

Y2K

I wake a dawn in the spot between the tennis courts and the parking lot. Someone has removed the little hut that I had previously made my home, but a few broken twigs remain. I read a story once about a tracker that was so skillful, he could spot a freshly broken twig on the forest floor to trail his quarry. I've never understood how this could be possible. How does a twig appear "freshly broken?" It's one of those things I read once and subsequently think about all the time against my will. Had I tracked someone here in my sleep? And I just managed to wake in time to miss them?

I climb back in my open window. When I lock it this time, I line the sill with anything fragile, breakable, or noisy that I can find. Maybe I won't be able to sleep through exiting if I break a bunch of shit on my way out. The sleepwalking was a new phenomenon for me so I hoped I could end it by taking precautions. Ever since Ron disappeared I was waking up in the spot between the parking lot and the tennis courts. Someone had built and removed a miniature dwelling there, crudely made of sticks this mysterious spot was also the vantage point from which someone had filmed a short clip of my street and conveyed it to me anonymously in a paper bag through the drop box where I worked at Blockbuster.

Mysteries abound.

Ron had been my manager at Blockbuster. A 15 year old with gigantism he had run away from home and confided in me that he got his job as my manager with the help of a fake ID. I hadn't seen him since the night I accompanied him to deliver a paper bag package (similar in size and shape to the package I had received) to a cop on a stormy night. I knew he couldn't return to Blockbuster because our regional manager Peggy had evidence he was stealing from the store. Somehow, she had also found out that he was only 15.

When I got to work I couldn't help but scan the parking lot looking for signs of Ron. I believed the tape had arrived in the drop box to be a message intended for me, but I didn't know yet what it meant. In the brief footage of my street the only event captured is me, riding by on my bike, but the camera doesn't follow me. The view remains fixed. Watching it repeatedly, I kept my eyes open for more clues, especially hoping that Ron himself would show up and explain.

There's a scene in ~~bad movies irresistible to some misguided directors~~ any movie with a bus. The good guy spots the ominous bad guy at a distance, say across a busy street. He tries to catch him, but a bus passes by, and he's no longer there. It's unintentionally funny, because you can't help but think of the guy ducking and running after the bus for the sake of "vanishing in thin air" Sadly, this occurs in the X-Files more often than it should. I know it happens in *M* (the story of an entire town terrorized by a pedophile until the town in turn terrorizes him.) maybe for the first time in cinema history. In *The Sting* Robert Redford runs out into the street chased by toughs. He seemingly disappears, but we see that he is hanging on to a street sweeper that safely carries him past his pursuers. If I were to catch a glimpse of Ron, I would fully expect to see him vanish without a trace before I can ask him for an explanation.

At Blockbuster, frat guys pressured me to remove their late fees. I made the mistake of telling someone once that we can remove late these anytime we see fit. Now word has spread to a bunch of people that I don't know thinking they can quickly make a confederate of me. I have since learned that Peggy does keep track of how much in late fees we forgive. I didn't want to be fired for giving freebies to jerks that wouldn't normally speak to me.

It doesn't help that I cannot think of an excuse on the fly for why I can't/ won't refund their accounts. I simply say that I cannot refund late fees, and when they start to hold up the line, I repeat myself, pulling a weird grimace and nodding my head toward my co-worker. I guess I'm hoping to communicate that I can't admit my transgressive power in front of a

fellow Blockbuster employee. The guy in front of me understands whatever he thinks he understands, because he winks at me and says, "Thanks."

At the end of my shift I used the VCR/TV to view the tape again. It was only a few minutes long. I noticed this time that the center of the viewfinder wasn't my dorm room window but more accurately the sky above the trees. Layered with wispy clouds over the big puffy variety, the sky that day looked like it could turn stormy. When I rode by on my bike I was just a tiny detail in a much larger scene. I rewound it and focused all my attention on the center of the screen and that's when I saw it. Like the person in a gorilla suit in the middle of a basketball game - at the same moment that I ride by a great object appears in the sky. At first it looks just like the clouds suddenly darkening, but it's more accurate to say the clouds resolve into a harder smoother shape. An unmistakable shape right out of Mulder's, I WANT TO BELIEVE poster. It looked like Ron, or whoever filmed, this had documented a UFO appearing in the middle of the day. I was tempted to watch it on repeat, but I worried about damaging the tape. I felt secretive about it for some reason and shut the TV off before I had to answer questions from my coworkers.

After work, I join a party in progress that is exactly like every party I've been to, in that the bathtub in the one working bathroom is filled with ice and beer, and there is not enough attention paid to the fact that some party goers might prefer to pee into a toilet rather than the shrubbery near the front door. The environment is increasingly hostile to my sensibilities since everyone has started talking about Y2K ceaselessly. Equal parts fear of the end of the world and on-up-man-ship of mansplaining the code involved, a huddle of feckless students argued over the ramifications.

"You'll see. The banking system will come to a halt. The chaos will be immense."

"Not to mention utilities. There won't be clean water after three days."

“The important thing is to have seeds. Bottled water is a waste of time. You gotta plan long term.”

Still. I wanted to be around people. I wanted to understand my own feelings of worry that I would be taken for a wacko if I shared the footage with any one or how this might bring harm to Ron. When I turn from that conversation to a discussion of the symbolism in *Stir of Echoes*, I decide it's time for bed.

I woke up happy to be in my own bed, but then I noticed the blood on both my hands. I checked myself for injuries, but was mostly just a cakey smear. Then I saw a concentration on the sheet over my abdomen. Years of movie watching have taught me that a belly injury is the worst way to die, but I don't find a gapping wound. I do find more and more blood the further down my body I search. The goriest mass surrounds my feet. A stagnant pain prompts me to check my toe. Unbelievably a tiny slice is the source of all this blood. A glance around the room and I see the crime scene clearly. A trail of blood follows a few feet from the broken mirror I kicked on my way to bed.

Mystery solved.

Earlier in the semester, before Ron disappeared, I experienced a super weird coincidence that had been the weirdest thing to ever happen to me up to that point. so I should have been prepared for finding evidence of aliens. I was reading *Lolita* for the first time. My mother asked me to read it along with her book club. None of the other women read it. They claimed the subject matter put them off of it, but in my experience, no one ever reads the book in a book club. I had an annotated copy, and I loved getting lost in the footnotes, admiring Nabokov's allusions to Edgar Allen Poe in Humbert Humbert's recounting of his first love, Annabel. Literature is like a scrim through which Nabokov viewed the world, an overlay of poetry and prose. Humbert's Annabel is Edgar Allen Poe's Annabel Lee, the

tragic, delicate child-bride whose death and burial take place “by the sea.” For our purposes, it would be wise to remember that Edgar Allen Poe invented the detective story.

The story of Humbert Humbert, a European academic that marries a single mother to get closer to her daughter, the true object of his affection victim is layer upon layer of cleverness. The fact that “Lolita” has come to mean a sexually advanced teenage girl is one of the greatest injustices of the patriarchy. Lolita’s suffering, her nightly tears, are glossed over in the popular memory of the character. The tormented, kidnapped victim of a rapist pedophile, her name is short-hand for a juvenile temptress. We’re told early in the story that Humbert is a murderer, so we anticipate his ultimate crime even as he rapes a child repeatedly.

A story also told from the point of view of the bad guy, there are multiple murders in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, but it’s not a murder mystery. Readers want the killer to get away with it, and we’re with him every step. We identify with his weakness, jealousy, and desire. Well, in the book, maybe not Matt Damon’s Ripley [1999 adaptation]. Highsmith tricks us into identifying with the bad guy. Humbert Humberts crop up in every era. Also released in 1999, Kevin Spacey makes us care what happens to the lecherous father in *American Beauty* in a way that Kevin Spacey turned out to be incapable of convincing us to route for 2019 Kevin Spacey.

Damon has a bacon number of two he was in the departed with Jack Nicholson, and Nicholson was in *A Few Good Men* with Kevin Bacon.

Lying in bed, I read the chapter in which Lolita’s mother is killed by a motorist just after she discovers Humbert’s secret love for her adolescent daughter by reading his journal. In her flight from the house, she is struck dead. The phone rings and Humbert answers. He cannot process that his neighbor tries to tell him his wife is dead, as she was with him only moments before.

Humbert says, "There's this man saying you've been killed, Charlotte," thinking that Mrs. Humbert is just beyond in the living room.

I put the book down and turned on the television in an attempt to better process/appreciate the scene. The rapid turn of events in the story and the horror of the mother's abrupt death, leaving her child alone with Humbert were all difficult to take in. I knew I could never be a literary genius like Nabokov, because my brain needed a dose *Law and Order* to counteract the perfection of *Lolita's* prose and twisty plot. Though I take issue with the way Lolita is remembered in the popular imagination, N.'s book doesn't offend me as it disgusts my mother's friends. (In the novel I read this week, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, a mom reads Lolita and declares it to be "a very silly book by a very clever man.") I find it difficult to stay in an art museum all day, too. Beauty exhaustion. I worried the phone would ring at that moment telling me that someone I had ambivalent feelings about was dead, because wouldn't that be the uncanny thing to happen at that precise moment?

Instead, the television was tuned to a black and white movie. An emotional woman runs out the front door, leaving a bewildered man to answer a ringing telephone. "Charlotte, there's a man saying you're dead." The station cuts to a commercial. I slowly realized that someone had made a movie of *Lolita*, and I didn't want to keep watching and spoil the plot.

I didn't know it had been made into a movie, It seemed like the least likely story to adapt to the screen considering the very young age of Lolita - 12. Plus, it was just more difficult in those days to confirm anything with the quick Internet search. Sure, there was internet, and I had done a few searches (mostly for Hanson. I don't like Hanson, but 80% of the early internet was Hanson fan sites. I lied to myself that this was somehow fascinating), but I didn't have access to the internet in my room. Turns out there was a 1997 film version, too, with Jeremy Irons! and an older actress to play Lolita. I spent the rest of the afternoon

feeling slightly creeped out by the universe in a way that rarely happens since the advent of Google.

All of this paled in comparison to having UFO footage in my possession. I'm pretty sure there was a government program to debunk UFO sightings that I've read about (or was it a trivia question?) Truly unknown sightings were determined to be clouds, stars, or weather balloons, since most UFOs were actually top-secret aircraft developed by the military. It was the strategy to make witnesses of UFO's seem like crackpots. Rather than revealing their secrets it was easier to label certain witnesses as unreliable and discredit them.

Conspiracy theories were really not on my radar in those early internet days, but now it reminds me of my friend Susie's favorite turn of the century pastime.

Along the side of the road a local church had planted tiny crop white crosses to commemorate the unborn. Susie would call the church and ask if they had accounted for her aborted babies in their miniature graveyard. We all despised the monument to wrongheaded grief and shaming, but only Susie was inspired to heckle the church.

“I just want to know how you're keeping count. I had some abortions in clinics but just one came out when I was on the John. I think it's real cool in all of y'all to care about my babies. If I'm ever going to keep one I'm going to call back. Maybe stop by.”

She would adopt a different voice and call back over and over. Sometimes I couldn't even follow what point she was trying to make, but I couldn't catch my breath from laughing so hard as I listened in.

“You people with your black helicopters and poisonous contrails. Pretty soon you'll be monitoring the clouds and worrying about the deep state surveilling you!”

I'm worried I might be misremembering this part. Did people talk about the “deep state” back then. I frequently checked the Google ngram viewer to verify when a word came into popular usage. If you've never tried it you should. It aggregates word frequency and print by year. You can check when a word was first used and see its peak usage.

Unmasked black helicopters feature in the season 2 finale of *The X-Files*. Susie was also a fan. Maybe they used the phrase deep state on the show.

The current strategy of the Air Force of asking the public for help and identifying UAPs (unidentified aerial phenomenon) seems like a new tactic in propaganda. And changing the name from object to phenomenon allows for clouds and tricks of light to be included. One thing I've always liked about clouds is that we perceive them as objects, but that's not quite right. As accumulations of water vapor, it's difficult to consider them solid objects composed of billions of tiny droplets of water. You see the reflected mini pinpricks of light that bounced back to us, but because our brain is accustomed to interpreting light and shadow as objects, we see objects floating in the sky even as another part of our brain tells us that a cloud is made-up of water droplets, it's very hard to see that. Plus some clouds just have a lot of personality.

On my break I watched the few minutes of the tape again. I didn't notice anything new this time, but the shock of seeing the object appear in the sky remained. Peggy tapped me on the shoulder.

“Where'd that tape come from?”

She might have called me into her office, but she didn't have one. So we spoke in the hallway outside the employee bathroom. There was a man at the end of the hall dressed in - I'm not lying - a trench coat. Peggy suddenly struck me as very sinister. She ignored the man's presence.



“I'm sorry to have to tell you this but we're going to need to let you go. We cannot tolerate theft.”

Too nervous to defend myself I handed over the tape and my blue polo.