

Beyond Pluto

One hundred years after the launch of Deep Space, the first manned mission to venture beyond Pluto, Deep Space returned and landed at Cape Canavral. Scoured bones were all that remained of the 36 astronauts. The only surviving organisms on board were a large lizard and an even larger catfish. Immediately a congressional committee was established.

Unanswered questions became chasms into which professionals in investigatory fields plummeted. Only an evolutionary psychologist and a forensic anthropologist emerged with their theories intact. Both were called to present their findings. Before the congressional panel the evolutionary psychologist suggested that the astronauts had split into two factions, both led by males. Each group led raids against their rivals in order to steal females. In this process many males were killed and probably females too, and traitorous females were most definitely killed. One of the groups fed the dead to the giant catfish, probably in order to demonstrate their ferocity to the other group. This explained

the numerous bones littering the bottom of the catfish tank. And one of the groups, possibly the same one, loosed the lizard, which ate the meat off the bones of the many bodies not dumped in the fish tank. Eventually one group defeated the other. But within the victorious group infighting claimed the lives of those remaining. The evolutionary psychologist concluded his presentation by confidently thanking the panel and taking his seat.

The panel invited the forensic anthropologist to present his findings. The forensic anthropologist assured that panel that, though the total lack of tissue remnants on the bones presented a grand obstacle, he was able, through persistence and ingenuity, to retrace the events that had transpired onboard Deep Space. At great length he described his approach to studying the bones and the tests he subjected them to. He explained to the panel how he judged the rate of decay using original air samples and thus create a timeline of events. The bones of all thirteen of the bodies found in the fish tank exhibited the exact same cause of death. Notches in the ribs over the heart suggested a stab wound with a metal blade. Rates of decay throughout the ship pointed to the captain, Dr. Samuel Becker, as the most probable last to die. The bones of the bodies near Captain Becker showed evidence of a weakened cell structure common to cases of starvation. When the forensic anthropologist discovered, while studying what he could obtain of the crew's original records, that the lizard and catfish were under the ownership of the eccentric Dr. Becker, everything tied together. The astronauts had not split into two factions. Actually the astronauts all belonged to one tightly knit group that centered on Captain Becker. Why else would thirteen of them have allowed themselves to be sacrificed to the catfish (obviously a very meaningful pet to the captain) without, in every case, significant signs

of struggle? And why had those near Captain Becker died of starvation while he had not, and he died later than them? Why also would the lizard and catfish be alive today? The astronauts offered up their rations to Captain Becker and his pets. They worshiped the captain. There was no other explanation. Soberly, the forensic anthropologist thanked the panel and took his seat before the committee chair could dismiss him. The chair thanked the specialists in kind and the panel adjourned.

Upon retiring to their offices the five committee members, Milson, Taymoore, Clarcia, Yungez, *and* Foxith all met a similar description related to them by their secretaries. A self-proclaimed clairvoyant in her mid-twenties had dropped by their office and left a note. Would they care to see it? Each committee member independently attributed the note to a crazy attracted by the strange circumstances surrounding Deep Space. No, they would not care to see the note.

That night President Destrehan, who had in recent years developed a fascination with the occult, dreamt a clairvoyant knew the truth about the demise of the astronauts. In his dream, though, no matter how he strived to meet her he was thwarted by an irrelevant excuse offered by Milson, Taymoore, Clarcia, Yungez or Foxith.

Alone in his bed the President awoke so disturbed he called an emergency meeting. At the meeting he did not return any of the greetings offered by Milson, Taymoore, Clarcia, Yungez or Foxith. He demanded to know who was hiding information regarding a clairvoyant who had knowledge of Deep Space.

At first the committee members were baffled. Vehemently Milson, Taymoore, Clarcia, Yungez and Foxith denied the accusation. Then Foxith silently recalled his secretary's account from the previous afternoon, then Clarcia, then Yungez, then

Taymoore, then Milson. When Foxith expressed ambiguity on the subject others began to follow suit. The president ordered them to contact the clairvoyant immediately. The committee members scattered, ransacked their offices, reconvened, and compared the notes left by the clairvoyant. All were blank save for the name Laura Hopkins and a phone number. Foxith was elected to make the call. Over the phone Laura Hopkins agreed to testify in front of the panel under one condition: the venue must be moved to a courtroom and the lizard and catfish must be present. The committee reported this to the president who agreed to the stipulations without hesitation.

The following noon, however, in the packed courtroom, with Foxith presiding and the rest of the committee members in the jury seats, President Destrehan became skeptical when Laura Hopkins took the witness stand. The clairvoyant wore her hair in a crisp ponytail. She wore glasses and a dress so simple she looked as if she were merely dropping by the courthouse on her way to her college courses. She wore none of the clunky jewelry or unkempt dresses the President expected of a clairvoyant. From his seat in the audience he stood, pointed at Laura Hopkins, and told her she was in big trouble. She pointed right back at him and told him to bring in the accused and stop wasting her time. The president looked at the bailiffs, and nodded his consent. The bailiffs wheeled in a large sloshing tank and a wide cage with thick steel bars. The lizard was as wide as a man and longer than a couch. Flattened under his own weight upon the cage's steel floor, he shifted his head grumpily and wagged his tongue to get his bearings. The catfish was larger than anyone expected. As long as the lizard and weighing several times more, it hovered in the tank with round mouth rhythmically gasping.

From the stand Laura Hopkins announced to all present that the astronauts had ceased to age once they had passed beyond Pluto. The first to notice this was the captain, Dr. Becker. Because of his advanced age, the aging process was conspicuous to him day by day. He used this knowledge to weave a very elaborate lie. He informed the crew that up until this moment the actual purpose behind their voyage into deep space had remained a secret known only by him. The reasons he had brought a Komodo Dragon and Wels Catfish onboard were not arbitrary. Those two animals were representatives of the gods who could grant the crew enjoyment of the benefits deep space had to offer. So many humans back on Earth had spent their lives searching for the fountain of youth. What they did not know was that the fountain of youth was not a fountain but a sea and that sea was called deep space. Now the crew swam in that sea and if they appeased the gods they could enjoy a place beside them as immortals. The crew rallied impressively behind Captain Becker's campaign to please the gods. The captain had planned to sacrifice any dissenters, but since there were no dissenters he was forced to sacrifice one assenter a year. This maintained a harmonious atmosphere on board for thirteen years. What the captain did not know, however, was that he had brought the lizard and catfish onboard for reasons that really *weren't* arbitrary. What is the one question, Laura Hopkins inquired of her audience, that everyone has neglected to ask? How have a lizard and catfish remained at their peak age after a hundred year voyage beyond Pluto and back? I argue that Dr. Becker was unknowingly professing the truth. The lizard and catfish *were* representatives of the gods. The lizard's whispering tongue and the catfish's gasping mouth subconsciously apprised the captain of this and directed his actions. For this reason I have summoned them here today to try them for the death of the crew and

the failure of the mission, and to understand the purpose behind their manipulations. I call to the stand to testify: the catfish.

With considerable effort a team of bailiffs wheeled the tank near the witness stand. Laura Hopkins stepped down and began interrogating the witness. Were you onboard Deep Space? The catfish merely pumped his mouth open and closed. Do you decline to answer? A settling sloshing prevailed as the only sound originating from the tank. Do you invoke your right to avoid self-incrimination? The catfish looked at the clairvoyant and helplessly swallowed great gulps of murky water. Laura Hopkins cleared her throat and turned to the court. The fish cannot hear me, she said. I am going to have to enter the tank. From the fish's current caretaker she gestured for not one breathing apparatus, but two. Upon the gasps rising from the audience she added, I will need someone along with me as a witness. Who will volunteer? President Destrehan stood and proclaimed, we will interrogate this beast together! He strode to the witness stand, shed his suit coat, and heartily followed the clairvoyant up the ladder that ascended to the lip of the tank.

Laura Hopkins assessed that the ladder's end appeared at a much greater height than she had originally judged. In fact the ladder seemed to disappear into a distance exactly proportionate to the amount she climbed, as if she were climbing over a curved surface. The threat of falling hung on her elbows and knees. It's a ways yet, she attempted to call down to the President, but the ambient air had been transformed by a wind that drowned out her voice. She began to fear she would have to rest her legs on the President's shoulders as he climbed beneath her. In this wind she did not have the voice to obtain his permission. She halted and readied, at the risk of both of their lives, to ease

her weight onto his shoulders without his knowledge of her intention. She paused and focused her eyes. Opposite the ladder and her clenching fists lay the rim of the tank.

Below, the president awaited her lead.

She threw one arm then the other over the lip and hauled herself into water that buoyed her quaking joints and eased the bite of the wind. She fitted the breathing apparatus around her face and, to make room for the President, paddled farther out into water that from her vantage seemed to expand toward a distant horizon. The President donned his breathing apparatus from the rim and attempted unsuccessfully to maintain his composure while splashing into the water. Laura Hopkins could not bring herself to face President Destrehan so she dropped below the surface and swam for the depths. For Destrehan's unspoken presence behind her she felt safer, but still she chastised herself for bringing along another on a mission that, on further examination, she should have executed on her own.

The water began to feel funny as if it were thinning to an ether-like consistency. She saw something suspended in the darkness and she strived to close in on the shape but she had lost command over the medium through which she moved. The shape increased in size and definition. Though she was not moving at a rate that pleased her at least she was progressing in her intended direction. A full read of the shape's outline confirmed it was the catfish, hanging eerily still in a field of blackness interrupted only by pricks of light like distant stars. She scanned for the President and found him beside her but upside down in relation to her. The distant points of light increased in number until their collective glow illuminated the contours of the catfish's marbled gray skin. The

resolution of the fish's skin against the depth yet between her and the fish forced Laura Hopkins to accept the monumentally enormous size of the catfish.

Tell us what happened onboard Deep Space, President Destrehan called into the silence, drifting perpendicularly to Laura Hopkins' left. Or was she drifting overhead perpendicular to him? The catfish's mouth contorted slowly and epically in the darkness, without producing a sound. The silence magnified Laura Hopkins' sharp rapid breathing. In an effort to spin around she flailed her limbs and accidentally struck the President. She kicked her legs and flapped her arms trying to rejoin him in hope of cutting them both obliquely free from a current that was apparently ushering them along. Her lack of ability to register movement had deceived her. They were plunging toward the catfish at a rate that was suddenly unleashing the true proportions of its gasping mouth. Catfish lips engulfed her full range of sight. Leaving much of the light of the stars behind they entered the catfish. Dim ridges broader than any mountain she had ever seen ranged along the interior of a beast that was proving more cavernous the deeper they penetrated. At the center of their trajectory a clammy esophagus blossomed open, providing the first pulse of sound beyond Laura Hopkin's own halting breath. The esophagus remained open for a beat before collapsing shut, where it rested for a beat before it unstuck and threw itself back open. With each beat of the esophagus an accompanying rushing sound altered its pitch like a wheeze, one that was quickly becoming deafening. This wheeze was the catfish's voice and its answer to the brazen questions posed by the President Destrehan, who was now ahead of Laura Hopkins, falling surprisingly passively.

Laura Hopkins beat her legs and swung her arms. At least she could keep President Destrehan from being swallowed first. On all sides the esophagus protracted,

belittling her efforts. Now it spanned wider than the catfish's lips had spanned. Were they shrinking? The esophagus seemed as expansive as the inside of a hollowed out Earth. They were shrinking at the same rate they were rushing forward. The esophagus closed on them yet did not crush them. Laura Hopkins remained centered in a vast, dark space devoid of any sensory input beyond a slight yet increasing pressure on the soles of her feet. A faint light followed suit, gathering in the bellies of droplets speckled across her mask until almost blinding. She clawed her mask off and drank the open air of the midday courtroom. Her ponytail spat as she swung about. Beside her dripped the President. They locked expressions, then looked at the catfish hovering in its tank, then looked at each other again. The President grabbed her hand. She interlaced her fingers with his. He squeezed her hand hard. Then he released her hand. We're moving on, he announced to the court with arms raised in a gesture part reassurance and part plea. Call the next witness. He trod up the aisle as if perfectly dry and took his seat.

Laura Hopkins aimed a flustered nod at the bailiffs. Cautiously they wheeled the steel cage to the witness stand and opened the gate. The lizard dragged himself from the cage and slunk up the few stairs. Before his tail could disappear up the stairs his arrow-shaped head craned beside the microphone and his clawed fingers scrabbled over the wood of the witness stand's topmost ledge. He scanned the entire range of spectators, pausing along the way to slip his tongue out as if tasting something about them. Laura Hopkins clenched her fists and bent her knees and elbows to contain her shivers. We're you onboard Deep Space, she asked. The lizard looked at her and flapped his tongue.

Yes, I was, he answered.

Can you- she paused. Quickly she asked, Can you recount to the jury what happened onboard?

Yes, I can, the lizard replied. He faced the audience. That is very easy, considering that you have already told half of the story. The crew did stop aging. They did worship the catfish and myself according to Captain Becker's urgings. But the story does not end there. One question you have neglected to ask holds the truth. Why did Deep Space return to Earth after one hundred years? There are forces in deep space. Those forces sought incarnation in the bodies of the catfish and myself. Once incarnated those forces manipulated Dr. Becker and the crew and devoured them. Then those forces turned the ship around so that those forces could come to Earth and do the same.

The courtroom was silent. No one shuffled. The President stood, his chest heaving.

But, the lizard said, I have a secret. And that secret will save you. Would you like to know what that secret is?

Talk to us straight and stop playing games, demanded the president.

The secret is that everything I just told you is a lie. The crew was dead before they even passed the last of Saturn's moons. They had broken into two factions led by males and killed each other off while leading raids to steal each other's females. How then, you ask, could the catfish and I have remained alive for so long? The answer is simple: we are not the same lizard and catfish that left Earth. Dr. Becker used the lizards and catfish he brought with him to breed lizards and catfish for the crew to eat. You have discovered no bones of the other lizards and catfish because the crew pulverized them and combined them with the soil on board. The catfish and I were babies when the crew died, and given

our lifespan, it makes sense that we are alive at the journey's end. And why, after all, did Deep Space return home after one hundred years? Because that was the plan all along. The controls were programmed to automatically steer Deep Space back to the site of its launch. The lizard paused. *But*, he said abruptly, I have a secret.

The spectators glanced about. The president pointed and charged, your story is a lie!

Yes, said the lizard. My story is a lie. But that is not my secret. The crew members of Deep Space know my secret. What happened to them *is* my secret. Only the crew know what happened to the crew. If you care to know my secret the same will happen to you. Do not think that you are different from them. You are the same as them. Now, who here is willing to accept that what happened to the crew was not due to some defect unique to them?

You are not here to make demands of the court, the president protested. You are here on trial and you have incriminated yourself enough. Now the panel will deliberate on your sentence. Contain this reptile!

That is all well and fine, said the lizard calmly. But before I return to captivity I have one more question to pose to the audience: would anyone present like to know my secret?

The president rushed the stand and tore at his sodden clothing, separating buttons from his shirt. Nobody wants to hear your secret, he screamed. You will not speak anymore or I will strangle you with my own hands!

Laura Hopkins placed herself between the president and the lizard. I will hear your secret, she said. Though she could not bear to look at the president she felt his wild

disbelief. Tears clouded her vision. This would be her only opportunity to know. She leaned toward the lizard. The President stormed away. The lizard's wet tongue tickled her ear.