

Scandal at Valley County
by Joe Nobel

Hospital issues fake babies to mothers — Daily Sentinel

Anna Maria DeReveria told reporters that she discovered her baby wasn't real a week after taking it home. Mrs. DeReveria said, "It suckled and squirmed and cried just like a real baby. But I got suspicious after a while when I noticed I never had to change his diaper." Jose, as she named it, was like a perfect little boy, never colicky, sleeping through most of the night, always smiling. "He looked too good to be true, and then I found out he was."

When asked why she didn't report it for another month after discovering her baby was fake, DeReveria said, "I didn't report it right away because I came home from the hospital drugged, and even when the drugs wore off, I didn't really want to believe it. It took a nurse at the clinic to tell me. She said, 'Hey, this isn't a real baby, it's just a mechanical doll.' But even after that, I was too embarrassed to report it."

Dr. Marshal DuPreis, administrator of Valley County Hospital was unavailable for comment at press time. However, we have learned that DeReveria's is only the latest of twelve replaced babies this month alone.

"Marshal, what's going on?" Therman Winslow, hospital trustee, asked as he stirred his coffee; black, two sugars. He sat in the other man's office of ornately towering bookcases of mahogany, across from the equally dark mahogany desk. The desk was piled high with letters, reports, and text books. And there was the obligatory sign, gold framed of course, 'Dr. Marshal DuPreis, Hospital Administrator'.

"Sorry about this, Therm," Marshal said. He didn't have a vibration of remorse emanate from his vocal cords when he said sorry. It was more like saying sorry when beating an opponent at golf, or Sorry, Ema and I can't make it to the islands this weekend. "I thought we had Axalatar finally under control. And it looked like we did, for months now ..."

"But it's apparent we just can't trust him. After all, Marshal, you gave him so many chances to march in step. Oh heck, why did we have to go and hire a space alien for obstetrics anyway."

"You know the answer as well as I. He can deliver three babies at the same time. He can see right into 'em, never a need for an ultrasound. Not being carbon based there's never an issue of infection - hell, he can spit into 'em and nothing will happen. And those long needly spikes coming from his knuckles: you should see him deliver a spinal epidural - one moment the mom is screaming in agony, and the next she's smiling in seventh heaven."

"Granted he's great. I absolutely concede that he's not a part of obstetrics, he is obstetrics: delivering three babies at a time - including cesareans; consulting on the phone to who knows how many patients at the same time; and he's the department switchboard - all he does is hold a

phone jack under his tongue and he can talk all day. Meanwhile, he's handling the department's administration."

"And the mothers-to-be love him; five arms, eight eyes, n'all."

"So what'll we do? Sure, I can settle the DeReveria case, my people are talking to her lawyer right now. But the press smells blood." Therman finally took a sip of his coffee.

"All right, here's a thought: let's not hide. Let's admit that the space alien working for us has a different set of morals, he lives by another set of codes, and things aren't the same where he comes from. He can schmooze the press the same way he schmoozes the moms. We'll promise 'em stricter oversight of the whole department. We'll hire an inventory manager to make sure no more babies are switched. The whole shebang."

"Okay, we'll call in the press. But we can't say inventory manager, we'll call the position ... a ... Newborn Guardian Oversight Advisory Supervisor. You talk to Axalatar, I can't stand his oily smooth personality. Make very sure he knows what to say. While you do that, I'll call the press."

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen from the press for attending at such short notice. Before we get started I'd like to state that the curtain covering my hind half is in place because I shall be doing an emergency cesarean of a premature infant on the other side of this boundary while we're having this conference. If you would be kind enough to refrain from shouting your questions in consideration of the patient, I would really be grateful. You know why you're here, you've done your investigative journalism, so I won't bore you or patronize you by giving a pre-canned speech. You've got questions to ask, so why not get started. You over there, the lady from the Dispatch."

"Axalatar, thank you for being so direct, allow me to do the same. Sir, how many babies in all have you switched for dolls?"

"I'll tell you the truth, Ms. Dispatch, I've stopped counting. Mr. Sun Times says it was twelve this month, I have no reason to dispute that figure. Next question ... let's see ... I'll take a question from Mr. Sentinal."

"What have you done with those babies, and how can the families get them back?"

"Ooops, that's two questions, not one. Throw the man out. Ha, just kidding. Okay I'll answer them both. Actually, I'll start with the second. You know, all these families delayed reporting back to the hospital for weeks, sometimes it took them over a month to come sheepishly calling. That tells me that it's really all the same to them: babies, dolls, what's the diff?"

"I'm sure for the most part these families will be happier with their mechanical babies instead of their real ones. Let's face it, they don't cry, they seldom poop, they don't get sick. And when they tire of them I can replace them with mechanical toddlers, and then mechanical teenagers. Think of it, little kids who won't break flower pots, won't write on the walls with crayons, teenagers who won't rebel or total the car, what parent could ask for more."

"And the first part of the question," the man from the Sentinal asked, "what did you do with those exchanged babies?"

"I sold them," Axalatar said disarmingly matter-of-fact. "I'll be frank with you, there's a hot market for human babies among the space aliens. Next question please."

Cries of disgust were heard from the well seasoned press corps.

"Shh, please. Remember the procedure I'm doing behind the curtains. Let's keep it down. Thank you.

"I'll tell you frankly, I made only a small profit on each of those sales. But when you consider the mechanical dolls they got in place - each one a uniquely crafted piece of art, guaranteed for years of baby enjoyment, with the finest components available - the loving mothers got the real bargain. Those realistic dolls each cost almost as much as the real babies sold for. And in the cases of small and sickly ones, especially if they were males, the dolls cost more. I was in it for a loss. But I stand behind my work. Each one is guaranteed for years of enjoyment, and can be uptraded for a toddler, junior, and then a teenager.

"I want you to know, I'm not getting rich on this deal. It's just supplementing my hospital earning. As some of you know, when I came to work for the hospital, all I asked for was a ditch in the ground to live in, preferably somewhere on the hospital ground, and have access to an open cesspool with flowing sewage. That's great as far as it goes, and I'm so happy with the hole the hospital trustees found for me, but occasionally one needs to supplement one's pay, if for nothing more than the occasional creature comfort. Surely you don't begrudge me of that. After all we're not talking about the outrageous profits that some of these interns make on their outside gigs. How rich do you think I could be if I live in a hole in the ground?

"Now I think I've answered enough questions for the afternoon. I'll turn the press conference over to Dr. Winslow and Dr. DuPreis. I have to turn my full attention to the cesarean going on behind the curtains. Good day."

The following morning Doctors Winslow and DuPreis walked along the paths of the Valley County Hospital grounds. They avoided the path leading past a certain hole in the ground.

"Marshal, that was the worst display I have seen in my twenty-five years as custodian of this institution."

"Axalatar was terrible," Dr. DuPreis said shaking his head. He looked straight ahead, never once looking Dr. Winslow in the eye. "He missed his calling as a vacuum cleaner salesman."

"Used cars — more like it."

"But there's something you need to know, Therman. Not everyone seems to agree with our assessment of that damn space alien. You see, I just stopped by at the switchboard; bookings in obstetrics are up one hundred and fifty percent over last month."

"The choice is obvious, we'll keep him." Therman stopped and turned to Marshal Winslow, now looking at him directly.

"We will?"

"Just until we get over the fiscal crisis, and not a day longer. Promise."

Thank you for reading Scandal at Valley County. I hope you enjoyed my story.

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Be well, Joe