



VOL. 1 ISSUE 2 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2023

AMERICA'S ONLY NEWSPAPER

PRICE \$8.50 PER ISSUE

THE REPUBLIC OF OCCLUDED FACTS

CH Exclusive Interview with UFO Whistleblower Dave Grusch
 REVEALS BLACK PROJECTS, SAPs, NHIs

Are top Hollywood executives aliens?

By WALTER KIRN

One unsettling way to spend a week in our Republic of Occluded Facts is to drive to a small mountain town in Colorado, ditch your phone because it gets no signal (and is a spying device in any case) and speak for hours after tripping about about aliens and their weird craft with a man who purports to know something of their history, a history he says our leaders lie about, out of fear, arrogance, and greed.

Dave Grusch, age 36, is a former intelligence agent, Air Force officer, and brief of presidents on spooky matters, many related to satellites and space, known only to our military elite. He's a six-foot-six pylon of a guy with close-cropped hair and an open, unshaven face that goes pink in the sun but doesn't quite tan. I meet him on a warm alpine morning in a hotel parking lot, the very definition of neutral ground. Standing beside his spotless new Ford truck, which he plans to trade in soon because that's how he is — a car guy who buys one rig then covets another, with custom high-performance modifications we venture some small talk and size each

other up, an art in which Grusch, an Afghan war vet, seems well-practiced. When my hands move, his eyes move. He has a planted way of standing that seems like it might provide the basis for a solid karate kick.



I agree in the parking lot to conceal the name of Grusch's hometown. Though he's lately become a public figure, "the UFO whistleblower," testifying in front of Congress about the nation's alleged astral secrets and appearing on podcasts and

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GPS

Purple mountain majesties, amber waves of grain threatened by artificial navigation systems

WE ARE ALL UBER DRIVERS NOW

Tiny metal bugs, traversing the grid

By WILL SELF

The great French philosopher of the quotidian, Michel de Certeau, argued that "space is practiced place." What he meant by this is that while places are given spatio-temporal locations, commonly assented to, space is the particular way we choose — both as individuals and groups — to inhabit or otherwise traverse them. Private ownership and other property titles and exclusions on land use necessarily impede some people's ability to "practice place," while enhancing others. But really, the means we've commonly employed to practice place for a long time now were already grossly circumscribing our personal space.

Before we began sitting in the little metal cells we call cars, we were sitting in slightly larger ones called railway carriages. There's an interesting coincidence (but maybe there's really no coincidence at all) between the entirely novel view from the train experienced by 19th century travellers and the inception of photography as a spectacular technology. Early rail travellers were surprised and often sickened by the way the rapid onward motion of the vehicle

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MULE DAYS

Humble pack-animals risk everything they have, move at astonishing speeds

FIDDLIN' PETE PLAYS "KING OF THE GYPSIES"

The drama of mule-packing rests in the psychology of the mule

By BER SAMUELS

The discovery of gold in Aurora, Nevada in 1862 brought a flood of miners and adventurers, including a young Mark Twain, to the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Anticipating a demand for beef, cattlemen followed shortly on their heels. Some of these cattlemen made it to Aurora. Others, passing through the adjacent Owens Valley and attracted by its open ranges, decided to settle there instead.

This was just as well, for by 1865 most of the gold in Aurora was gone, and pretty soon the town was in irreversible decline. The population fell from 10,000 to a couple hundred within only a few years. Some people broke down the empty houses and sold the worn bricks to contractors on the coast. Others moved into the Owens Valley, where the cattlemen had established a string of towns running southwards down the corridor between the Sierra and White Mountains. The first of these townships was Bishop, established in 1862, to be followed by Big Pine in 1865. To accommodate the new towns, Inyo County was formed in 1866.

To remain profitable, the towns of the Owens Valley needed to reach over the Sierras to the Central Valley, so the cattlemen of Bishop began breeding mules. As the other gold and silver mines in the Eastern Sierras went bust, many of the cattlemen sold their herds to earn a living packing mules. The industry remained whole even through the ascendance of the railroad, since mules were — and are to this day — the most reasonable way to carry anything through the Sierras. The mule-packing industry became a source of economic security in troubled times, and the mule itself became a symbol of strength and dignity to the people of the Owens Valley.

This may have been part of the reason that William Mulholland, head of the Los Angeles Water Department, turned to Owens Valley mule packers to construct his aqueduct, built on land he duped out of the hands of local farmers. Mules hauled 25-ton sections of steel pipe to Owens Lake, which waters the whole valley. As detailed in the movie *Chinatown*, the pipes were assembled into a 137-mile siphon as part of a plan concocted by Mulholland, which turned the Owens Lake into a salt flat and eliminated most of the farming in the Owens Valley. Out of work, many of the region's farmers drove mules to help construct the aqueduct that had destroyed their farms.

This led to a decades-long period of cultural decay, in which the Owens Valley towns called to mind the grim fate of Aurora and the other mining camps. So in 1969, a small group of mule-packers planned a fair to revitalize the valley's failing fortunes. The fair would consist of a competition to see who could pack a mule the fastest. They called it Mule Day.

Within just a few years, Mule Day became one of the biggest agricultural festivals in America. It held racing and dressage events, hosted vendors from all over California, and put on a parade of mule-drawn carriages before tens of thousands of visitors; it is often referred to as the "Grand-

"All the world's a stage we're going through."
 — Lorraine Moore, Anagrams

daddy" of American mule shows. In 1974, former California Governor Ronald Reagan was the fair's Grand Marshal. The fair gradually expanded to cover a whole week, and was renamed Mule Days.

Give or take a couple tents, Mule Days goes on now just as it did fifty years ago. For one thing, it is absurdly quiet. There is no event-wide PA system and people keep their voices low, which makes for a pleasant Saturday afternoon. At certain moments — it is difficult to tell exactly when — a line starts to form at the entrance to the main arena. Once enough people have entered the arena, the two announcers, Bob Tallman and Bob Feist, turn on their microphones and begin to toss jokes back and forth, mostly about the mules and sometimes about the riders. Beneath their voices, it is possible to make out the impact of grasshoppers on the dirt and birds in the trees. The vendors do not play music. The children are typically reserved, shuffling forwards with shy smiles. The dust clouds kicked up by passing cars outside the fairgrounds also help to deaden the sound.

Every few minutes, however, the quiet is broken by some cross between a violin and a foghorn which is hard to identify as an animal sound — until the mule that made it takes a big wheezing breath and does it again. It is too solemn to be a whinny and too desperate to be a bray. Even the old mule hands raise eyebrows and turn to the noisy

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HELLS ANGELS DO DISNEYLAND

Once-feared outlaw motorcycle gang now a bunch of strawberry moonshine-sipping sumps

RYOBI-POWERED DILDO CAPTIVATES SQUARES

Selling tickets to once-sacred festivals

By VALEN LAMBERT

Everett's isn't too busy for a Friday, which is surprising, as it's the premier dive bar in downtown Arcata.

Catfish is bouncing tonight. I've now come in enough to where he doesn't card me at the door. He tips his hat. "Nice to see ya." Inside, my boss at the elementary school is playing pool with some skinny aging punk who put King Gizzard on the jukebox. Her long blonde hair falls to the side as she snipes a solid off the wall into the corner pocket. She always wins. My housemate Chris and I go to the bar and each pay \$4 for our Rainiers. Robert is behind the bar; he greets us with a recycled dirty joke before he cracks and hands 'em over.

On our way over to Everett's Chris and I walked past The Jam, another bar just around the corner. A few dozen Hells Angels are parked out front, lining G Street. Staring out the porthole window beside our booth, I see a couple of silver-haired bikers still outside, gabbin' in their leather jackets on the sidewalk. I make out the Hells Angels patches in the red glow of the Everett's neon signage. It's a patch I'd always look for on a biker when I was younger. Seeing one felt the same as spotting a celebrity or a convict. They've descended on our sleepy northern California town en masse, like mythological characters emerging from a forgotten America.

Arcata is a small town. A two-stoplight town, really. It's a town that has tactfully slipped through the manicured naps of

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SWIFTIES

Pop Princess Takes Seattle

70,000 FEMALES FILL FOOTBALL STADIUM AT \$1500 AND UP PER TICKET AS GLITTERY-EYED PSYCHOTICS ROAM THE STREETS

Will deliverance arise from the outstretched hand of Taylor Swift?

By DAVID SAMUELS

Picking glitter off the carpet of the Ace Hotel in Seattle in the dog days of August is the reward I get for leaving home and venturing into the great beyond. Every year, at around this time, I descend from my farmstead in order to report on what remains of the America I once loved, and still have strong feelings for, despite the bitter taste of ashes in my mouth. "They're Taylor Swift fans," the woman cleaning the floor beside me helpfully explains. "They're very nice, but they leave glitter everywhere."

Taylor Swift seems like the least of Seattle's problems, though. It's not that city people are rude by nature, as I explained recently to one of my neighbors. It's that the math is different, that the basic social interactions like stopping to say "hello" or give directions might bring you face-to-face with a being whose psychotic pain-ridden inner landscape hopefully does not resemble anything that is familiar to you. The chance for effective communication under such circumstances generally becomes the healthiest choice is to skip the pleasantries and keep on moving. Which is why I left.

Seattle is welcoming Taylor Swift, America's reigning pop princess, on the last leg of her Eras tour, which is clearly the music event of the summer, with tickets selling for \$1,800 and up. A

price that made my non-attendance pretty much of a no-brainer, until a music-lover friend, proclaiming himself to be tired of my prejudice against his teenage popper idol, offered me a ticket. I accepted his offer immediately, on the premise it was a tease. When the ticket arrived in the mail, I had little choice but to cover my bed by booking a flight here.

A few blocks from the Ace is a spot that specializes in Thai street noodles, which is a dish that I love but which is seldom available on my mountain top. I sit down outside, and within five minutes a member of one of the street armies of the walking wounded, those that occupy the downtown area of major American cities, strolls over and starts three tables down from me. Or maybe crazy person isn't the right term. He is in his early forties, well-muscled, and possesses an acute sense of just how far out he can act.

"I'm trying to go up in there," he explains, making low gestures with his hips towards the expressionless waitress indoors. "Like, I want to fuck her, get up inside her pussy."

The dining couple pretend to be unbothered, having perfected the distinctive, glassy-eyed stare with which American urban-dwellers have learned to greet the more unpleasant aspects of

their daily reality. I'm not here, the stare proclaims. You're not here. I'm not with her. He's not with me. I'm not human. You're not human. You cut out off my head, or grow three heads out of your neck in place of your one head, here in front of the \$8.50 cupcake store. I would still notice nothing.

It's cowardice, of course. But I hardly blame them. What bothers me is that it's also something worse, namely the pro-active severing of human bonds and shutting down of accompanying human perceptions which urban-dwellers, and many of the rest of us, have now learned to do by rote — like subjects of some 1960s lab experiment in which college students were made to play prison guards and give each other electric shocks. Maybe by fast-forwarding through the unpleasant parts, we might arrive together in an abstract, connectionless space in which no one has any responsibilities to anyone, and then the monster in front of me will disappear or wander off elsewhere for prey, or to find drugs.

When the blank stare fails to produce its desired effect, the crazy person takes his act a step further, leaning in a full foot and a half into the couple's personal space. "I'm going to sit here, and I'm going to watch you chew," he explains. With the male

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Friday Night Smackdown in Puerto Rico

Hyped-up Ricans Pop for Bad Bunny

REAL LIFE IS FAKE, WRESTLING IS REAL

"Wool! Wool! Wool!"

By ALEX PEREZ

I'm a middle-aged man on a plane heading to San Juan, Puerto Rico to watch professional wrestling. Many failures have led me to my aisle seat across from the toilet. I failed as a baseball player after a decent run. I was what they call a 5 o'clock hitter, which means that I looked great ring-batting practice before the game, but when the lights came on and the crowd streamed in, I struggled. After the bat let me down, I decided to pick up the pen. A guy whose first language was Spanish and who'd spent most of his life hanging out with jock savages wanted to be the next Philip Roth. A total fool, I was. I am. A foolish failure who persevered a bit, wrote some decent stories, and got into the top creative writing program in the country, except the novel didn't sell. I'd struck out yet again.

Why am I writing in the third person? It must be something failures do. Which is how I decided to become a cultural critic. Merely writing those words — cultural critic — makes me laugh. Go ahead

and laugh at Perez. Who decides to become a cultural critic? A failure, of course. Why was I so ready to fail again? Professional wrestling, that ridiculous American art form of ridiculous failures, was the culprit.

Because I'd grown up watching professional wrestling, I'd seen countless guys fall as one character, only to find success with another gimmick. Dwayne Johnson was an abnormally boring goody two-shoes as Rocky Maivia, but when he turned heel and became The Rock, his career took off. Steve Austin was a mid-tier guy as Stunning Steve Austin, but when he shaved his head, grew a goatee, and transformed into Stone Cold the biggest

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OCCLUDED FACTS

From PAGE 1

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Grusch's troubles, and his strange path to national celebrity, began several years ago with an assignment from a superior in the intel world to poke around inside the government and try to learn whatever there was to learn about so-called Non-Human Intelligences (NHIs) and the incredible vessels they're thought to pilot. Grusch was thorough, wary of being misled. The investigation took four years.

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ers, to bring forth evidence that will pierce the veil, and launch a new era of interstellar cross-species exploration.

What he can say, and did say, to Congress, on TV, in a hearing held last August, is that decades of hiding and studying these wonders for purposes of developing high-tech weapons — a cloaked endeavor he calls "The Program" — has massively corrupted US officialdom and its corporate instruments in electronics and aerospace, who operate without proper oversight and have resorted to criminal misdeeds, including murder, he's said, to shield their work.

After an hour of checking each other out, Grusch and I climb into his truck and head for a nearby mountain trail. "I like to drive fast," he says, and he does so, protected by a slick new radar detector mounted in the cab.

The son of a Pittsburgh Lincoln Mercury salesman and the first person in his family to go to college (he studied physics at Pittsburgh University), the UFO whistleblower grew up in lean, uncertain circumstances. There was a bankruptcy, food stamps, church assistance. It bred a fascina-

His most suggestive comment of the hike, one that haunts me throughout the day, involves the cultural history of The Program. When I venture a theory that knowledge of its secrets might induce in insiders, over time, a state of cultic grandiosity, Grusch says I'm on to something, describing a "gnostic" streak in certain initiates. "We are the gatekeepers, they think." There are also people of fundamentalist religious views who regard the matter with spiritual horror and would rather it never see the light of day: "Obviously there are some who are going to think these Non-Human Intelligences are extensions of demonic principalities."

For lunch, we zoom off to a toy-like tourist village of art galleries and ice cream shops. Given the peculiar morning I've had, the strolling visitors eating waffle cones seem childlike and pitiful. They appear not to know that they dwell inside a puzzle world, where recently retired spies with heads full of paradigm-destroying secrets and loaded sidearms in their pants are lurking beside them, only steps away. Or is Grusch lying to me as part of some vast government psy-op, designed to break our minds and render us helpless to further elite manipulation?

At the fancy bistro he takes me to, he orders a gourmet pizza topped with jalapenos and drizzled honey. He turns on his phone and a Google alert appears.

"The Washington Post is attacking me," he says.

I read the piece on my own phone as we eat. It's mostly a media story, throwing shade on the upstart News Nation cable channel for devoting so much time to NHIs after running its first big interview with Grusch. The piece accuses the channel, heaven forbid, of chasing ratings. Irked by the article's insinuation that he is colluding in a grift, Grusch reverts to demolishing his pizza. Later, outside, he takes a phone call from a congressional aide and walks for ten minutes in circles around a park, furrowing his brow and nodding. It's a scene from a paranoid thriller, fun to watch.

We spend the afternoon together chatting beside a bubbling mountain stream. He clues me in about the mechanics of military secrecy, shooting down the common notion that our government is too incompetent or leaky to hold back the truth about NHIs. By burying pieces of The Program inside already existing "Black Projects" and "SAPs" (Special Access Programs), the enterprise has been erased from view, even the view of many working on it, who can't see the galaxy for the stars and planets. But surely, I say, our presidents must know, and our CIA directors and their ilk. "Not necessarily," he says. I ask him to name the person who knows the most out of everyone who at least knows something.

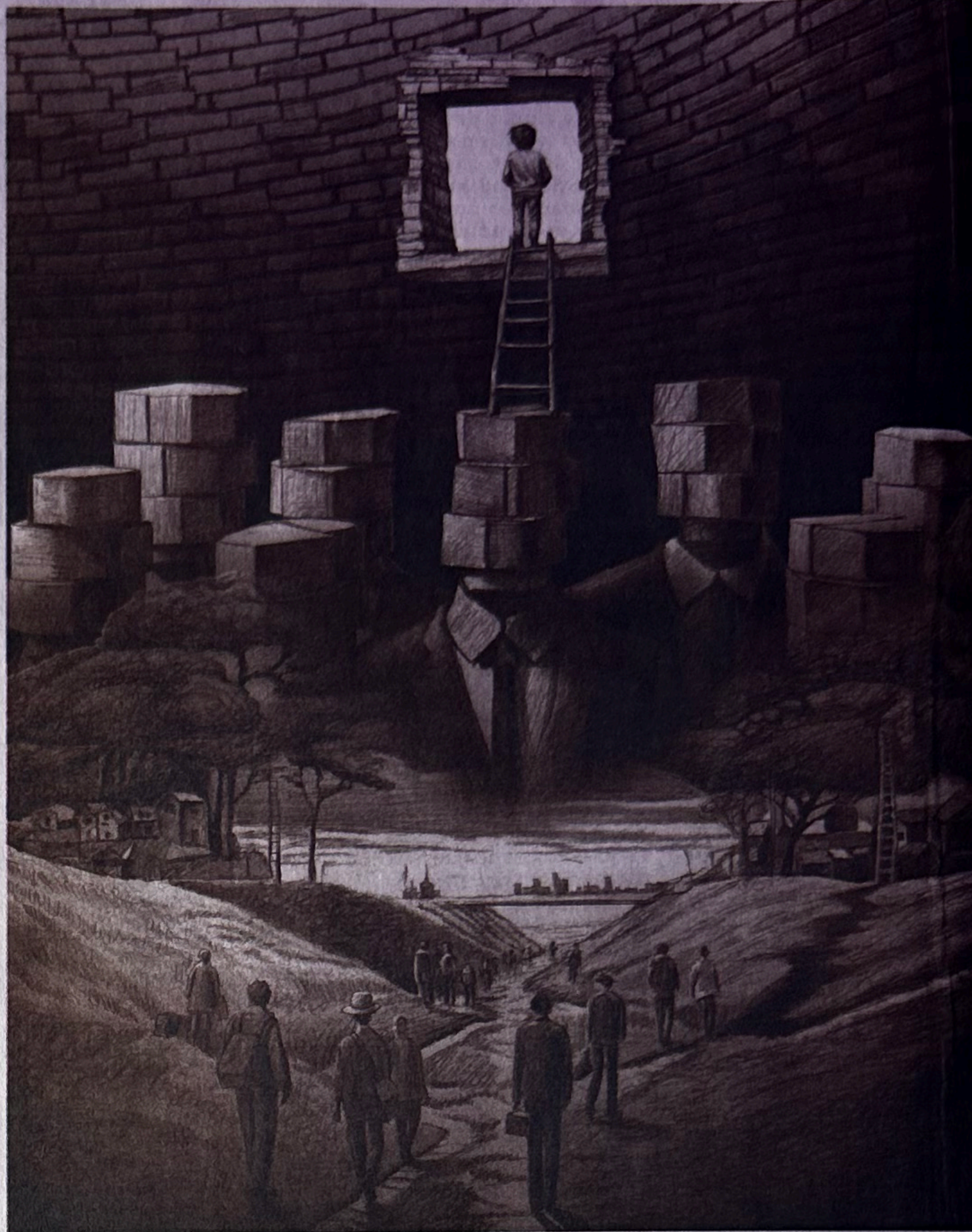
He offers a guess, off the record — a formidable figure from late twentieth century politics, though it's not among the few that I anticipated. "I'm only guessing," he reminds me.

I tell him this style of interplay is maddening.

"Welcome to my world," he says.

....

A tender issue soon arises: A recent article in *The Intercept* exposed a difficult



Snuffy

The essence of what he says he found is that aliens are here, they've been here for a while (he's cagey about how long), and we have several of their ships, which we keep stashed away in secret hangars whose locations he claims to know.

in my career. I knew where the skeletons were and what doors to knock on. You bump into one thing and think you've found it, but it's only one slice. I would see one facet of the prism, but I wasn't able to look down on all the vertices. There was a lot of deception, a lot of lies, and some 'reverse interrogation.'"

In the end, Grusch compiled forty interviews, some from people he'd worked with in the past but hadn't suspected held pieces of the puzzle. The essence of what he says he found is that aliens are here, they've been here for a while (he's cagey about how long), and we have several of their ships, which we keep stashed away in secret hangars whose locations he claims to know. We also have "biologics," meaning bodies, whose characteristics Grusch isn't free to specify though he hints that these come in different shapes and sizes. Finally, he learned that these beings may not be friendly. "Indifferent to us at best," he says. He also suggests they belong to groups or species which may, in some cases, dislike each other.

Grusch predicts that much more will be revealed soon, within a year, he hopes, but such forecasts are common on the UFO scene. (It's not just aliens who supposedly warp time, it's the humans who discuss them.) But the process may be speeding up: Grusch says he is working behind the scenes on legislation that should allow him, and oth-

tion with distant worlds.

"Throughout the chaos of my childhood, I gravitated toward Star Trek and military stuff," he tells me. "I had a fascination with astronomy. I had a telescope as a teenager, observing Saturn and various star clusters. I used to work at the Buhl Observatory in college. I used to give night sky tours to the public. And I used to help produce planetarium shows."

....

Once out on the trail, surrounded by granite peaks which Grusch loves to climb as a "masochistic hobby," I press him for details on The Program. It's a frustrating interrogation. He swings between a boyish eagerness to share the secrets of the cosmos — "We are not alone!" "Maybe we're like chimpanzees to them" — and recesive, disciplined discretion. At times, he falls silent in answer to my questions, but his silence reads in different ways. When I ask him, for example, if the "beings" have been with us since ancient times, he gazes off at a mountain in the distance in a manner I find enigmatically affirming.

"There is no reason why a well thought-out story should resemble real life; life strives with all its might to resemble a well thought-out story."

— Isaac Babel

moment in Grusch's life, and used it to question his mental health. Several years ago, while living in Virginia, he fell into an alcoholic funk and muttered about committing suicide. He was then held for 72 hours in a drying-out facility. The reporter found police records of the incident after being tipped off, Grusch believes, by one of his bureaucratic foes.

He now offers me his side of the story. The drunken incident in fact occurred, he says. But he insists it wasn't as discrediting as the writer made out to be. Like so many combat vets, he lives with a level of trauma, he explains. For a while, he treated it with booze. Strong spirits have always had a bad effect on him, acting on his system almost like "opiates," a problem he says is common in his lineage. He sought treatment after the event and feels he's put his low period behind him. I hear in his upbeat tone a plaintive note, one I know from my own struggles with addiction.

This is surely a flawed human being here before me, a suffering child of our indifferent universe. We are all flawed beings. But I'm convinced that his tales of his investigations within the universe of secrets, which surely does exist, is not merely an act. Earlier, recalling Afghanistan, where he identified targets for fiery death, he averred that his new mission — waking our no-longer lonesome species to the folly of seeking "feudalistic dominance" — feels redemptive, morally restorative. Though it does seem that battle excited him, too.

"At heart, I'm an operator," he told me after confessing to feeling a bit awkward wearing a suit to his congressional interview.

He gripped an imaginary weapon and swept its barrel through the air as though clearing an enemy position. His favorite allies in his wartime years? "The Germans and the Brits." They got the job done. "And the Mongolians." Toughest guys he knew.

We part for a couple of hours before dinner. I retreat to my motel cabin, lie down, and drift. Paranoia creeps in, possibly a man-

FINALLY, HE LEARNED THAT THESE BEINGS MAY NOT BE FRIENDLY. 'INDIFFERENT TO US AT BEST,' HE SAYS.

ifestation of what Grusch calls "ontological shock," which is when new thoughts and old thoughts can't be reconciled. Do I trust his fantastic tale? Not sure. Do I trust the familiar, legacy tales? Not sure. Not as much as I did yesterday.

What I trust more than ever, strangely, is Hollywood. During our long and winding conversation, Grusch shared with me certain private notions about the NHI phenomenon — the creatures may be telepathic; they may use forms of high-tech camouflage; their ships may exist in dimensions beyond our four;

their bodies may be drones or avatars — which evoke familiar tropes from movies and TV shows. Are insiders at work in entertainment circles? Have monstrous secrets been seeded throughout our culture to prepare us for the coming shock? Are top Hollywood executives themselves aliens? It all seems possible.

We're joined at dinner by Jessica, Grusch's wife of seven years, a former Air Force nurse from Akron, Ohio who served in Afghanistan herself. She's quietly humorous, polite, possessed of perfect posture, and stoically tough-minded in a way that reminds me of my late mother, also a nurse from the Akron area. I find her presence balancing and calming.

I sense this young couple has faced some novel challenges, not least her husband's evolution from a lethal, locked-on soldier-spy to a messenger of wild, disruptive truths. "It definitely been a journey!" says Jessica. One theme at dinner is Grusch's obsessive streak; he reveals that he's been diagnosed as "slightly autistic" and acknowledges having trouble with social niceties such as "remembering people's birthdays." He shoots his wife a bashful glance and she returns a forgiving one. When it's time for dessert, they both demur — counting their calories, American style — but then they relent, being naughty, and order cake.

After dinner I watch them drive off into the dark, up to their house on a ridge beneath the stars. "I always complete my missions," Grusch said tonight, sawing into his thick steak. "I'll complete this one too," he pledged. And I believed him.

I believed he's a young man who won't — who can't — turn back. ♣

FEATURE

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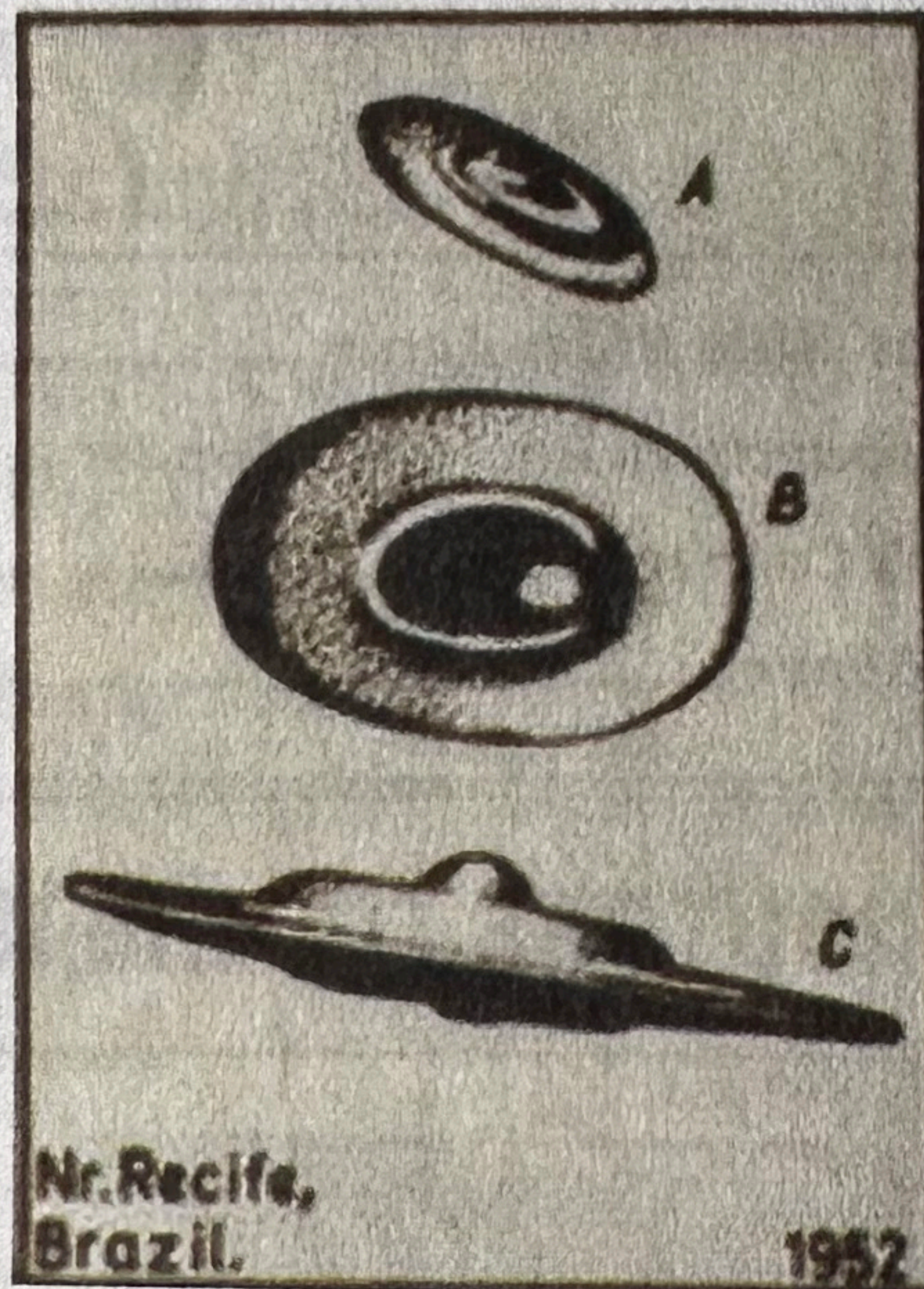
Are top Hollywood executives aliens?

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other up, an art in which Grusch, an Afghan war vet, seems well-practiced. When my hands move, his eyes move. He has a planted way of standing that seems like it might provide the basis for a solid karate kick.



National Archives UK

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Tiny metal bugs,
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By WILL SELF

The great French philosopher of the quotidian, Michel de Certeau, argued that "space is practiced place." What he meant by this is that while places are given spatio-temporal locations, commonly assented to, space is the particular way we choose — both as individuals and groups — to inhabit or otherwise traverse them. Private ownership and other property titles and exclusions on land use necessarily impede some people's ability to "practice place," while enhancing others. But really, the means we've commonly employed to practice place for a long time now were already grossly circumscribing our personal space.

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FEATURE

SWIFTIES

The discovery of gold in Nevada in 1848 led to a flood of miners, including Mark Twain, to the town of the Sierra Nevada. Anticipation for beef, cattle, and sheep led to the establishment of these cattle ranches in the area. The town of Aurora, Oregon, through the area, the Valley and at the open ranges, disappeared there instead.

This was just one of the many towns that were abandoned in 1865 most of the time. The town was abandoned because of the decline. The population fell from 10,000 to a few hundred within a few years. Some people lived in empty houses and worn bricks to the coast. Other towns like the Owens Valley and the cattlemen in the area a string of towns southwards between the mountains and the plains were established in 1860.

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His most suggestive comment of the hike, one that haunts me throughout the day, involves the cultural history of The Program. When I venture a theory that knowledge of its secrets might induce in insiders, over time, a state of cultic grandiosity, Grusch says I'm on to something, describing a "gnostic" streak in certain initiates. "We are the gatekeepers, they think." There are also people of fundamentalist religious views who regard the matter with spiritual horror and would rather it never see the light of day: "Obviously there are some who are going to think these Non-Human Intelligences are extensions of demonic principalities."

For lunch, we zoom off to a toy-like tourist village of art galleries and ice cream shops. Given the peculiar morning I've had, the strolling visitors eating waffle cones seem childlike and pitiful. They appear not to know that they dwell inside a puzzle world, where recently retired spies with heads full of paradigm-destroying secrets and loaded sidearms in their pants are lurking beside them, only steps away. Or is Grusch lying to me as part of some vast government psy-op, designed to break our minds and render us helpless to further elite manipulation?

At the fancy bistro he takes me to, he orders a gourmet pizza topped with jalapenos and drizzled honey. He turns on his phone and a Google alert appears.

"The Washington Post is attacking me," he says.

I read the piece on my own phone as we eat. It's mostly a media story, throwing shade on the upstart News Nation cable channel for devoting so much time to NHIs after running its first big interview with Grusch. The piece accuses the channel, heaven forbid, of chasing ratings

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in my career. I knew where the skeletons were and what doors to knock on. You bump into one thing and think you've found it, but it's only one slice. I would see one facet of the prism, but I wasn't able to look down on all the vertices. There was a lot of deception, a lot of lies, and some 'reverse interrogation.'"

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"Throughout the chaos of my childhood, I gravitated toward Star Trek and military stuff," he tells me. "I had a fascination with astronomy. I had a telescope as a teenager, observing Saturn and various star clusters. I used to work at the Buhl Observatory in college. I used to give night sky tours to the public. And I used to help produce planetarium shows."

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Once out on the trail, surrounded by granite peaks which Grusch loves to climb as a "masochistic hobby," I press him for details on The Program. It's a frustrating interrogation. He swings between a boyish eagerness to share the secrets of the cosmos — "We are not alone!" "Maybe we're like chimpanzees to them" — and recessive, disciplined discretion. At times, he falls silent in

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We spend the afternoon together chatting beside a bubbling mountain stream. He clues me in about the mechanics of military secrecy, shooting down the common notion that our government is too incompetent or leaky to hold back the truth about NHIs. By burying pieces of The Program inside already existing "Black Projects" and "SAPs" (Special Access Programs), the enterprise has been erased from view, even the view of many working on it, who can't see the galaxy for the stars and planets. But surely, I say, our presidents must know, and our CIA directors and their ilk. "Not necessarily," he says. I ask him to name the person who knows the most out of everyone who

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Grusch predicts that much more will be revealed soon, within a year, he hopes, but such forecasts are common on the UFO scene. (It's not just aliens who supposedly warp time, it's the humans who discuss them.) But the process may be speeding up: Grusch says he is working behind the scenes on legislation that should allow him, and oth-

tion with distant worlds.

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"There is no reason why a well thought-out story should resemble real life; life strives with all its might to resemble a well thought-out story."

— Isaac Babel

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He offers a guess, off the record — a formidable figure from late twentieth century politics, though it's not among the few that I anticipated. "I'm only guessing," he reminds me.

I tell him this style of interaction is maddening.

"Welcome to my world," he says.

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A tender issue soon arises: A recent article in *The Intercept* exposed a difficult

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moment in Grusch's life, and used it to question his mental health. Several years ago, while living in Virginia, he fell into an alcoholic funk and muttered about committing suicide. He was then held for 72 hours in a drying-out facility. The reporter found police records of the incident after being tipped off, Grusch believes, by one of his bureaucratic foes.

He now offers me his side of the story. The drunken incident in fact occurred, he says. But he insists it wasn't as discrediting as the writer made out to be. Like so many combat vets, he lives with a level of trauma, he explains. For a while, he treated it with booze. Strong spirits have always had a bad effect on him, acting on his system almost like "opiates," a problem he says is common in his lineage. He sought treatment after the event and feels he's put his low period behind him. I hear in his upbeat tone a plaintive note, one I know from my own struggles with addiction.

This is surely a flawed human being here before me, a suffering child of our indifferent universe. We are all flawed beings. But I'm convinced that his tales of his investigations within the universe of secrets, which surely does exist, is not merely an act. Earlier, recalling Afghanistan, where he identified targets for fiery death, he averred that his new mission — waking our no-longer lonesome species to the folly of seeking "feudalistic dominance" — feels redemptive, morally restorative. Though it does seem that battle excited him, too.

"At heart, I'm an operator," he told me after confessing to feeling a bit awkward wearing a suit to his congressional interview.

He gripped an imaginary weapon and swept its barrel through the air as though clearing an enemy position. His favorite allies in his wartime years? "The Germans and the Brits." They got the job done. "And the Mongolians." Toughest guys he knew.

We part for a couple of hours before dinner. I retreat to my motel cabin, lie down, and drift. Paranoia creeps in, possibly a man-

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ifestation of what Grusch calls "ontological shock," which is when new thoughts and old thoughts can't be reconciled. Do I trust his fantastic tale? Not sure. Do I trust the familiar, legacy tales? Not sure. Not as much as I did yesterday.

What I trust more than ever, strangely, is Hollywood. During our long and winding conversation, Grusch shared with me certain private notions about the NHI phenomenon — the creatures may be telepathic; they may use forms of high-tech camouflage; their ships may exist in dimensions beyond our four;

their bodies may be drones or avatars — which evoke familiar tropes from movies and TV shows. Are insiders at work in entertainment circles? Have monstrous secrets been seeded throughout our culture to prepare us for the coming shock? Are top Hollywood executives themselves aliens? It all seems possible.

We're joined at dinner by Jessica, Grusch's wife of seven years, a former Air Force nurse from Akron, Ohio who served in Afghanistan herself. She's quietly humorous, polite, possessed of perfect posture, and stoically tough-minded in a way that reminds me of my late mother, also a nurse from the Akron area. I find her presence balancing and calming.

I sense this young couple has faced some novel challenges, not least her husband's evolution from a lethal, locked-on soldier-spy to a messenger of wild, disruptive truths. "It definitely been a journey!" says Jessica. One theme at dinner is Grusch's obsessive streak; he reveals that he's been diagnosed as "slightly autistic" and acknowledges having trouble with social niceties such as "remembering people's birthdays." He shoots his wife a bashful glance and she returns a forgiving one. When it's time for dessert, they both demur — counting their calories, American style — but then they relent, being naughty, and order cake.

After dinner I watch them drive off into the dark, up to their house on a ridge beneath the stars. "I always complete my missions," Grusch said tonight, sawing into his thick steak. "I'll complete this one too," he pledged. And I believed him.

I believed he's a young man who won't — who can't — turn back. ●