

SCOTT MINAR

Flying Saucers

“So, I have a question only a physicist can answer.” Steve’s eyebrows rise. I’m telling him the story of a college friend and I standing in the grass at an outdoor concert. We are heads-up and stargazing, searching the night sky when we are startled by an enigma: a distinctive flash of light, a bright shooting star making a perfect right angle in the dark expanse overhead. We are sure it’s a UFO.

After explaining, I ask Steve, a NASA scientist who specializes in solar winds, “Was that a UFO?”

“A perfect right angle?” Steve echoed.

“Sure! It was perfect.”

Before I utter the last syllable though, he adds, “From what perspective?”

That pulls me up short, mind slower than tongue, one on earth and one in a spaceship travelling at the speed of light. I understood what he was suggesting, but couldn’t stop myself from asking anyway, “What do you mean?”

Steve explains that in a three-dimensional world, if we shift perspective—i.e. the particular point of view from which we observe—then the degree of angle also shifts. He tries to let me down easy—offering that patient, kindly look physicists use when they realize the rest of the world isn’t seeing things accurately. “It was a meteor. They split when entering the atmosphere. It happens all the time.”



The conversation changed me.

Despite my short career as a philosophy major at university, I had to admit that I'd failed to ask the right questions or to consider the limits of subjectivity in a grand universe of unfathomable scale.

When it came to inquiry, I had to start over—even though I'd graduated from college long ago and was a teacher myself.



I've loved every sci-fi film I've ever seen (though I've skipped a few on principle), every sci-fi story or novel or investigative journalism book I've ever read. Pitiful, I know. I've worked hard to earn the *nerd* label. All sci-fi fans will tell us their love is based on three things: escapism times three (sorry real estate moguls). The world backs you up against a figurative adolescent dumpster in the alley, and this is the way out—perfect, unassailable. Fantasy can't be disproven as narrative reality. It is itself. It is “what it is”: a nice way to get away to a nicer place—sealed, positive ending secured and locked down. I've been like this since I was a child, and I'm not alone. The Star Trek franchise's apparent immortality is evidence of sci-fi's power and appeal—to a large number of a certain predisposition anyway. I was reading Kurt Vonnegut's novels in high school study hall, while taking a C in English. Raised on Ursula Le Guin, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury, I read books like *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*; or *The Martian Chronicles*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and *Dune*. I gobbled speculative narratives up, a voracious reader of what Steven King's mother called “trash,” as distinguished (by her) from the even more pejorative term, “bad trash.” I binge-read Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods* in an afternoon. My friends and I were on a journey. It was the 1970s; everyone was.

In one of the Golden Era science fiction stories I consumed back then—I can't remember the title or who wrote it—two children are being raised by their grandparents on a recently terraformed Jupiter. When an intergalactic social worker comes to check on them, she discovers that the children are receiving letters from their space-travelling, circus-performer parents once a week. But, as it turns out, the parents haven't really written a missive in years. They gave up shortly after dropping the kids off in their flying saucer. The grandfather started writing the parents' weekly letters for them, out of pity for the children. When the social worker confronts him about this, she says, "You have to tell them what's going on! You can't treat your grandchildren this way. I've always believed that the truth will set you free."

He responds, "And I have always believed it is the dreams that keep us going."

In retrospect, I was more like the social worker in that story, I suppose, but also, in truth, had the qualities of both. It's not easy to say which character in the tale is right—because of course both of them are. This little dialogue gem was one of the turning points that reset my perspective. Sometimes a question or a debate can be a Proteus moment. It can wake us up.



The term "flying saucer" was probably invented around 1930, a year after my parents were born. But by 1952, the year before I came into this world, it had been replaced by the Air Force term, "UFO," the abbreviation for "unidentified flying object." The term "flying discs" is also sometimes used. Contrary to popular belief, sightings of disc-shaped flying objects may have been recorded as early as the late medieval period. Imagine Arthur and Lancelot riding toward Camelot only to be accosted by the giant robot *Klaatu* from the 1950s version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. This is even crazier than Mark Twain's gambit in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Hank

Morgan, the main character of Twain's time travel novel, merely brings nineteenth century technology to Camelot in order to save himself and to prosper, at least for a while, as Arthur's advisor and a replacement for Merlin.

I used to live and teach in Elmira, New York where Sam Clemens and his family are interred. I would sometimes ride a bicycle to the Clemens/Langdon gravesite at Woodlawn Cemetery—a sprawling, old New England graveyard of immense natural beauty—to sit on a stone bench nearby and eat my lunch while meditating on literature's limitations beneath the giant oaks and maples shading that hillside. The school where I taught, Elmira College, was steeped in Twain studies and Clemens lore. A tour bus pulled up to campus several times a day. Visitors would get out, walk thirty yards or so across our college green filled with elms, cottonwoods, and oaks—their leaves' fluttering an atonal but nonetheless beautiful paean to upstate New York's unique and pleasant ambiance—and arrive at Twain's study to hear a brief lecture about its history. The construction is an octagon, a faceted circular geometry, and was built for him by his liberal and somewhat wealthy in-laws, the Langdon's. The study was originally placed at Quarry Farm on a promontory overlooking the Chemung River valley, where Sam and Livy, his wife, spent their summers and where many of his most famous novels were written. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is often referred to as a “groundbreaking” science fiction novel. But there were earlier versions of a time travel story—H.G. Wells' *The Chronic Argonauts*, for example, was published in 1888, a year before Twain's novel.

In those days, I often used to think of Twain's study as a kind of flying saucer. Ridiculous, I know, but sometimes one kind of imagining provokes another. It was fun to think of Twain taking off in that thing, winging west toward the Mississippi. What kind of innocence story—preserved or lost—would that be? Once during a seminar on teaching *Huck Finn* conducted by Vic Doyno of the

University of Buffalo, we argued for a week over the question of whether or not Huck Finn changes over the course of his eponymous novel.

I mused then, and still do, that an abused child always needs a generous eye, so I have often thought for reasons I would learn much later in my own life.



A funny thing happened to me once involving memory. My friend, bio-psychologist Patrick Drumm, has always warned me that memory is highly unreliable. I already knew a bit about that from reading a bundle of books about well-known criminal trials. Manson Family prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi famously argues that eyewitness testimony is largely misunderstood as evidence and is in fact often either dubious or simply wrong. Memory is typically recursive, a process involving subjective recovery of objective events, with emphasis on the word *subjective*.

I told a story for years about my father's illness and early death. He died of massive heart failure in the 1970s brought on by complications from adolescent diabetes. I often talked about the events that led to his illness. I told the story this way:

He had a car accident when he was sixteen. He was gravely injured and suffered a collapsed lung that needed to be re-inflated via the insertion of a tube through an incision just below his rib cage, a silver-dollar sized pucker on his skin there for the rest of his life. It looked like someone had poked his side with a giant, invisible pencil and then left it embedded there. A telephone pole had collapsed on top of his car. Electrical wires everywhere, it took some time to get him out. He was rushed to the hospital where he became so ill that he lost all of his hair and teeth over the following weeks. He eventually dropped to 93 lbs. and was given his Last Rights by a priest. The cross they gave him had a skull-and-crossbones on it, the kind reserved for those about to die. Then a day came when doctors told his family he wouldn't last the night. He recounted a marvelous dream

he had then in which he was floating in outer space and had a choice to leave earth or return to it. He decided to return, and when he woke the next morning his condition had improved. He defied remarkable odds and lived—but his pancreas was gone. He took two shots of insulin a day for the rest of his life and hid his condition from most people—afraid it would make him unemployable. Eventually, he became a cop though and told thrilling stories about his adventures in law enforcement, the dangers he faced routinely.

I was talking with my mother a few years ago about this story, and I said to her. “You know, when dad got his diabetes, after the car accident.”

She said, “What accident?”

Memory reset.

“There wasn’t an accident?” I asked.

“No. He had appendicitis. They botched his surgery. After he came home, he became more and more ill. It was your Aunt who suggested he had to go back to the hospital. That’s when they discovered they left something inside his abdomen and he developed sepsis from it.”

Memory is useless. Why had I turned that narrative around in my head toward this elaborate, more-than-a-little absurd version? I instantly knew she was right.

I’d heard the story before. But why reinvent it over time? What mechanism inside me wanted it to be a car accident? What film was I watching inside my own head, changing the narrative to suit what or whom exactly? Of course, sometimes people simply omit the truth and lie by omission.

One of the more comic stories I tell involves how I didn’t know my mother’s first name until I was fifty years old.

My father was a tall German/Scots- or -English American, depending on how we trace the tree—fair-skinned, dirty blonde hair and striking gray eyes. We are Von Heller's on the German side, and part of the Virginia/West Virginia Byrd's on the Scots-English side. Apparently, my ancestor William Byrd I was the founder of Richmond, Virginia, and our tree includes Byrd the explorer and Byrd the senator, among others. My mother, on the other hand, is a short Sicilian woman—from the Leta and Frasca clans—whose first language was Italian. She was born at home on Cleveland's east side and is a great keeper of secrets. She would never tell me her birth date. My sister-in-law finally got it out of her: March 25, 1929.

We were at lunch with my mother's side of the family, Aunt Jean and cousin Rose. My aunt was talking about how they had moved from the Collinwood area of Cleveland to Murray Hill, or Little Italy as it was and is still called. Aunt Jean said, "Yeah, that's when we stopped calling you Anna."

My mother said, "I hated that name. They always called me Anna Banana."

I interrupted. "Wait, what do you mean they called you *Anna*?" My mother's name is Nancy.

Nancy said, "That's what they called me in the neighborhood."

I said, "So your name is Anna?"

Aunt Jean chimed in for her, "Nope."

I was really confused. I looked at my Aunt, whose real name is Mary (every Italian family understands why a middle name is sometimes needed in cases like these—too many Mary's) and said, "What's her name?" a smile of shock now creeping into my expression.

Nancy, my mother, answered, "*Annunciata*."

"*Annunciata*?" I parroted in absolute disbelief.

“Yeah, that’s why they called me *Anna*. But then my Aunt told my mother, ‘Call her Nancy. That’s a good name in America.’”

I was floored. “So, I’m fifty years old and just learning that my mother’s name is *Annunciata*?”

I had intimations about my mother’s propensity to keep things secret before, but here was definitive proof—and a mystery. Why keep that from your children for so long? Without my aunt, I might never have known my mother’s name.

But the years have taught me a few things. Who’s to say what that truth or those omissions really indicate? The past itself is much more of a mystery than we may know.

Annunciata is for the Annunciation, when Gabriel came to the Virgin Mary and told her she would be the mother of the Son of God. He told Mary to name her son *Yeshua*. Many Christians observe the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25th—my mother’s birthday. My grandmother named her daughter as a good Catholic should, for the feast associated with her appearance in the world. This is also an approximation of the northern vernal equinox, nine full months before the birth of Christ in December. I was born on December 22nd. So my mother and I are a small reflection of a much bigger picture, a longer story. Aren’t we all in one way or another.

How strange the days unravel over time. What lessons hide inside them waiting to be relearned and unfolded, unearthed or unwrapped like a present.



There’s one more flying saucer I have to tell you about.

When I was a boy, our family had trouble. It was one of the things that led me—along with so many others, under what I’m sure are similar circumstances—to seek the solace of science fiction and fantasy. One day, my mother came home as usual, and my parents had their typical knock-

down, drag-out fight. This kind of thing happened, to the best of my imperfect recollection, a few times a week for roughly five years—from the time I was eleven till I was sixteen. These were epic screaming matches, and my mother, a classically trained singer and stage actress, could really belt it out to the air. My father, who was paradoxically high-tempered and jovial, typically sat for a while and listened before chiming in. Then they'd be done for the evening. On this occasion though, my father, was more quiet than usual. Eventually, when he'd had enough, he picked up the saucer underneath his coffee cup and threw it across the room toward my mother where it shattered against the wall above the stove.

My mother went apoplectic with rage.

He wasn't trying to hit her. It was just a reflection of something else that was coming apart, something else that was broken.

The chronic angers of that house were a firing range, a dumping ground, a laboratory where forensic scientists might map the troubles of a family constituted too early by people who were too young and full of life's fire. Whatever it was that was broken then, however, was not to remain so, even though the effects of it would go on for a long time. Hope springs eternal. As an adult, I recognize how difficult our lives can sometimes be under stress and strain, dreams deferred or absent or impossible to reach from here.

What to do with all of that. I am still asking the question most days.

So I used my flying-saucers narratives to lift me away.

It took a long time, but I figured out years later, that I was one of those pieces of shattered ceramic, splintered by impact against the wall. Our family's physics were not a solitary thing or a unique event. Many of us have similar stories. I was split first in two, and then into many pieces by the anger I was raised with and under. Then I tried to add to it myself, but it wasn't in my nature. I learned later in life, when I had to, that young children absorb rage as guilt for their own

wrongdoing, which is of course a chimera. We blame ourselves—because we can't face the fact of such anger, its visceral face, and we don't have the tools to manage it the way an adult might. It seems to us a black hole, a huge breach in the psyche where truth can't be faced, can't be denied—trapped at the edge of the singularity, an orbit we will never break. I tried unsuccessfully for a long time to understand and manage these things. I ran from and then into the walls and ceilings around me like some trapped, frantic bird. But in the end, I couldn't escape myself—or by myself. I needed help and I got it. Someone opened a door for me, and I went out—left with only the puzzle of memories like a giant jigsaw on the living room floor.

I ran toward those other flying saucers as a way of running away from the one flying across our kitchen. It's a small truth perhaps, but it means a lot to me.



Memory is like an old VCR. We have a tape that we occasionally rewind. But every time we do, the replay is different. The narrative changes, things shuffle—are reset or reimagined. Imagination may be part of that. It is a kind of Jungian shadow following our recall and presenting, as it were, a different picture, one that is moving along with us. If I see the flying saucers one way, my parents are coming to get me, to take me back home to love and safety. If I see them another way, it's the opposite. But what is the truth? Grappling with the truth or the past is like lying down on a granite slab and wrestling with it.

We can't change it, there's nothing to win, and it doesn't fight back. So as the shrinks say, we are left with a choice and the ability to choose.

That's the point of the story I love best, when the character chooses goodness and love even in the depths of space and at the cost of her/his own life. There's a bigger picture here, a

widescreen we all sit in front of. The projected light is behind us, but there's nothing to see if we stare into it. Only the story and its beauty make the difference.