

## Lounge Act

David ran into the terminal, stopped; no employees at the counters. Travelers and employees stood in front of the monitors, faces turned up. “What’s going on?” he said aloud. A man in a gray suit turned, looked at David, eyed him up and down. David tried to brush the red powder off his clothing and hair.

“They cancelled all flights because of this dust storm. Looks like you’ve been out in the stuff,” the man said. David stopped brushing mid-stroke. Over the man’s shoulder, he caught the news on the monitors. This couldn’t be happening.

Video of the downed jet played on the screen. Through the grainy footage, David saw red dust covered the jet. A reporter pointed, the camera panned to a small plane still smoldering at the end of a different runway.

Just yesterday his face appeared on those monitors telling the world the comet posed no threat to anyone. “We’ll be in for some spectacular sunsets,” he told the reporter when she asked what they could expect. He hadn’t mentioned the red dust.

Why should he frighten people? He turned from the televisions and walked into a nearby airport lounge. When the bartender approached, he ordered a whisky.

Astronomers in 1910 triggered massive hysteria when they announced that poisonous gas spewed from comets. People panicked when the earth passed through the tail of Halley’s Comet. Newspapers reported that some committed suicide.

But nothing happened. Astronomers learned not to share certain information with the public. Comets got blamed for bringing all kinds of things to our planet, including UFO’s. This comet acted different. Most sun grazing comets fall into the sun. This one survived. Bigger than any comet he’d ever seen, at least the size of a small planet.

Because it moved so close to the sun, nobody had good measurements yet. He planned to make those calculations today with the university telescopes. He'd left early to catch his flight to the conference. Now he wished he'd cancelled his trip.

"I tried to tell you. You wouldn't listen."

David winced, swore under his breath. Manny had ferreted out his hiding place. He'd forgotten all about the old guy. The news of the dust storm on the TV's distracted him. Manny climbed up on a bar stool next to him.

"That's not a comet. It's a planet that'll cause a whole lot of destruction before it gets where it's going. You can warn the people, help them prepare."

David felt his throat constricting. "Prepare for what?" He ran his hand through his hair, saw it shake. "Manny, you're no astronomer. Hell, you're not even a scientist. You know nothing about how we track near-earth objects. We've watched this one for weeks."

Manny leaned closer to David, wild eyes flashed. "I don't know all the science you do, but I know history. We're about to relive it."

"Oh, come on," David said. "I spend my life making sense of things that fly around in space. Someone on my team calculates the projected path of this ...thing ... every hour non-stop since we first saw it a few weeks ago. I ... we have it under control."

Manny sat back, touched his fingertips together, eyes locked on David's, lowered his head, one bushy eyebrow lifted. "You mean the dust?"

David stiffened his back. "Localized phenomena. Look, you spend your days digging myths out of ancient manuscripts, go around spreading pseudo-science. How do you expect anyone to take you serious?"

Manny leaned forward, raised a finger, paused, then sat back without a word.

David turned away, swirled the ice in his glass, threw back a slug. The dust continued to fall outside the window of the airport lounge like red snow. He thought about finding another place to wait out the storm.

“Congratulations. I heard they named the planet after you,” Manny said.

David slammed his drink down on the counter. Whiskey sloshed over the rim. “Fat lot of good that is now. Besides, it’s a comet.”

Manny chuckled. “Amazing you happened to show up when my plane went off the runway. Fortuitous, really.”

David stared at him, opened his mouth to speak, closed it, turned back to his drink.

“I see you’re still skeptical, my friend. If I tell you what will happen next, then what will happen after that, will you at least consider what I have to say?”

David let out a breath. Did he have a choice?

“Go ahead old man. Doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere. If this dust doesn’t stop in ten minutes, I’m headed back to Boulder.”

Manny pulled some papers out of his old worn leather briefcase. A small color snapshot fluttered to the bar. David picked it up, captivated by the intelligent blue eyes of a self-possessed woman who looked to be in her early thirties. He handed it to Manny.

“Cynthia,” Manny said. “She’s like you – a scientist. Graduated from Cal Tech. Now she studies earthquakes at Berkeley.” He paused, took a deep breath and let it out, staring at the picture. “My own daughter doesn’t believe me.”

He put the picture away, held up a few worn pages. “Did you read my last paper?”

David looked away.

“I didn’t think so. I’ll try to summarize.”

David hunched over the bar, looked back at Manny, listened.

“As the planet gets closer to earth, this dust we’re experiencing will mix with ash. The ash/dust mixture will contaminate fresh water wherever it falls. We’ve got to cover our reservoirs fast.”

David sat up. He hadn’t listened to Manny in the last conference, felt sorry for the old professor especially when everyone laughed at him. He’d agreed to have the guy ejected because he’d come there as someone’s guest, not scheduled to present anything.

“People have to get prepared right now. They’ll need enough food and water to last for at least a few weeks. Rivers will turn to blood. Fish will die, affecting the entire food chain.”

“Birds will drop out of the sky for no apparent reason,” David said, amusement in his voice. He couldn’t believe what he heard.

“Exactly. This will cause real problems in metropolitan areas.” Manny leaned toward David. “People exposed to ash will get sick. Some will die if they remain unprotected too long.”

David squirmed on the barstool. Death?

“Everyone will need to stay indoors.” He put his fingertips side by side on the bar, drew them apart as if applying tape. “... seal their windows. Keep the red dust out. Besides water, sheet plastic and tape will fly off the store shelves.”

“Slow down, Manny. You’re talking crazy again. We haven’t analyzed the powder yet. We don’t know if the stuff poses any kind of a threat. This kind of talk sounds, well, premature.”

Manny stood up. “In a few days this dust will turn to hail-sized pebbles that’ll destroy crops all over the world. Make a deafening sound when they hit the earth.”

“You’ve watched too many disaster movies, Manny. That’s not science.”

“The meteorites will knock out power everywhere. Communication systems will fail all over the globe, take out most of our satellites. How that will affect our way of life?”

“According to our best calculations, that scenario’s impossible,” David said. “We’ll lose one or two satellites. Most of the dust will burn up in the atmosphere. Happens all the time. Backup satellites are already up there.”

Manny paced back and forth. People at nearby tables stared. “Next we’ll pass through sheets of petroleum that will mix with the pebble-sized hail.”

He raised one arm high, hand outstretched, lowered it down to the level of his knees, as if catching an infield hit. “Atmospheric friction will cause this deadly hail to catch fire when it falls.” Most of the bar patrons turned to watch him. Every other conversation stopped.

“Sheets of petroleum? Manny, this dust is nothing new.” David paused, smiled. “There’s just a lot of it today. That’s why we’re seeing it reach the earth.”

Several people in the bar stood, walked toward Manny. David looked around, smiled again. “There’s no oil sitting in space. Lots of dust, no oil.” He waved his hand, dismissing the idea.

Manny raised his voice. “Spontaneous fires will break out all over the world. Forests will be incinerated. Cities will burn.” He threw both arms wide.

A group of evangelists walking by the bar stopped, listened, nodded their heads in agreement. “Amen,” one of them said. Others stopped behind them, looked inside the bar.

Still seated, David held one palm out. “Fire doesn’t fall from the sky.” He spread both arms wide, palms up. “There’s no evidence for that.”

Manny pointed to David, intensity in his eyes. “Peshtigo fires 1871. Look it up.” He turned away from David, back toward the crowd. David pictured Manny in front of a class.

“The falling debris,” Manny’s hand shot in the air again, “will grow larger until that debris plummets down like artillery shells.” The hand dropped. “The fiery meteorites will last for days.”

“Fiery meteorites? Manny, we’re talking a little red dust here, no big deal.” David turned to the crowd. “People, this is just a comet. We’ve all seen them before.”

“The fiery meteorites will finish off crops in every country of the earth, burn them to ash. About this time the earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic activity will begin in earnest,” Manny said.

The crowd grew. David pushed off the stool, stared at Manny. Preposterous. He put up his hands in protest. “You can’t say these things.”

Manny asked the crowd, “Have you ever experienced a powerful earthquake?”

“Northridge, ‘84,” a man in the back said. “Sylmar, ‘71,” a woman nearby said. “Loma Prieta, ‘89,” another man said.

“Those were nothing compared to the earthquakes that will happen when the planet comes close enough. The gravitational pull will rip apart Earth’s tectonic plates with an indescribable force.”

David turned to leave. Manny didn’t take the hint. David watched him climb on a low cocktail table. No wonder people thought he acted crazy.

“While this happens, clouds, darkness will cover the earth. Smoke and ash will grow thicker and hotter by the hour making it more difficult to breathe--”

“Stop,” David shouted. “Dammit. I’ve heard enough of your doomsday prophecies.” He pointed his finger at Manny. “What we’ve got now is a comet passing by. Nothing more.”

He walked back to Manny, stood in front of him. “A comet can’t cause the end of the world. You can’t go around telling people this kind of nonsense. You’ll create panic.”

The crowd pressed closer. “Call security,” someone at the back of the bunch said. David ignored the stares. He couldn’t let this go on.

“Where did you come up with this crap? No, wait, don’t tell me. You read it in an ancient manuscript you found in the basement of some old church. You believe the words tell the story of what happened to earth sometime in our distant past.”

Manny’s expression softened. Had David hit a nerve? “Well, I don’t believe any of it,” David continued. “You have no evidence for all this garbage.”

“I didn’t say the meteorites will cause the end of the world,” Manny said, his voice quieter, “but the end of the world as we know it.” He turned back to the crowd.

“The planet will bring a whole lot of destruction, but won’t hit us. It’ll come up alongside then overtake us in the same orbit around the sun.”

The bar now filled with people; standing room only. Manny held center stage. The man’s boldness impressed David. If only he wouldn’t talk nonsense.

“See, the two planets execute a docking maneuver.” He held his arms out wide, hands open, palms up, fingers spread as if holding two planets in his hands. “Eventually they will come so close that the magnetic poles of the two planets will align.”

David threw up his hands in exasperation. He paced around in a small circle. “Oh now I’ve heard it all. What you’re saying sounds impossible. Contrary to all the laws of motion. Come down off that table. You’re scaring everybody.”

Manny’s face glowed with excitement. “When the planets snap together in a magnetic embrace,” he brought one hand closer to the other, then twisted his wrists so the imaginary

planets flipped toward each other, “the sun will look like it’s gone backward. The stars will rise and set with incredible speed.”

David heard a few oh’s and ah’s, amen’s from the crowd that grew larger still. Someone said, “I see what you’re saying.” He saw several people nodding their heads. Were all of them idiots?

“The oncoming planet’s larger than the earth so both will rotate at a much slower speed once they get together. When that happens, you’d better hope you’re not living anywhere north of a large body of water.”

David shook his head. “I know I’m going to regret this. Why?”

“You’re asking me? Come on, David. You’re a planetary scientist. When the earth slows down, where does all the water in the ocean go? Back to the poles, of course.”

“You tell him,” someone shouted.

Manny smiled. “I’d love to see that view from space when the planets snap together. Think of all the water in the Gulf of Mexico. I’d hate to live in the Mississippi valley.”

“Are you through?” David said to Manny.

Manny stepped down from the table. “No, but that’s enough for now. I wouldn’t want to overwhelm you,” he said, then folded his arms.

Two men in uniform appeared, grabbed David by the arm.

“Hey, let go of me. You want that guy. He’s the crazy one. Can’t you see what he’s done?” David had a hard time convincing them not to take him away. Why had he let this nut case rant on?

The guard released David, stayed to watch the action. “Stop playing Chicken Little,” he said to Manny. “The sky is not falling,”



Manny looked beyond David's shoulder, "Yes it is. Look." He pointed to the television monitors. The subtitle on the display read "Seattle – Fire from the Sky."

Manny pointed to the evangelists. "Can I get an Amen?" All obliged in chorus. The uproar of the crowd died down. All heads turned to watch, listened.

David saw what looked like heavy hail falling; only not hail. Pebbles fell in sheets like rain. The newscaster's voice said it looked like fire mixed with sand.

Fire from the sky, something he'd said many times before could never happen. David watched, horrified, puzzled. In a moment the burning hail disappeared.

A news helicopter flew out, filmed the destruction. The video displayed several fires in the city. The falling gravel stopped. David felt his shoulders slump.

"What you see is a small sample of what we're in for." Manny stood by David's side again. "The fire and hail will return, more widespread with each passing hour. We've got a small window before travel becomes impossible."

Manny placed a hand on David's shoulder, faced him. "I'm going to that conference to try to make a difference. Will you introduce me? Let me present evidence from the historical record. I've got all the information I right here." Manny raised the briefcase.

David shrugged Manny's hand off his shoulder. "I wouldn't be caught dead with you. Your theories sound crazy. So are you. I'm sorry I gave you a ride. You're not going to the conference with me."

David walked away. How could anyone in their right mind believe this stuff? He hoped to never see Manny Volynsky again.