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If one were to mathematically analyze the timing of major life decisions, not that my interests run to quantitative studies, I theorize one would find a statistically significant clustering at multiple-of-five birthdays. (If Dad heard that prediction, he would, without missing a beat, ask if I was referring to integral multiples of five. You can imagine what a trial my childhood was.) The speculation comes to mind because this all began on my twenty-fifth birthday. A quarter century: it had struck me more as a substantive fraction of a lifetime gone than as a cause for celebration.

My friends, however, were of a different mind.

At State U., even in the Soc. department, a Taco Bell run was considered a multicultural experience. I'd ranted about the local ethnocentrism often enough, so I was delighted and touched when my friends surprised me with a Japanese night out. We're all impoverished grad students, so here "out" meant gathering in one of their apartments. How ironic was it that one of the few times they were game to try something not remotely hunk of corn-fed Midwestern beef, they picked my least favorite cuisine? The *sushi* wasn't a problem, however, as there was plenty of *saki* with which to swig down the raw eel and yellowfin and squid, not to mention several items I didn't recognize and decided not to ask about.

How different things might have been if only I'd masked the food with *wasabi* mustard instead of the rice wine.

Everyone had brought foodstuffs in my honor, so I had to sample it all. Japanese etiquette, my hostess gleefully informed me, required downing each cup of *saki* in one swallow—and she owned water tumblers, not delicate ceramic cups. By my third California roll, I was feeling no pain. Halfway through my gastronomic survey, I was improvising paeans to diversity. No one even tried to match drinks with the birthday boy, but we all got pretty damn mellow.

What came next seemed like a profound idea at the time: *very* multicultural soc. I remember plopping myself down in front of a computer, and the gales of laughter as I almost toppled off the chair. I remember guffaws at my typos and boisterous negotiations over wording. After a ceremonious clinking, but rather more like clanking, of cheap glassware, I recall clicking *send* to dispatch our masterpiece. Lost in an alcoholic fog, however, was the exact topic of our enthusiasm.

The project about which we had all been so enthusiastic was only a vague recollection when I awakened the next day, head throbbing and tongue furred. My only clear memory beyond dissolving raw fish in alcohol was the sadly dead-on caricature on my birthday cake: the head of a young Woody Allen on a tall and gangly frame. The phrase Ichabod Cranium flashed through my mind—I could only hope *that* thought had gone unarticulated.

Someone had brought me home, gotten me undressed and into bed. My bedroom faces west; the sunlight streaming through a gap between my drapes showed it was late afternoon. If the punishment fit the crime, I had *really* enjoyed my party. I was pondering the wisdom of getting up when a roadrunner-like “me-meep” made my skull resonate. Email.

I stumbled past my PC on my way to the bathroom. The subject line of the newest message brought a shock of memory. It was a reply. “Please, no,” I croaked.

Please is not always the magic word. It appeared that the *Journal of Emergent Sociology* was facing a last-minute delay in the delivery of an invited paper, and so had a hole to fill in the upcoming quarterly issue. They couldn't promise publication, of course, but would look favorably upon a timely submission along the lines of my overnight emailed proposal.

I scrolled down the message to see just what I'd suggested in my drunken stupor. Reading, my stomach lurched.

* * * *

My father hoards speech as if words were being rationed for some war effort, a miserliness that manifests itself both in vocabulary and brevity. As to the former, I'll offer only an example. I knew the word *vehicle* before car, plane, or boat. How odd is that? As for the latter, there's a reason my sister refers to Dad as Professor Cryptic.

Before and since my teenage years, I've found his economy annoying, but it gave rise to what, entirely in hindsight, I recognize as a valuable aid to my ability to reason abstractly. My own spendthriftiness of utterance (and any social skills I may have) I learned from my mother.

“Brian. Rule One,” Dad would call parsimoniously, without glancing up from his newspaper. I was left to translate for my uninformed friends: if it shakes the house, don't do it. Rule One actually made a lot of sense for little boys. It had no loopholes.

Rule Two, which is what had me reminiscing about childhood regulations, had been pretty much ignored at the recent party. Think *before* you do things. Rule Two was promulgated long before I was of an age to drink, so Dad had never derived the obvious corollary: avoid important decisions while drunk and

unable to think. (He would surely have shortened that. “Don’t drink and think,” sounds about right.)

The paper I’d envisioned, in that *saki* -sodden stupor, involved those whose interests were *really* multicultural. As in: enticed by cultures that weren’t even human. I’d somehow been egged on in my drunken state to propose a sociological analysis of UFO, pardon the judgmental expression, nuts. There were more than enough Internet chat rooms in which such people congregated for me to easily do a study. The problem wasn’t a lack of raw data, but the probable consequences of publication. The mind reeled at how such a paper would be received by my fellow academics. Yes, a few sociological papers *did* exist about UFOs and, excuse me while I throw up, Ufologists ... but those were by safely tenured faculty. My thesis advisor slash mentor was not yet tenured; my highest priority was not being laughed out of renewal of my paltry fellowship.

Retracting my proposal could only draw more unwelcome attention to myself. Plan B, once panic receded, was the old switcheroo. I’d produce a paper that, while nominally consistent with my mercifully brief emailed abstract (how desperate *were* they for material?), was largely off the UFO topic. I’d reference the nuts, I decided, far less for what they believed than as a population across which to study the dissemination of ideas. My spirits lifted as the paper took form in my mind’s bloodshot eye: stolid, stilted, unassailably academic and unremittingly boring—as removed as could be from the sensationalism implied by the drunken abstract. With luck, the full paper would be rejected. Even without luck, I was going for something wholly forgettable.

My field and my passion is discourse analysis, a perspective at the intersection of literary studies, history, and traditional sociology. (Dad once made mention of roadkill at said intersection, but I refuse to go there.) The little-green-men believers were as valid a population as any for the study of vocabulary propagation and transformation. That is, I could extract trends and patterns in metaphors, themes, and figures of speech, then extrapolate to the social forces causing and caused by that imagery. Or I could go all simple and mechanical (and, truth be told, more safely dull). That would place the prospective paper in the entirely traditional and non-controversial sociological mainstream of content analysis: categorizing the topics within the text samples.

A few nights spent lurking in chat rooms yielded plenty of themes to be examined. Skinny gray men, it turned out, rather than little green ones. Evolutionary convergence, to explain ET’s humanoid appearance. Alien secrecy. Government cover-ups, usually involving men in black. (Why always men? Sexism among Ufologists could be another paper. I sternly dismissed that thought as an avoidable distraction.) Flying saucers: disk-shaped vehicles, when posturing to sound objective. Solid light—can you say oxymoronic? The ever-popular, if hard to justify, abduction claims. Ridicule factor, a self-fulfilling rationalization for the paucity of credible evidence. Luminous energy display. Arguments among proponents of saucer-borne beings, interdimensional entities, and time travelers.

Harder to process than the patent silliness were the scattered occurrences of logic.

One reason I was thinking of my parents, I knew, was the too-long unacknowledged happy-birthday recording they’d left on my answering machine. Admitting to myself that there was another explanation, I dialed my father’s office.

I’m more than a little bit murky about the types of physics. I didn’t know if what Dad did had any bearing on my problem—but I couldn’t say that it didn’t, or if that which I was pondering related to the even more abstruse arcana he collected on his own time. After a few pleasantries, I cleared my throat. “Say, Dad, are you familiar with Drake’s Equation?”

“Drake’s Equation,” repeated Dad. His manner toggled to pedantic mode within two syllables. “A model

for approximating the number of technological civilizations in the galaxy. You estimate the stars in the galaxy, the fraction of those stars with planets, the fraction of those planets giving rise to life, and so on. You make up most of the numbers, so the equation ‘proves’ whatever you want about the prevalence of communicating ETs.”

The chat-room denizens who had struck me as most thoughtful used, with what degree of justification, I could not say, values that predicted interstellar contact was entirely implausible. “And Fermi’s Paradox?”

“Who are you really, and what have you done with my son?”

I repressed mild irritation; Dad had every reason to be surprised by my questions. “Do you know?”

“Yes.”

What I took to be pencil-on-desktop tapping noises emphasized the pause at the far end of the line. He was no doubt stymied by the futility of drawing me a picture. It hadn’t taken me long, growing up, to crack the code of, “This will take pencil and paper.” It meant: here comes more information than I would ever want to know (or could hope to process). Pencil and paper also had going for them, at least in the eyes of Professor Cryptic, that whole picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words thing.

Eventually, Dad found his tongue. “The galaxy is a big place, so it seems improbable Earth has the only technological civilization. Now, assume there are others. Spacefaring aliens would colonize nearby solar systems. In time, those settlements would mature to repeat the cycle. The numbers you invent this time deal with how quickly the colonists fill their new homes and the speed of starships. The values you pick don’t much matter. In a few million years, a cosmological eyeblink, any such aliens fill the galaxy. So, asked Fermi, where are they?”

“Cleveland?”

“I taught you well,” Dad chuckled. “Brian, why these questions?”

My answer, if incomplete, was truthful: researching the propagation of vocabulary in certain chat rooms. I had, in fact, already web-surfed my way to definitions of the terms about which I’d asked Dad. What I had not known was whether the sites at which I found my answers were just a less overt sort of crackpot destination. The hidden agenda of my call was to hear if a serious ‘hard’ scientist took these ideas seriously. On the one hand, he knew the terms; on the other hand, the sarcasm had been awfully broad. “So tell me, Dad, what do you think?”

“About whether there are aliens? UFOs?”

“Uh huh.”

“Insufficient information.” Another prolonged pause. “You?”

“I’m studying Ufologists, Dad, not UFOs.” Amid a diatribe about the study of objects the existence of whose subject matter had never been demonstrated, I took satisfaction at the success of my deflection. Had I been pinned down on the subject my own beliefs, I could not, for the life of me, guess what I would have at that moment said.

* * * *

“ ‘Discourse Analysis of a Self-Selecting Subculture,’ scene 1, take 4,” I emoted more than dictated into

the microcassette recorder. No sociology paper would ever see dramatization, but any amusement I could extract from this experience was welcome. A mug of tepid coffee surrounded by cookie crumbs memorialized a previous bout of procrastination.

The title was as generic as I could make it. What passed for a plan remained workmanlike dullness—satisfy my obligation with a submission that, if it were ever published, would vanish without citation into a Bermuda Triangle of unquotable academic prose.

None of my rumination was new. I was stalling ... again.

“The research presented in this paper draws inferences from the language usage of a unique Internet community.” I tried unsuccessfully to feel some righteous indignation at the friends and colleagues who had egged me into this. “Internet chat-room visits are, as the netizen reader is surely aware, voluntary, as is each decision as to whether and about which topics to offer comment. Participation in this venue, it is furthermore necessary to recognize, can be entirely anonymous. Ianelli and Huang (1997) have documented the consequences of perceived anonymity, behavioral effects that are neither easily nor unambiguously disentangled from the group dynamic. The term ‘dynamic’ is, in this context, doubly pertinent, as both the membership and the interactions of chat-room occupants vary over time.”

Was that sufficiently turgid, ill-formed, and wishy-washy to dissuade readership—or, better still, to preclude acceptance for publication? One could hope. One *did* hope.

Alone in my cluttered apartment, I, too, was—until the moment this paper was offered for publication—anonymous. What would be the interpretation of *my* words, *my* selection of metaphor, among my peer discourse analysts? Once this paper was sent off, my anonymity would be replaced by ... what? Notoriety, I suspected.

But infamy had ceased to be my biggest concern. The political incorrectness of the phrase *be damned*, I was beginning to recognize that in the course of my research I had gone native.

* * * *

Kelly O'Brien had been at my party, but as the guest of a friend. Our usual conversation was an exchange of grunts when we occasionally crossed paths, most typically both of us on trash runs to our apartment complex's dumpster. Since the party, our relationship had been subtly different in a way I could not exactly define. My best guess was quiet amusement at my expense. Fair enough—I had been *very* drunk that night. Kelly was a grad student, too, but in her case of computer science—another reason our chance encounters were brief.

After too many of my evenings spent researching the paper, her amusement became more overt. “How are the BEMs?” she asked, grinning, as we passed in the parking lot. She was dressed, as usual, in faded jeans, an oversized plaid flannel shirt, and an irksome aura of competence.

Bug-eyed monsters. Sighing, I began synopsisizing my progress to date. She interrupted me mid sentence. “My conscience is getting the best of me here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were set up, Brian, and I made it possible.”

I tried again. “What do you mean?”

She brushed an errant wisp of hair from her eyes. “The proposal wasn't your idea. Your buddies,” and she named a few, “goaded you into it. I'd pre-rigged the PC to intercept outgoing email.”

“But the reply came from the journal.”

Smugness and sympathy battled over her face. Smugness won. “It was from your friends. I spoofed the return address.”

Her explanation of how she subverted the email system went over my head, which was in any event already spinning. Kelly wasn't the only one who had seemed unusually amused with me of late. “When was someone going to tell me?”

She shrugged. “Dunno. Everyone expected you to have a momentary panic attack when you saw the reply, then to realize the acceptance couldn't possibly be real. Your dogged seriousness as you keep doing this research has been the source of much entertainment.”

I wasn't surprised. Some remote corner of my mind was, in fact, quite taken with their gag. Considering my frequent rants at their supposed provincialism, a maudlin fixation, even sober, about my milestone birthday, and my *saki* -swilling subterfuge with the *sushi* , their practical joke hardly lacked for poetic justice.

While a distant recess of my mind was processing that reaction, most of my consciousness was focused on an epiphany far more important: I intended to continue my new research.

* * * *

The conversational gambit “You got me good,” released peals of laughter from friend after friend. By the third such incidence, I was grossly embarrassed at my gullibility. Rereading now my drunken proposal email and the only slightly less ridiculous acceptance message only made me feel worse. *How* had I been taken in for more than a week by such nonsense?

To be kind to myself, an absurdly strong work ethic had started me digging while still hung over—and, despite the absurd path that had led me to the UFO chat rooms, there actually were some interesting patterns there. An apparent cacophony of dialogue, I had been quick to determine, became more illuminating once I organized them by the participants' points of view. At one end of my self-made spectrum were the true believers, for whom no claim of alien manifestation or governmental cover-up was improbable. At the other extreme were the debunkers, for whom all evidence, no matter the claimed quality or quantity of corroborating fact, was as entirely *un* convincing. In between were the skeptics, who accepted nothing non-critically, but—while never, it would appear, actually convinced of the existence of UFOs or aliens—professed minds open to future evidence.

Kelly's parking-lot confession had broken some metaphorical ice, and we were on the way to becoming real friends instead of acquaintances by association, but our increasingly lengthy conversations kept reminding me of my naiveté. After she demonstrated how she'd messed with my email, and shared with me a few other hacking exploits, a horrifying thought occurred to me. Could I be certain the prank was over? I had no idea if my chat-room visits and Internet searches were being stage-managed, if friends with too much time on their hands were electronically still yanking my chain. No matter where I went on campus, might not someone with Kelly's mischievous skills detect the log-in to my university account and do ... whatever?

The irony that I was becoming as paranoid as the true believers I might or might not be investigating did not escape me. I started frequenting municipal libraries, using Internet access from the public-library

computers to revisit the chat rooms I'd previously explored. The good news was that my now-anonymous forays showed nothing at odds with my previous lurks.

My original survey had encompassed only a few days, but the longer I read, the more I perceived common patterns of discourse. I dug through the archives of several UFO chat rooms to increase my sample size. The common thread, I decided, was the influence of the skeptics. These people calmly but compellingly rebutted the many claims of close encounters, of alien abductions, of—arguing about parameter values for Drake's Equation—the mere plausibility of extraterrestrial visitors. Under the onslaught of the skeptics' quiet logic, the community in even the most rapidly growing chat room would soon peak. Since everyone participated via alias, I could not begin to tell whether the true believers were persuaded by these arguments, or merely moved to more hospitable environs.

I was as yet unconvinced, of course, that my new friend Kelly wasn't *somehow* still orchestrating the practical joke to end all practical jokes.

* * * *

When my mother was a girl, Rule One was “No singing at the table.” As best I can tell, there was no Rule Two. Neither Mom's musical interests nor aptitude were passed on—talent, alas, tends to be a recessive gene—but I certainly was exposed to plenty of music growing up. My tastes are a few centuries more current than my parents', but I'm enough like Mom to always be listening to something. Her musical preferences, however, lent themselves more to where I wanted to lead this conversation than did my own.

“You know,” I began, “how some pieces of music are obviously related?” The somber, prematurely balding man across the table from me only nodded. “My musical gifts are limited, but I'm pretty good at recognizing compositions as being by the same composer. Whether I'm listening to a symphony, an opera, a sonata, or the requiem mass”—all Mom's taste, not mine, I hasten to add—“there's no mistaking Mozart.”

My lunch companion poked unenthusiastically with a fork at his French fries. Nigel Wellman was an ex-patriate Brit teaching at a nearby liberal arts college. His field was lexical analysis, just barely close enough to discourse analysis that he had responded to my voice mail. I'd never heard of him until undertaking a literature search. We had met at a diner on the edge of his campus. “Had you mentioned wanting to discuss musicology, I would have steered you to someone else on the faculty.”

I'd invited him to discuss overlap between our areas of research. That remained my plan. “Bear with me, Nigel.” I rapped with little success on the bottom of a catsup bottle until our waiter went away. “Music was only an analogy. My speculation, which I hope you can validate, is that a person's textual writings also have similarities, despite a variety of topics and venues.”

In a remarkably short time, half of his cheeseburger disappeared. “Of *course* such similarities exist. They underlie, for example, the many assertions that Shakespeare did not write the works popularly credited to him. While the most common alternate attribution is Sir Francis Bacon, there are other credible candidates.” His voice warmed; his eyes shone. “Christopher Marlowe, for example, and Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford. The lexical metrics are quite fascinating.”

“Metrics?” It was suddenly all I could do to get that word in edgewise.

“Indeed.” My companion took a quick gulp of Coke, then launched into a lecture. That was okay—I was here to learn. “One can quantify language usage in a number of very precise ways. Average sentence length and variability of length. Average paragraph size, in both word and sentence count, and variability

of same. Range of vocabulary and frequency with which synonyms are employed. Then there is sentence structure: preference for active or passive voice, degree of use of dependent clauses, rate of pronoun-for-noun substitutions.” Flourishing his fork in grand emphasis, Nigel was entirely transformed from the gloomy fellow I'd met minutes earlier. “There are many other patterns: recourse to foreign expressions, application of various figures of speech, and so forth.”

After a long while, the torrent of words slowed. I'd long since given up trying to follow the details, instead taking comfort in the one assessment I had been qualified to perform. Not only was Nigel widely published, but his papers were frequently cited in what appeared to be the mainstream publications of his esoteric field. Sensitized by the immersion in lexical analysis, I now couldn't help but notice my flowing-water metaphors.

“I *asked*,” said Nigel irritably, “about your target.”

“My what?”

Nothing remained in the Brit's glass but ice. He stirred the cubes with his straw. “Sudden interest in lexical analysis always means one thing: the desire to prove, or disprove, common authorship of some materials. So what axe are you grinding?”

“Pure academic research, I assure you.”

Nigel arched an eyebrow skeptically.

After muttered practice for the whole drive over here, I was as prepared as I could be for this moment. In my study of Internet chat rooms, I explained, I'd sensed similarities in purportedly independent comments. “So” I wrapped up, “I've come to suspect there are people using multiple screen names. It's pretty sad to think anyone would try to bolster his arguments by hiding behind several personae. If I'm right, there would probably be a paper there—but not a paper for me. My field is sociology, not psychology ... I have no intention of producing an article about a handful of UFO skeptics with too much time on their hands.”

We haggled over the price of a quick scan of a few chat rooms, settling on a banana cream pie to go. I took the check, Nigel took a list of chat rooms and screen names from me, and we went our separate ways.

* * * *

“My results,” Nigel had insisted, “merit a steak dinner.” He would say no more about those findings over the phone. The good news was I could buy our steaks at the grocery—he had a raft of hardcopies he wanted to show me, paperwork strewn across his apartment.

He shoved my bag unexamined straight into his refrigerator, extracting, while he was there, a beer. That cold bottle was for me; he took a warm one from the pantry for himself. Then he led the way to his study, whose decorating scheme was dead trees and pastel highlighter.

“What's up?”

Nigel waved me into the den's only chair. “You wondered if there were fewer skeptics than screen names.” He fairly bounced on his toes.

“And were there?”

“Most definitely.” My original list of aliases was pinned to a wall, a check mark beside every entry. He rapped it for emphasis. “A lot fewer.”

As he walked me through a collection of printouts, replete with highlighting, underlinings, circled phrases, and marginal scribbles, I struggled to understand. “You’re saying *one person* is inventing all these chat rooms-worth of dialogues? Why would someone do that?”

“That’s *not* what I’m saying. The exchanges are quite real. In your terminology, there are many true believers, many debunkers.” There was tapping and rustling as Nigel aligned his papers into a neat sheaf. “But of calm, dispassionately reasoning participants, those you call the skeptics, in several of these chat rooms more than half of relevant screen names map to a single person.”

The statement was so astonishing, that I set it aside for later analysis. “Anything else?”

“For one, your friend isn’t a native English speaker.” I must have started at the phrase *your friend*, because he clarified, “Your quarry. Fascinating.” From a file cabinet emerged more papers, replete with other annotations. The more excited Nigel became, the more enigmatic grew his elucidations.

“Nigel? In words of one syllable or less?”

He took a deep breath. “My apologies. In a nutshell, the language usage is too formal—the always-correct grammar that is the classical sign of an educated non-native speaker. Most everyone else’s dialogue is full of spelling errors that no plausible typo can explain, of slang and abbreviations. Our guy didn’t use a single dangling participle or split infinitive. Surely you noticed how stilted that material reads.” He accepted my nod and was off again. “This was so intriguing that I expanded the experiment a bit. Naturally, there are UFO-related chat rooms in many languages. I’m moderately fluent in French, German, and Japanese, and I found similar patterns there.”

“Similar patterns.” I was reduced to parroting, never a good sign.

“Chat rooms in each language in which the prevalent voice of reason disguises itself behind multiple screen names. One non-native speaker.”

There was no denying the obvious question. “The same person across languages?”

Nigel canted his head thoughtfully. “English, French, and German, certainly. Japanese, I’m not qualified to say. But if I were a betting man, I’d say yes, there, too.”

* * * *

What is the meaning of someone who is fanatical about being calmly reasoning? Before anyone began posing that riddle about *me*, I had other matters to attend to. If I expected renewal of my fellowship, I simply had to show progress on my dissertation.

My approved topic dealt with religious transformations in early medieval societies. More specifically, I was using discourse analysis in the context of long-ago royal conversions, assessing the impacts on the subject populaces. In those days, when the king converted, everyone else was expected to. I was looking for shifts in world view, how day-to-day routines and rituals were affected ... those sorts of thing.

My research involved mining contemporaneous literature for evidence. The work necessarily involved an indirect approach, of course, since only the writings of the elites were available. In the Middle Ages, who

but the elites *could* write? I could go on and on, but the topic matters more here than the details.

State U. owned, curiously enough, thorough resources on the baptism of Clovis and the consequent mass conversion to Christianity of his people. I was poring over an English translation (Gregory, sixth-century Bishop of Tours, had, of course, written in Latin) of the *History of the Franks* when a dissertation-irrelevant question occurred to me. Were there chat rooms of a religious nature? I'd never looked.

A second set of Internet communities soon stunned me. Phenomena that in other venues I'd seen presented as proof of alien visitations or time travelers became, in this new context, signs of miracles or angels or visitations by the Virgin. Once again I encountered true believers, skeptics, and debunkers. These skeptics were as stubbornly persistent as any in the UFO realm. Some argued that unexpected manifestations were personal religious experiences, not to be analyzed. Others opined that these revelations were unavoidably suspect, associated as they were with fasting and sleepless vigils on solitary retreats.

With a flash of insight, I saw that the pattern was exactly the same as in the UFO scenarios: discrediting supposed strange events of any kind. I shivered as traditional content analysis confirmed what my gut already knew: *these* skeptics' themes of objectivity, isolation, and the uniqueness of mankind paralleled the UFO conversations.

I was entirely unsurprised when, soon after, Nigel Wellman completed a second lexical analysis. The same prolific skeptic frequented the religious chat rooms as the UFO chat rooms.

* * * *

"Will you get that?" I yelled from my bedroom/office. Kelly was in the living room, and closer to the knock. I'd invited her over to split a pizza.

"Are you expecting anyone?"

"Just the pizza guy," I lied. I'd ordered on-line; the pizza wasn't due for another thirty minutes. My eyes were glued to four inset windows on the screen of my PC, two for the wireless webcams I'd hidden in my living room and two more for those in the hallway. Who knew I would ever get so involved with experimental methods? One of the webcams had a side view of Nigel Wellman waiting outside my front door, his cheeks and lips working in what I assumed was whistling. Another camera viewed the apartment door over his shoulder. Side and rear views of Kelly appeared in the final windows as she approached the door from its other side.

She swung the door open as Nigel's hand came up to knock again. My eyes stayed on the screen. Set-up had taken me a while, but I had clear shots of both of my guests' faces. I saw no surprise, no recognition. They did not know each other.

I couldn't tell whether I was relieved or disappointed.

"Nigel, Kelly." I ushered the two of them to my dining room table. "The pizza I promised *is* coming—only a bit later than I mentioned. Until then, I want to bring you both up to date." They took turns looking amazed as the full story of my recent chat-room obsessions unfolded. The pizza arrived as I was finishing.

"So *this* is your story? There's one person generating half or more of the analysis and argument in all of these chat rooms." Kelly tore at the pizza as she spoke, the slice she'd selected trailing long strings of

molten cheese. “You want me to write software to find more signs of her.”

“That's right. Will you?”

“Nice try.” She deftly snapped stretchy cheese tendrils with a finger. “Some of us aren't that gullible.”

“What do you mean?”

“I helped your friends get you. You're playing a return prank. No sale.”

Nigel grimaced at his cold beer. I'd forgotten to let some warm up for him. “I've looked at several chat rooms on my own. Brian had nothing to do with my studies, or with which rooms, or even the languages I chose.”

Kelly hoovered down the rest of her first slice before answering. “I was recruited in the practical joke on Brian. I don't question him having an accomplice.”

It had never occurred to me Kelly would question *my* motives. I'd been reduced to buying webcams I couldn't afford to convince myself she wasn't *still* getting me. Then the benefit of my paranoid delusions struck me. “Come see what else I've been up to.”

* * * *

The amateur spy set-up, uncomfortably beyond-my-means confirmation of my own continuing suspicions, succeeded where my honest protestations had not. The webcams convinced Kelly that Nigel and I weren't co-conspirators in a counter-prank; she agreed to work with him on a program. Many lexical-analysis algorithms had long ago been committed to code; what I wanted Kelly to do was to take the standard tools Nigel used and embed them in a real-time search program. I needed to know—and by now my new friends were almost as curious—just how pervasive was our unseen skeptic.

Three days later, reconvened this time on Kelly's living room sofa, I watched in fascination as Nigel went over a collection of hardcopies strewn across a Salvation Army-sourced coffee table. These dialogues had been snagged by his/Kelly's science project. He circled phrases, highlighted text, muttered to himself. The conclusion: new chat rooms, new screen names, even new languages ... and still more appearances of the same skeptic.

“That's not even the most interesting thing.” A mouthful of popcorn muffled Kelly's words; she made a show of chewing faster as she deposited a fresh stratum of paper. “I altered the program a bit to search chat-room archives. Observe the dates.”

The dates went back to 1995—soon after the birth of the commercial Internet. Who had the time and persistence?

* * * *

Looking around, I couldn't help but remember the Island of Lost Toys from a perennial Christmas television special. There was every variety of cast-off PC, going back, if the tags could be believed, to 386 boxes. Several of the newer systems had been pressed into duty for tonight's happening. My mind's ear had rejected a more definitive label, like experiment. Whatever the evening's activity might prove to be, I didn't think it would turn out to be science.

Why was I so obsessed with this?

“Ready, guys?” Kelly was manic. She was clutching one of the many cell phones in her computer-filled apartment. The phones were bought-with-cash throwaways; I felt vaguely like a mob boss. The disposables seemed like prudent precautions until we had some idea what kind of obsessive-compulsive we were dealing with. (Someone like me, my inner self whispered.)

She nattered on about her preparations. My head overflowed with buzzwords, with little grasp of the telecomm set-up she'd masterminded. Six chat-room sessions had been established, accessed through a like number of aliases, Internet service providers, web hosting services, and untraceable cell-phone links. Our county is flat and sparsely populated, meaning the cell-phone towers were few and are far between. Anyone hacking the mobile-phone system could gain only a very approximate idea of where we were. (In the state of lunacy, my inner voice volunteered.) The latest version of Nigel's and Kelly's lexical-analysis software monitored every chat session.

Kel inundated me with technotrivia about mechanisms supposedly further hiding us: network address translators, encrypted links, firewalls, dynamic host control protocol, spoofing. She could have imparted an equal amount of insight with much less effort by simply invoking BFM. That's black and that's magic; you can fill in the middle word.

It took a punch in the shoulder to rouse me from self-hypnosis. “What, Nigel?”

“Our wizard says we're ready, Brian.”

I studied the area once more. Flashing icons on six monitors confirmed that the Skeptic—he had graduated to a proper noun—was active in every chat room, behind yet more pseudonyms. The Skeptic was, in fact, active in far more than six dialogues, but we'd limited our attentions to those electronic communities that could route private messages in addition to group chat.

The same sentence had been typed at each computer, awaiting only a mouse click to be dispatched. “Let's do it.” We sat, each within easy reach of two computers. “On the count of three. One ... two ... three.” We each clicked two mice.

“We know what you have been doing,” challenged our six simultaneous messages.

The chimes of incoming responses rang out almost instantly. On my screens came, “I won't go back,” and “Why are you back so soon?” One of Kelly's screens repeated, “I won't go back,” while the other, cryptically, introduced, “How are wryteewr?” Nigel's displays offered, “Why are you back so soon?” and “Leave me alone.”

“Too short to be conclusive,” said Nigel. “No comment about that gibberish word.”

We'd signaled together to get the Skeptic's attention. It had obviously worked; no reason to change tactics now. “Try, ‘Why won't you come back?’” When the typing stopped, I added, “Go.”

Multiple replies again, of which the most fascinating related to the rapid pace of breakdown of tribal barriers, the osmosis of cultural constructs via public exhibitions, and customs changing in reaction to the primitive but rapidly improving crafts of artisans. Nigel had risen from his seat; he crouched over me to poke at one of my keyboards.

“Let me think,” I growled. “You're in my way.”

The keyboard had a long, stretchy cord; he whisked away the console and began typing. Yet another

window opened on one of my screens, blocking much of the oh-so-tantalizing text. “Good,” said the Brit. “Finally a sample long enough for analysis. It’s definitely from our friend.”

Breakdown of tribal barriers? Was our mysterious Skeptic an anthropologist? If so, why spend so much time discussing UFOs? Breakdown of tribal barriers? My mind suggested some possible translations: globalization, democratization, and the spread of capitalism. Options for the other unexpected phrases followed: ubiquitous American music and movies; a world in technological ferment.

Not an anthropologist. A sociologist.

* * * *

Another of Dad’s household rules had me shaking my head for much of my youth. Rule Three opined that things are often what they seem. For a long time, I thought it only a too-cute reversal of the old adage about things *not* always being what they seem. A first college class in philosophy opened my metaphorical eyes: Rule Three was a whole lot easier to offer to a kid than the principle of Occam’s razor. William of Occam, a fourteenth-century British philosopher, had famously declared that entities should not be unnecessarily multiplied. Famously, but not very lucidly. Occam’s Razor was commonly translated into: take the simplest explanation unless there is evidence of a more complex reason. Rule Three—once I got it, I had to approve.

Without allowing myself a chance for second thoughts, I typed and sent, “So for how long has your kind been studying planet Earth?”

* * * *

“You were only half right,” wrote the being who had quickly adopted the Skeptic as a descriptor. That was the first reaction in some time to my continuing exposition.

“I was ENTIRELY right,” I typed in retort. “That is not to dispute a second fact of which I was then unaware.”

“You are more like your father, I think, than you realize.”

I glowered at the monitor in more than mild indignation—then laughed. “It’s true,” I keyed. What purpose was there in denial? The Skeptic was, by design, a master observer.

More precisely, it was an extraterrestrial artificial intelligence inserted, mobile, into 1995’s then-nascent Internet. An alien mind left to secretly study humanity, and to report its findings, should its just-passing-through patron species ever come back.

Given interstellar distances, a return visit in fewer than several decades was not to be expected ... hence, I now understood, the Skeptic’s panicked reaction to an apparent return in a few scant years. It could have meant an in-transit emergency. The wryteewr were, simply, AI crewmates about which the Skeptic worried. The Internet offered no mechanism for conveying non-human languages; without a concise translation, the AI had resorted to transliteration.

“We know what you have been doing,” I had challenged. In context, which we did *not* have at the time, those words could have been, and were, mistaken to mean, “We know you have gone native. That’s why we’re back. That’s why we’re communicating over the humans’ primitive network in which you have tried unsuccessfully to hide.”

That the alien AI who had blurted, “I won’t go back,” *had* gone native, I did not doubt. Our ethereal

visitor found humanity endlessly fascinating, a cauldron of cultures only beginning to blend into a planetary unity. Its creators had completed that homogenizing transition centuries earlier. Earth was simply too fascinating a place to leave.

And the superhuman display of multi-tasking skepticism that had unwittingly revealed the surreptitious sociologist? The AI's persistent, dogged discrediting of all things paranormal was, ironically, intended to discourage humans from looking for ETs, real or virtual.

* * * *

But I hadn't quite yet answered the Skeptic's question. Dad would have done so in eight words or less. With me, as with Mom, a significant reply was more about the journey than the destination. I resumed my tale.

“What now?” Kelly's question had had a succinctness of which Dad would be proud.

“Are we off-line?” My head was pounding, this time without benefit of alcohol.

She gestured at our collection of cell phones all gathered in a row. Their tiny LCD screens were blank. The monitors, too, were dark; the status LEDs on the system boxes were unlit.

“What now, indeed,” agreed Nigel. “What would the authorities make of our extracurricular project?” He laughed nervously. “That assumes one knew which authorities were appropriate. I haven't a clue.”

It could have been my imagination, but I hadn't thought so. “Are you both looking at me? Expecting *me* to decide?”

“Uh huh.”

“Yes.”

Holy hell. *Why me?* “If you don't mind me asking, do *you* believe we've ‘spoken’ with an alien AI sociologist freely roaming the Internet?” Two pensive nods. “I suppose you think this is, somehow, a sociological matter.” Two *more* nods, this time emphatic.

The credible announcement of extraterrestrial intelligence could—would—impact society seismically. Credible, yes, but not one-hundred-percent incontrovertible: the “proof” of any claim depended on how and when—and even whether, now that the shock of its unmasking was past—the AI we'd named the Skeptic responded to future contacts. Would any claims we three might make become the next story our alien strove, in its quietly compelling way, to undermine?

My eyes squeezed shut in thought, and in remembrance of coursework past. The Copernican revolution that the Earth was not the center of the universe took centuries to reach general—and still incomplete—acceptance. Darwin's theory of evolution remained controversial in countless communities. The medieval conversions that until recently had been the myopic focus of my interests ... yes, I knew all about how disruptive a shift in world view could be. *We are not alone* was as major a world-view change as I could conceive of.

“Brian.” Kelly's voice had been soft but insistent. “We can't go blithely about our business with *this* hanging over our heads. It's far more your specialty than either of ours to understand the consequences.”

On what basis could *I* presume to make such a decision?

“Let me sleep on it,” I'd lied.

* * * *

“I was no sooner home from Kelly's unit than I went back on-line,” I typed. If the decision were to be mine alone, there was no reason not to continue the discussion one on one. I'd necessarily re-connected with none of the BFM subterfuge Kelly could arrange. Any danger I could foresee in renewed contact was not to me. “Of course, you know that.”

“Will you reveal me?” the Skeptic had asked as soon as I'd dialed up, privately, from my own apartment and associated myself with the recent confrontation. I had as quickly responded, albeit with uncharacteristic brevity, “I don't know.” After what seemed endless introspection, although I knew it was only seconds, I had changed my answer to an even terser, “Yes.”

I had, for two hours now, been handling the follow-up question, “Why?”

This had begun with my failure to observe Rule Two: think *before* you do things. I'd unmasked the Skeptic by belatedly applying Rule Three: things are often what they seem.

Why was I so fixated on Dad's damned rules?

My rambling answer had, finally, come to the very heart of the matter. “I was trained to observe societies, not to shatter them,” I typed. It was a calm, professional position to take. It was entirely true.

But did that narrow truth matter? I couldn't, I didn't, believe things were that simple.

Copernicus had been right, no matter the shock to people's egos. Earth *wasn't* the center of the universe, and it couldn't be wrong that we now recognized that. Darwin, too—humanity was part of the tapestry of life, not somehow above or apart from it. I couldn't imagine that, if I somehow had the power to reverse those intellectual awakenings, I would. So who was I to suppress, presuming for the moment that I even could, a discovery as fundamental as those of Copernicus and Darwin? Fact, Brian: we *aren't* alone.

I was convinced ... I just wish I knew why.

Unexpected motion caught my eye. The PC monitor now showed an oddly familiar little boy bouncing on a bed. As if triggered by my renewed attention, a short string of text appeared across the bottom of the screen. “I understand.”

I stared into the one webcam I hadn't returned, now perched atop the monitor. With the realization that the Skeptic was watching me, the familiarity of the youngster was obvious. He was the backwards extrapolation from my real-time image to how I might have looked as a five year old. Had the Skeptic known to apply a buzz cut, it would have had me right.

“I understand,” I read aloud. *What* did the Skeptic understand, I wondered, as the virtual bed shuddered in synchronicity with “my” jumping. Behind “me,” books and toys toppled from cluttered shelves. That being a sociologist was not a license to censor? That was *a* truth, I was certain, but was it the whole truth?

The infuriating admonition from my youth echoed in my mind's ear a split second before “Rule One” popped tersely onto the screen. *If it shakes the house, don't do it.*

My alien friend did understand me. He knew me, in fact, far better than did my own father—or than I knew myself.

I never was any good at following the rules.

* * * *

With thanks (and apologies) to Jenn.

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