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COMET-INDUCED MANIA

by Bob Hartig

I missed the last occasion, so I'm fuzzy on the proper procedure for greeting a new millennium. If strange sights in the heavens are part of the plan, though, I'd say the Hale-Bopp comet got us off to a fine start back in 1997. When that mysterious visitor traced the spring night sky, it left in its wake a luminous trail and a nation reawakened to the sense of wonder. This alone made it well worth the price of admission, but as it turned out, bells and whistles were included one night in the form of a lunar eclipse plus something to do with Venus—overkill, perhaps, but a cinch to draw a crowd.

What with Venus doing whatever it was doing, the moon eclipsing, Hale-Bopp glowing frostily above the northern horizon, and all of them conducting business at once, it was quite a show. In retrospect, it's a wonder my landlord didn't consider it an amenity and raise the rent. People can get funny when it comes to signs in the heavens.

Fortunately, I'm not that way. Mine is a precision-tuned psyche oiled with generous quantities of native intelligence, and I've always laughed at the idea of such things affecting me. Free from absurd notions, I in fact made a point of enjoying the entire spectacle beyond the range of city lights. North of town, where night is night and the sky a revelation of stars, I sat outside for several hours, watching as Hale-

Bopp glistened, Venus gleamed brightly, and Earth's dark amber shadow nibbled at the Moon. The heavens were at their maximum potency. If ever they could have affected me, this was their chance.

Yet I returned to town untouched by anything other than the customary profound sense of awe. I saw no flying saucers, experienced no shift in my body's electromagnetic field, felt no sudden compulsion to balance my checkbook using base two. My constitution has always been proof to foolishness.

Later, however, I noticed people around me exhibiting definite signs of comet-induced behavior. It was rather alarming, and some of it was serious enough that I had to confront the individuals involved.

Take my upstairs neighbor, Snively Flimsington. Normally an inoffensive fellow, the following day he displayed clear signs of interstellar mania. The worst part was, he tried to cover it up by pretending he was doing nothing out of the ordinary.

"Stop it," I told him. "It's really obnoxious when you do that."

"Do what?" asked Snively. In the spirit of Hale-Bopp, he had been telling me about his interest in heavenly bodies, particularly one living in the apartment above him, when I noticed him wiggling his ears in a manner just calculated to grate me. It was very annoying, especially since I was already feeling suddenly, inexplicably irritable.

“You know what I mean,” I said, darkly. “I suppose you’re going to play Mr. Innocent, aren’t you. Well, I’m onto your little game, so you can just cut it out. It’s driving me crazy, watching you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” snapped Flimsington. That was just like Snive—always playing mind games, though given the smallness of his home field, you had to wonder why.

Well, let him have his fun, I thought. He’ll tire. I stood there and endured for another minute or two as he droned on in his usual, wearying monotone, all the while wiggling his ears. Only now he added a new dimension of irritation by vigorously flapping them whenever he wanted to emphasize a point.

The guy was really getting on my nerves. Deciding a subtle counteroffensive would be my best defense, I crossed my eyes and began flubbing my lips with my fingers, producing a *blublublublubl* sound.

Flimsington shot me a searching look. “You all right?” he asked. I chuckled to myself, knowing my plan was succeeding.

“Perfect,” I replied. “Why do you ask?
Blublublublublubl.”

“Just wondering,” he said. From the look on his face, I could tell the gears of thought, rusty from long disuse, were creaking into motion inside his head.

However, it became clear that repentance was far from his mind. Incredibly, Snively's ears began swelling to elephantine dimensions. As I watched, they started to churn furiously, generating a stiff gale that rapidly grew to hurricane force. Pieces of air began to pelt me. I dodged as a large chunk flew like shrapnel over my right shoulder, barely missing me. What made it especially maddening was that all the while, Flimsington just stood there looking at me with an innocent, albeit puzzled, expression.

I realized my only recourse was to take direct action. Reaching forth suddenly, I grabbed him by both ears and shook his head rapidly back and forth, attempting to snap him into sobriety.

“STOPPP IIIITTT!! AAAHHHHHHH!!!!” I requested.

But Flimsington's mania only escalated abruptly, and instead of complying, he merely shot his eyes wide open, mimicking a person startled out of his wits.

Not to be outdone, I retaliated by foaming at the mouth and laughing wildly. Then I wrestled him to the ground and taped his ears to the sides of his head, using generous amounts of duct tape. I've learned that you can't mess around in situations like this, and I was just glad I had the tape on hand, having realized only that morning the importance of always carrying ten or twelve rolls with me wherever I went.

I used up an entire roll on Flimsington, but I'm glad to say the treatment was a success. At least, I assume it was, since I never heard a peep from him after he finally broke

loose and ran screaming down the street. Being sensitive to his feelings, I wanted to reassure him that his making a total ass of himself was no cause for embarrassment, but I didn't get the chance since he moved out of his apartment the next day. You'd think he'd at least have stopped by to thank me for my help—but then, that was Flimsington for you.

Not every encounter turned out that well. A few days after the episode with Snive, I was in my office after hours at the publishing house where I work, rejuvenating my brain with a creative break, when one of our editors, Herb Bose, popped in unexpectedly. With him was a tall, iron-jawed gentleman—one of those people whose face looks naggingly familiar, although you can't quite place it.

“Bob, I want you to meet . . . what on earth are you doing?”

Herb normally being one who is quick to grasp the essence of a thing, I was disappointed that he'd ask. Any idiot could have told him I was standing on my head with my feet propped against the wall, flipping a yo-yo at the ceiling. Herb later insisted that an idiot *did* tell him, but I knew that wasn't true because I told him myself.

“Just conducting a little experiment,” I said. “I was interested to see whether I could operate my yo-yo upside-down. Check this out.” I executed a neat Walk-the-Dog.

“I don't believe it,” Herb muttered. I could tell he was impressed, although viewed upside-down, the look on his face conveyed the odd illusion of utter disgust.

“You think that’s something, watch this,” I said. I flicked the yo-yo into an expert Around-the-Moon, deftly nailing a fly in the process.

“!!!!!!!!!!!!” exclaimed Herb.

“Aaaaggghhhh!!!” yelped the visitor, suddenly grabbing his nose with both his hands.

“Hey, sorry about that!” I chuckled. “That’s the first time I ever knocked a fly off anyone’s nose with a yo-yo. Looks like I shaved it a smidgen close. Still, not bad for a first effort, eh? Just grab a tissue from that box over there and you can stanch the blood while I get up.”

“You moron!” Herb gasped in a strangled voice.

“That’s no way to refer to your guest, Herb,” I reproved gently. “True, he flinched at a crucial moment, but that doesn’t make him a moron. An idiot at worst, I’d think. I’ll bet *he* knew what I was doing when you guys walked in here.”

I rose to my feet, a difficult maneuver since they were still propped halfway up the wall. “Bob’s the name,” I said, extending my hand to the visitor in hearty greeting. He stared back at me, one hand still covering his nose, but made no effort to return my handshake. From the moaning sound he was making, I got the impression that something was causing him deep distress. Strange.

Stranger still, why did I just *know* that I’d seen this fellow somewhere before?

Herb steered the man to a chair. “Geez, are you all right?” he asked.

Finally the visitor spoke. “Dat weally huwt,” he said, wringing his swollen schnoz with a tissue. His iron jaw quivered slightly and he looked up at me with accusing eyes.

“I’m terribly sorry, Rock,” said Herb, glaring at me. “Bob’s terribly sorry, too, aren’t you Bob? Tell Mr. Cragg here how sorry you are for whopping his nose with your yo-yo.”

Mr. Cragg?

It dawned on me in a flash. *Rock Cragg! Of course! Author of a squadron of best-selling man’s-man books. Rock Cragg, who wrote that favorite of myself and two million other red-blooded males, The Manly Art of Roadkill Taxidermy. Rock Cragg—critically acclaimed as today’s Hemingway and now being wooed by our publishing house. Rock Cragg!*

“Sorry?” I mused aloud. “*Sorry?* For what? Herb, do I understand that this is *Rock Cragg*? Why, the man’s so tough he makes G. Gordon Liddy look like Woody Allen, and you think he’s gonna be bothered by a little thing like a hard, weighty object mashing into his nose at high speed? Not the *Rock Cragg* I read and love. Shoot, if I hadn’t done the job, he’d have *hired* someone to do it just to keep his pain threshold at its peak. Am I right or am I right, Rock, old boy?”

“It’s stiww bweeding, idn’t it?” asked Rock. A tear coursed down his cheek.

“Ha, ha, what a joker,” I chortled. “Well, let me get you something to wash up with. Yechh, what a mess.” I stepped out of my office and returned with a full glass and a handful of paper towels, just in time to encounter Herb and Cragg tiptoeing out of my door.

“Okee-dokee, Rock, time to clean up,” I said, pushing him back into the chair. “Now, just you tilt your head back and we’ll have you taken care of in a jiffy.” I soaked the towels thoroughly and flopped them wetly across his reddened proboscis.

“Waaahhhhhh!!!! What are you doing to me, you lunatic??!!!” Cragg shrieked, clawing at my hand.

“Relax,” I said, scrubbing away despite his protests. “We’re just killing all those nasty germs while we get you cleaned up.”

The way he thrashed, you’d have thought this was the first time the man ever had rubbing alcohol applied to a bloody nose. I actually had to hold him down so the liquid could drip down his nostrils. It was terrible. And Herb was no help at all. I don’t know what I expected of him, but trying to throttle me with his bare hands was certainly not on the list. I was glad no one else was in the building to witness the spectacle.

Suddenly, with shocking clarity, I realized what I was dealing with: comet-induced mania! What other explanation

could there be for such frantic behavior on the part of two grown men? For the first time, it occurred to me that I was in a dangerous situation—one that would require fast and decisive action if I was to escape unscathed.

Fortunately, I was not defenseless. With a blur of speed, I freed myself from the grasp of the crazed Herb, ran behind my desk, and opened my drawer. In a flash, I had my weapon in hand. I raised it to where they could see its dull, metallic sheen in the overhead light. “Don’t either of you move,” I ordered. “I’ve got you both covered.”

Herb gasped. “Don’t do it, you fool,” he said. He and Cragg backed into the corner as I advanced.

As I later explained to the police, I’d had no prior experience with duct-taping two large, struggling, adult males together. That’s why I admittedly overestimated the amount of tape needed to subdue them, resulting in what looked like a huge silver grub with two noses and four wild eyes peering from one end.

Still, better not to take any chances when you’re dealing with people under the interstellar influence. Besides, it was for their own good, which is exactly what I told our CEO the next morning.

Not that he understood, preoccupied as he was with Rock Cragg’s reluctance to have further dealings with a company that harbored, as Cragg put it, “such a blathering madman.” Clearly he’d taken a dislike for Herb, although I couldn’t see that Herb had done anything to deserve such harsh words.

Well, attitudes can get edgy when cosmic events are at work. That's why it's always good to have a clear-minded individual like me around for when things get out of hand.

What bothers me is, I never did get reimbursed for the twelve rolls of duct tape I used up on company business.