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THIS IS A CHALLENGE TO THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

*You won't look up because they don't want you to. They want you to think this is the account of a paranoiac, that he has an agenda, that he was bitter from his discharge following a so-called breakdown during the Second World War. Or maybe you'll think the story has no relevance today.*

*That's the way you're taught to think--to keep your head down, to believe the official version of events, to follow orders. But this is a true story, recorded in 1954 by the first man who shouted at an insane world to look to the sky and see through the clouds.*

Everyone saw foo fighters. Ask any pilot. But with all the other crazy things you see in a war it must have seemed pretty unimpressive.

When I came back from the war, I felt like I had a single mission in life--to tell people the truth about what I had seen, but I didn't have a very clear memory of it and didn't have the focus to write a book. I could draw, though, and since a kid I had always had a fantasy in the back of my mind of drawing comics.

The office I work in now is four rows of drafting boards on a blue carpet, pens scratching ink onto thick paper under

fluorescent lights. I'm currently working on Weird Science-Fantasy #26--the first issue I've done entirely on my own. This is a nonfiction comic book, perhaps the world's first. I'm drawing a mushroom cloud copied from an actual photograph of an atomic bomb set off seven years ago at the Alamagordo test site. It's important to ground my readers in the historical context of my topic; sightings of flying saucers only became common after the 1947 atomic tests.

On December 9, 1949, astronomer Tsuneko Saeki observed a giant explosion on Mars--an explosion he attributed to a nuclear detonation. That was when the cover-up kicked into high gear and Project Saucer started the first round of systematic denials.

Take the Muroc Air Force Base, Project Saucer Case Number 1. On July 8, 1947, about a dozen trained pilots and ground officers watched for fifteen minutes as two silver discs circled 8000 feet overhead. The Project Saucer Investigators could find no explanation for the observers' estimation that the UFOs were traveling at 300 to 400 miles per hour, but by the end of 1949, Air Materiel Command dismissed the case as a "misinterpretation of real stimuli, probably research balloons." Was the Air Force claiming its own officers were incapable of estimating velocity, or was it claiming there was a 300-mile-per-hour wind blowing that day?

My editor comes by, a wide man in a grey flannel suit. I slide a hand over the panel I'm working on.

"Hey, Joe, I need to talk to you a minute. No rush, just

whenever you have some time." And he turns and walks back down the line of drafting boards.

I look at my drawing of a tornado sucking Muroc Air Force Base into the sky. Were the first eleven pages really that bad?

I tap my pencil on my lips trying to think of a final caption for the Muroc page, but I can't because I'm too nervous. I get up and start towards Mr. Wallace's office, but he hasn't even made it there yet. He's still walking down the aisle, looking at the drafting boards, leaning over to ask questions. And I'm twenty feet behind, lurching towards him like some sycophant.

Now he's talking to Ed Fowler. Probably chuckling over those juvenile space operas he writes.

I keep a distance of ten feet, hoping they won't notice me, but Ed twists his head around and gives me this look.

Mr. Wallace looks up, tilts towards his office, and I follow him. I almost expect Ed to hit me with a spitball before I get through the door.

Mr. Wallace rounds his desk, sits in his chair, and lights a cigarette before saying anything. I remain standing.

He exhales. "I just got back from a meeting with the ad guys. They like your idea."

"Really?"

"I think it's a bit dry and preachy myself, but they say UFOs are hot right now."

"Preachy?"

"You think you can do another issue?"

"Well...sure...I just need time to do research."

He coughs out a cloud of smoke. "Research?"

"Or you could give me a team...to help me work on it."

"I thought you did all your ink and colors yourself."

"No, I mean for the research."

He puts his hand over one eye. "It's a comic book, Joe."

I shut up.

Mr. Wallace takes a last puff and stubs out the cigarette.

"Listen. I almost hate to encourage you...This is just an idea...But the marketing guys were saying they could do this as a fan club for the kids."

"What kind of fan club?" I ask.

"Well...the idea was they would arrange for a toy company to do a run of plastic binoculars with the EC Comics logo on them. You know...send in two coupons from the back of Weird Science-Fantasy plus fifteen cents and get a pair so you can look for UFOs yourself."

I'm grinning like an idiot. It's the best idea I've heard in my life, and he can tell I'm thinking that, because he gives me his sour face.

"Listen, Joe." He points at me. "You've been working here for a while now..."

"Five years."

"...And I've always thought you had some pretty crazy ideas. But you're a great artist." He shrugs. "And marketing apparently thinks we're gonna do really well on this issue...But can I ask

you something?"

I nod.

"What's with the Air Force? We don't need you trying to stir up trouble right now, especially with all this hubbub about comic books being bad for kids."

As I walk back to my drafting board, the idea of the binoculars reminds me of an experiment done by the Canadian government--"PROJECT MAGNET"--which involved flying a lit balloon over Ottawa during a baseball game. When none of the thousands who were out that night reported seeing a UFO, the government concluded that the reason there aren't more UFO sightings is simply that people don't look up.

I need to redefine my objectives. Yes, this is a challenge to the U.S. Air Force, but it is more directly a challenge to the U.S. people. A challenge to look to the sky for the answers instead of following the official story set down by our earthbound rulers.

But what's the real story? I spend the rest of my work day running through different ideas in my head. The fundamental contradiction is that the UFOs suggest an alien interest in intervention on this planet. But why then would they not announce their presence more formally? They must be afraid of the consequences.

I've been trying to limit my study thusfar to the observations of trained professionals (pilots), but I can't shake the connection to Roswell. New Mexico, 1947. Maybe the crash was

a response to the Alamagordo tests. That would explain the increase in sightings.

Maybe aliens actually were captured. Interrogated and tortured by the Air Force. Maybe they're still being held hostage.

*In fact, the craft that crashed in Roswell was monitoring secret Air Force weapons testing when it was shot out of the sky by the U.S. government. The victims who survived the crash were kept in brutal captivity until their vivisection some months later. The the crew of saucer 537 were the first casualties of our resistance and gave us reason to go underground, knowing what would happen if we were ever to be captured.*

*We sent a mobile unit to confront the subject in his apartment that night while asleep. In this encounter, we made the first recordings of his memories, thus compiling the account you are reading. We decided to keep our presence hidden for the time being.*

Tonight I stare at the headlights of cars dragging across my walls. Forming strange shapes, reminding me when...

Flying back from the run on Dresden radioactive light slashed through my vision. I had seen them for real, close enough to make out windows through the green glow and even round grey heads on the other side. I wasn't the only one who saw it, but I was the only one who thought it would be a good idea to notify my

superiors.

I remember the look on the psychologist's face when he said he was recommending me for immediate discharge. It was the look of a military man, not a medical professional.

I'm drawing mushroom clouds again. Over and over. When they tested the Hydrogen Bomb in March, I knew we would be in for trouble. There are already satellites watching us right now. They want you to be worried about Soviet satellites, but trained astronomers know there are others.

We must be vigilant. Something is going to happen.

My last drawing is the best I've ever done. A beautiful middle-American townscape, a church and a few houses, lush bushes and rolling hills. In the foreground stands our typical reader--a barefoot boy in jeans and a plaid shirt, fishing pole on his shoulder and slingshot in his back pocket. He gazes into the distance. The caption reads, "Look to the skys, America!" And above the town floats a radiant metallic sliver--the flying saucer coming to deliver us from our own destruction.

But the next time I see Richard Wallace, he's clawing at his tie, trying to stick to his guns and save his ass from marketing:

"I just don't see why you have to spend so much time harping on the Bomb."

I just stare. Why wouldn't anybody?

"Listen, I know you have this thing against the Air Force. But I don't think it's a good idea to make everything

so...political."

There is nothing I can say to convince a person this brainwashed.

"Denouncing the U.S. Air Force...claiming our nation's defense policies are misguided." He turns his head to the side. "Are you saying we should let the Soviets have atomic weapons but remain defenseless ourselves?"

"What?"

"You need to change this. We don't wanna print anything that'll draw undue attention...like that fiasco with the zombie stories last fall."

It's a direct threat. He knows it and I know it. Three horror writers were fired that season "in the interest of promoting more age-appropriate subject matter."

So I'm forced to rewrite and redraw most of the comic book over the next week to make the deadline. Long nights groggy at my desk, dismembering my masterpiece. Turning it into another embarrassing pulp fantasy like everything else this sorry operation churns out.

I know what they want me to do. I can do it well enough. I've done it before.

Oh, wow, look at how mind-boggling these flying saucers are. Could they be visitors from outer space? Secret government test aircraft? No, scratch that. Secret Soviet weapons? We must be vigilant and watch the sky for these invaders be they alien or communist.

*At this point, we decided to send a direct message. The subject was well aware of his function but was still bowing to his terrestrial hierarchy. It was imperative that we perform a full-scale abduction. We took the subject from his bedroom and linked him into our master brainwave computer. More recordings were made, and we induced the memory of his original encounter with us.*

Light crinkles over my numb face. Slit eyes rolling in a drooly glaze. Their machine brings me back. Back to the time when a bucktoothed mountain kid learned to read maps so he would be able to blow things up from above. It rained hot metal shards. Cleaning cities from the map.

Flak had blown off the nose and turret of the plane. One gunner was screaming on the floor while the other knelt over him, asking over and over what he was supposed to do. The pilot and copilot were arguing. The bombardier was missing, the turret gunner either dead or close enough to count.

And frigid wind blew through the fuselage, making it into some kind of giant flute. The whole plane whistled as we fell through the sky.

I do not remember abandoning the plane, bailing out, pulling my parachute, landing. I remember cold grey shapes in the calm green light.

And lost time.

*We attempted to recover the subject's memory of the rescue, but our brainwave technology was still in its infancy at that time.*

A field. of mud. The ground churned up all around me. Trees splintered off at the trunk. Debris. Wood and metal scattered. Bricks. Masonry. A building?

I realized I wasn't wearing my parachute.

It was a long walk into town.

There was no town. Only heaps of rubble smoldering in the wind.

This night in bed I'm brought memories of that past life. Details I'd rather not think about. But their machine forces me to.

I open my eyes to a blur of white and green, reach hands up to my temples, find the wires there. The machine is a shining slab of what looks like grey-black stone with red and yellow lights set in it. Bulbous grey fingers slide over the lights as the aliens at the machine control my thoughts.

And then I am asleep again, hearing their message streaming through my brain.

You are a weak species, given to following orders and believing what you have been told. But you are learning. And you must learn if you hope to not destroy yourselves. That is why we have not intervened. That is why you must not compromise. That is why you must deliver your message.

The printing room is in the basement of our building, a vast machine of whirring and clanking rubber and metal. I sneak in easily enough through the blue double doors at the bottom of the cement staircase but am immediately accosted by a chubby, bald man with rolled-up sleeves.

He shouts over the noise of the machine: "Never seen you down here before."

I think fast. "EC Comics. Some last minute changes." My hand shakes as I raise the original version of the comic book for him to see.

He takes them from me, eyeing the sheets of paper suspiciously. Then he looks up. "Well, we haven't sent this one to press yet, so it looks like you're just in time."

I'm sitting drawing mushroom clouds when the courier marches in with a stack of sample copies, drops them in front of Richard Wallace's office, and gives a quick knock before running to his next delivery. I slink down the row of desks and am fishing out a couple for myself when the door swings open.

I can't wipe the smirk off my face.

"The hell are you so smug about?" Wallace looks down, then back at me, then down to the stack again.

He bends over and grabs a copy from the stack and opens it.

I let myself smile. The top of the first page reads, "THIS IS A CHALLENGE TO THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE."

He throws the issue on the floor and shoves me.

Both he and I know there are already a thousand copies on their way to distribution and it would be a waste of money to throw them out and reprint.

"Fine, you get the book you want. Now pack up your desk and get out of this office. Consider yourself lucky if we don't file a lawsuit."

And when he turns around, I'm reminded of the Army psychologist. After I left his office, he came out into the hall and said, "Joe...Honestly...Don't worry about it...You seem pretty sane to me...But you know how it is...Orders come down...You hafta do what you're told." Then he turned and walked away, solid olive drab shoulders cutting me out.

*The giant silver computers on the ocean floor had calculated the annihilation of Earth, but obviously that never happened. Somehow a single comic book changed the data enough to buy time. But these days we can't be so sure.*

*This is a challenge to the United States Air Force, recorded on the granite brainwave machines of the Little Greys fifty years ago. It remains a challenge today. Because even if the course of history changed, the Air Force never did. And what do you see now? Still blowing people up. Cities melted to rubble.*

*That is why we, the LittleGrey UnderGround, have decided to engage in a campaign against the United States Government which still seeks to exterminate us.*

*I, Frank Fucile, am their human representative, sucked up into that shining spacecraft that recorded Joseph O's thoughts half a century ago. They plugged me into their glowing machine and set my hands on a keyboard. So that I could pass on their message to you.*

*Look to the sky. Ignore your earthbound rulers. The world depends on it.*