

The Case of the Phantom Paperclip

by John Olson

I was sitting on the steps in the entryway to our apartment building taking off my running shoes when I spotted a paperclip on the floor. I assumed it had fallen from the mail that my wife had just taken from our mailbox. Once my shoes were removed, I went down to pick it up. I looked down, but I didn't see it. How could this be? I'd just been looking at it. Did it stick to the bottom of my foot? Nope. Did it somehow manage to slide under the welcome mat? Nope. I closely examined the floor, which is covered by a dark brown carpet with a dense nap. It was nowhere to be seen. I entered our apartment and got a flashlight and came back out to look some more. No sign of a paperclip anywhere. What the hell. Did I hallucinate a paperclip? Had it been an optical illusion? Why would I hallucinate a paperclip? I mean, they're handy, but I don't think they're worth a hallucination. People hallucinate demons and angels. All sorts of things. But paperclips?

I was sure it had been real. The paperclip had the exact appearance of a medium-sized paperclip. There was nothing remotely odd or distorted about it. Nothing that would suggest it was a minor hallucination, a harmless perceptual anomaly. It drove me crazy. The world can survive with one less paperclip in it. That's not what bothered me. What bothered me is reality. Things in the mundane, empirical world of Newtonian laws — the human universe - don't pop in and out of existence like virtual particles in the vacuum of space. Virtual particles are theoretical, short-lived particles that manifest as temporary fluctuations of energy. They tend to appear in pairs due to the fundamental principle of conservation of energy and momentum in quantum field theory; when a virtual particle is created from the vacuum, it must simultaneously create a corresponding antiparticle to maintain the

overall charge and other quantum numbers as zero, effectively "borrowing" energy from the vacuum for a very brief time before annihilating each other, and disappearing. But that's not where we live. The human universe is dense with predictability, solid as a fireplace grate and as true and undeniable as the red glow of the logs it cradles. In Greek philosopher Heraclitus's world, fire represents the underlying principle of the universe, the material basis of an orderly universe. He had nothing to say about paperclips.

The inexplicable is not a good feeling. Things don't just disappear. Imagine pulling out a chair to comfortably sit down and having it disappear the minute your buttocks — anticipating a nice, cushioned landing — find nothing but empty space and you end up on the floor. Or plunging a fork into a bite of ribeye and the ribeye vanishes and your fork comes down hard on a plate of fine bone china, sans rib eye. Nothing there. Maybe a bit of sauce. What the hell? Did it come to life and get up and walk away? Go to the men's room? Should you call the waiter and ask for another rib eye, as the one you were about to eat suddenly vanished?

Or, let's say you've got to clean the gutters on your roof. You get a ladder from your garage and set it against the wall and put your foot on the bottom rung of a ladder and - no rung. Just empty space.

Or during a long sea voyage you come upon a ship at sea, everything intact, everything normal, except there's no crew. This actually happened. December 5th, 1872, the British brigantine *Dei Gratia* happened upon a disheveled but still seaworthy ship called the *Mary Celeste* with its sails slightly torn and moving in the wind but with no crew aboard. Not a soul.

This is not the kind of reality I signed up for. I mean sure, things do disappear over time. People die. Pets die. Land masses are swallowed by the ocean. Lakes dry up. Cities are deserted. Empires fall. But not all at once. Not one minute there then next minute gone. Not like that. This is a circumstance with far-reaching implications. Today it's a paperclip, tomorrow it might be a car. Or a house. Or a wife. Or a father. Or a mother. Brother sister cousin uncle. Who knows?

It doesn't help that I've never felt especially secure about our reality. I've seen too many abrupt changes over the years. Friends turn suddenly sullen, or bitter. Lovers who once doted on you begin undermining your confidence with stinging, sarcastic criticisms. People who were once passionate about social justice begin ranting about how lazy the homeless are, or providing justifications for the use of terrible weapons in foreign countries.

And now — due to climate change — the entire planet is undergoing a colossal transformation with ominous implications for the survival of the human species.

It's not an especially friendly universe. It works in mysterious ways. There's so much phenomena out there that doesn't fit a logical framework. Dark matter, for example, the mysterious substance that makes up a huge portion of the universe's mass, causing discrepancies in gravitational calculations of galaxy rotation, but eludes the detection of our finest technology.

Or that dark energy that's accelerating the expansion of the universe, what's that?

Or consciousness, emotions, God. Self-awareness, sexuality, the origins of life. Why do cows stand along the Earth's magnetic poles — facing north and south — whenever they're grazing or resting? Why did mammals return to the sea and become whales and seals and dugongs? Why do certain plants contain alkaloids such as morphine? Why does biodiversity increase as you approach the equator? How did Argentine ants manage to colonize across three continents?

And why does anything exist at all?

I looked again the next day. Not a sign of a paperclip. Not a sign of anything. Not even a tack. Or a stray brad. Or a bobby pin. Or a rubber band. Or a piece of lint. Or a button or a barrette. Nada. Just dark brown carpet and the silence of the hallway.

And I keep wondering why, why a paperclip? Why not a tarantula? Why not a capsule or a pill or a lozenge? Something with a little mystery. Something to which a narrative might stick. Paperclips are such inane objects. Why would I hallucinate something that tame,

that insipid, that tedious, that uninspiring? Was this the revenge of a bureaucrat, the prank of a policy-making poltergeist? What the hell is reality anyway? What's holding it all together? Besides a paperclip.

