

Unexpected Flying Objects

by Saul Bloodworth

The Nevada desert is a raw, red, rocky landscape, scorched by the sun and dried by the wind. In summer, the glowing sun looms above the mountains, driving every living thing underground. Winter transforms the sky into an icy, blue-shimmering hemisphere that freezes anything alive. The bloated sun of autumn drenches the desert in a golden shimmer until the instant it sets to make way for the white, crater-strewn moon. Sometimes unidentified objects fly past the moon.

Emmanuel Goldstein's workday did not start until the sun went down, because his job involved observing the night sky. Tomorrow, on September 11, 2001, the sun would rise over Tikaboo Peak at 4:55 a.m., waking the buzzards, armadillos, and iguanas. And the cows. Now it was approaching ten o'clock. a clear warm, autumn night. Manuel sat in his kitchen at a folding table, twirling spaghetti and tomato sauce around a fork, and drinking coffee. Black. He'd have to stay awake for several hours, yet. Under the table crouched a small, gray-black cat with white paws, who had adopted him, and was hoping to catch a stray noodle or two.

Manuel lived in a trailer, a mobile home he'd bought from two Navajos at Lake Tahoe and set up here in the Tikaboo Mountains. The trailer was as sparsely furnished as might be expected of a young man living alone in the desert. Stacked on the shelves that spanned the back wall were three boxes of cornflakes, two boxes of crackers, a loaf of bread, a pair of dried cactus fruits, a box of spaghetti, canned tomatoes, a large hunk of cheese, a square metal can filled with cooking oil, along with several empty plastic water bottles, two plastic bowls, two thick, round wine glasses, and three ceramic mugs adorned with a rainbow-colored apple with a bite taken out. Manuel was using the fourth mug for his coffee. The

trailer also contained an enormous refrigerator, a scratch-and-dent electric range with two burners, and a sink with an equally scratched and dented steel basin. From the other end of the trailer came an occasional chirp. The radio scanner announced every ten minutes that it was on standby.

Right next to the kitchen was the tiny bathroom with a shower in which Manuel could barely turn around. Across the trailer's midsection stretched a rope hammock containing three blankets in the classic striped pattern of the Navajo. The front of the trailer contained a room claimed by the cat as hunting ground and by Manuel as an office. A steel bookcase was fixed to the wall, a small TV set on a shelf, alongside a desk crammed full of books, maps, stacks of paper, and a lamp,. Next to that, his Mac. A G4 Powerbook, the latest model, connected to the outside world via DSL. That a trailer could have Internet access was something that Manuel had only learned upon his arrival in the desert. His Mac was protected by a firewall against any virus attack, or at least he hoped it was. The TV was connected to a satellite dish on the roof. Regular antennas wouldn't work in the restricted military zone. Cell phones either. In addition, Manuel had installed a digital camera on the roof, also connected to his Mac. Not exactly cheap. But necessary for his research. The TV was on low in the background, as always. The late-night news in Nevada began at 10 p.m. Not much going on in the world today, anyway.

The trailer stood at the edge of Rachel, a village which consisted of a handful of trailers scattered in the desert, in addition to two or three whitewashed huts and a bar, the Little A'Le'Inn. And pick-ups everywhere. From Rachel, Highway 375, dubbed the "Extraterrestrial Highway," headed past the "Extraterrestrial Store" and the famous Black Mailbox, where UFO-seekers gathered at night. Highway 375 ended at Interstate 93, which led to Las Vegas, one hundred miles south of Rachel. A two-hour drive—almost three in Manuel's rickety VW-Bug.

North of Rachel, on grounds known as Yucca flats, the U.S. Army tested atomic bombs. Half of Nevada consisted of testing grounds

for the Air Force, NASA, or the CIA. But the largest testing grounds lay twenty miles west of Rachel, on Groom Lake, a salt lake, where the stealth bomber which could fly under radar had been developed for the Gulf War, thanks to a technologically sophisticated paint. But that is not why this particular test area was famous. It was famous because it was secret, so secret that it didn't even have a name and was not depicted on any map. The Secret Service and the Army called it "Dreamland." But UFOlogists and Trekkies, conspiracy theorists, lunatics, and skeptics who believed NASA faked the moon landing in the Nevada desert with the aid of Hollywood, called it "Area 51." Here, they believed, was where the government was hiding flying saucers that had crashed on Earth. Manuel considered it all quite silly. Yet he found Area 51 remarkable as well, because it was here that the U.S. Army's own unidentified flying objects were launched.

Manuel had grown up in California. He was from an intellectual, middle-class family, if the founder of a hemp bakery in Santa Barbara and an unpublished science-fiction writer could be counted as intellectual middle class. After graduating from Abbie Hoffman Senior High in Santa Barbara, he went to the University of California at Berkeley. The most left-leaning university in the country. There he had met Amy. Amy was wonderful. Funny, pretty, self-confident, full of energy. Politically active, smart, courageous; he'd loved it when she stood on a podium under a poster of Harvey Milk or Angela Davis, pushing her brown hair back as she spoke, the untamed looks of a lioness. They were inseparable, or at least he thought they were, until he noticed he wasn't the only one she fascinated. Not by any means at all. Then came tears, a break-up, and his decision to start a new life—in Rachel, Nevada.

He set his plate in the sink, crammed his lean frame into the tiny bathroom, turned on the faucet, and looked in the mirror. Long, curly brown hair that he wore in a ponytail here, far away from friends. Soft brown eyes, three days' growth on his chin, out of laziness, not fashion. Why shave in Rachel? A critical glance at his sloping shoulders. Definitely too much time spent at his desk.

Manuel flexed, smiled at his reflection, filled his cupped hands with water, and splashed his face.

When he sat down at the computer, it was almost 11 o'clock. Time to tune in to BBC World News. Couldn't miss anything. Then he checked his e-mail. Eighteen new messages, mostly credit ads and singles' agencies, two offers to effortlessly lose three pounds in nine days—or was it nine pounds in three days?—and three ads for penis enlargements. Manuel grinned. Did he even know anyone who'd actually had his penis enlarged? How did those spammers make a living, anyway? Two circulars from military strategy research institutes. One message from Berkeley. The university was hounding him again about some deadline he'd missed. Three messages from friends in California. And one from Kahless75.

Manuel had met Kahless75 in a chat-room for manic-depressive astronauts who believed that NASA had faked the moon landing in the Nevada desert with the help of Hollywood, and had communicated regularly with him ever since. Mostly about conspiracies and rocket technology, Kahless75's hobby. Definitely not his profession—he knew too much about it.

“Hi, LeiaOrgia,” Kahless75 wrote. LeiaOrgia was Manuel's chat-room name. A name that made him quite popular among men with square eyes, who zoned out all day at their computers, but none of them knew, of course, what he looked like. “Have you heard about the Pentagon's new plutonium-powered supersonic drone? It combines the remote-control technology of the Predator IV with the camouflageability of the Stealth Bomber and can simulate any flying object on a radar screen, from a Cessna to the Saturn V. See if you can find out anything about it in the Area.”

The Predator? There were rumors on the Internet about this new super jet, but Manuel hadn't seen one yet. “What does it look like?” he e-mailed back.

“Black,” Kahless75 replied. “By the way, SAC air base in Omaha sent a truck convoy toward Area 51 last night. Maybe it has something to do with this new superdrone.”

Maybe, thought Manuel. Or maybe not. The next e-mail was from Roswell666. Roswell666 was a little crazy, even by Manuel's standards. "Hi, Leia," Roswell666 wrote. "Did you know that a once-in-a-lifetime planetary alignment will occur tonight? Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars are on a tangent with Alpha Centauri at the farthest point. Which means extraterrestrial warriors have their sights on Earth, and soon chaos will reign."

Manuel sighed. What did he mean, 'soon'? Since that dimwit had become president, chaos was already reigning all over America. He scrolled further. A new message blinked on the screen. From someone he had not been in touch with before. Niitaka, he called himself. Or herself. On the Internet, you never knew. The name seemed vaguely familiar somehow, but he didn't know why. Better google it, he thought. He clicked on the message. "Tomorrow at 8:46 a.m., history will repeat itself, only on a grander scale," Niitaka wrote. "Much grander."

Manuel shook his head. Another nut-job. He deleted the message.

Shortly before midnight, he launched the program that uploaded the data from the digital camera on the roof. The moon had risen. Waxing moon, half full. A little too light, really, for what he had in mind, but it was a beautiful, clear night. Would be a shame to waste it. Something rumbled softly in the distance, right about where Area 51 was located.

Manuel was a researcher. He watched the night sky, gathering material for the dissertation he'd eventually submit to Berkeley. Someday. "Quasars and Black Holes as Phenotypes of Galactic Anomalies and Their Visual Effect on the Physiognomy of the Milky Way." At some point he had determined that there was something far more interesting to observe in the Nevada desert. Area 51. And the thrill of the forbidden only added to his interest. Manuel was also an anarchist.

It wasn't all that easy to observe Area 51. The grounds had tighter security than LucasFilm during the shooting of *Star Wars*. On top of that, his trailer was located more than thirty miles away from the military zone—and you couldn't get much closer. Around the Area

ran a ten-mile restricted zone marked by meter-high aluminum posts with steel balls on top, which, Manuel assumed, contained sensors. And signs everywhere declared, "Use of deadly force authorized." Camouflaged men, dubbed "Cammo Dudes" by the inhabitants of Rachel, patrolled the restricted zone with semi-automatic weapons. Beyond the warning signs, right in the middle of the restricted zone, was Groom Lake. On its shore was a runway for takeoffs and one for landings, but some of the aircraft could land directly on the surface of the salt lake. Beyond that lay the Area itself, the actual military complex. It was surrounded by a reinforced steel chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Armed soldiers stood at the guard huts at each entrance, day and night. Nighttime was the busiest.

When Manuel climbed the slope of Tikaboo Peak, he spied more than a dozen hangars through his binoculars, one of them large enough to house two space shuttles side by side. Most of the time various barely identifiable aircraft flew dry runs with wailing engines under halogen light, accompanied by an occasional flash of lightning. Sometimes fighter jets—if they were fighter jets—flew test maneuvers in the Nevada sky, until they disappeared into the stratosphere. From the mountainside he had seen a tall, funnel-shaped antenna tower. The only thing he had *not* ever seen take off or land there was a UFO.

Because Manuel didn't stand a chance of getting into the restricted zone, much less the Area itself, his only options were monitoring radio traffic, searching the skies, and observing military vehicles entering or leaving the Area. And keeping tabs on Internet rumors, of course. Of which there were many circulating. He monitored stories about hangars, in which neutron bombs and sonic weapons were stored, or bunkers without gravity, where highly intelligent alien beings, nitrogen- or sulfur-based, were dissected. Manuel had lived in Rachel, Nevada, for eight months, and the continual contact with all of those wannabe-scientists, Internet loons, and specialists who'd lost their faith, often barely distinguishable from one another, left him feeling like he was slowly turning into some sort of Roswell666 himself.

He almost didn't notice the new e-mail blinking on his monitor. It was from JEdgarH. JEdgarH was an interesting chat partner. Not a UFO-nut. Rather a political mind. Manuel suspected that JEdgarH worked for the government, maybe for Congress, or for a senator. "Leia Orgia," JEdgarH wrote, "Watch out. Efforts are underway in Washington to tap your computer. Ever heard of the *Laterna Magica*? Soon the FBI will be able to sneak into your home and install a scanner that will transmit everything that happens on your hard drive."

Manuel felt slightly uneasy. Though he believed the government to be capable of anything, he had installed security software that should immediately inform him if anyone tried to break in. But you never knew. Maybe even Steve Jobs was working with the feds. "Furthermore," JEdgarH continued, "the Republicans are planning to clean out the electoral registers and purge as many Democrats as possible by the next election."

Manuel shrugged, even though the other couldn't see him. "Republicans, Democrats, they're all the same," he mailed back.

A frowny face arrived by way of reply. "Don't tell me *you* are one of those vote-wasting Naderites."

Manuel actually had voted for Nader, the Green Party candidate, a fact he didn't necessarily want to reveal. "Depends on what your definition of 'are' is."

This time he got a smiley face in return. "On the other hand, your vote must count double—don't you live in the restricted military zone?"

Manuel would not stand for that. "Technically speaking, I'm a student at Berkeley. So my vote probably wasn't counted at all. But everything is controlled by the military industrial complex anyway. So why vote?"

JEdgarH blinked back again. "Next time maybe only those who can prove they've voted for Reagan already will be allowed to cast a ballot at all."

Meanwhile it was four o'clock in the morning, Pacific time. Seven o'clock eastern. TH

"Are you sure that mysterious truck convoy from Omaha was heading this way?" he wrote to Kahless75. On the other hand, trucks arrived often enough at the Area. It was 5:30 a.m. He poured the last bit of coffee down the drain and wrote a few notes for his dissertation, mainly to ease his conscience. He suspected there was a black hole right next to Betelgeuse. Or maybe it was a dead insect on the scanner's surface. He decided to climb up on the roof tomorrow to check for damage. When he glanced at the screen again, he noticed a spot of light moving directly above him. The spot was moving too slowly for an airplane and too fast for a star—for a planet, that is. Stars don't move at all. Maybe it was a satellite.

As he gathered his papers, he remembered that he had wanted to google something. What was that again? He clicked on the *New York Times* website, which had already posted the morning news, then on Washingtonpost.com. Yep, the earth had survived the night. He was...

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" a female voice cried, beyond hysterical. At the same time, the gray and black cat jumped straight up, thoroughly distraught, all four paws in the air, and scrambled under one of the Navajo blankets. "My God, the tower, the... fire..." The hysterical voice was coming from the TV. Manuel looked up, irritated. He wasn't used to TV personalities displaying real emotion. Certainly not female ones. The TV screen showed the World Trade Center in New York. Smoke rolled out from a giant hole in the upper floors. Huge tongues of flames licked all around the building, which was at least a hundred stories tall. The image shook and swayed, as if amateurs were on the job.

Manuel reached for the remote and flipped through the channels. ABC, CBS, NBC, FUC—the same image everywhere. Then back to CNN. He could not grasp what was happening. "At 8:46 a.m., an airplane crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center," the woman's voice reported, still utterly hysterical. An airplane? The plane must have disappeared in that huge cloud of smoke. Was it an accident? An attack?

He was staring at the screen when it happened. A small, second plane steered slowly toward the other tower. The plane only seemed small and slow, however, because the towers were so huge. It was actually a Boeing 767 heading for the World Trade Center at full speed. And crashing into the second tower. An enormous orange fireball broke out of the second tower, blazing up to the tower roof. Then a giant black ball of smoke enveloped the tower. The camera was glued, shaking and wavering, to the orange fireball, which exploded again in an instant replay. And again. And again. Sudden cutaway: the camera wavered, as if it were falling, then focused on the street, still shaking wildly. It looked like Beirut, 1988. Dented cars, dark, motionless bodies on the asphalt, gray rubble, gray clouds of dust, white figures covered in chalk, running away in terror, past the camera, while a tremendous cloud of rubble loomed behind them, growing larger and larger, at a mind-blowing rate.

It took Manuel more than an hour to tear himself away from the images on TV. Only then did he notice a red-blinking letter on his computer, indicating new mail had arrived. Niitaka again. "Just like I predicted!" he wrote. Manuel stared at the message for several seconds in utter disbelief. Then he pulled himself together and replied: "Who are you?!"

No response. He waited a few minutes. Still nothing. Then he remembered what he'd wanted to do earlier. He was going to google the name. Niitaka.

Niitaka was the Japanese code word for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

