

QUID SOM, MISER! TUNC DICTURUS?

PERSPECTIVE

AP/Home Info Service, September 2, 1996:

WASHINGTON, D.C.-Scientists are convening at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Conference to listen to speakers presenting papers on subjects ranging from "Lack of Proof for Supermassive Intergalactic Gravitational Lenses" to "Distribution of Wild Rodent Plague Through Ground Squirrel Fleas (*Diamanus Montanus*) in Southern California." Yesterday, one of the most hotly debated papers was presented by Dr. Frank Drinkwater of Balliol College, Oxford University. Dr. Drinkwater maintains that there are no intelligent extraterrestrial civilizations. "If there were, we would certainly have seen their effects by now." Dr. Drinkwater maintains that one civilization, creating self-reproducing planet-visiting spacecraft, would permeate the galaxy in less than a million years.

No conclusion was reached by conference scientists regarding the recent disappearance of Jupiter's sixth moon, Europa. Professor Eugenie Cook of the University of Washington, Seattle, maintains that the moon has been displaced from its orbit by collision with a massive and heretofore unknown asteroid. Famed astronomer Fred Accord maintains that such a collision would have "shattered the moon, and we would still be able to see the orbiting fragments." No such sightings have been reported. Many scientists remarked on public apathy over

such an unprecedented event. After a month, the story of Europa has almost vanished from the media. Accord commented, “Obviously, more provincial difficulties, like the U.S. presidential election, loom larger.”

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September 28-29

Camped beside the mountain that should not have been there, wrapped in cold desert darkness, Edward Shaw could not sleep. He heard steady breathing from the still forms of his two companions, and marveled at their ease.

He had written in his notebook:

The mound is approximately five hundred meters long and half as wide, perhaps a hundred meters high, (apparently) the basaltic cinder cone of a dead volcano, covered with boulder- and cobble-sized chunks of dark black scoria and surrounded by fine white quartz sand. It is not on our maps nor in the 1991 Geosat directory. The flanks of the cone are steeper than the angle of repose, as much as fifty and sixty degrees. The weathering is haphazard at best— some parts open to the sun and rain are jet black, shiny, and other areas are only mildly rusty. There are no insects on the mound—specifically, lift any rock and you will *not* find a scorpion or millipede. There are no beer cans.

Edward, Brad Minelli, and Victor Reslaw had journeyed from Austin, Texas, to combine a little geology with a lot of camping and hiking across the early autumn desert. Edward was the eldest, thirty-three; he was also the shortest and in a close race with Reslaw to lose his hair the fastest. He stood five feet nine inches

in his hiking boots, and his slender frame and boyish, inquisitive features made him seem a lot younger, despite the thinning hair. To see objects closer than two feet from his round nose, he wore gold wire-framed round-lensed glasses, a style he had adopted as an adolescent in the late seventies.

Edward lay on his back with his hands clasped behind his head and stared up at the clear steady immensity of the sky. Three days before, dark and gravid clouds had conspired in the flaming sunset to drop a true gully-washer into Death Valley. Their camp had been on high ground, but they had seen basketball-sized boulders slide and roll down freshly gouged channels.

The desert seemed once again innocent of water and change. All around the camp hung a silence more precious than any amount of gold. Not even the wind spoke.

He felt very large in the solitude, as if he might spread his fingers over half the land from horizon to horizon, and gather a mica coat of stars on his fingers. Conversely, in his largeness, he was also a little frightened. This inflated magnitude of self could easily be pricked and shrink to nothing, an illusion of comfort and warmth and high intellectual fever.

Not once in his six-year career as a professor of geology had he found a major error in the U.S. Geological Survey Death Valley charts. The Mojave Desert and Death Valley were the Mecca and Al Medina of western U.S. geologists; they had tramped over the regions for well over a century, drawn by the nakedness and shameless variety of the Earth. From its depths miners had hauled borax and talc and gypsum and other useful, unglamorous minerals. In some places, niter-lined caves wedged several hundred feet into the Earth. A spelunker need descend only twenty or thirty feet to feel the heat; creation still lay close under Death Valley.

There were hundreds of dead volcanoes, black or sullen red on the tan and gray and pink desert, between the resort at Furnace Creek and the small town of Shoshone, yet each one had been charted and was likely featured in some graduate research paper or another.

This mountain was an anomaly.

That was impossible.

Reslaw and Minelli had shrugged it off as an interesting if unique

error on the maps; a misplacement, like the discovery of some new island in an archipelago, known to the natives but lost in a shuffle of navigators' charts; a kind of Pitcairn of volcanic mounds.

But the cinder cone was too close to routes traveled at least once or twice a year. Edward knew that it had not been misplaced. He could not deceive himself as his friends did.

Neither could he posit any other explanation.

They walked once again around the base of the mound at midmorning. The sun was already high in the flat, still blue sky. It was going to be a hot day. Red-haired, stocky Reslaw sipped coffee from a green-enameled Thermos bottle, a serviceable antique purchased in a rock-and-junk shop in Shoshone; Edward chewed on a granola bar and sketched details in a small black cloth-bound notebook. Minelli trailed them, idly chipping at boulders with a rock pick, his loose, lanky form, unkempt black hair, and pale skin giving him the appearance of a misplaced urban scrounger.

He stopped ten yards behind Edward. "Hey," he called out. "Did you see this?"

"What?"

"A hole."

Edward turned back. Reslaw glanced back at them, shrugged, and continued around the mound to the north.

The hole was about a meter wide and slanted upward into the mass of the mound. Edward had not seen it because it began in deep shadow, under a ledge illuminated by the warm rays of the sun. "It's not a flow tube. Look how smooth," Minelli said. "No collapse, no patterns."

"Bad geology," Edward commented. *If the mound is a fake, then this is the first mistake.*

"Hm?"

"It's not natural. Looks like some prospector got here before us."

"Why dig a hole in a cinder cone?"

"Maybe it's an Indian cave," Edward offered lamely. The hole disturbed him.

"Indians with diamond drills? Not likely," Minelli said with a faint edge of scorn. Edward ignored his tone and stepped on a lava boulder to get a better look up into the darkness. He pulled

a flashlight from his belt and squeezed it to shine a beam into the depths. Smooth-bored matte-finish lava walls absorbed the light beyond eight or ten meters; to that point, the tunnel was straight and featureless, inclining upward at about thirty degrees.

“Do you smell something?” Minelli asked.

Edward sniffed. “Yeah. What is it?”

“I’m not sure . . .”

The odor was faint and smooth and sweet, slightly acrid. It did not encourage further investigation. “Like a lab smell,” Minelli said.

“That’s it,” Edward agreed. “Iodine. Crystalline iodine.”

“Right.”

Minelli’s forehead wrinkled in a mock fit of manic speculation. “Got it,” he said. “This is a junkie rock. A sanitary junkie cinder cone.”

Edward ignored him again. Minelli was infamous for a sense of humor so strange it hardly ever produced anything funny. “Needle mark,” Minelli explained in an undertone, realizing his failure. “You still think this isn’t a map mistake?”

“If you found a street in New York City, not on any map, wouldn’t you be suspicious?”

“I’d call up the mapmakers.”

“Yeah, well, this place is as crowded as New York City, as far as geologists are concerned.”

“All right,” Minelli conceded. “So it’s *new*. Just popped up out of nowhere.”

“That sounds pretty stupid, doesn’t it?” Edward said.

“Your idea, not mine.”

Edward backed away from the hole and suppressed a shiver. *A new mole and it won’t go away; a blemish that shouldn’t be here.*

“What’s Reslaw doing?” Minelli asked. “Let’s find him.”

“This-a-way,” Edward said, pointing north. “We can still catch up.” They heard Reslaw call out.

He had not gone far. At the northernmost point of the mound’s base, they found him squatting on top of a beetle-shaped lava boulder.

“Tell me I’m not seeing what I’m seeing,” he said, pointing to the shade below the rock. Minelli made a face and hurried ahead of Edward.

In the sand, two meters from the boulder, lay something that

at first glance resembled a prehistoric flying creature, a pteranodon perhaps, wings folded, canted over to one side.

It was not mineral, Edward decided immediately; it certainly didn't resemble any animal he had seen. That it might be a distorted plant, a peculiar variety of succulent or cactus, seemed the most likely explanation.

Minelli edged around the find, cautiously giving it a berth of several yards. Whatever it was, it was about the size of a man, bilaterally symmetric and motionless, dusty gray-green with touches of pastel flesh-pink. Minelli stopped his circling and simply gaped.

"I don't think it's alive," Reslaw said.

"Did you touch it?" Minelli asked.

"Hell no."

Edward kneeled before it. There was a definite logic to the thing; a kind of head two feet long and shaped rather like a bishop's miter, or a flattened artillery shell, point down in the sand; a knobby pair of shoulder blades behind the fan-crest of the miter; short thin trunk and twisted legs in squat position behind that. Stubby six-digit feet or hands on the ends of the limbs.

Not a plant.

"Is it a corpse, maybe?" Minelli asked. "Wearing something, like a dog, you know, covered with clothes—"

"No," Edward said. He couldn't take his eyes away from the thing. He reached out to touch it, then reconsidered and slowly withdrew his fingers.

Reslaw climbed down from the boulder. "Scared me so bad I jumped," he explained.

"Jesus Christ," Minelli said. "What do we do?"

The snout of the miter lifted from the sand and three glassy eyes the color of fine old sherry emerged. The shock was so great that none of the three moved. Edward finally took a step back, almost reluctantly. The eyes in the miter-head followed him, then sank away again, and the head nodded back into the sand. A sound issued from the thing, muffled and indistinct.

"I think we should go," Reslaw said.

"It's sick," Minelli said.

Edward looked for footprints, hidden strings, signs of a prank.

He was already convinced this was no prank, but it was best to be sure before committing oneself to a ridiculous hypothesis.

Another muffled noise.

"It's saying something," Reslaw said.

"Or trying to," Edward added.

"It isn't really ugly, is it?" Minelli asked. "It's kind of pretty."

Edward hunkered down and approached the thing again, edging forward one booted foot at a time.

The thing lifted its head and said very clearly, "I am sorry, but there is bad news."

"What?" Edward jerked, his voice cracking.

"God almighty," Reslaw cried.

"I am sorry, but there is bad news."

"Are you sick?" Edward asked.

"There is bad news," it repeated.

"Can we help you?"

"Night. Bring night." The voice had the whispering quality of wind-blown leaves, not unpleasant by itself, but chilling in context. A waft of iodine smell made Edward recoil, lips curled back.

"It's morning," Edward said. "Won't be night for—"

"Shade," Minelli said, his face expressing intense concern. "It wants to be in shade."

"I'll get the tent," Reslaw said. He jumped down from the boulder and ran back to the camp. Minelli and Edward stared at each other, then at the thing canted over in the sand.

"We should get the hell out of here," Minelli said.

"We'll stay," Edward said.

"Right." Minelli's expression changed from concern to puzzled curiosity. He might have been staring at a museum specimen in a bottle. "This is really, wonderfully ridiculous."

"Bring night," the thing pleaded.

Shoshone seemed little more than a truck stop on the highway, a café and the rock shop, a post office and grocery store. Off the highway, however, a gravel road curved past a number of tree-shaded bungalows and a sprawling modern one-story house, then ran arrow-straight between venerable tamarisk trees and by a four-acre swamp to a hot-spring-fed pool and trailer court. The

small town was home to some three hundred permanent residents, and at the peak of the tourist season—late September through early May—hosted an additional three hundred snowbirds and backpackers and the occasional team of geologists. Shoshone called itself the gateway to Death Valley, between Baker to the south and Furnace Creek to the north. To the east, across the Mojave, the Resting Spring, Nopah and Spring ranges, and the Nevada state line, was Las Vegas, the closest major city.

Reslaw, Minelli, and Edward brought the miter-headed creature into Shoshone after joining California state highway 127 some fifteen miles north of the town. It lay under moistened towels in the back of their Land Cruiser on the spread fabric of the tent, where once again it seemed dead.

“We should just go into Las Vegas,” Minelli said. He shared a front seat with Reslaw. Edward drove.

“I don’t think it would last,” Edward said.

“How can we find help for it here?”

“Well, if it really *is* dead, there’s a big meat locker in that grocery.”

“It doesn’t look any more dead than before it spoke,” Reslaw said, glancing back over the seat at the still form. It had four limbs, two on each side, but whether it stood or walked on all four, none of them knew.

“We’ve touched it,” Minelli said mournfully.

“Shut up,” Edward said.

“That cinder cone’s a spaceship, or a spaceship is buried underneath, obviously—” Minelli blurted.

“Nothing’s obvious,” Reslaw said calmly.

“I saw that in *It Came From Outer Space*”

“Does that look like a big eye floating on a tentacle?” Edward asked. He had seen the movie, too. Its memory did not reassure him.

“Meat locker,” Minelli responded, his hands trembling.

“There’s a phone. We can call ambulances in Las Vegas, or a helicopter. Maybe we can call Edwards or Goldstone and get the authorities out here,” Edward said, defending his actions.

“What’ll we tell them?” Reslaw asked. “They won’t believe the truth.”

“I’m thinking,” Edward said.

“Maybe we saw a jet plane go down,” Reslaw suggested.

Edward squinted dubiously.

“It spoke English,” Minelli commented, nodding.

None of them had mentioned that point in the hour and a half since they had hauled the creature away from the base of the cinder cone.

“Hell,” Edward said, “it’s been listening to us out there in space. Reruns of *I Love Lucy*.”

“Then why didn’t it say ‘Hey, Ricky!’?” Minelli asked, covering his fear with a manic grin.

Bad news. Like a mole that shouldn’t be there.

Edward pulled the truck into the service station, its heavy-duty tires tripping the service bell. A deeply tanned teenage boy in jeans bleached to nondescript pale gray and a Def Leppard T-shirt walked out of the garage attached to one side of the grocery and approached the Land Cruiser. Edward warned him back with his hands. “We need to use a phone,” he said.

“Pay phone right there,” the boy drawled suspiciously.

“Anybody got quarters?” Edward asked. Nobody did. “We need to use the store phone. This is an emergency.”

The boy saw the towel-shrouded shape through the Land Cruiser windows. “Somebody hurt?” he asked curiously.

“Stay back,” Minelli warned.

“Shut up, Minelli,” Reslaw whispered through gritted teeth.

“Yeah.”

“Dead?” the boy asked, one cheek jumping with a nervous tic.

Edward shrugged and entered the grocery. There, a short and very wide woman clerk in a muumuu adamantly refused to let him use the phone. “Look,” he explained. “I’ll pay for it with my credit card, my phone card,” he said.

“Shoa me the cahd,” she said.

A tall, slender, attractive black-haired woman came in, dressed in unfaded jeans and a white silk blouse. “What’s wrong, Esther?” she asked.

“Man’s givin’ us a royal payin,” Esther said. “Woan use the pay phone ahtside, but sayes he’s gaht a credit cahd—”

“Jesus, thanks, you’re right,” Edward said, glancing between them. “Ill use my card on the pay phone.”

“Is it an emergency?” the black-haired woman asked.

“Yeah,” Edward said.

“Well, go ahead and use the store phone.”

Esther glared at her resentfully. Edward sidled behind the counter, the clerk moving deftly out of his way, and punched a button for an open line. Then he paused.

“Hospital?” the black-haired woman asked.

Edward shook his head, then nodded. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe the Air Force.”

“You’ve seen an airplane go down?” the woman asked.

“Yeah,” Edward said, for the sake of simplicity.

The woman gave him an emergency hospital number and suggested he use directory assistance for the Air Force. But he did not dial the emergency number first. He dithered, glancing nervously around the store, wondering why he hadn’t planned a clear course of action earlier.

Goldstone, or Edwards, or maybe even Fort Irwin?

He asked directory assistance for the number of the base commander at Edwards. As the phone rang, Edward hunted for an excuse. Reslaw was right: telling the truth would get them nowhere.

“General Frohlich’s office, Lieutenant Blunt speaking.”

“Lieutenant, my name is Edward Shaw.” He tried to be as smooth and calm as a television reporter. “I and two of my friends—colleagues—have seen a jet go down about twenty miles north of Shoshone, which is where I’m calling from—”

The lieutenant became very interested immediately, and asked for details.

“I don’t know what kind of jet,” Edward continued, unable to keep a slight quiver from his voice. “It didn’t look like any I’m familiar with, except maybe . . . Well, one of us thinks it looked like a MiG we’ve seen in *AvWeek*.”

“A *MiG*?” The lieutenant’s tone became more skeptical. Edward’s culpable squint intensified. “Did you actually see the plane go down?”

“Yessir, and the wreckage. I don’t read Russian . . . But I think there were Cyrillic markings.”

“Are you positive about this? Please give me your name and proof of identity.”

Edward gave the lieutenant his name and the numbers on his license plate, driver's license, and, for good measure, his MasterCard. "We think we know where the pilot is, but we didn't find him."

"The pilot is alive?"

"He was dangling on the end of a chute, Lieutenant. He seemed alive, but he went down in some rocks."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Shoshone. The . . . I don't know the name of the store."

"Charles Morgan Company Market," the black-haired woman said.

Edward repeated the name. "The town's grocery store."

"Can you lead us to where you saw the aircraft?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yessir."

"And you realize the penalty for giving false information about an emergency of this sort?"

"Yessir, I do."

Both women regarded him with wide eyes.

"A *MiG*?" the slim, black-haired woman asked after he hung up. She sounded incredulous.

"Listen," Edward said. "I lied to them. But I'm not going to lie to you. We might need your meat locker."

Esther looked as if she might faint. "What's happenin' heah?" she asked. "Stella? What's this awl abauht?" Her drawl had thickened and her face was sweaty and pasty.

"Just you," Edward said to Stella.

She examined him shrewdly and pointed to his belt and rock hammer, still slung in its leather holder. "You're a rock hound?"

"A geologist," he said.

"Where?"

"University of Texas," he said.

"Do you know Harvey Bridge from—"

"U.C. Davis. Sure."

"He comes here in the winter . . ." She seemed markedly less skeptical. "Esther, go get the sheriff. He's at the café talking to Ed."

"I don't think we should let everybody in on this," Edward suggested. *Bad feeling.*

"Not even the sheriff?"

He glanced at the ceiling. "I don't know . . ."

"Okay, then, Esther, just go home. If you don't hear from me in a half an hour, go get the sheriff and give him this man's description." She nodded at Edward.

"You'll be okay heah?" Esther asked, short thick fingers rapping delicately on the counter.

"I'll be fine. Go home."

The store had only one customer, a young kid looking at the paperback and magazine rack. With both Stella and Edward staring at him, he soon moved out through the door, shrugging his shoulders and rubbing his neck.

"Now, what's going on?" Stella asked.

Edward instructed Minelli to drive the Land Cruiser around to the back of the store. He motioned for Stella to follow him through the rear door. "We'll need a cool dark place," he told her as they waited.

"I'd like to know what's happening," she repeated, her jaw firm, head inclined slightly to one side. The way she stood, feet planted solidly on the linoleum and hands on her hips, told Edward as plain as words she would stand for no more evasion.

"There's a new cinder cone out there," he said. Minelli parked the vehicle near the door. Talking rapidly to keep his story from crashing into splinters, Edward opened the Land Cruiser's back gate, pulling aside the tent and moist towels. "I mean, not fresh . . . Just new. Not on any charts. It shouldn't be there. We found this next to it."

The miter-head lifted slightly, and the three sherry-colored eyes emerged to stare at the three of them. Reslaw stood by the store's far corner, keeping a lookout for gawkers.

To her credit, Stella did not scream or even grow pale. She actually leaned in closer. "It's not a fake," she said, as quickly convinced as he had been.

"No, ma'am."

"Poor thing . . . What is it?"

Edward suggested she stand back. They unloaded it and carried it through the delivery door into the refrigerated meat locker.

PERSPECTIVE

East Coast News Network interview with Terence Jacobi, lead singer for the Hardwires, September 30, 1996:

ECNN: Mr. Jacobi, your group's music has consistently preached—so to speak—the coming of the Apocalypse, from a rather radical Christian perspective. With two songs in the Top 40 and three records totaling ten million sales, you've obviously hit a nerve with the younger generation. How do you explain your music's popularity?

Jacobi (*Laughing, then snorting and blowing his nose*): Everybody knows, between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two, you've got only two best friends: your left hand and Christ. The whole world's out to get you. Maybe if the world went away, if God wiped the slate clean, we could get on with just being ourselves. God's a righteous God. He will send his angels to Earth to warn us. We believe that, and it shows in our music.

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October 3

Harry Feinman stood near the back of the boat untangling line from the spindle of his reel. Arthur let the boat drift with the slow-moving water. He dropped anchor a dozen yards south of the big leaning pine that marked the deep, watery hollow where, it was rumored, fishermen had pulled in so many big ones the past few years. Marty played with the minnows in the bait bucket and opened the cardboard containers full of dirt and worms. The sun was a dazzle outlined by thin high clouds; the air smelled of the river, a fresh, pungent greenness[^], and