

Cryptic by Jack McDevitt

It was at the bottom of the safe in a bulky manila envelope. I nearly tossed it into the trash along with the stacks of other documents, tapes, and assorted flotsam left over from the Project.

Had it been cataloged, indexed in some way, I'm sure I would have. But the envelope was blank, save for an eighteen-year-old date scrawled in the lower right hand corner, and beneath it, the notation "40 gh."

Out on the desert, lights were moving. That would be Brackett fine-tuning the Array for Orrin Hopkins, who was then beginning the observations that would lead, several years later, to new departures in pulsar theory. I envied Hopkins: he was short, round, bald, a man unsure of himself, whose explanations were invariably interspersed with giggles. He was a ridiculous figure; yet he bore the stamp of genius. And people would remember his ideas long after the residence hall named for me at Carrollton had crumbled.

If I had not long since recognized my own limits and conceded any hope of immortality (at least of this sort), I certainly did so when I accepted the director's position at Sandage. Administration pays better than being an active physicist, but it is death to ambition.

And a Jesuit doesn't even get that advantage.

In those days, the Array was still modest: forty parabolic antennas, each thirty-six meters across. They were on tracks, of course, independently movable, forming a truncated cross. They had, for two decades, been the heart of SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. Now, with the Project abandoned, they were being employed for more useful, if mundane, purposes.

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Even that relatively unsophisticated system was good: as Hutching Chaney once remarked, the Array could pick up the cough of an automobile ignition on Mars.

I circled the desk and fell into the uncomfortable wooden chair we'd inherited from the outgoing regime. The packet was sealed with tape that had become brittle and loose around the edges. I tore it open.

It was a quarter past ten. I'd worked through my dinner and the evening hours, bored, drinking coffee, debating the wisdom in coming out here from JPL. The increase in responsibility was a good career move; but I knew now that Harry Cooke would never lay his hands on a new particle.

I was committed for two years at Sandage: two years of working out schedules and worrying about insurance; two years of dividing meals between the installation's sterile cafeteria, and Jimmy's Amoco Restaurant on Route 85. Then, if all went well, I could expect another move up, perhaps to Georgetown.

I'd have traded it all for Hopkins's future.

I shook out six magnetic disks onto the desk. They were in individual sleeves, of the type that many installations had once used to record electromagnetic radiation. The disks were numbered and dated over a three-day period in 2001, two years earlier than the date on the envelope.

Each was marked "Procyon."

In back, Hopkins and two associates were hunched over monitors. Brackett, having finished his job, was at his desk reading.

I was pleased to discover that the disks were compatible to the Mark VIs. I inserted one, tied in a vocorder to get a hard copy, and went over to join the Hopkins group while the thing ran. They were talking about plasma. I listened for a time, got lost, noted that everyone around me (save the grinning little round man) also got lost, and strolled back to my computer.

The trace drew its green-and-white pictures smoothly on the Mark VI display, and pages of hard copy clicked out of the vocorder. Something in the needle geometry scattered across the recording paper drew my attention. Like an elusive name, it drifted just beyond reach.

Beneath a plate of the Andromeda Galaxy, a coffee pot simmered. I could hear the distant drone of a plane, probably out of Luke Air Force Base. Behind me, Hopkins and his men were laughing at something.

There were patterns in the recording.

They materialized slowly, identical clusters of impulses: the signals were artificial.

Procyon.

The laughter, the plane, the coffee pot, a radio that had been left on somewhere: everything squeezed down to a possibility.

More likely Phoenix, I thought.

* * * *

Frank Myers had been SETI Director since Ed Dickinson's death twelve years before. I reached him next morning in San Francisco.

"No," he said without hesitation. "Someone's idea of a joke, Harry."

"It was in your safe, Frank."

"That damned safe's been there forty years. Might be anything in it. Except messages from Mars...."

I thanked him and hung up.

It had been a long night: I'd taken the hard copy to bed and, by 5:00 A.M., had identified more than forty distinct pulse patterns. The signal appeared to be continuous: that is, it had been an ongoing transmission with no indication of beginning or end, but only irregular breaches of the type that would result from atmospheric and, of course, the long periods during which the target would have been below the horizon.

It was clearly a reflected terrestrial transmission: radio waves bounce around considerably. But why seal the error two years later and put it in the safe?

Procyon is a yellow-white class F3 binary, absolute magnitude 2.8, once worshipped in Babylon and Egypt. (What hasn't been worshipped in Egypt?) Distance from earth: 11.3 light-years.

In the outer office, Beth Cooper typed, closed filing drawers, spoke with visitors.

The obvious course of action was to use the Array. Listen to Procyon at 40 gigahertz, or all across the spectrum for that matter, and find out if it was, indeed, saying something.

On the intercom, I asked Beth if any open time had developed on the system. "No," she said crisply. "We have nothing until August of next year."

That was no surprise. The facility had booked quickly when its resources were made available to the astronomical community on more than the limited basis that had prevailed for twenty years. Anyone wishing to use the radiotelescope had to plan far in advance. How could I get hold of the Array for a couple hours?

I asked her to come into my office.

Beth Cooper had come to Sandage from San Augustin with SETI during the big move twenty years before. She'd been secretary to three directors: Hutching Chaney, who had built Sandage; his longtime friend, Ed Dickinson; and finally, after Dickinson's death, Frank Myers, a young man on the move, who'd stayed too long with the Project, and who'd been reportedly happy to see it strangled. In any case, Myers had contributed to its demise by his failure to defend it.

I'd felt he was right, of course, though for the wrong reason. It had been painful to see the magnificent telescope at Sandage denied, by and large, to the scientific community while its grotesque hunt for the Little Green Man signal went on. I think there were few of us not happy to see it end.

Beth had expected to lose her job. But she knew her way around the facility, had a talent for massaging egos, and could spell. A devout Lutheran, she had adapted cautiously to working for a priest and, oddly, seemed to have taken offense that I did not routinely walk around with a Roman collar.

I asked one or two questions about the billing methods of the local utilities, and then commented, as casually as I could manage, that it was unfortunate the Project had not succeeded.

Beth looked more like a New York librarian than a secretary at a desert installation. Her hair was silver-gray. She wore steel-rimmed glasses on a long silver chain. She was moderately heavy, but her carriage and her diction were impeccable, imbuing her with the quality that stage people call presence.

Her eyes narrowed to hard black beads at my remark. "Dr. Dickinson said any number of times that none of us would live to see results. Everyone attached to the program, even the janitors, knew that." She wasn't a woman given to shrugs, but the sudden flick in those dark eyes matched the effect. "I'm glad he didn't live to see it terminated."

That was followed by an uncomfortable silence. "I don't blame you, Doctor," she said at length, referring to my public position that the facility was being underutilized.

I dropped my eyes and tried to smile reassuringly. It must have been ludicrous: her severe features softened. I showed her the envelope.

“Do you recognize the writing?”

She barely glanced at it. “It's Dr. Dickinson's.”

“Are you sure? I didn't think Dickinson came to the Project until Hutch Chaney's retirement. That was '13, wasn't it?”

“He took over as Director then. But he was an operating technician under Dr. Chaney for, oh, ten or twelve years before that.” Her eyes glowed when she spoke of Dickinson.

“I never met him,” I said.

“He was a fine man.” She looked past me, over my shoulder, her features pale. “If we hadn't lost him, we might not have lost the Project.”

“If it matters,” I added gently.

“If it matters.”

She was right about Dickinson: he was articulate, a persuasive speaker, author of books on various subjects, and utterly dedicated to SETI. He might well have kept the Project afloat despite the cessation of federal funds and the increasing clamor among his colleagues for more time at the facility. But Dickinson was twelve years dead now: he'd returned to Massachusetts at Christmas, as was his custom. After a snowstorm, he'd gone out to help shovel a neighbor's driveway and his heart had failed.

At the time, I was at Georgetown. I can still recall my sense of a genius who had died too soon. He had possessed a vast talent, but no discipline; he had churned through his career hurling sparks in all directions. But somehow everything he touched, like SETI, had come to no fulfillment.

“Beth, was there ever a time they thought they had an LGM?”

“The Little Green Man Signal?” She shook her head. “No, I don't think so. They were always picking up echoes and things. But nothing ever came close. Either it was KCOX in Phoenix, or a Japanese trawler in the middle of the Pacific.”

“Never anything that didn't fit those categories?”

One eyebrow rose slightly. “Never anything they could prove. If they couldn't pin it down, they went back later and tried to find it again. One way or another, they eliminated everything.” Or, she must be thinking, we wouldn't be standing here having this conversation.

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Beth's comments implied that suspect signals had been automatically stored. Grateful that I had not yet got around to purging obsolete data, I discovered that was indeed the case, and ran a search covering the entire time period back to the Procyon reception in 2011. I was looking for a

similar signal.

I got a surprise.

There was no match. There was also no record of the Procyon reception itself.

That meant presumably it had been accounted for and discarded.

Then why, two years later, had the recordings been sealed and placed in the safe? Surely no explanation would have taken that long.

SETI had assumed that any LGM signal would be a deliberate attempt to communicate, that an effort would therefore be made by the originator to create intelligibility, and that the logical way to do that was to employ a set of symbols representing universal constants: the atomic weight of hydrogen, perhaps, or the value of pi.

But the move to Sandage had also been a move to more sophisticated, and considerably more sensitive, equipment. The possibility developed that the Project would pick up a slopover signal, a transmission of alien origin, but intended only for local receivers. Traffic of that nature could be immeasurably difficult to interpret.

If the packet in the safe was anything at all, it was surely of this latter type. Forty gigahertz is not an ideal frequency for interstellar communication. Moreover, the intercept was ongoing, formless, no numbered parts, nothing to assist translation.

I set the computer working on the text, using SETI's own language analysis program. Then I instructed Brackett to call me if anything developed, had dinner at Jimmy's, and went home.

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There was no evidence of structure in the text. In English, one can expect to find a 'U' after a 'Q', or a vowel after a cluster of consonants. The aspirate is seldom doubled, nothing is ever tripled, and so on. But in the Procyon transmission, everything seemed utterly random.

The computer counted two-hundred fifty-six distinct pulse patterns. Eight bits. Nothing recurred at sufficient intervals to be a space. And the frequency count of these pulse patterns, or characters, was flat; there was no quantitative difference in use from one to another. All appeared approximately the same number of times. If it was a language, it was a language with no discernible vowels.

I called Wes Phillips, who was then the only linguist I knew. Was it possible for a language to be structured in such a way?

"Oh, I don't think so. Unless you're talking about some sort of construct. Even then...." He paused. "Harry, I can give you a whole series of reasons in maybe six different disciplines why languages need high and low frequency letters. To have a flat 'curve,' a language would have to be deliberately designed that way, and it would have to be non-oral. But what practical value would it have? Why bother?"

* * * *

Ed Dickinson had been an enigma. During the series of political crises after the turn of the century, he'd earned an international reputation as a diplomat, and as an eloquent defender of reason and restraint. Everyone agreed that he had a mind of the first rank. Yet, in his chosen field, he accomplished little. And eventually he'd gone to work for the Project, historically only a stepping-stone to serious effort. But he'd stayed.

Why?

Hutching Chaney was a different matter. A retired naval officer, he'd indulged in physics almost as a pastime. His political connections had been instrumental in getting Sandage built; and his assignment as Director was rumored to have been a reward for services rendered during the rough and tumble of congressional politics.

He possessed a plodding sort of competence. He was fully capable of grasping, and visualizing, extreme complexity. But he lacked insight and imagination, the ability to draw the subtle inference. After his retirement from Sandage, Chaney had gone to an emeritus position at MIT, which he'd held for five years.

He was a big man, more truck driver than physicist. Despite advancing age—he was then in his 70's—and his bulk, he spoke and moved with energy. His hair was full and black. His light gray eyes suggested the shrewdness of a professional politician; and he possessed the confident congeniality of a man who had never failed at anything.

We were in his home in Somerville, Massachusetts, a stone and glass house atop sweeping lawns. It was not an establishment that a retired physicist would be expected to inhabit: Chaney's moneyed background was evident.

He clapped a big hand on my shoulder and pulled me through one of those stiff, expensive living rooms that no one ever wants to sit in, into a paneled, leather-upholstered den at the rear of the house. “Martha,” he said to someone I couldn't see, “would you bring us some port?” He looked at me for acquiescence.

“Fine,” I said. “It's been a long time, Hutch.”

Books lined the walls: mostly engineering manuals, a few military and naval histories. An articulated steel gray model of the Lance dominated the fireplace shelf. That was the deadly hydrofoil which, built at Chaney's urging, had created a multi-purpose navy that was simultaneously lethal, flexible, and relatively cheap.

“The Church is infiltrating everywhere,” he said. “How are things at Sandage, Harry?”

I described some of the work in progress. He listened with interest.

A young woman arrived with a bottle, two glasses, and a plate of cheese. “Martha comes in three times a week,” Chaney said after she'd left the room. He smiled, winked, dipped a stick of cheese into the mustard, and bit it neatly in half. “You needn't worry, Harry. I'm not capable of getting into trouble anymore. What brings you to Massachusetts?”

I extracted the recordings from my briefcase and handed them across to him. I watched patiently as he leafed through the thick sheaf of paper, and saw with satisfaction his change of expression.

“You're kidding, Harry,” he said. “Somebody really found one? When'd it happen?”

“Twenty years ago,” I said, passing him the envelope and the original disks.

He turned them over in his hands. “You're not serious? There's a mistake somewhere.”

“It was in the safe,” I said.

He shook his head. “Doesn't much matter where it was. Nothing like this ever happened.”

“Then what is it?”

“Damned if I have any idea.”

We sat not talking while Chaney continued to flip pages, grunting. He seemed to have forgotten his wine. “You run this yourself?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Hell of a lot of trouble for somebody to go to for a joke. Were the computers able to read any of it? No? That's because it's gibberish.” He stared at the envelope. “But it's Ed's handwriting.”

“Would Dickinson have any reason to keep such a thing quiet?”

“Ed? No: Dickinson least of all. No one wanted to hear a signal more than he did. He wanted it so badly he invested his life in the Project.”

“But could he, physically, have done this? Could he have picked up the LGM? Could he have done it without anyone else knowing? Was he good enough with computers to cover his tracks?”

“This is pointless. Yes, he could have done it. And you could walk through Braintree without your pants.”

A light breeze was coming through a side window, billowing the curtains. It was cool and pleasant, unusual for Massachusetts in August. Some kids were playing halfball out on the street.

“Forty megahertz,” he said. “Sounds like a satellite transmission.”

“That wouldn't have taken two years to figure out, would it? Why keep the disks?”

“Why not? I expect if you go down into the storeroom you'll find all kinds of relics.”

Outside, there was a sound like approaching thunder, exploding suddenly into an earsplitting screech. A stripped-down T-Bolt skidded by, scattering the ballplayers. An arm hung leisurely out the driver's side. The car took the corner stop sign at about 45. A couple of fingers went up, but otherwise the game resumed as though nothing had happened.

“All the time,” Chaney said. His back to the window, he hadn't bothered to look around. “Cops can't keep up with them anymore.”

“Why was Dickinson so interested in the Project?”

“Ed was a great man.” His face clouded somewhat, and I wondered if the port hadn't drawn his emotions close to the surface. “You'd have to know him. You and he would have got along fine. He had a taste for the metaphysical, and I guess the Project was about as close as he could get.”

“How do you mean?”

“Did you know he spent two years in a seminary? Yes, somewhere outside Philadelphia. He was an altar boy who eventually wound up at Harvard. And that was that.”

“You mean he lost his faith?”

“Oh, yes. The world became a dark place, full of disaster. He always seemed to have the details on the latest pogrom, or viral outbreak, or drive-by murder. There are only two kinds of people, he told me once: atheists, and folks that haven't been paying attention. But he always retained that fine mystical sense of purpose that you drill into your best kids, a notion that things are somehow ordered. When I knew him, he wouldn't have presumed to pray to anyone. But he had all the drive of a missionary, and the same conviction of-” He dropped his head back on the leather upholstery and tried to seize a word from the ceiling. “-Destiny.

“Ed wasn't like most physicists. He was competent in a wide range of areas. He wrote on foreign affairs for *Commentary*, and *Harper's*; he published books on ornithology, systems analysis, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Edward Gibbon.”

He swung easily out of his chair and reached for a pair of fat matched volumes in mud-brown covers. It was *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the old Modern Library edition. “He's the only person I've ever known who's actually read the thing.” He turned the cover of volume one so that I could see the inscription:

*For Hutch,
In the fond hope that we can hold off the
potherbs and the pigs.
Ed*

“He gave it to me when I left SETI.”

“Seems like an odd gift. Have you read it?”

He laughed off the question. “You'd need a year.”

“What's the business about the potherbs and pigs?”

He rose and walked casually to the far wall. There were photos of naval vessels and aircraft, of Chaney and President Fine, of the Sandage complex. He seemed to screw his vision into the latter. “I don't remember. It's a phrase from the book. He explained it to me at the time. But....” He held his hands outward, palms up.

“Hutch, thanks.” I got up to go.

“There was no signal,” he said. “I don't know where these recordings came from, but Ed Dickinson would have given anything for a contact.”

“Hutch, is it possible that Dickinson might have been able to translate the text? If there had been one?”

“Not if you couldn't. He had the same program.”

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I don't like cities.

Dickinson's books were all out of print, and the used bookstores were clustered in Cambridge. Even then, the outskirts of Boston, like the city proper, were littered with broken glass and discarded newspapers. Surly kids milled outside bars. Windows everywhere were smashed or boarded. I went through a red light at one intersection rather than learn the intentions of an approaching band of ragged children with hard eyes. (One could scarcely call them children, though I doubt there was one over 12.) Profanity covered the crumbling brick walls as high as an arm could reach. Much of it was misspelled.

Boston had been Dickinson's city. I wondered what the great humanist thought when he drove through these streets.

I found only one of his books: *Malcolm Muggeridge: Faith and Despair*. The store also had a copy of *The Decline and Fall*. On impulse, I bought it.

I was glad to get back to the desert.

We were entering a period of extraordinary progress, during which we finally began to understand the mechanics of galactic structure. McCue mapped the core of the Milky Way, Osterberger developed his unified field concepts, and Schauer constructed his celebrated revolutionary hypothesis on the nature of time. Then, on a cool morning in October, a team from Cal Tech announced that they had a new set of values for hyperinflation.

In the midst of all this, we had an emergency. One night in late September, Earl Barlow, who was directing the Cal Tech groups, suffered a mild heart attack. I arrived just before the EMT's, at about 2:00 A.M.

While the ambulance carrying Barlow started down the mountain, his people watched helplessly, drinking coffee, too upset to work. The opportunity didn't catch me entirely unprepared. I gave Brackett his new target. The blinking lights of the emergency vehicle were still visible when the parabolas swung round and fastened on the bright dog-star Procyon.

But there was only the disjointed crackle of interstellar static.

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I took long walks on the desert at night. The parabolas are lovely in the moonlight. Occasionally, the stillness is broken by the whine of an electric motor, and the antennas slide gracefully along their tracks. It was, I thought, a new Stonehenge of softly curving shapes and fluid motion.

The Muggeridge book was a slim volume. It was not biographical, but rather an analysis of the philosopher's conviction that the West has a death wish. It was the old argument that God had

been replaced by science, that man had gained knowledge of a trivial sort, and as a result lost purpose.

It was, on the whole, depressing reading. In his conclusion, Dickinson argued that truth will not wait on human convenience, that if man cannot adapt to a neutral universe, then that universe will indeed seem hostile. We must make do with what we have and accept truth wherever it leads. The modern cathedral is the radiotelescope.

Sandage was involved in the verification procedure for McCue's work, and for the already controversial Cal Tech equations. All that is another story: what is significant is that it got me thinking about verifications, and I realized I'd overlooked something: there'd been no match for the Procyon readings anywhere in the data banks since the original reception. But the Procyon recordings might themselves have been the confirmation of an earlier signal!

It took five minutes to run the search: there were two hits.

Both were fragments, neither more than fifteen minutes long; but there was enough of each to reduce the probability of error to less than one percent.

The first occurred three weeks prior to the Procyon reception.

The second went back to 2007, a San Augustin observation. Both were at 40 gigahertz. Both had identical pulse patterns. But there was an explosive difference, sedately concealed in the target information line: the 2007 transmission had come while the radiotelescope was locked on Sirius!

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When I got back to my office, I was trembling.

Sirius and Procyon were only a few light-years apart. My God, I kept thinking, they exist! And they have interstellar travel!

I spent the balance of the day stumbling around, trying to immerse myself in fuel usage reports and budget projections. But mostly what I did was watch the desert light grow hard in the curtains, and then fade. The two volumes of Edward Gibbon were propped between a *Webster's* and some black binders. The books were thirty years old, identical to the set in Chaney's den. Some of the pages, improperly cut, were still joined at the edges.

I opened the first volume, approximately in the middle, and began to read. Or tried to. But Ed Dickinson kept crowding out the Romans. Finally I gave it up, took the book, and went home.

There was duplicate bridge in town, and I lost myself in that for five hours. Then, in bed, still somewhat dazed, I tried *The Decline and Fall* again.

It was not the dusty rollcall of long-dead emperors that I had expected. The emperors are there, stabbing and throttling and blundering. And occasionally trying to improve things. But the fish-hawkers are there too. And the bureaucrats and the bishops.

It's a world filled with wine and legionnaires' sweat, mismanagement, arguments over Jesus, and the inability to transfer power, all played out to the ruthless drumbeat of dissolution. An

undefined historical tide, stemmed occasionally by a hero, or a sage, rolls over men and events, washing them toward the sea. (During the later years, I wondered, did Roman kids run down matrons in flashy imported chariots? Were the walls of Damascus defiled by profanity?)

In the end, when the barbarians push at the outer rim of empire, it is only a hollow wreck that crashes down.

Muggeridge must have been there.

And Dickinson, the altar boy, amid the fire and waste of the imperial city, must have suffered a second loss of faith.

We had an electrical failure one night. It has nothing to do with this story except that it resulted in my being called in at 4:00 A.M. (not to restore the power, which required a good electrician, but to pacify some angry people from New York, and to be able to say, in my report, that I had been on the spot).

These things attended to, I went outside.

At night, the desert is undisturbed by color or motion. It's a composition of sand, rock, and star; a frieze, a Monet, uncomplicated, unchanging. It's reassuring, in an age when little else seems stable: the orderly universe of mid-twentieth century had long since disintegrated into a plethora of neutron galaxies, colliding black holes, time reversals, and God knows what.

The desert is solid underfoot. Predictable. A reproach to the quantum mechanics that reflect a quicksand cosmos in which physics merges with Plato.

Close on the rim of the sky, guarding their mysteries, Sirius and Procyon, the bright pair, sparkled. The arroyos are dry at that time of year, shadowy ripples in the landscape. The moon was in its second quarter. Beyond the administration building, the parabolas were limned in silver.

My cathedral.

My Stonehenge.

And while I sat, sipping a Coors, and thinking of lost cities and altar boys and frequency counts, I suddenly understood the significance of Chaney's last remark! Of course Dickinson had not been able to read the transmission: that was the point!

* * * *

I needed Chaney.

I called him in the morning, and flew out in the afternoon. He met me at Logan, and we drove toward Gloucester. "There's a good Italian restaurant," he said. And then, without taking his eyes off the road: "What's this about?"

I'd brought the second Gibbon volume with me, and I held it up for him to see. He blinked.

It was early evening, cold, wet, with the smell of approaching winter. Freezing rain pelted the

windshield. The sky was gray, heavy, sagging into the city.

“Before I answer any questions, Hutch, I'd like to ask a couple. What can you tell me about military cryptography?”

He grinned. “Not much. The little I do know is probably classified.” A tractor-trailer lumbered past, straining, spraying water across the windows. “What, specifically, are you interested in?”

“How complex are the Navy's codes? I know they're nothing like cryptograms, but what sort of general structure do they have?”

“First off, Harry, they're not codes. Monoalphabetic systems are codes. Like the cryptograms you mentioned. The letter ‘G’ always turns up, say, as an ‘M’. But in military and diplomatic cryptography, the ‘G’ will be a different character every time it appears. And the encryption alphabet isn't usually limited to letters; we use numbers, dollar signs, ampersands, even spaces.” We splashed onto a ramp and joined the Interstate. It was elevated and we looked across rows of bleak rooftops. “Even the shape of individual words is concealed.”

“How?”

“By encrypting the spaces.”

I knew the answer to the next question before I asked it. “If the encryption alphabet is absolutely random, which I assume it would have to be, the frequency count would be flat. Right?”

“Yes. Given sufficient traffic, it would have to be.”

“One more thing, Hutch: a sudden increase in traffic will alert anyone listening that something is happening even if he can't read the text. How do you hide that?”

“Easy. We transmit a continuous signal, twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes it's traffic, sometimes it's garbage. But you can't tell the difference.”

God have mercy on us, I thought. Poor Ed Dickinson.

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We sat at a small corner table well away from the main dining area. I shivered in wet shoes and a damp sweater. A small candle guttered cheerfully in front of us.

“Are we still talking about Procyon?” he asked.

I nodded. “The same pattern was received twice, three years apart, prior to the Procyon reception.”

“But that's not possible.” Chaney leaned forward intently. “The computer would have matched them automatically. We'd have known.”

“I don't think so.” Half a dozen prosperous, overweight men in topcoats had pushed in and were jostling each other in the small entry. “The two hits were on different targets: they would have looked like an echo.”

Chaney reached across the table and gripped my wrist, knocking over a cup. He ignored it. "Son of a bitch," he said. "Are you suggesting somebody's moving around out there?"

"I don't think Ed Dickinson had any doubts."

"Why would he keep it secret?"

I'd placed the book on the table at my left hand. It rested there, its plastic cover reflecting the glittering red light of the candle. "Because they're at war."

The color drained from Chaney's face, and it took on a pallor that was almost ghastly in the lurid light.

"He believed," I continued, "he really believed that mind equates to morality, intelligence to compassion. And what did he find after a lifetime? A civilization that had conquered the stars, but not its own passions and stupidities."

A tall young waiter presented himself. We ordered port and pasta.

"You don't really know there's a war going on out there," Chaney objected.

"Hostility, then. Secrecy on a massive scale, as this must be, has ominous implications. Dickinson would have saved us all with a vision of order and reason...."

The gray eyes met mine. They were filled with pain. Two adolescent girls in the next booth were giggling. The wine came.

"What has the *Decline and Fall* to do with it?"

"It became his Bible. He was chilled to the bone by it. *You* should read it, but with caution. It's quite capable of strangling the soul. Dickinson was a rationalist; he recognized the ultimate truth in the Roman tragedy: that once expansion has stopped, decay is constant and irreversible. Every failure of reason or virtue loses more ground.

"I haven't been able to find his book on Gibbon, but I know what he'll say: that Gibbon was not writing only of the Romans, nor of the British of his own time. He was writing about us...."

"Hutch, take a look around. Tell me we're not sliding toward a dark age. Think how that knowledge must have affected Ed Dickinson."

We drank silently for a few minutes. Time locked in place, and we sat unmoving, the world frozen around us.

"Did I tell you," I said at last, "that I found the reference for his inscription? He must have had great respect for you." I opened the book to the conclusion, and turned it for him to read:

The forum of the Roman people, where they assembled to enact their laws, and elect their magistrates, is now enclosed for the cultivation of potherbs, or thrown open for the reception of swine and buffaloes.

Chaney stared disconsolately at me. "It's all so hard to believe."

“A man can survive a loss of faith in the Almighty,” I said, “provided he does not also lose faith in himself. That was Dickinson's real tragedy; he came to believe exclusively in radiotelescopes, the way some people do in religions.”

The food, when it came, went untasted. “What are you going to do, Harry?”

“About the Procyon text? About the probability that we have quarrelsome neighbors? I'm not afraid of that kind of information; all it means is that where you find intelligence, you will probably find stupidity. Anyway, it's time Dickinson got credit for his discovery.” And, I thought, maybe it'll even mean a footnote for me.

I lifted my glass in a mock toast, but Chaney did not respond. We faced each other in an uncomfortable tableau. “What's wrong?” I asked. “Thinking about Dickinson?”

“That too.” The candle glinted in his eyes. “Harry, do you think *they* have a SETI project?”

“Possibly. Why?”

“I was wondering if your aliens know we're here. This restaurant isn't much further from Sirius than Procyon is. Maybe you better eat up.”

About the Author

Jack McDevitt (1935-) recently retired from a position with the U.S. government to write full-time, but his stories have been appearing with increasing regularity since the early 1980s and he has won several awards. Social impacts are never far from his attention