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The Mistake

Michael Zwetsch
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"On a snowy winter night, Max Thornton, a columnist for the New York Times, sees an old man waiting for the bus. The old man wears an agitated expression, and glances around furtively into the dark city shadows. His lips move noticeably, and Max overhears a panicked, subdued whisper."

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On a snowy winter night, Max Thornton, a columnist for the New York Times, sees an old man waiting for the bus. The old man wears an agitated expression, and glances around furtively into the dark city shadows. His lips move noticeably, and Max overhears a panicked, subdued whisper.

"They’re ready . . . already know how to use the gravitational assist. Jupiter is nearing occultation . . . soon . . . God help us! They know how to use it!"

The old man’s voice rises in pitch as he utters these last two exclamations, and the reporter hears them quite distinctly. Intrigued by the venerable old man’s queer words and wildly disheveled appearance, Max takes a seat next to the old man, who immediately stops muttering to himself and stares penetratingly at the young reporter.

“How do you do? My name is Max Thornton. Ever read the New York Times?”

“Ayuh. You wrote that bleeding-heart editorial about the Brady Bill. Want to get the scoop on something really big? If you knew what I knew, you might just start to rethink that article.”

Thornton smirks at the old man. “Try me,” he says.

The old man stares long and hard at the young columnist, sizing up his balls, perhaps, then begins:

“They’re the reason this dang planet of ours is so messed up. It’s all their fault,” the old man spits out, along with a few small flecks of saliva that land on Max’s cheek.

Wiping them off, Thornton replies, “Who exactly are they?”

The old man jerks his head around then spins it back again, as if he were trying to catch someone sneaking up behind him. He then answers the columnist in a low whisper,

“They arrived on our world in 1908. Remember the Tunguska Event?”

Thornton nods, having read about the queer explosion that occurred in the Siberian wilderness in 1908. Thoroughly unexplained, the blast had decimated the primeval forest for hundreds of square miles and had been estimated at being 100 times more powerful than any nuclear bomb.

“What are you saying, old man?” Thornton’s smirk twists into a mocking grin.

“Listen I say! They crash-landed. Disrupted the space-time continuum, they did! They were desperate, though. Their star was in

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the last phase of supernova, and their system was dying. They needed a new world to colonize, and ours was their primary target.

"They despise us. Want to know why? They're not compatible with our planet's life. Oh, sure, they are completely organic, and resemble earth-like organisms in every way, but their carbon molecules are left-handed! All life on Earth is based upon right-handed carbon molecules. They can't eat what we eat, mate with us, or contract any of our diseases. But they look exactly like us. And do you want to know what's worse? They want to get rid of us. They are gradually replacing all life on Earth with their life. Haven't you ever heard of global warming? Mass extinctions? Who do you think caused World War I, World War II, the extermination of the Jews, the Cold War? Who do you think killed JFK?"

Max stops grinning, and puts this question to the old man: "So where are these aliens?"

They are everywhere. When they came, there were only a small number of them. But now they've multiplied. They had to flee their dying planet very quickly, and they could only make a one-way trip. Good thing for us they must have lost their luggage along the way, too.

"But now, they're building a machine. It functions like a gravitational magnet, and it can transport an army of deadly weapons, machines, and equipment from their now dead planet in just a few hours. Enough firepower to destroy all human life on Earth, and enough equipment to terraform the Earth completely. And do you know what the only thing stopping them from doing that is? Just time. One year, three months, and 17 days to be exact. When Jupiter occults their star, and when their device will suck black death from the stars onto our world!"

Just then, the bus roars into view. It had begun to rain. The old man mutters a hurried farewell and scurries onto the bus.

"Wait!" Max cries, but as he looks into his wallet, he discovers he does not possess exact change.

The bus roars off, like a lion snatching away a juicy morsel. Thornton kicks the growing puddle underfoot, and stares at the bus receding in the distance.

What a crazy old man, he thinks. Where did he ever get that notion?

As he walks home, Max Thornton whispers into his tape recorder, which had been running all along: "He was wrong. We didn't shoot JFK."

--Michael Zwetsch