

The Very Large Array

“Are you doing anything *really* exciting this January?” asks the star-bordered ad in the paper.

“No,” says Neil Granger aloud. “Duh.” It is a word he’s learned from Melanie and her friends and he finds it expressive in its succinctness though would never use it in actual conversation.

The ad is for an astronomy class at a local astronomer’s private observatory in a neighboring town. It’s on Thursday nights. Neil is free on Thursdays, as he is every other night of the week.

He scans the paper to see what else is going on. It’s all about war. They are itching for more. Afghanistan and the “war on terror” are not enough. It will be Iraq this time—their real target all along, thinks Neil. “Propaganda!” he snorts, reading yet again about Saddam Hussein’s supposed weapons of mass destruction. Neil suspects that most of the stories are printed verbatim from White House press releases. Neil’s invectives at editors and reporters often grow heated to the point where he has to hurl the newspaper onto the floor, scaring Spinoza. He’s given up watching television news altogether.

He picks the paper up off the floor, cuts out the ad for the astronomy class, and puts the rest in the recycling bin. He calls the number in the ad and tells the voice recorder that he wants to register.

Neil turns on the radio to the classical music station and sits down in the living room with his bowl of rice and vegetables. Spinoza is determined to claim his lap. Neil has long accepted that Spinoza's will is stronger than his own. He holds the bowl awkwardly above the cat's head, eating slowly, listening to something bland played on violins. Have we not learned a damn thing, he thinks to himself. He remembers the Vietnam years, when he had vigor and hope as well as a searing determination to bring his government to its senses. He leans his head back on the couch and closes his eyes in exhaustion. He puts the empty bowl on the coffee table and strokes Spinoza who responds with a squeak of pleasure without waking up.

The phone rings and the machine answers. He recognizes the teasing voice of the caller. Earlier in the day she accosted him outside the café where, since his retirement, he indulges in an occasional morning coffee. "Alone and palely loitering, Neil?" she said, her small hand resting on his arm. Neil does not let her know that he recognizes the quote since it would lead to further conversation about poetry and Keats, and he would like to get away from her as soon as he can. Roberta and his ex-wife are in a book club together, reading women writers. Whatever. That's another expression he's learned from Melanie. These young people have a way with laconic utterances.

"So, Neil," says Roberta's disembodied voice, "if you're free next Thursday please join us. Just a few friends, and I'll make my famous risotto."

Neil grabs the phone. "Roberta? I just came in and heard your voice," he lies. "Actually I'm busy on Thursday." He cannot resist the opportunity to tell her he's busy. For once he has a bona fide excuse.

Roberta is unperturbed. "OK, another time. Ciao, bello." To his knowledge Roberta has never set foot in Italy.

He is aware that Roberta and other women feel that he should make himself available for dating. He knows that he is lucky, if luck it is, to have become neither fat nor bald in middle age. His features are inoffensive. He is moderately youthful in his body. "An accident of nature," he acknowledges to his image in the mirror.

Melanie had responded to his notice on the pet store bulletin board seeking a cat-sitter for a three-day absence--the last conference he'd have to attend before retiring. It was not long after 9/11. Everything felt contingent, insecure, and he was uneasy about leaving Spinoza alone, supplied with food and water, as he might otherwise have done. When she came to meet him and the cat, Spinoza crept onto her lap within seconds and remained there purring. Neil had never seen him so smitten. The girl was about fourteen, he guessed, tall for her age, with a pleasant though not pretty face. A bright girl, quiet in her speech and comfortable with herself.

"Sure," she said when he explained that a half hour visit each day would suffice. "I can walk here after school. We'll have fun, won't we, Spinoza?"

Spinoza was in fine shape when Neil returned from the conference. Melanie came to the house the next day to pick up her pay. The cat materialized immediately to greet her. Melanie sat on the floor, her fingers buried in his fur.

"Do you think I could visit him sometimes?" she asked, looking up. "We can't have a cat at home because my brother's allergic."

"Certainly you may," he said. "If it's OK with your parents." Neil had not met them. He assumed they were conventional people who would not see the world as he did. But they had produced a nice child, caring and responsible.

Neil looked at her, neatly cross-legged on the floor, the ecstatic cat enclosed by her thin jeans-clad legs. She would surely forget about Spinoza soon enough.

The moonless sky is dark by the time Neil leaves on Thursday. He turns onto a small road that climbs toward the mountain, a darker presence against the starlit sky. Neil has the sense that he is driving upwards into the realm of the stars themselves, leaving earth behind.

He parks and follows a path through trees toward the observatory. The astronomer is standing on his deck, bundled up, greeting people. Neil recognizes him from newspaper photos. He gestures to a roofless enclosure on the deck in which Neil can see a large telescope. “We’ll come out here a bit later.” They follow him into the house and upstairs into a low-ceilinged, dimly lit room. Dreamlike electronic music is playing. Neil settles himself on a low couch. The astronomer tells them about the relationship of light and time, about Copernicus and Galileo and Kepler, about the infinitesimally tiny scale of our planet in the universe. Some of this Neil already knows but he receives it like a balm, feeling his mind stretch. The astronomer leads everyone outside and they take turns climbing steps up to the eyepiece of the telescope. By now the night is freezing but Neil is warm with excitement. They look at M13, a brilliant ball of suns more than a hundred light-years across. “The distance,” says the astronomer, “that light travels in a hundred years, at the rate of 186,000 miles a second.”

The stars wheel above him as he walks back to the road. Another class member catches up with him, an older man who had asked a number of questions, not unintelligent. Neil tries to remember his name.

“You live in Mount Laurel too, don’t you?” the man says. “Do you want to drive together next week?”

Neil demurs. He would prefer to drive alone, to recapture the extraordinary sense of ascending into the sky. He takes the man's phone number, says he'll call if he can arrange to ride together, knowing he will not.

His euphoria lasts until the next morning when he listens to the news on NPR, those familiar voices repeating untruths with such credulous solemnity. No one in the media is pointing out the illogic of the official argument. "Do you really believe Saddam has chemical and nuclear arsenals?" Neil hisses at the radio. "Do you? Then you must believe he'd use them against American troops." Conscienceless though Bush and Co are, he can't imagine they'd send young soldiers to certain death in a nuclear holocaust. Therefore, they know the weapons don't exist. Therefore, their goals are not what they're telling us.

He despairs to see how so many people swallow and regurgitate the lies. They are seduced and glorified by the prospect of war. Whatever is uncertain in their lives is replaced by this urgent and clear direction. Heroism and sacrifice. All bullshit. He can't bring himself to argue with people face to face but he signs petitions, sends checks, calls his representatives, writes letters to the paper.

It is only when Neil summons the energy to join one of the anti-war protests that he feels the slightest stirring of hope. He strides along frigid Washington streets surrounded by masses of others who feel as he does, chanting with them, slightly self-conscious but also inspired: "*This is what democracy looks like!*" But the media ignores them. The rest of the country does not know that hundreds of thousands of people have traveled far from their homes, have shivered for hours in sub-freezing weather holding home-made signs with their furious, witty messages. In the Vietnam War each protest was amplified in the press, building a movement that forced the war to

end. He remembers being with his friends, laughing, fearless, holding up a giant peace sign decorated with dandelions.

When Melanie comes to visit he is careful not to express his despair about the impending war. He has no idea of her parents' politics but he assumes that they would prefer not to expose their young daughter to the rantings of an angry activist. By now he's met them once or twice; polite, reasonable-seeming people.

Neil's attempts to link with like-minded souls have not been successful. He finds too many of them tedious, repeating the mantras of their youth or spouting sentiments as naïve as those of the flag-wavers. He suspects they find him a puzzle: a conservatively-dressed man amongst all the jeans and droopy sweaters, who says little and smiles less. Perhaps they think he's a CIA spy. On the five-hour bus ride to DC he sits next to a woman who tries for the first hour to engage him in conversation, then gives up.

"Maybe she liked you," suggests Melanie. She's on the couch with her legs tucked under her, Spinoza snuggled beside her. Neil has disobeyed his own rule and is telling her about the trip. "Was she cute?"

"I don't think so," he says. He can't remember the woman's face. "I think she was a grandmotherly type. She was just trying to entertain herself. It was a very long ride."

"But it's great that she went, right? I mean, an old lady, going all that way, and it was so cold. She must be very worried."

Melanie has not so far expressed an opinion about the war.

"Many of us are worried," says Neil. "War is terrible. There's no point, absolutely no point." He stops himself.

“I know, crazy. Me and Matt wrote a letter to the president. If there’s a war, it’ll be kids like us who end up going.”

Neil is surprised and pleased. He overlooks the grammar mistake. “I hope very much that the president reads your letter.” He was Melanie’s age when he first became aware of the great wrongs in the world and the heady possibility of standing up against them. Optimism was in his bloodstream then, as it is now in hers.

The astronomer is talking about extraterrestrials. He’s dispassionate and scientific about it, to Neil’s relief. It would be very disappointing if he turned out to be a UFO nut.

“Think about it. There are 400 billion suns in this galaxy alone. If just a tiny percentage of them have planetary systems, that’s a lot of planets. Multiply that by all the suns in the other galaxies. Do you think it’s *remotely* possible that our planet is the only one that’s developed intelligent life?”

He pauses. The class has learned not to reply to his rhetorical questions.

“Of course it’s not. The question is, how would we ever know? We’re all so far away from each other. There’s a whole field of study called SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Useless, probably. Not because there isn’t any extraterrestrial intelligence, but because the chances of contact are virtually nil.”

On the screen appears a vast field of tall, ungainly contraptions reaching up toward the sky. “That’s the VLA, the Very Large Array. Those giants are movable radio telescopes spread out over twelve miles in the Southwest. It’s like an enormous ear, listening. They’ve been listening for years. If a signal comes in—they’ll hear it.”

On the way home Neil wants to savor the idea of distant beings in the black reaches of space, far beyond the possibility of contact. He regrets agreeing to carpool with Wes, the man who lives in Mount Laurel. But Wes is as struck as Neil by this vision.

“Thank god, you know,” Wes says, steering cautiously down the dark winding road. “Thank god we can’t get to them, or them to us.” Neil looks at him with appreciation. “It’s enough just to know they’re out there. They have to be, right?”

“Yes,” says Neil. “They have to be.” The class is ending next week, to his regret.

Neil has become used to Melanie appearing at the back door every week or so to visit Spinoza. He keeps a supply of her favorite corn chips on hand. She has taken to bringing homework questions to him, once she finds out that he was the director of the historical society and is knowledgeable about topics she has to study. She gets an excellent grade in her history class at the end of the year.

Neil is mildly uncomfortable at the idea of this growing friendship with a 15-year-old girl. Not the friendship itself, which feels easy and pleasant, but the thought of how it might look to someone else, her parents, for example. But he puts aside his qualms. It is so long since he’s had a friend of any age. He feels something loosen and flex within himself, the ability to talk, listen, even make a joke on occasion. He talks to her more about the political situation, knowing she’s interested. He tries to soften the degree of his rage about it but it relieves him considerably to scoff at Bush and Cheney and their ilk. She is so open to his opinions, so ready to respond with a gratifying “Duh!” and roll of the eyes at the latest idiotic pronouncement.

On occasion Melanie brings her friends Matt and Caitlin. Neil is struck by their androgynous sameness and their gentleness, the three of them fussing over Spinoza, who adores

the attention. They chat to each other in soft voices. Neil joins them or just sits with his book enjoying their murmuring presence. They talk about school, the Internet, the looming war.

When she comes alone Melanie is in the habit of picking up a book or an artefact, or standing in front of a painting, and asking him about it. He enjoys her curiosity about the objects that his life is furnished with. She holds up a small wooden carving of a fat, jolly man stretching his arms above his head. “What’s this?”

He tells her about the Laughing Buddha—“Not the real Buddha, but a Chinese monk from much later. He’s supposed to bring good luck. It was given to me by a Chinese historian from Shanghai.” He explains, briefly, about Buddhism. Again Neil feels the need for caution. Melanie and her family attend church. They could be Christian fundamentalists, for all he knows. So many people are, these days. He does not mention that he was for several years part of a local sangha.

Spinoza, who uncharacteristically has not yet appeared to greet Melanie, staggers into the room, his legs collapsing under him. Melanie and Neil run to him. Spinoza’s head is crooked and his eyes are zigzagging from side to side. Melanie is in tears. “What’s wrong? What’s happening to him?” But Neil has no idea. He’s never seen anything like this. “I have to take him to the vet.” He’s thinking it’s a stroke. Do cats have strokes? There’s no time to look in his cat books, or go online, or even call the vet.

“Neil—I can drive,” says Melanie. “I don’t have my license yet but I know how. You can sit in the back with him.”

Neil looks at his beloved cat, suffering, perhaps dying. “OK, yes, let’s go.”

He wraps Spinoza in a towel—he has a cat carrier but he can't thrust the poor creature into a cage at this moment. He cradles the cat in his arms, calling out directions to Melanie, who is driving with care. Spinoza is trembling and claws at his neck in panic. Neil whispers to him, trying to sooth him. His own heart is pounding.

The vet's office is only ten minutes away. The receptionist listens to Neil's hurried explanation and shows them into an examining room. Neil and Melanie wait, silent except for their murmurs of comfort to Spinoza.

The vet examines the cat, her skillful hands imparting a degree of calm.

"It's not a stroke," she says at last. "I think it's vestibular disease." She explains: it's probably caused by an undetected ear infection, and in spite of the alarming symptoms, it's not life threatening. They'll give him antibiotics and it should resolve in a day or two. "I do think we should keep him here overnight just to watch him. You and your daughter can go home. You should be able to come and get him tomorrow."

Neither Melanie nor Neil corrects her assumption about their relationship. Neil is overwhelmed with relief. He's never heard of vestibular disease but he knows a little about inner ear function and it seems plausible. He looks at Melanie, who is trying not to cry. He pats her shoulder. "Let's say goodbye to him, then."

She leans down to Spinoza. "See you tomorrow, little guy. Don't be scared. You'll be OK."

Neil strokes the cat's back with a light finger. He has an absurd impulse to kiss him but does not.

Neil drives on the way home, collecting himself. Melanie continues to dab her eyes.

“I’m OK,” she says when Neil looks at her. “You think she’s right? That it’s not serious?”

“She knows what she’s talking about,” says Neil, though he himself finds it hard to reconcile the cat’s extreme state with the vet’s reassuring diagnosis. “They’ll take good care of him. Melanie—thank you so much for helping. I do appreciate it.”

“I liked that part of it,” says Melanie. “The driving part.”

At her house the situation seems to call for more than the usual goodbye, so he leans across to give her a quick peck on the cheek. She hugs him, her tears flowing again. “I hope he’s OK!”

He reassures her as best he can. “I’ll let you know what they say tomorrow.”

That evening is the roll-call vote in the Senate on the resolution to authorize Bush’s war. The House has already voted yes, though with dissenters. Neil knows the vote is likely to pass, with war’s inexorable momentum. But by now the voices of the anti-war activists are loud. A sizable number of “no” votes in the Senate could at least temper the rush to catastrophe.

Neil turns on the television, bracing himself.

One by one the senators deliver their vote. Yes. Drop bombs. Send in thousands of troops to massacre and be massacred. Go ahead, Mr. President. Many of them recite the familiar specious arguments.

Neil has a tiny residual hope that his own senators will be braver. The majority of their constituents don’t want war. Hillary Clinton appears, dressed in somber gray. He listens to her grating voice denouncing Saddam Hussein’s crimes and his intent to re-arm. But, unlike the

others, she also criticizes the US's support for him in the past. She warns sternly against preemptive war. "History has at times proved dissenters to be right," she says.

Oh Hillary, thinks Neil. Oh Hillary. Is it possible that in spite of everything you are a dissenter?

Her long speech builds to a conclusion. Neil leans forward.

"If we were to attack Iraq now, alone or with few allies, it would set a precedent that could come back to haunt us," she says. "So, Mr. President, for all its appeal, a unilateral attack is not a good option."

He can't believe she has summoned the courage to go against the murderous flow.

But she goes on. "I will take the President at his word that he will seek to avoid war, if at all possible." *This* president's word? "And therefore, ladies and gentlemen," she continues, "I have concluded that a vote for the resolution best serves the security of our nation. I cast it with conviction." She is still talking when Neil turns off the television. He stares at the opaque screen.

He turns it on again later to find out the final vote. Seventy-seven out of a hundred senators, including both of his, have voted yes. He is furious at himself for thinking, for even a second, that it could have turned out any other way.

In the morning he finds out that Spinoza is doing better and can come home later in the day. He expects that Melanie will phone or appear. He feels awkward calling her house. But when he has not heard from her by mid afternoon he calls. Her mother answers.

"You let my daughter drive your car." Her voice is cold.

"Oh—Melanie must have explained to you, about the emergency with my cat—" but she cuts him off.

“Melanie is fifteen years old. She’s too young to drive. You were putting her in danger.”

The woman’s voice rises. “We could have you arrested, do you realize?”

“Ms...” he scrambles for the last name. “Ms. Sherman. I’m very sorry. It was an emergency. We thought the cat might die.”

Again she cuts him off. “Her dad and I aren’t happy with Melanie visiting you anyway. We don’t think it’s right.” Neil shrinks from what she’s about to say. “From now on you won’t be seeing her at all.”

“Ms. Sherman—please, let me explain—perhaps I could come by and speak with you and your husband.” But the woman hangs up.

Neil sinks into a chair. Great sorrow is hovering, not yet landed. It is tainted by shame, to be seen as Melanie’s parents see him.

He forces himself to dial again. He says, “Please just tell Melanie that the cat is OK,” and hangs up before she can.

He brings Spinoza home in the cat carrier with instructions to keep him in one room until he’s steadier on his feet. Spinoza is better but not at all himself.

Neil sits on the couch with the cat resting on his lap. He is alone again. His cat is ill. There will be no more young people in the house with their contagious assumption of a beneficent world. A war will start and people will die, and be injured and displaced. Ordinary young men will turn into rapists and torturers. The rest of the world will hate and despise the United States even more, with justification. There will be more attacks.

We have failed, thinks Neil.

Darkness falls but Neil does not turn on the lights. The house is silent except for occasional creaking as it settles into the chilly night.

He dozes, then wakes, still upright on the couch. The aura of a dream is with him. He waits and the dream comes into focus. He sees the Very Large Array in the distance. He approaches and realizes that is not radio telescopes but Laughing Buddhas, dozens of them, thirty or forty feet high, each one stretching its polished wooden arms to the sky. His dream self understands that this display is intended for his benefit.

Spinoza hasn't moved, his steady breathing almost imperceptible. A quarter moon is low in the sky. Neil has adopted the astronomer's faint scorn of the moon as an object whose closeness makes it unchallenging to observe, its brightness only obscuring more interesting phenomena. He stares it until it sinks below the window.