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## **Alien Brothers, Come on Down!**

*Amid the panic over abductions and evil ETs, a gentle voice is heard. But do Steven Greer and his pilgrims have the candlepower to score that intergalactic high five?*

By Alex Heard

It's sundown on a cool may evening, and I'm cruising northwest out of Minneapolis in a five-vehicle caravan en route to a nighttime skywatch for UFOs. Suddenly, it happens. Dusk's glowy red peacefulness is shattered by the sight of a flashing, chrome-sided object zigzagging through space at terrifying speed.

Unfortunately, it's the car I'm trying to follow. The outing's leader, Steven M. Greer, an emergency physician from Asheville, North Carolina, ran late finishing his dinner, so our convoy was late getting started. We're supposed to be in place by nightfall, and as the sun plummets, our pacesetter, a local UFO buff named Martin Keller, hurries it up with an 80-mile-an-hour clip and aggressive, chassis-wobbling passes. After exiting I-94 to catch a smaller four-lane, Keller makes a wrong turn that necessitates a five-minute roadside rethink and a U-ie. Whizzing back toward the tiny hamlet of Big Lake on the bumpy road, we max-out at 85.

Ultimately we come to a safe stop at our destination, the William T. Cox Diamond Anniversary Unit of Sand Dunes State Forest. In a small parking lot that fronts a stand of pines, a dozen men and women gather flashlights, daypacks, folding chairs, and ground sheets, and then walk a half-mile down a sandy service road, trudging past a pond that throbs with night-critter noises.

Shortly we arrive at a large, open field littered with dead scrub and slash and drop our equipment.

Greer is a well-built 37-year-old whose sturdy neck supports a simian head decorated with red-blond hair, a beard, and glasses: The overall impression is of a bookwormy, partially sheared Sasquatch. As we settle in he glances around, frowns and squints, then deems the spot ripe for sightings. Indeed, what he considers promising data soon whistle in. From a stand of tall pines about a quarter-mile north of us drifts the call of a whippoorwill and a weird, lonely tone that I've never heard before. Greer, still standing, executes a three-quarter torso twist and cocks an ear at the trees. Body alert, he announces that the tone is "almost identical" to a sound recorded a few years earlier by a UFO skywatch group in Canada. Significantly, it occurred near a field where crop circles--patterns and lines that for some time now have been mysteriously turning up on British and North American farms--had recently appeared. Analysis of the Canadian tone, he claims, showed that "it did not match any sound known on this planet." The scientific verdict on crop circles is that they're hoaxes stomped into place at night by human beings, but Greer has decided that UFOs have something to do with their formation. Why would extraterrestrials travel jillions of miles to play Spirograph in mankind's wheat? Using a phrase that he calls on often, Greer says, "We just don't know."

"We are hearing beeping sounds off on the near horizon," one of his assistants says with martial crispness into a microcassette recorder. Greer has instructed us each to carry one and to log reactions as events unfold. Ignoring the helper, he continues his evaluation. "We assess this site as...pretty good," he tells his recorder. "It is in a known active area." He's referring to

the nearby town of Elk River, which underwent a flurry of UFO sightings in 1992. "We have a good horizon-to-horizon view and a high cloud ceiling."

**\*\*The sound again\*\***

"And it's doing a pretty good imitation of a crop-circle noise!" the assistant says. Whatever the sound's source, it is spooky: metallic, ringing, metronomic. Soon it stops. I peer at the pines. By the failing light they're like a dark, blurry smear on a bad watercolor. Greer will theorize later that a "blacked out" UFO could be hovering in there. Since our goal tonight is nothing less than soliciting physical contact with extraterrestrials, I mull something he said earlier in the day, during a six-hour workshop on the ins and outs of ET etiquette. What will I do if the unimaginable happens and a rubbery, potbellied imp with a head the size of a butt roast comes skittering out of those trees?

"This is a mutual dance," Greer advised, "but let them be the leading partners. Don't rush up and give them a hug. For all you know you'll crush them."

Here's something else to think about the next time you're lolling around a darkened campsite, staring into the night sky and wondering what might be out there. According to *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, the controversial recent book by Harvard University psychiatry professor John E. Mack, hundreds of thousands of Americans believe they've been kidnapped by extraterrestrials at some point in their lives. Whatever one thinks of Dr. Mack--he's been hailed as a courageous maverick and pilloried for sloppy science--the key point is this: Consistent with most past testimony on the subject, the majority of his patients make it clear that Steven Spielberg got it all wrong in *E.T.* Far from being cuddly, crinkly Wee Pals, aliens are remembered by their terrorized victims as mantis-eyed meanies who carry footlong genital probes and razory scoops with which they extract tiny "dips" of human flesh--for use, it's often surmised, in unholy genetic experiments.

These days, the only people who think aliens deserve a hug are found in a different ring of the UFO big top. These are the so-called contactees, a label for New Age types who believe that aliens are essentially angels with a mission: to reach out to enlightened earthlings with promises of love, peace, and an impending golden dawn. Significantly, most contactees haven't actually met any aliens. These cozy messages tend to crackle in on the etheric shortwave via channeling, dreams, or telepathic mind-melds. The beings themselves are appealing, often depicted in baroque, conversion-van-art-style illustrations as blond, blue-eyed, and doe-beautiful. Basic contactee theology has it that if a critical mass of people put their faith in the aliens, they'll come on down, offering mankind a milky-palmed high five and putting a stop to war, nuclear proliferation, and environmental destruction. A typical and full-blown contactee vision is the happy creed of the UNARIUS Educational Foundation, a 40-year-old group whose late leader, Ruth Norman, predicted that sometime soon after the year 2001 a fleet of 32 flying saucers will land in an interlocking pancake stack outside El Cajon, California. To prepare, UNARIUS purchased what amounts to a UFO parking lot, 67 acres of land in the scruffy hills nearby. Currently vacant--except for a sign that says WELCOME SPACE BROTHERS--this site will apparently grow into a shining university where earthlings can study the wisdom of the universe at no charge.

You need to know these competing themes--aliens are among us and they're cruel; aliens are coming soon and they're as perky as the King Family Singers --because Greer has merged the most appealing elements of both into a bold new belief system, one that, as a bonus, has an active recreational component. In Greer's view aliens are physically here (as abductees would

have it) but they're nice (as contactees say). In fact they're so responsive to open-minded humans that it's possible to venture out and call them in like a flock of jabbering, sociable mallards. He refers to such human-initiated contact with aliens as "a close encounter of the fifth kind," or CE-5. (The term builds on existing UFO terminology coined by the late astronomer J. Allen Hynek: CE-3, a close encounter of the third kind, means any contact with an extraterrestrial. CE-4, a somewhat redundant bit of post-Hynekan lingo coined in the eighties, refers to abductions.)

In 1990 Greer--whose interest in the topic dates back to his youth--founded a group dedicated to the CE-5 proposition. He called it the Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence. UFO skywatch clubs are nothing new--they've been around since flying saucers whooshed into the American consciousness with the first big wave of alleged sightings in 1947, kicked off by pilot Kenneth Arnold's famous report of metallic, disk-shaped objects flying near Mount Rainier, Washington. The CSETI difference is Greer's impatience with the traditional notion that we have to wait passively for them to show up. He believes we can prime the pump. Armed with a hardware cornucopia (high-power halogen lights, radar detectors, walkie-talkies, still and video cameras), Greer and his followers do exactly that, gathering at darkness-swaddled mountains, fields, and woods, where they beam photons and positive energy into the inky infinite. Greer claims an astonishing success rate at calling in UFOs; he says he's scored more than a dozen sightings in countries all over the Western Hemisphere. The big kahuna--an alien-paw-to-fleshy-hand meeting brought about by his teachings--hasn't happened yet, but he boldly vows that it will before the turn of the century. By then, he promises, "We'll have a full landing where a CSETI team goes on board."

Greer fiercely rejects being called a contactee. He lumps such people in with a "fringe religious" element that is at odds with his preferred self-image of agate-eyed rationality. Still, the dividends that he promises sound familiar. Among other things, he maintains that the great meeting will bring about a millennial revolution in "human consciousness" as men and women breathlessly absorb lessons from beings whose technology, says Greer, "will seem like magic to us." Replacing the bad old global order will be a harmonious one-world government, as earthlings realize that all of us are adrift, together, in an infinite universe of superior minds.

Much like any contactee, Greer has ascertained this in part through spiritual revelation. To augment what he jokingly calls his "left brain, anal-retentive, medical side," Greer for years has studied both Transcendental Meditation and the Baha'i religion. TM emphasizes that civilization advances through quantum leaps in consciousness, while Bahaim stresses the spiritual oneness of mankind. Greer also claims to marshal a psychic power known among paranormal seekers as "remote viewing"--an ability to "see" distant events that are taking place simultaneously. And though he shies away from saying that he receives direct mental feeds on an intergalactic beeper, one former CSETIan says that Greer used to have her transcribe his microcassette recollections of "lucid dreams" in which he communicated with "a female entity" from outer space. Publicly, Greer sidesteps the issue, but he clearly hints that CSETIans receive mental nudges from far out in the cosmos, and that it's all being done for a reason.

"I think that we are being trained," he says. "This is my sense. I may be wrong. But I believe that somehow we are being thrown into a schoolhouse for the Earth."

It's a raw, dribbly Saturday night in downtown St. Paul, and a spiffy, jacket-and-tie-wearing Greer is prowling the amber-washed stage of the World Theater, the same spot where

Garrison Keillor has spun many a comfy tale about Lake Wobegon. Nothing like that tonight, though. Instead a group of about 200 is getting chilled by what Greer, speaking in a soft, somewhat lispy southern voice, calls "high strangeness," accounts of his alleged UFO-sighting adventures, along with related talk of crashed flying saucers, government secrecy, and "disinformation" plots to derail CSETI's important work. The audience is like any lecture crowd—homogeneously natty and attentive—but the reaction to Greer is noticeably various. Some people, probably having expected a less metaphysical UFO lecture, sigh audibly. Some leave. Quite a few, however, are clearly engrossed. Greer, it seems, is talking an eerie, insider language they want to hear.

"We can document that in the fifties," he says, "UFOs were classified at least two levels higher than the H-bomb experiment." Later, he claims that he was once dragged into "a hotel room" by members of "the Aviary," a supposed top-secret cabal of U.S. government officials who know what's really at the bottom of the UFO enigma. Greer says they grilled him for hours about "just what in the hell we're doing and why." CSETI, he barked back defiantly, is "not gonna back off, so long as I'm breathing the free air of Earth."

Greer has a talent for making all of this sound like research instead of claptrap. He helps this process along by flaunting his M.D. as if it certified his credentials to scientifically investigate UFOs. At his home hospital—Caldwell Memorial in Lenoir, North Carolina—the official word is that Greer's UFO interests are his own business and that he's an amply skilled physician. But he's no empiricist, a fact hinted at by his liberal use of empty jargon such as "primary and secondary vectoring" (translation: waving and blinking a flashlight) and "decompensating" (panicking). Still, he seems sincere in his belief that flying saucers are real, that he's seen them, that ETs are friendly, and that for its own good the world must know this.

At present the last goal is a distant dream: Global membership in CSETI stands at roughly 1,000, and that figure may be inflated. On the other hand, Greer's campaign to get attention and money from VIPs is going pretty well. Among those who have either joined, made sizable donations, or attended meetings are folk singer Burl Ives and his wife, Dorothy; actor Eddie Albert; Horst Rechelbacher, founder of Aveda Corporation (who bought a "lifetime gift membership" for \$10,300); Marie "Bootsie" Galbraith, wife of Evan Galbraith, President Ronald Reagan's ambassador to France and a recent candidate for the GOP gubernatorial nomination in New York; philanthropist Laurance Rockefeller (who gave CSETI \$20,000); and Frederick Smith, an owner of the Fox Broadcasting affiliate in Baltimore (\$16,000).

Greer is less popular among his colleagues, particularly those who inhabit the third subgroup in UFOdom, people who might be called "hardware-ees." These are the men and women who know that the smirking archdruids of science won't be silenced until courtroom-ready evidence—an irrefutable photograph, an ET carcass—has been procured. This will be achieved only by hammering away at the subject with the classical methods of investigation: computer enhancement of images, fine-tooth combing of government archives, Freedom of Information Act requests.

Greer is well known and widely dismissed among the hardware-ees, in part because they generally stiff-arm people bearing the contactee taint. In addition, Greer has personally mashed toes all over the country with his tendency to show up on other people's turf and make incredible boasts about sightings scored by his methods. According to some, that's what happened in March 1992 in Gulf Breeze, Florida, a coastal town that has long been a setting for nighttime sightings. One evening a 39-person CSETI workshop group descended on the beach, ran the CSETI drill under Greer's leadership, and took videos of what look like nothing

more than distant lights passing over the water. The way Greer told it in a subsequent self-published report, the group scored "a confirmed, close range, multi-witness... interactive encounter" with four UFOs that responded in kind when he signaled "with a 500,000 candle power light in intelligent sequences."

"The sad part," gumbles Bruce Morrison, a local skywatcher whom Greer lists as a witness to this historic contact, "is that we were standing right next to him and we have everything on videotape and voice tape. Regarding his claims, let's just say he has a very, very bad habit of greatly embellishing what he sees."

Greer scoffs at such talk. In calm tones he dismisses his critics, skeptical journalists, and various unseen enemies. ("I am certain," he says blithely during one phone interview, "that this conversation is being monitored.") The terrifying visions of the abductees, he says, are simply misreads of their experiences. He's deduced that aliens have "no net harmful intent," and prospective CSETI working group members are required to accept this key tenet. The most overtly whimsical contactees, obviously, are silly and irrelevant. He'll admit that some of the hardware folks do good work, but too often they're the paranormal equivalent of ambulance chasers, wheezing lardbutts whose tardy appearance at UFO hot spots accomplishes little, because they don't come spiritually prepared to close the deal. "ETs have been knocking on our door for decades," says Greer, "and there has not been an appropriate response from human society."

Though Greer claims to have come awfully close to enticing ETs to land, all he has as proof is his word and testimony from like-minded compatriots. His photographic evidence is pretty shaky, which seems odd given that Greer insists he's been close enough to see "superstructure" on spacecraft. He argues that this is simply logical. For whatever reason, ETs aren't ready to pose for pictures yet, and we shouldn't question their greater wisdom. A typical example of their shyness occurred outside Mexico City in 1993. In response to a long-running spate of sightings over the metropolis and nearby Mount Popocatepetl, Greer swooped in with a five-person Rapid Mobilization Investigative Team, highly trained CSETI adepts with the means to take off on short notice and the skill to get results. The group set up base camp on a 7,000-foot plateau at the foot of the smoking volcano on January 31; from there it made evening forays, armed with still cameras and a video recorder. The most exciting contact occurred at 11:45 P.M. on February 1.

"Suddenly," Greer related in his CSETI report, "I sensed--knew--to sit up and look to my right, and there it was: a large amber craft moving obliquely away from us in the northwest sky.... We signaled for the spacecraft to come over to our location. IMMEDIATELY, it turned off its present course, and moved directly towards us." The craft, Greer wrote, was a huge, triangular structure that responded with a light show of its own, then began descending as if to land. Unfortunately, at the climax of "the most significant group CE-5 in history," the cameras failed, even a trusty pocket automatic. Ending the ten-minute event, the craft vanished, flashing a "lovely and poignant 'good-bye'" with its "retrograde lights."

Sounds good, if you buy it and accept the contactee doctrine of alien kindness. Sounds scary if you worry that, had the brothers landed, they might have rotated Greer's team over plutonium coals until they blistered like grilled frankfurters. At the World Theater, a smart shopper asks Greer how he can be so sure that extraterrestrials mean him no harm. He replies with a grisly medical analogy, that of a critically wounded "accident victim" who is brought into the emergency room and mistakes rescue procedures for torture. Strapped down, with bloody, rubbery-handed strangers manipulating his pain-wracked body, the victim may

perceive that he's being violated when in fact he's being saved. So it is, says Greer, with mankind, which is in dire need of help from Trapper John, ET.

"Any computer projected into the year 2100 will tell you that we're not going to be around if current trends of environmental disaster and other things hold," he says. "If the Titanic is sinking and you're plucked off the bow, were you abducted or rescued?"

Apparently, some pilgrims found that less than convincing, because turnout for Greer's UFO workshop, held the next day in a downtown Minneapolis performance space, is low. About a dozen men and women show, along with various CSETI assistants, including friendly, bassett-faced Martin Keller--CSETI's media-relations specialist--and a few anxious, anonymous aides-de-Steve who flit around like mosquitoes as they tend to his needs. I take my seat in a circle of plastic chairs, getting my first close look at the man. Casually dressed in elastic-waist chinos, a sport shirt, and running shoes, he's fidgeting with a bulky light as an episode of Sightings (a TV show devoted to fringe topics) about CSETI flickers on a monitor behind him. Then he clears his throat, arranges his papers, and talks in a steady gale through the morning and afternoon.

The infamous ego isn't notably manifest--no puffed chest or Napoleonic glares--but Greer obviously doesn't like giving up the floor. When a class member chips in verbally, his body language shifts to highly impatient until the affront mercifully stops. Among the paying customers, just about everyone offends at some point. Most annoying is a fortyish couple--a big, loud, bearded man named Elias and his smiling, hippie-esque wife, Lisa--who challenge Greer's view that aliens are inherently good. Greer slaps them down by pointing out that it's in the government's interest to promote such "paranoia."

"The Red Scare has been replaced by the Gray Scare," he says, referring to the widely held notion that many aliens have ashen skin. "Personally," he adds, "I consider the term 'grays' a racist appellation." Elias and Lisa pipe down.

Between such crackling high spots we get a reprise of the night before, but with an increased level of detail that takes us an onion-layer closer to the inner sanctum. Completing this class is a prerequisite for becoming an RMIT member, an enticing prospect given that Greer boasts a sightings "batting average of 1.000" for this crack corps. After a review of the basics--the importance of consciousness, the need for "an open mind"--Greer walks us through the Contact Trilogy, his three-component, argot-rich recipe for ET lurin'.

First you waggle lights. Greer hoists his, a black-plastic-encased baby whose beacon is visible for ten miles. Then you play recordings of the crop-circle tones to signal that you're tuned in. Greer plays a tape made during a July 1992 CSETI vigil held in an active crop-circle region in Wiltshire County, England. An ebullient New Agey woman comments that the sounds are "animal-like." Greer looks irked. "These tones have been analyzed--"

She adds a soothing corrective. She means only that the aliens "may be coming in using the sound of animals to protect themselves from...whatever."

"Could be," Greer says stiffly. "We just don't know."

Finally we get the how-tos of "coherent thought sequencing," which is analogous to what golf-instruction manuals call "visualizing success." You close your eyes and try to establish a conscious connection with a UFO pilot or commander, and then imagine the flight path that

he, she, or it would take to find you. As we perform a 20-minute test think, Greer suggests visualizing macro-scale landmarks--like the finger-shaped western edge of Lake Superior--to give the pilots direction. Afterward he asks who saw what. It's clear that this group is hair-trigger ready.

"The craft is round," Lisa says. "A ball. With many different lights around it. They communicate telepathically. If you say, 'Come in peace,' they'll come. If you think negatively, they won't come."

"Right, right," says Greer. "That's very true."

Greer has brought the highest level of theatrics to UFO calling, but he isn't the first to try it. Ever since the UFO age began, eager-beaver contactees have felt the need to reach out and touch. The granddaddy of them all was a 1950s-era occultist named George Adamski, who claimed that he met a handsome Venusian in the California desert and even had an assistant take plaster casts of the being's footprints. While Greer is less bold than Adamski in his claims, he inspires the same question: What's the motivation here?

Lately, several ex-CSETIans and former employees, put off by what one calls Greer's "bullying" style, have defected and started talking. The portrait they paint is of an egotistical fraternity president, the type of guy who believes mawkishly in the values he represents but doesn't much care about his pledges except as dues payers.

To be sure, some CSETIans are fully satisfied with the product—for example, Dorothy Ives, a member of the CSETI executive council, who says that her and her husband's initial assessment hasn't changed. "The first time Burl met Steve," she says, "he looked at me and said, 'This man is eminently sane.'" But lapsed members tell stories of behind-the-scenes tantrums (Greer reportedly got pretty hot after the Minnesota workshop, which lost several hundred dollars), expensive globe-trotting to spread the word, and rampant chintziness. Greer likes to moan about the financial sacrifices he's making to carry on CSETI's work--in a letter to Janice Williams, an Asheville woman who managed the CSETI office until last March, Greer claimed that "my income at present is LESS than [my family's] expenses for living"--but the fact is that he isn't poor. Along with drawing a doctor's paycheck, Greer has several hefty real estate holdings, which he's in the process of liquidating. He and his family live in a 22-room Tudor-style home in one of Asheville's most exclusive subdivisions, Biltmore Forest; it's on the market for \$698,000 (recently marked down from \$725,000), and he's selling another home for \$398,000. He also draws rent from the Asheville office structure that houses CSETI's international headquarters.

What Greer gets out of CSETI seems to be the means to galavant often and in style. A typical year, says Williams, included a couple of dozen first-class jet trips in the United States and abroad. Usually these involved either fund-raising, RMIT missions, or attempts to get closer to the upper reaches of world power. In a representative spree, Greer last January went on a round-tripper from Asheville to Los Angeles, Phoenix, New York, London, back to New York, and back to Asheville. (Greer says he paid excursion fare for this trip but doesn't mention that he upgraded to first class using frequent-flier points available only to people who fly more than 30,000 miles a year.)

Whether all this scurrying amounts to much is an open question, but in one memo to CSETI executive council members Greer argues for the affirmative. At one 1993 meeting in Horst Rechelbacher's Aveda Spa in Osceola, Wisconsin, he writes, he met an unnamed "friend and

advisor to Pres. Clinton and Al Gore.... He mentioned the private Tel. number of Pres. Clinton (not the Oval office number, but the President's private office number), and we anticipate further briefings via this excellent contact." Additionally, according to Williams, Greer's rainmaking travels have generated contributions that other CSETIans aren't always told about.

"Last February I heard Steve talking about how he poor-mouthed to Frederick Smith that his expenses exceeded his income because he's spending everything on CSETI," says Williams. "So Smith wrote him a CSETI check for \$11,000. Steve told me not to tell anybody about it, because he always tells people like Marty Keller that there isn't any money to pay them. I found out later that Smith had also written Steve a \$5,000 check for his personal use."

All of which is between Greer and his troops. Of more general interest is his declaration, recalled by another former CSETI office manager, Bobbie Ammons, that he's something of a divine personage: "He told me he is the reincarnation of the son of the founder of the Baha'i religion." That would be Abdul Baha, son of the prophet whom Baha'is know as Baha' Allah. According to Ammons, Greer also told her he's "going to be martyred for the cause--which he says is his destined mission to be the one who represents humanity when the ETs come."

Greer hotly denies this--pointing out among other things, that "Baha'is don't even believe in reincarnation"--but if true it would explain certain grandiose themes in a 1993 CSETI white paper titled "Project Starlight Overview." This internal document, authored by Greer, is an action plan for disseminating the truth about extraterrestrials to a global power elite, but it reads more like the journal of a grape-juice-faced nine-year-old. Greer assigns numerical values to the "disinformation" threat posed by various hostile forces and exhaustively lists a grab bag of people who must be cultivated. Among the rated threats: "Certain fundamentalist Islamic countries contend that [CSETI's agenda] is an attempt by the West...to control world events and undermine their cultures. Probability [of this occurring]: would guess 30-50 percent." The targets include "the White House," Pope John Paul II, Bhoutros Bhoutros Ghali, the Dalai Lama, the Aga Khan, Pat Robertson, Carl Sagan, Walter Cronkite, Michael Eisner, King Juan Carlos, C-SPAN's Brian Lamb, Robert Redford, Barbra Streisand, and yes, Steven Spielberg.

Greer seems to mean well in the paper. "All that is said and done will be guided by a high sense of global social responsibility," he writes. "This will be one of the most significant events in human history, and it belongs to all peoples." If only he gave some sign of a quality that has proved so valuable to other great spiritual leaders: actually liking people. In the end his biggest flaw may be that he's somehow managed to squeeze the fun out of contacteeism.

There isn't much hilarity in Sand Dunes State Forest. Greer seems distracted, only half with us. My theory, strictly a guess, is that our less-than-impressive team depresses him. Or it may just be Elias, who sits to my left, braying about things like a "suit" he's invented that would protect the wearer from the air pressure, temperature, and gravitational shifts experienced during an abduction.

Greer reviews "boarding-party" details as our team fusses with sleeping bags and squeaks rusty lawn chairs into position. Each member records a brief message on the official team microrecorder; if we're all whisked away, whoever comes along and finds the smoking remains will know whom to notify. Greer kicks off. "This is CSETI team leader Dr. Steven Greer, boarding party member one. My wife is Emily. Her phone number is..."



When Elias's turn comes, he's stumped. His wife, Lisa, is sitting next to him fingering a piece of lapis lazuli jewelry that she plans to present to our alien host. "My wife is here. I have no one I can notify," he says dolefully, then passes the shiny plastic lozenge to me.

"This is Alex," I say, "boarding party member 11. My wife is Susan. She's at the Red Roof Inn, the, um, the one south of Minneapolis."

Greer tells everybody to choose a buddy. I exchange a silent, gruff nod with Bob, a friendly, sixtyish guy stretched out on a folding chaise longue. Like an all-business camp counselor, Greer says that if anyone finds himself overcome with terror in the event of a landing, he should go to his buddy--his "buddy for life"--and ask for an escort to "the safe place," a designated circle of grass a short distance away.

We begin. Greer narrates a coherent thought sequence that sounds like program notes to an Up with People concert. "Send a thought of love to a loved one; now see whereby you are able to perceive these thoughts, and ask yourself, What is that awareness?" He positions flashlight-wavers in various spots around our circle; pulling duty with touching resolve, they silently and diligently high-beam the universe. The stars are out; the sky is bright but partly overcast. At one point a high, ragged cloud drags underneath a triangle of stars, briefly creating the illusion that the stars, not the clouds, are moving. Elias rises to the bait.

"There they are! There they are! Three UFOs, flying in formation!" Nobody says anything. Curiously, Elias doesn't recant so much as lose interest, telling Lisa that he just saw three craft "straight over us" and then dropping the subject. I take a break, duly notifying my buddy.

"Going to the bathroom in the safe place, Bob."

"Check."

After that, all is quiet for a while. Then the tones, which have faded in and out a few times, resume, and Greer and Keller decide to mount a formal search-and-confirm op. I tag along, and the three of us crunch toward the woods, jiggling our flashlights. Greer has bragged that he's "part Cherokee," but part Tonka truck is more like it. Our crashings should scare off anything that isn't wearing moss. Surprisingly, though, the tones continue. And grow louder.

At the edge of the woods, before we duck in to meet our destiny, Greer tells Keller in an excited whisper that he wouldn't be surprised to see a UFO hovering in a clearing. Crunch, snap. After a few minutes of pinpointing, the tone is directly overhead. Keller shines a light. It's an easily identifiable flying object: a perched owl. And not just any owl, but one with an especially grumpy glare that seems to say, "What in the hell are you doing?" I turn to Greer to see how he handles this particular CE-zero.

"Interesting," he says thoughtfully. "The tone was similar to a crop-circle sound, but it was aurally distinct enough to not quite match it." He turns to the expressionless Keller and says, "Well, that's what fieldwork is all about."

*Alex Heard is a senior editor of Outside. He is working on a book about millennial subcultures in the United States, to be published by Norton.*