

Evidence

by Barry R. Taylor

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In the situation room, Staff Sergeant Duncan Reynolds frowned at the maps and photographs on the table in front of him. The room was busy. Beyond the table, a big screen on the wall showed a map of the county blazed with three red dots. Land around the dots was marked in different colours. Two civilians were working computers and talking on phones beneath the giant television. Officers came and went, delivering messages.

Duncan was frustrated, and deeply worried. Three missing persons in less than two weeks and not a hint where any of them had gone. The first was Rosalie Dixon, a middle-aged woman out walking the dog. The dog came back alone, dragging its leash. Rosalie's husband reported her missing that evening. Four days later, Melissa Burns, a woman in her twenties, climbed on her bicycle to ride home from work, something she did routinely in summer. Her boyfriend found the bicycle by the side of the road. Duncan recognized, with a knot in his stomach, the signs of a serial abductor. But the last disappearance, Hector Fraser, was a man. Gone fishing. He told his friends he would meet them at the river early one morning, never showed up. Officers found his pick-up truck by the side of the road, not far from the river. Duncan suspected a drowning, at first. The man's waders were still in the back of the truck, along with his lunch, his fishing gear and a six-pack of beer.

The mystery was impenetrable. Duncan had been a cop long enough to know that people didn't simply disappear. There was always a reason. Yet there was nothing to link these disappearances, no apparent motive, no evidence of theft or violence. Ground search and rescue had been called in, but so far the forest revealed nothing. The dogs couldn't find a scent. Duncan's superiors wanted answers. The story dominated local news, and local gossip.

Someone knocked at the open door. Duncan looked up to see Corporal Brown standing there, looking annoyed. Brown's giant moustache and rotund figure gave him the look of an angry walrus. "Sorry to intrude, Sgt.," he said. "You have a visitor. Malcolm Rasch is here again. He claims to have information pertinent to the missing persons cases."

Sgt. Reynolds was a tall, fit man whose bald head gave him the air of an intellectual, which he was not. “Rasch?” he demanded. “The UFO nut? I have no time for his brand of nonsense today. Take a statement and send him on his way.”

“Sorry, Sgt.,” Brown apologized again, “I tried that already. He absolutely insists on talking to you. He claims his information will be misunderstood otherwise.”

“Which case does he want to talk about?”

Brown shrugged. “All of them.”

Duncan made an exasperated sound. “Look, I don’t have time – ”

He was interrupted by a small, energetic man who dashed into the room around the big mountie at the door. “Don’t try to put me off again, Sgt. Reynolds,” the man snapped. “You keep saying you want help from the public; well, here it is. I have uncovered information vital to your investigation, if you would take five minutes to listen.”

Duncan said, “Malcolm, not today. We’re in the middle of a complex missing persons case. The RCMP are pursuing multiple leads. You can have a full update, along with the news media and everyone else, in the press conference at five.”

“Multiple leads? Come on, you haven’t got any leads. You have no clue where those people went. If they were in the woods you would have found them by now. If they had been abducted you would have heard from the captor. Or found a body.”

“Excuse me, who is this man?” said a stout woman in civilian clothes, standing on the far side of the table.

Duncan heaved a sigh. “Right, of course. Malcolm, let me introduce Dr. Trudy MacNeil, our regional expert on missing persons behaviour. Trudy, this intemperate man is Mr. Malcolm Rasch, sometime lecturer in astronomy, our regional UFO enthusiast and another reason I am considering early retirement.”

“We call them UAPs now,” Rasch insisted, “Unidentified Aerial Phenomena. NASA decided UFO carried too much cultural baggage.”

“Whatever! Blathering about flying saucers won’t help us find the missing people. Malcolm we have work to do.”

Dr. MacNeil held up a hand. “Wait, wait, hold up a minute,” she said. “We should at least listen. Mr. Rasch, what is this vital information you want to share?”

Duncan shook his head. He shot a knowing glance at Corp. Brown, who had taken a seat beside him.

Rasch gestured toward the photos on the table. “Look, what have you got: three disappearances in ten days, all within a 10-km radius. You’ve pulled in resources from all over, but your daily updates give out nothing. From which I infer that you have no leads. I’m willing to bet you have no physical evidence at all. The missing people have one element in common, though. All three were travelling alone along an empty county road.”

“That fact had not escaped our notice,” Duncan said drily. “Why are you still in the room?”

Rasch held up a finger. “There is a second common element, one that the mounties probably didn’t notice, or didn’t attach importance to. All three disappearances happened in the midst of a major flap.”

“Excuse me, a what?” said Dr. MacNeil.

“A rash of UAP sightings. Reports of UAPs in this region are exceedingly rare, maybe one a year. A very boring place to pursue my interest. But in the past two weeks there have been fourteen reliable reports. Fourteen! That’s a decade’s worth of sightings in two weeks – and all in or near this county.”

Duncan groaned out loud. “Not this again. Malcolm, people report these sightings to the local RCMP detachment. We know all about them. Lights in the sky, objects moving without wings, all the classic features of a UFO. When one person sees one, everybody else thinks they’ve seen one too. Trudy, why are you indulging this nonsense?”

She was thoughtful. “Because he’s right,” she said. “So far, anyway. He’s right that there is no connection among the victims, except their locations. He’s right that we have no leads. He’s right that we should have found them by now, or at least one of them. Ground search and rescue has been all over those sites; we haven’t found a footprint. So I’m willing to at least listen to other perspectives.”

Rasch pointed at the monitor on the far wall, with its multicoloured map. “Is that a search optimization chart?” he asked.

Dr. MacNeil evinced surprise. “Yes. Yes it is. I didn’t expect an astronomer to know that.”

“They’re surprisingly useful in UAP research too. But if I’m right, you’re looking the wrong place.”

“Why do you say that?”

He pulled out his cell phone. “I visited the road where Rosalie Dixon disappeared, after it was opened to the public. I found this on the edge of the gravel.” He held up the phone so everyone could see the picture on it.

“What’s this?” Duncan demanded. He snatched the phone from Rasch’s hand. “It’s a pothole,” he pronounced. He handed the phone to Corp. Brown, who only shrugged.

“It’s a hole, certainly,” Rasch replied, “Or a depression. The road has been recently graded, and this hole was all alone. Do you notice anything unusual about it?”

“Yes,” mused Dr. MacNeil, who had taken the phone from Brown. “It’s perfectly round,”

“Exactly. A round, flat-bottomed depression, 78 cm in diameter.”

Duncan was growing impatient. “Yes, well, sometimes potholes are round. Most of the time, in fact. What has this hole in the road got to do with anything?”

Rasch spread his hands. “All right, I know how crazy this sounds, but here goes. Maybe you can’t find the missing persons because they aren’t there. Maybe that hole isn’t an unnaturally round pothole. Maybe it’s a depression made by a pad on the leg of an aerial vehicle.”

“May I please throw this man out?” pled Corp. Brown.

“Mr. Rasch!” Trudy MacNeil exclaimed. “Are you seriously contending that these people were abducted by aliens!”

He spread his hands again. “I offer it as a possibility that warrants consideration. It fits with the observations, including the UAP sightings, and we have no other explanation for the disappearances. When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“You are quoting Sherlock Holmes,” Trudy MacNeil replied, “a man whose most prominent feature is that he doesn’t exist. Besides, you haven’t yet eliminated the impossible. That impression could as easily – and far more likely – have been made by something earth-bound, a car or a piece of equipment. Maybe a pole for a light or a satellite dish.”

“True enough,” Rasch said reasonably. “But would any of those make an impression this deep? I don’t see how. This hole was made by something very heavy.”

She was dismissive. “Surely you can’t go leaping to alien abductions based on a single round depression in the road.”

Rasch said, “If the mounties had found one footprint of a man’s boot they would have built an entire theory around it.”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Duncan declared. “Look, dozens of people have been up and down that road for the past week. News crews, search and rescue, EMO, everybody. We released that site days ago. Anybody or anything could have made that hole.”

Rasch disagreed. “I think the remarkable fact is that the impression survived despite all the traffic. A bit of luck.”

“And I think we can dispense with this idea swiftly,” said Dr. MacNeil. “An aerial craft, of whatever kind, wouldn’t have one landing pad. There would be two or three, or four.”

Rasch nodded. “Three is most likely. A three-legged stool is stable on any floor. I looked. I brought some friends and we all looked. We didn’t find another depression.”

“Which pretty much settles that. Thank you for coming in, Mr. Rasch.”

“Not quite,” said the UFO enthusiast. “We didn’t find anything, but we didn’t know exactly where to look. How big would a landing craft be? How far apart would the pads lie? In which direction? And as Sgt. Reynolds has pointed out, there has been enormous traffic on that road. But yesterday the RCMP allowed public access to the second site, where Melissa Burns left her bicycle. Search and rescue are still on the ground there, so we began searching a little farther down the road. We found this.” He flipped to a second picture on his phone. He handed it across the table to Dr. MacNeil.

She studied the photo for several seconds. “Another round hole,” she said at last.

“A round depression. No water in it, and the sides are straight, not sloped like a pothole. Flip to the next picture.”

MacNeil studied the second picture. Rasch said, “We found that impression nine and a half metres from the first one. It’s not as clear because there has been tire traffic over it.” He paused for emphasis. “Both impressions are 78 cm in diameter.”

“Could be,” MacNeil allowed. “This impression isn’t very clear.” She handed back his phone.

“What does any of this prove?” Duncan demanded. MacNeil offered him the phone, but he waved it off. “Any heavy piece of equipment could have made those holes. Search and

rescue has light poles that must weigh half a ton. Of course the holes would be identical, they would be made by the same equipment. Landing pads, my grandmother's chickens. Those are holes in the gravel, nothing more. For that matter, you or anyone could have made them yourself, to get a little publicity. Malcolm if you are hoaxing us, I will bring charges against you faster than you can blink. Not least for wasting police time. And I will let Corp. Brown put the cuffs on you."

"Looking forward to it," Brown rumbled.

Rasch raised both hands. "I promise you absolutely and categorically this is not a hoax. I am not making any of this up. None of my group are making this up. I cannot entirely guarantee that someone, a rescue volunteer or a prankster, didn't create these holes, but how did they do it, and when? There are people all over that site night and day. It would take time and effort to make those holes exactly. Surely someone would notice."

Duncan said, "Do you even realize how ridiculous you sound? Malcolm, there are no extra-terrestrials. There are no intergalactic space ships. Two holes in the ground don't prove anything. We are an Earth-bound police force trying to save lives and we have no time for wild imaginings." He felt his ire rising, as it always did when he argued with Rasch.

The other man seemed equally annoyed. "Extra-terrestrials may or may not be real, Sgt.," he replied. "Nevertheless these holes are real. They are physical evidence. Evidence you seem intent on ignoring, even though you have nothing else to go on. If there are no extra-terrestrials, if UFOs are a myth, then who or what made these impressions? And why did we find them where two people disappeared?"

"I think what Sgt. Reynolds is saying," Dr. MacNeil broke in, "is that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Now I'm quoting Carl Sagan, who really does exist. Even if we assume these holes were made by an aerial vehicle, there is no need to assume aliens. They could have as easily been made by a man-made vehicle like a quadcopter. They're already using them as air taxis in New York."

"True enough," Rasch replied. "But why would someone with a quadcopter suddenly abduct random people?"

"Why would space aliens abduct random people?" MacNeil retorted.

"Why don't aliens abduct this guy?" Corp. Brown put in.

“Your claim still lacks convincing evidence,” said Trudy MacNeil. “If your mythical vehicle has three landing pads, you should have found a third impression in the ground.”

He nodded. “Yes. Assuming the landing pads make an isosceles triangle, we can calculate the location of the third one based on the other two. The trouble is that the road where Melissa Burns disappeared is only about eight metres wide. The third impression would be off the road some way, in brush on one side or a hayfield on the other. We extrapolated from the two impressions we had, but where the third impression should have been there was too much brush to see anything. A circle in vegetation wouldn’t persist like a hole in the road.”

Trudy MacNeil said, “So you still have no definitive evidence of your far-fetched and rather creepy idea.”

He nodded. “No I don’t. That’s why I came to the detachment. The third site, where Hector Fraser went missing, is very near an intersection. The intersection is more than 10 m wide in every direction. Otherwise, there is forest close to the road on both sides. If I were setting down an aerial craft under those circumstances, the intersection is where I would do it.”

Dr. MacNeil considered it. “You’re saying that if we look at the intersection next to where Hector Fraser’s truck was found, we should see three round impressions in the gravel, each 9.5 m from the next, in a triangle, and each 78 cm in diameter.”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s certainly worth looking. Since the site is still closed to the public, there has been less traffic, save for ground search crews. And thus very little chance for a hoax.”

Duncan got to his feet. He said, “We have wasted enough time on this nonsense. I remind everyone that three missing persons are depending on us to find them. Lives are at risk. Reports are coming in that we need to look at. Corp. Brown, please see Mr. Rasch to the door.”

The consultant stopped him a second time. “Wait, wait a minute Duncan. I don’t believe in flying saucers any more than you do, but Mr. Rasch has given us a plausible hypothesis. Sherlock Holmes would approve. If we examine the intersection and don’t find three impressions of the right size and position, it scuttles the alien invasion theory permanently. But if by some chance we do – well, at least we need to wonder where the holes came from.”

Rasch turned to the scowling senior mountie. He said, “ Staff Sgt. Reynolds – Duncan – I would like to request formal permission to access the site to examine the intersection. I can work with an RCMP escort if you prefer. I won’t interfere with ground search and it won’t take long.”

Duncan was about to say “No” when Dr. MacNeil interjected. “We can do better than that,” she declared. She walked to the busy desks at the back of the room, picked up a cell phone and punched a button. “Archie? Trudy MacNeil here. Tell me, do you have a drone down, recharging? Can you do me a favour? Send the drone up and let it hover over the next intersection for a couple of minutes. That’s right, down the road about a hundred metres. Keep the entire intersection in view and crank up the contrast. Send the footage to us live, ok? We’re . . . following a hunch.”

She lowered the phone. “This should only take a minute,” she said.

“Bloody waste of time,” Duncan grumbled.

The big screen on the far wall flickered. The multicoloured contour map disappeared, to be replaced by an aerial shot of a gravel road, with tall forest pressing both sides. Telephone poles drifted by as the drone moved down the road. The high contrast image made potholes and puddles stand out like craters on the moon.

The drone arrived at the intersection. The image stopped moving as the drone hovered. The gravel intersection filled the screen in stark detail. Everyone in the room leaned in to look.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Trudy MacNeil murmured, after a minute.

Staff Sergeant Duncan Reynolds glared at the television screen, then at Malcolm Rasch, then back at the television. “Early retirement,” he said to the room.