

JERRY OLTION

THE GREAT MARTIAN PYRAMID HOAX

About "The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax," Jerry is astonishingly, frighteningly.  
. .  
. silent.

At least if they recover the film, they'll find out how we died." David Nelson struggled to keep his voice from quavering as he gripped the Jesus bar bolted to the instrument panel before him, and he tried not to look at the kilometer-high pyramid rushing toward the bridge of his nose.

Beside him in the scout plane, his companion, Muriel Mondou, seemed frozen in place, her right hand steady on the control stick, her left poised on the throttle. The instrument lights illuminated her form-fitting spacesuit with a soft glow that accentuated all her curves, and even now as she flew the plane into the yawning brink of disaster, David felt his hormones respond to the sight. He was not unique in that. The news media back on Earth ran her photos whenever they could, usually with captions like "Mon Dieu Muriel!" and they wrote articles describing her as "a broad interpretation of the term, 'space spectacular.'"

David, whose life depended more on her skills as an astronaut than on her measurements, was just glad she could fly.

She had brought their airspeed down as slow as possible, but in Mars's thin atmosphere that wasn't very slow. "If they recover the film, we're dead anyway," she said without looking away from the windshield.

David didn't bother asking why they were taking pictures, then. He'd already argued that with her. Posterity, she'd said. They owed it to posterity to expose the fraud once it'd served its purpose.

The proximity alarm went off with a bone-tingling wail, and David slapped the quiet switch. His spacesuit wasn't nearly as form-fitting as hers, but after weeks of operating the navigation and science controls while wearing it, he hardly noticed the extra thickness of his gloves. "Two kilometers and closing," he said, but in the time it took him to say it, that distance had diminished by half.

Deimos and a sky full of stars provided the only light. Without amplifier goggles over their helmets they would have been flying nearly blind. Even with the goggles, the pyramid was just a gray triangle against a black sky. Its leading edge loomed like an assassin's knife, then slashed past only ten meters beyond their left wing.

David jabbed at the fire button for the port-side laser spectrometer, and a beam of intense blue light lanced out from the wingtip. Where it struck, the pyramid's rock face erupted in a line of lava.

An instant later they were clear. Muriel pulled the plane up and around in a crop-duster turn, then leveled out for another run. The building of the great pyramid of Cydonia had begun.

The pyramid had always been there, of course. Building one of the kilometer-high mountains that littered the Cydonia plain would have taken the entire Army Corps of Engineers a couple centuries. Muriel and David were the only two people on Mars, and they had struggled for over a week just to erect their living bubble, an inflated plastic dome covered with Martian soil for radiation shielding. What they were doing now was simply turning a natural feature into an alien artifact by drawing lines so it would look like something constructed.

This was the last week of a long and ultimately disappointing expedition. They'd been a year just in transit from Earth, a beefcake hunk of a man and a blonde goddess of a woman packed into a cylinder smaller than most studio apartments, driving each other crazy even though they'd been selected for compatibility just as much as for audience appeal or exploring ability. Arriving in Mars orbit and setting up their expedition base had broken the monotony, but the surveying flights had quickly become as dull as drifting in space. Their plane was even smaller than their spaceship, and it was almost all wing; after six weeks in the tiny cockpit, radar- and photo-mapping half the planet, they could count the rivets in their sleep.

And to top it off, they hadn't made any Earth-shaking discoveries. Oh, they'd learned all sorts of interesting things about the geological makeup of the surface, and uncovered plenty of evidence that the stream beds seen in satellite photos had indeed carried water millions of years ago, but they hadn't discovered anything useful in selling Mars to the tax-paying public, and that was the real catastrophe. As AI Shepard had once said about the Mercury program, "No bucks, no Buck Rogers." You had to have public support if you wanted money enough to fly; the near-death of the space program after the lunar landings had proved that. Muriel and David had provided as much inspiring footage as possible, both in flight and at home in their dome shelter, which they kept at about 75 degree so they could lounge around in front of the cameras with very little clothing but the planet hadn't produced anything spectacular, and that was the problem. Unless they could come up with something about Mars that would inspire the masses back home, theirs would likely be the only mission there in the twenty-first century.

"There's always the Face," Muriel had said when the subject had first come up. Ever since a Viking photo had shown what looked to be a face staring up out of the Martian landscape, tabloid newspapers had been milking the story to death. They'd printed photos of the face and the mysterious pyramids surrounding it, photos retouched to make it look like the face was changing expression, speaking even crying when the Pope died. The Martian Face was such a popular symbol

that

when NASA had announced its intention to send an expedition to Mars, the tabloid-reading public had naturally assumed the whole reason was to check out the face.

NASA had stubbornly scheduled the flyby for last, holding out for a legitimate scientific discovery, but time was running short. A few planners had secretly hoped the survey plane would malfunction before the end of the mission and the public would have to make do with more pictures from orbit, but for once the machinery had performed as designed. They would be able to do the flyby after all, and as the time drew nearer, more and more of their hopes rested on it.

And fear that it, too, would be a bust began to weigh heavily on the crew. Nobody who knew anything about Mars seriously expected the face to amount to anything more than a chance arrangement of impact craters on a hillside, and the "pyramids" around it were almost certainly just mountains that had eroded with unusual symmetry. So when Muriel had said, "There's always the Face," David had responded with, "Oh sure. That ought to be good for about fifteen seconds of drama."

They'd already done their usual getting-ready-for-bed show with the lace nightie and the spandex bikini briefs, and had turned off the cameras for the night. They'd been enjoying their precious few moments of privacy by scratching and belching and trimming their nose hair like normal people, but Muriel had turned away from the mirror where she was flossing her teeth and said, "Maybe longer, if we do it right."

David had blown his nose, then said, "Oh? And what do you think we can do to make the Face more exciting than a mountain with old craters on it?"

"I don't know," she'd replied, beginning to pace the narrow confines of the dome. Ten steps took her from the glitzy chrome bathroom-kitchen on the north wall past the lab/dining table in the center of the room to the bed on the opposite side. "We'll have to see it up close first. But once we know what's actually there we could choose our approach angle to enhance the illusion, or maybe even use the exhaust from the emergency takeoff boosters to carve out the features a little better."

"With the cameras running all the time, documenting everything we do. Uh huh."

She'd paced back into the kitchen. "We can shut off the real-time cameras in the plane and just use the still cameras with our personal film reserve. Mission Control doesn't ever have to know we were there, but we'll have documentation if we need it."

"You don't think they'll notice when our signal suddenly stops?" he'd asked sarcastically.

"That's why we go at night." She'd walked back over to the bed, picked up his pile of discarded clothing, and tossed it to him. "Mission Control thinks we're about to hit the sack; we can rig the computer to keep sending fake heartbeat and respiration telemetry while we go check it out. "

"Tonight?"

"Tonight and tomorrow night are all we've got before we make the daytime flyby, and we may need both nights to do the touch-up work."

So off they'd gone, overjoyed to have slipped their reins for the first time since they'd begun training for the mission, but when they arrived after a three-hour flight they'd found the Face to be even less than they'd hoped for. If it had been built to resemble a human visage, then it had been intended to be

seen only from orbit. Up close it was little more than an enormous sand dune with blowout hollows in the right places to suggest eyes and a mouth. In anything but oblique light, and from any view but directly overhead, it wouldn't

look like anything at all. And it was far too big for Muriel and David to modify

in any significant way, even with the fusion engine on their landing craft.

But the pyramids had looked promising. Straight-edged, flat-sided, all they lacked was some sign of an intelligent hand in their construction. As the two explorers circled the biggest of them, David had fired the laser spectrometer at

the side of it, letting it vaporize some of the rock surface so he could read an

emission spectrum from it and see what it was made of. Just ordinary Martian dirt, it turned out, but when they'd made another pass and saw the spidery line

the laser had traced, Muriel had whooped with delight and said, "Hey, that's it!

We can carve it into blocks!"

After half a dozen passes, they backed off to study their handiwork. With the exception of a minor squiggle in one line from turbulence, the laser bums were arrow-straight and perfectly spaced.

"God, that looks great," David said. "They're just thin enough they won't show up from orbit, so it'll look perfectly legit when we take close-ups the day after tomorrow."

"I don't know, though," Muriel said. "They're fifty meters apart. Who's going to believe Martians could lift fifty-meter blocks into place?"

David laughed. "You're kidding, right? We're talking about the kind of people who thought the face was trying to speak."

"Ah. Good point."

"What worries me," said David, "is how we're going to cut the uprights. If we want it to look like blockwork, we have to cut vertical joints, too, and they're

going to be a lot tougher. They have to connect with the horizontal lines, and if we overshoot by more than a few centimeters, it'll blow the whole effect."

"Hmm." Muriel banked around for another look. She studied the lines for a minute

more, then said, "We could rig the uplink antenna motor to aim the forward laser, and program the pattern we want into the navigation computer. If I flew

us straight toward the middle of the pyramid, it could draw the vertical lines for us."

David winced. "Straight at it? You know how close we'd have to get before the navcom could get a fix on the pattern?"

Muriel tipped the plane over in a slow barrel roll. "Hey, you forget who's flying this thing. We can do it."

David looked out at the pyramid doing its pirouette around them. Shaking his head, he said, "The things I do for the space program."

The next night came far too quickly. They arrived back at base from their first night just in time to take off for the next day's mapping flight over Xanthe, so they were pumping stimulants most of the day just to stay awake. On top of that, David had to spend most of his time in the cramped equipment bays in the wings to either side of the cabin, hooking the uplink motor to the spectrometer laser and patching the navigation computer into the system.

They landed at their base camp just before nightfall and made a show of getting ready early for bed, then as soon as they'd shut off the lights they jumped up and snuck out of the dome like teenagers heading to a party. Muriel flew at top speed toward Cydonia while David recalled the photos of the lines they'd drawn the night before and fed them into the navcom's pattern recognition buffer.

"All right," Muriel said when the first triangular peak slid up over the horizon. "Lock onto the west side of number one; we might as well make our first run count."

"Ready here," David replied.

Muriel slowed the plane to just above stall speed--still almost the speed of sound -- and lined it up so they were flying directly toward the pyramid. They watched it grow larger and larger, waiting nervously for the navcom to recognize it and lock on.

"Come on," David pleaded. "Find the son of a bitch!"

The wall eclipsed nearly half the sky before Muriel banked hard to the left and pulled back on the stick, shoving the throttles forward at the same time to keep them from stalling out. The pyramid slid past only meters below.

"Why didn't it lock on?" she asked.

David was still staring straight ahead. "Because there weren't any lines there for it to lock onto," he replied softly.

"What? There had to be. We marked every side of every damned pyramid in Cydonia last night."

He looked over at her. "Well we must have missed this one, because I guarantee you, I'd have seen a paper cut if there'd been one."

Muriel looped and banked the plane through an Immelmann turn, taking them back alongside the face they'd nearly smacked into. Sure enough, it was smooth as a stretch of beach at low tide.

She banked the plane tight around the edge, but the next face was just as smooth. Once more with the same result, then she continued around until she was aimed at the next pyramid.

It, too, was smooth.

"I know we etched this one," she said. "I remember that little crater down there at the base of it."

"Yeah?" David asked. "Then what happened to the lines? Did little Martians come out and patch them up today?"

"Maybe," she said. "Do me a favor and aim the penetration radar at it when I swing us around."

"What, you think it's hollow?"

"I don't know what it is, but something funny's going on, and that's one thing we can check pretty easily."

"True enough," said David. He turned on the radar unit, and while he set it for maximum penetration he said, "We should have thought of doing this last night."

She laughed. "Are you kidding? We were so intent on setting up a big find, we forgot to look for a real one."

David laughed with her. "God, who'd have believed it? The tabloid writers were right. This is where all the action's at on Mars."

"Maybe. Get ready, we're coming up on it."

The plane swept past a few hundred meters from the pyramid, but David didn't look up from the radar screen. Sure enough, the cone-shaped image was darkest at the edges, and nearly transparent in the middle.

"Jesus, it's only a few meters thick," he said. "There's no way that thing's built out of rock. It's got to be something else, with a layer of rock and dirt over the top."

"Just like our dome," Muriel said. She banked the plane and began circling.

David looked out at the sharp triangles against the night sky. "What, like a radiation shield?" he asked. "Why would Martians need a radiation shield? They evolved here, didn't they?"

Muriel shrugged. "There used to be water here, and more atmosphere. Maybe they evolved under that, and when it got thinner they had to go underground."

"Jesus," David said again. "Why did we have to find this now? We've only got two more days before our launch window!"

"Hey, look at the bright side," Muriel said. "All we've got to do tomorrow is shoot one radar image like that one and we'll be coming back for sure."

David shook his head. "Somebody will, but it won't be us." "Why not?"

"Did Armstrong and Aldrin ever go back to the moon? Hell no. Once they got home they were national heroes; NASA wasn't about to risk them on another flight. They even tried to take away their jet privileges."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was. Trust me; we may have made the find, but we'll be watching on TV along with the rest of the great unwashed when the first people walk inside it."

Muriel banked the plane lazily left, then right. "Not if we beat them to the punch," she said. "I bet that little crater I saw is actually the doorway."

David looked at it as they flew past again. "Why would there be just one?" he asked. "If it's a door, wouldn't every pyramid have one?"

"Maybe they're all connected underground," Muriel said. "Maybe the Martians don't go out much anymore. Or maybe they don't go out at all, and that's there just for us."

David looked over at her, but it was impossible to read expressions in the darkness. He said sarcastically, "And I suppose the Face really was made to draw us here after all."

"Could be. We won't know unless we investigate closer."

He laughed a high-pitched, nervous laugh. "Mission Control would never let us go inside, not on our last day."

"What if we don't ask? We're here right now; I say let's land and check it out."

"In the dark?"

"Sure. We've got the emergency retros. I can skid this thing to a stop in less than half a klick. The sand is flat all around the base of the pyramids; it'll be a piece of cake."

David looked down at the radar screen. The image confirmed Muriel's statement; there was plenty of flat ground down there. No sign of life, but. . . .

"Do you think it's smart to just waltz in there? I mean, we were firing lasers at them last night."

Muriel was already banking for her approach. "They haven't fired back yet. Besides, this'll give us a chance to apologize before we leave."

"Oh sure, like they're going to understand anything we say."

"Who knows? They could have been listening to our radio and TV broadcasts for years."

"Now that's a scary thought."

Muriel laughed. "That's what I love about you; you're so positive." Before he could reply, she said, "Hang on, this could get bumpy," and she lowered the nose of the plane.

She brought them in near the base of the pyramid with the crater at the bottom of it. The wall was a flat mountainside to their left, and the ground rushed past only a few meters below as she killed velocity by tilting the plane higher and higher toward a stall. At the last moment, just as the warning buzzer sounded, she leveled it out again and lit the retro rockets, which braked the plane to a near-stop in the air. It fell like a rock the last couple of meters, bounced and slid a little ways on the sand, then came to rest less than a hundred meters from the crater.

Muriel let out the breath she'd been holding. Turning to David, she said, "Well, let's go see if the natives are friendly."

Muriel had been right; the doorway was obvious enough once they hiked to the edge of the crater and looked inside. The pit hadn't been formed by meteoric impact; it was merely a depression carved like a strip mine next to the pyramid.

A depression whose angled sides matched the pyramid's slant perfectly, and from the bottom of which a tunnel led underneath the wall.

"Why the basement access?" David wondered aloud, shining his helmet spotlight around as he took it all in.

"Maybe the Martians are built like beavers and this was a pond before the planet dried up."

"Hah. Right. More likely it's a trap; we get to the middle of it and the bottom falls out or something." All the same, he walked down the crater's steep slope, carrying the suitcase-sized portable EVA kit in his left hand. It held sample containers, air and soil test equipment, spare power packs for the pressure suits, and an emergency radio transmitter that would be useless under all that dirt. David snorted at the thought of using it anyway. Who would they call? They were going to have to rely on their own resources here; nobody at mission control could help them now.

Muriel was right beside him, her form-fit spacesuit making her look almost unclothed in the dim starlight and the reflected glow of their helmet beams.



"I hope Martians have the same standards of beauty we do," David murmured.

"I hope they don't," Muriel said. "I've already got half of Earth ogling my body; I don't need a planet full of Martians staring at me too."

"They're staring at us anyway," David said. "I can feel it."

"Hah. They've probably been dead for. millennia." Muriel stepped out ahead of him, but at the mouth of the tunnel she leaped back in surprise, nearly crashing into him.

A meter or so in front of her, a spider the size of an outstretched hand stood motionless on the ground.

David backed up a pace. "Whoa, what the heck is that?"

"I don't know," Muriel said, "but whatever it is, we're outnumbered. Look." She

tilted her head back to illuminate the side of the pyramid, which was littered with them.

None of the spiders moved, so after a minute they bent down to examine the one by their feet. Its resemblance to a spider was only superficial; it had four legs instead of eight, and its hollow body held a tiny mound of dirt that made it look more like a toy dump truck than an arachnid. In front of the hopper was a flat plate a few centimeters on a side that looked for all the world like a solar collector.

Sure enough, under the glare of their spotlights, the creature began to move. One leg at a time, it crept forward with its minuscule load of soil.

"Hah!" Muriel said, straightening up. "I bet they're repair robots. Solar powered and slow as hell, but they're probably fast enough to keep ahead of weathering. All they have to do is haul a teaspoonful of dirt at a time up the side of the mountain for the rest of eternity, and the pyramid's radiation shield will stay good as new."

"Or maybe they're the local equivalent of scorpions," David said. Muriel snorted. "I don't see anything they could bite or sting with." She stepped over it contemptuously and continued on into the tunnel, David following nervously behind.

The roof was smooth as poured concrete, and way out of reach overhead. The tunnel was wide enough for both of them to walk abreast to the far end, which sloped upward again after a few dozen steps and terminated at a closed door. An L-shaped handle stuck out from about head high.

"I don't see a doorbell," Muriel said. "Think we should knock?"

"If aliens came to my place in the middle of the night, I think I'd appreciate it," David said. "Give me time to get into my underwear, at least."

"Right. The great American phobia: getting caught by aliens without your underwear." Muriel reached up and banged her space-suited hand flat against the door a few times.

While they waited for something to respond, she said, "So do we go with the traditional 'We come in peace,' or do we make something up?" Despite her nonchalant attitude, her voice was fast and nearly breathless.

David wasn't doing much better. His laugh sounded forced and his voice cracked when he said, "How about the even more traditional 'Take me to your leader

"Sounds good. You want to say it or should I?"

"How 'bout we say it together. In a monotone of course."

"Right. As soon as the door opens."

But after five more minutes and another couple rounds of knocking it became apparent that they weren't going to be greeted at the door.

"Okay," David said as he reached for the handle. "Plan B." It took both of them tugging on the lever before it would budge, but when they pulled it downward they felt a latch click and they were able to pull the door outward.

As in a refrigerator, a light came on inside when the door cleared the jamb. It could have been a refrigerator light for all the illumination it provided, but it was enough to let them see what lay beyond the door: another five meters or so of smooth-sided tunnel and another door.

"Hah, an airlock." David hauled the EVA kit inside and the two of them pulled the door closed behind them. The pressure in the lock began to rise almost immediately.

David opened the EVA kit and switched on the spectrometer. He read off the list of gasses as they appeared on its screen. "Nitrogen, methane, ethane, propane, hydrogen cyanide --What the hell is this? Mars never had hydrocarbons in its atmosphere. And where's the carbon dioxide?"

"My ears just popped," Muriel said. "The pressure must be higher than OURS, too."

"One and a half times Earth normal. That's crazy. Mars couldn't hold that kind of pressure for a day. It'd all blow off into space."

Their spacesuits had gone from being shaped balloons around their bodies to being tight, wrinkled, constricting clothing. Only the rigid helmets retained their original shape.

"I hope these things hold against pressure from the other side," David said. "There's enough cyanide out there to knock us flat in no time."

"Let's make this a short visit, then," Muriel said. She went to the other door and repeated her knocking.

Nobody answered her that time, either, so they pulled open the inner door as well. Beyond it they found a dimly lit locker room, obviously a suiting-up area.

Thick orange dust covered the floor and the benches --which were high enough to be tables for a human.

"Doesn't look like anybody's been here for a while," Muriel said. "Like maybe a couple thousand years."

In the larger chamber, they could see a distinct orange haze to the air as well.

"This isn't right," David insisted. "This is more like Jupiter's air, or Saturn's."

Muriel shook her head. "No, they're mostly hydrogen. It's more like one of their big moons."

"It's cold enough to be." He looked at his suit thermometer. "Uh-oh. It's over a hundred below in here. Our heaters aren't going to be able to keep up with that, not with this much air to suck the heat away."

"Let's grab what we can, then, and get out of here." Muriel opened one of the lockers. It was nearly twice her height, and so was the spacesuit it contained.

She and David pulled it out and dragged it into the airlock.

"Tripod legs," she pointed out immediately. "Four arms. And it's tall and thin as a light pole."

"That fits, at least," David said. "Mars's gravity is low enough to make tall an option."

"So's just about every Jovian and Saturnian moon."

They made another run, grabbing an armful each of what little portable equipment they could find, then they slammed the airlock door behind them, their fingers and toes already numb with cold, and waited impatiently for the cyanide-laced air to bleed away. When their pressure suits had ballooned back to normal, they opened the outer door and carried their treasures to the plane. Muriel went back for the spider and stowed it in a heavy metal sample canister, just in case it decided to wake up again in flight.

Inside the plane, David called up the astronomy database on their reference screen. It only took a minute to find a perfect match for atmospheric composition. "Titan," he said. "These guys were from Saturn's moon, Titan."

Muriel strapped herself in and started the engines. "Then this was their outpost when they explored Mars." She looked over at the pyramid. "God, I'd love to come back with the right kind of equipment and go deeper inside there."

"Dream on," David said. "I'll bet you Mission Control won't even let us come back tomorrow. They won't want to risk losing us in there, not now that we've already got a few artifacts. And when the public catches wind of this, there won't be a nickel for another Mars expedition."

Muriel paused with her hand on the throttle. "Huh? Why not ? This place could be a gold mine. Think what we can learn about the beings who built it."

David sighed. "You're thinking like a scientist again. Try thinking like the average voter. We've discovered evidence of life on Titan; where do you think the next space shot is going to go?"

"Even with these pyramids just sitting here waiting for us?"

"Even so. Planetary missions are expensive; people are going to spend their money on the ones with the shiny new package."

Muriel powered up the engines, and the plane began to slide across the sand. As it lifted into the air, David said, "Forget coming back here; from this moment on, Mars is a dead issue."

At the base of the pyramid, two thin, leathery Martians peered out of the tunnel at the departing airplane. One of them turned a talking stalk toward the other one and blinked its biolight in speech. "I think they fell for it," it said.

The other one blinked back: "Good. I was beginning to worry that the Face wouldn't draw them here after all."

The first Martian blinked in staccato laughter. "No, humans will always succumb to curiosity. Now if the Titans are ready with their fake Pluto outpost by the time the Earthlings get there, I bet we can keep them from bothering either of us for another century at least."