at the newspapers on his desk before he got undressed. On the front of today's paper was a picture of a bunch of Egyptians standing on the bank of the Suez Canal and waving their shoes at an American warship. The caption said that was a gesture of contempt. The photo had something to do with what happened last week, when Nasser closed the Suez Canal, or the Straits of Tiran or whatever it was, against shipping headed for Israel, and the Israelis kept saying that was an act of war.

So this is the war he was talking about, Danny thought suddenly. Not Vietnam at all.

6.

Leon said again the next day: "There's going to be war."

This time he said it to Danny and to Meg Colton, who was now his ladyfriend. It was Saturday afternoon, and they all sat at the kitchen table eating some sort of

cold soup Leon had prepared that morning, before Meg arrived in her car. The soup was greenish-brown in color, and Danny wasn't sure what was in it. Pureed brains of space alien, no doubt. They'd eat his tongue for the second course.

This was the first time Danny had seen Meg since last March, when he'd been introduced to her. He and his father had been in New York for a get-together of Leon's relatives, and late in the afternoon Leon had said to him, *Let's go, me bai-i-i*, without any explanation, and the two of them had driven to a Chinese restaurant. She'd been there waiting for them. Leon had said, *Danny, this is Mrs. Colton.*

Danny saw a short, heavy-breasted woman in her forties, with gray-streaked hair and shoulders that were slightly hunched. He saw she was fairly nervous. She had a present for Danny: a book about the education of Henry Adams, in which he didn't have the slightest interest but which he thanked her for. As they were being shown to their table, she and his father had talked briefly in lowered tones about somebody named Michael, who'd moved out from somewhere into an apartment of his own.

And now, as they sipped their brain-of-space-alien soup at their own kitchen table, Mrs. Colton asked Danny about those places in Israel you saw in the news these days, now that there was the crisis and everybody was talking about the Middle East. Had Danny visited any of them when he was over there?

He had. There was a photo in yesterday's *Times*, of Jordanian troops doing maneuvers in their part of Jerusalem. The caption said that in the background was the Notre Dame church, in the Israeli part of the city. Danny remembered how he'd stood on the roof of Notre Dame looking in the opposite direction, peering through borrowed binoculars into that part of Jerusalem where he'd never be allowed to go. Searching, among a swirling wilderness of walls, for the one Wall that really counted.

He didn't feel like telling this to Meg Colton, however. So he said there weren't any places in the newspapers that he recognized.

She said: "Did you know anybody over there who was a soldier in the Army?"

Yes, Mrs. Colton. I did.

A good friend of mine is a sergeant in the Israeli Army. He's from Philadelphia originally, and he's a UFOlogist, just like me. He solved the UFO mystery, actually, and that's why the three men in black were after him. They wanted to silence him, and the only way they could do that was by killing him, you see.

They wanted to kill me too. They wanted to tie both of us up so we couldn't move, and then burn us alive. But neither of us was there when they came for us, because he was sitting up all night in a Cuban café and I had escaped from them by getting into a UFO and going down into the underworld.

I don't know how long I spent in the underworld. It felt like centuries. We drank filth in the underworld. Greenish-brown filth, from a desolate lake.

But all he said was: "My landlady's son was in the Army. I slept in his room while he was away. But I really didn't get to know him very well."

7.

The war broke out on Monday, June 5. On Tuesday or Wednesday, Danny happened to walk past a newsstand. He saw a headline in one of the Philadelphia papers: **ARAB ARMIES SMASHED IN BLITZ – ISRAEL PROCLAIMS TOTAL VICTORY.**

He remembered that headline for the rest of his life.

8.

"I'm a little bit surprised," Meg Colton said, "that you're not going back. Now that you can get to all the places you couldn't get to before."

Danny wasn't sure if this was a question that required some answer or if he could just nod and say *Ah*, this having become over the past year one of his standard tactics of evasion and deflection. He couldn't imagine why Mrs. Colton

should be surprised he wasn't going back to Israel. It was August already. Six more weeks, and he'd be starting college at Carthage. He hardly had time now for a trip to Israel. Even if he had any desire for it.

"Any time Danny's ready to go," Leon announced, "I'm ready to send him. He knows that. I've told him."

Again Mrs. Colton had driven down to Kellerfield for the day. They'd set up a table in the back yard and tried to have their lunch outdoors. But it was too buggy, and the day was oppressive: heavy, close, lowering. It would feel better if it'd go ahead and rain, but Danny knew it wasn't going to. This was Pennsylvania, and this was August. After twenty minutes they went indoors and turned on the fan.

Leon chewed thoughtfully on a chicken bone. "I read in the *Times*," he said, "about how they tore down the barrier between the two parts of Jerusalem, the Jewish and the Arab section. And they ran into each other's arms! It was like a family reunion, the paper said. Like long-lost brothers."

Danny remembered that headline: *Arabs and Israelis Mingle Gaily in United Jerusalem*. It had seemed to him freakish, incomprehensible. He'd been sure that if the Israelis and the Arabs of the two parts of Jerusalem ever made contact with each other, it would be with knives in each other's throats.

Your magic binds together / That which custom has strictly divided.

Not for Danny, though. For him it was too late.

His mind had sunk into a dark meditation, on why it was that when you missed out on something you'd desperately wanted you never got a second chance at it, and how terribly unfair that was to people like him, when Mrs. Colton broke into his thoughts with another of her questions.

"All ready for Carthage?"

Well, yes, he supposed he was ready. What exactly did you have to do, to be ready for college? He'd preregistered for his courses. He'd signed up for the university meal plan. He'd been assigned a dormitory room, and even knew the

name of his roommate. Was there more he needed to do that he didn't know about yet?

"I went to Carthage too," Mrs. Colton said. "With your father and mother. Did you know that?"

Yes, he'd known. He supposed he'd always known. It didn't interest him. He asked her no questions, showed no curiosity, as she'd maybe been hoping he would. He didn't know what Meg Colton, formerly Meg Kupferstein, had done at Carthage, with his mother and more pertinently with his father. He didn't want to know.

9.

It was the third week of September when Leon drove Danny up to Carthage to begin his college adventure. Good-bye, then, to Kellerfield! Good-bye to the whole damn State of Pennsylvania! Danny was sure he wouldn't miss either one.

The night before they left, Danny opened the top drawer of the dresser in his bedroom.

The manuscript of his UFO book, the one he'd written for Basil, was in that drawer. Every now and then, through the spring and the summer, he'd opened the drawer to take a look at it. Perhaps it could be redeemed, resurrected. he might yet be able to publish it, in one way or another. At the very least – so he thought to himself, each time he pulled the drawer open – he could read and admire the work he had done.

How meticulously it was researched! How fluently written! How many quarts and gallons of midnight sweat he had poured into it, in thirst and in burning darkness, all while his mother lay on her bed in the next room gasping for her breath.

She'd died anyway, without a word to him.

Without a sign.

Shuddering in shame, he pushed the drawer closed. He promised never again to open it.