

What 'X' Found...x...x

By Nels Hanson

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Nels Hanson's, "What X Found," holds enough Americana to know that its collapsing.

I will be the first to tell you that I think Donald Trump is/was a cunt, so that you know where I guiltlessly fall on the side of things.

"What X Found" is the sort of disintegrating culture and economy tale that makes these what-ifs enjoyable.

We've called it magical realism, but we should also add a dash of satire and Gilliam's Brazil in there, this story is clever, political, relevant, and works with history to paint a picture.

The style is unique, a sort of creative historical fiction, arranged as both doomsday soothsayer and prophet.

The folklore is strong with this one. The citation, whether true or bullshit, is a fun touch and adds the little leniency of authenticity to the conspiracy.

There are flashes of Burroughs, the way in which the speaker speaks rhythmically, pharmaceutically, as if the education and comprehension of the system as an addict and a queer let you write a few books or two, and the disjointedness manages to enhance the character's trustworthiness.

For instance, if X or the speaker magically showed up at my apartment right now, as I sit here typing, drinking cheap beer, and read this entire story to me as a radio show, like The Shadow of the 30's, then I would gladly go down this rabbit hole. They would need the right voice, but it would be an important performance of this story – the fall into paranoia, the indecency of people to disagree with facts, the insanity of recognizing how often America does this again and again and again.

The amount of evidence it takes to create a narrative lies inside.

The key to your own truth means putting the puzzle pieces together.

The fact that rhetoric and information control is still a potable concern in these days of cyclical labor uprising hits the surreal in this story home hard.

It mused my brain, but check this story out.

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language...)*

It's difficult, I know, to accept you've been living in a dream, but that's the task, once the shock and panic wear off and the awe begins, to realize all we never knew, though sometimes on a hunch or in troubled sleep we half suspected and maybe caught a glimpse.

It was attached to a college photo of his beautiful late wife, so at first I imagined Claire was somehow Grace and the years had instantly dissolved, a May shower falling on frozen snow. (At 30 I'd married someone else and desperately divorced at 40.)

Or none of it?
Or only 10 of 10,000 parts?
Or all?

What X Found

After X Senior died alone in the private plane crash near _____, _____, my friend X Junior was sorting through his father's things and found the trapdoor under a tacked Persian rug, the hatch blended to the oak parquet.

And a steel-lined cubicle, seven filing cabinets containing official-appearing federal documents – with information at first glance startling, hard to weigh, then harder to forget – which changed X Junior's fate and mine, and perhaps his father's . . .

For example:

“At the beginning of World War 11 a psychic was shown the Washington D.C. phone book and asked to give the dates of death for 50 random listings, all later

verified over time by ensuing obituaries, including, apparently by chance, the accidental electrocution of a well-known syndicated astrologer, in 1972.”

And:

“The chemical analysis of the water from Lourdes proved inconclusive though on multiple occasions sensors perceived an intermittent glow akin to green radium from a wristwatch, that was confirmed by spectrograph and requires further investigation as to the rays’ potential beneficial use in battlefield triage.”

At a safe distance, I followed X’s nightly progress, as he combed through the clandestine reports for months, cross-indexing everything, placing folders in marked legal boxes, and finally rented a van.

What to think of the fraction of the evidence X chose (dared?) to share, sometimes followed by his cryptic commentaries, reflective, downcast, outraged, by turns exuberant, almost manic?

And the detail of the quoted material itself, that X compared to kernels of corn or rice, which foreign artisans inscribe with lengthy texts from the Bible or Koran?

“The interlocking ‘coincidences’ surrounding the assassination of each American president mathematically may indicate a conspiracy of God’s or another supernatural or alien, unearthly agency, as current ESP and time-remote viewing programs and their experiments now partially suggest.”

– Is the president John Wilkes Booth? I won’t be his Doctor Mudd!

(Each entry with often his added note seemed more outlandish than the previous, and I remembered I hadn’t known or seen X the last 30 years – our renewed relationship was sudden and unexpected and started at X’s surprise inception, by postcard: *“In a hard*

time amid a double thunder, like wedding bells tolling for a funeral – after a first, solitary bell rang its omen of two sadder deaths to come – I realize you are my only living friend, when I feel the true weight of my losses and my recent strange discoveries – ”)

“Re binary systems and borderline phenomena, i.e. the “ghost in the machine,” see transcribed hypnosis session, file name ‘Cinnabar,’ South Korean ‘I Ching Adept’.”

– This is dynamite.

At first we spoke by phone and e-mail, I didn’t know how the things X showed me could be true, but he assured any doubts would disappear when I examined the evidence in person. He had to talk to someone who might understand – he sensed we shared a “tragic bond” – as he uncovered a growing web and abruptly shifted to registered mail, to detail a possibly imminent and dreadful – or marvelous? – event:

“The Knights Templars fleeing Europe before Columbus did hide a treasure on the island in Nova Scotia, gold hunters digging for 300 years down the timbered shaft that killed six men with cave-ins and gas fumes, channels that funneled seawater to instantly drown intruders.

“The Holy Objects the Order found during the Crusades, in Jerusalem under the ruins of Solomon’s Second Temple, were removed in 1917 and remain in Idaho, in a mineshaft until the promised Grand Master appears during the partial eclipse of the October full moon six months from now.”

At the bottom:

For the President’s eyes only!

A week before X died –

(In a crosswalk, hit and run: I only learned of his death six months afterward, in the Obituaries Section of our alumni magazine – I hadn't realized X helped design the International Space Station, or was friendly with several mystic-leaning ex-astronauts.)

– I received a letter by Federal Express, from deep in Mexico, with a key and the combination to a lock, an address in what I'll call Y-City.

And a newspaper clipping of his father's fatal plane crash.

To further explain, X and I were college roommates, but for years had fallen out of touch, until the passing of his wife and her twin – I'd nearly married Grace, Claire's identical sister before she'd turned from my love. (I prefer false names to Y and Z.)

The "McKenna" women had died unexpectedly at 52, at the same instant, at birthday parties a thousand miles apart, in _____ and _____, each from a sudden, massive heart attack.

The week before, X Senior's Piper Cub struck the empty barn in _____, near a hamlet I'll call "Terrytown," to mask a subtle "verbal symmetry" X noticed among himself, his father and me, his distant college friend.

In his grief for wife and sister-in-law – and X Senior – X had remembered our shared youth, recalling Grace and me with regret, our tender love that unlike his and Claire's had failed to grow and flourish, which deepened his mourning for his wife.

Two months later, clearing his father's house, the triply bereaved son found the hidden library, and then made contact, convinced he and I shared a special fate. He reminded me of his award-winning physics experiment our senior year at _____ – as a volunteer subject, I'd thrown sevens seven times in a row with the metal dice he tracked on a computer screen, the odds changing by the second as on a race track's flashing,

ringing tote board.

(He kept referring to a half-torn, yellowed sheaf, “*scattered with abstruse equations which somehow register qualities, texture and color, subjective intent and mood as well as quantity, a marriage of mathematics and expressionism, a psychoanalytical and predictive calculus,*” with the penciled letters “*Wife of A. E.*” on a final page’s lower right corner. Later, I held that fragile paper in my hand.)

– *With a year of steady work, I believe I could write out the actual history of the last 200 years, and of however many years might still remain, in a few short expressions joining numbers and accompanying symbols like accent marks, if I had the time . . . Tonight I feel like John Keats, in his poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” like Balboa discovering the Pacific!*

As X had warned me in his last message, I didn’t stir for a year, while my head rang and rang, with the “secrets” X had revealed and their growing immediacy, concerning unfolding national and world events. X had called the uncanny correlations “mirror effects,” unlooked-for and repeating phenomena, “quirks” in time and nature that caused X to imagine (and fear) that he was reading history before it occurred, and to resort to a complicated code he swiftly devised:

– XI6*ZZ@9%D)

– It’s like the world’s turned upside down!

“Toward the end of Stalin’s regime, Russian scientists discovered the soul is immortal but were silenced and liquidated, recordings and films locked forever in the Kremlin’s deep cellars as maze-like as the Vatican’s vaults and catacombs. ‘It’s as if the commissars hold the devil in prison,’ as my deep source described the well-guarded

‘menace,’ whose exposure would jeopardize both the economy and the stability of the party and regime.”

In his made-up language, X added:

– Like Poe’s ‘The Cask of the Amontillado’? Fortunato wasn’t a Mason . . .

I kept alert for strange phone calls, computer messages, persons knocking at the back gate, cars parked under the elms, delivery people next door or down the street, plumbers’ and electricians’ trucks, meter readers, once a police cruiser double parked at my curb, after a series of hang-up calls, until I was haunted by the same suspicions that had troubled X.

Could it all be true? If it was, X knew it now.

I wondered an October dusk, as I watched an orange crescent rise above the hill:

“On the dark side of the moon far beneath its surface there is a great abandoned city on a blue lake’s frozen shore.”

Then when the pandemic hit and the quarantine and the government started pulling back, I thought it might be safe and drove 500 deserted miles to a rental company, found the shuttered garage on the narrow avenue of black-numbered units that stared like ghostly absent faces:

“Antarctica in prehistoric times was tropical and women and men frolicked happily there.”

What fool’s errand – *what doom?* – had captured X and me, his father?

I got out and opened the combination lock, turned the key and quickly lifted the accordion door to hide my car. (I saw a half-dried pool of oil where he had parked the van.)

I kept my mask and rubber gloves on, in case there were some hidden virus germs or other microbes or poisons, and so I wouldn't leave fingerprints on the material densely stacked along the wall, beside a standing lamp, folding chair, and a coffee table where I found the dead man's note, scrawled in simple English on a yellow "post-it."

It was attached to a college photo of his beautiful late wife, so at first I imagined Claire was somehow Grace and the years had instantly dissolved, a May shower falling on frozen snow. (At 30 I'd married someone else and desperately divorced at 40.)

– You won't let me down because like me you'll never be the same.

I started through a heavy cardboard box, one file and another marked at the top with Secret, Top Secret, Interoffice Intel Only, Sealed Archive, etc., etc., as X had described.

“Multiple witnesses, several with I-Phone shots, have confirmed hostile African-American spirits haunt Jefferson's Monticello, as ghosts of the Cherokee Nation were found last year to inhabit Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, in that case in accelerating numbers.”

“An estimated 37% of the gold bars in Fort Knox are gilt-covered lead.”

I began to skip, as if flipping the pages of an unread child's picture book, or twisting the lens on a kaleidoscope for the next unexpected wonder –

“Under ultraviolet light the wing lattice of the 17-year cicada is a shifting matrix that at temporary rest forms the number 665, not the previous 664 of specimens taken last century. (Miramar, Bell labs)”

Every evening for a week I returned, until I began sleeping on an air mattress and some nights venturing out to fill my ice chest.

“A married lover of JFK’s captured his semen and over a decade distributed frozen metal test tubes to over 100 fertility clinics, the financial and political liabilities and effects of gene overexposure presently uncertain, pending C Group’s ongoing analysis and future projections.”

“Select individuals knew for years that visitors from worlds beyond our solar system had long visited Earth, since the brontosaurus herds they hunted for fresh meat, an old pistol like Buck Rogers’ and other lost weapons encased in stone with the fossil record.”

All nonsense, the work of some crazed and intricate, hyperactive mind(s)?

I couldn’t stay away, despite the feared Delta epidemic in Y-City. I’d got nearly half our history wrong, if the stamped, embossed documents were half genuine, as X and his father evidently believed they are, and shadowed others who may enforce their secrecy . . .

(What agency so jealously (and violently?) protects such a varied list of strange asserted revelations, to guard what interest(s) or cabal from what dangers of exposure?)

Did the hovering threat prove their authenticity?

“There’s a transporter machine as in the ‘Star Trek’ TV series, from a diagram Nikola Tesla penciled on a napkin. The influential in The Hamptons know about the device and pre-pay fares to leave the Earth together should protected areas become unlivable. (Redacted from Crowder Report: see polygraphs 1-4)”

(I read that two months ago. The cache is safe, my whereabouts ever-changing as I describe things you deserve to hear, to make your own decisions, as if a large meteor or UFO had quietly hit our planet – *Not one of these passing “tic-tac” crafts Navy pilots*

capture on video, no larger than a speck, diving and then rising from the sea, suspected “psychoid” projections from Jung’s “collective unconscious,” as X once wrote toward the end.)

What should you or I believe?

This?

“Atlantis didn’t perish but slipped through a crease in the time-space fabric and thrives invisibly beyond the Pillars of Hercules and for a day reveals its shining crystal towers every eight years, at a conjunction of sunspots and cosmic flares from space.”

Or?

“Surviving scattered buffalo in small but rapidly growing numbers periodically returned, reclaiming grasslands of the Mountain and Plains states and threatening potential devastation of the livestock industry, and were reduced and again forgotten, until last year’s widespread grazing failure.

“It was their 10,000 ghosts that cropped the meadows short as sheep browse the stalks, to the roots,’ Gray Wolf, our second informant, acknowledged casually in passing, referring to the scant forage and the disappearing cattle, from information he claims he gathered on a vision quest. Asked about peyote or other drug use inducing changes of consciousness and perception, he remained noncommittal and the interview was mutually and amicably concluded.” (Page 3, Interview with Gray Wolf, continued)

Or none of it?

Or only 10 of 10,000 parts?

Or all?

Something was afoot with X’s father, maybe with people he knew or worked

with, not to mention whatever role X had assumed or played . . .

Did one man alone make the whole thing up? Have carpenters come in while the family was on holiday, file cabinets transported an afternoon his wife and children saw a movie at the triplex?

Where did X Senior find the time, for the immaculate, painstaking fabrication of mountains of “classified” false records, a project worthy of the incognito English nobleman who Mark Twain and W.H. Auden believed penned Shakespeare’s many plays and sonnets?

To what purpose, if the cellar documents weren’t originals?

For what purpose, if they were?

Was X murdered?

Who drove the swerving car into the crosswalk and sped off evading capture?

And X Senior?

Why his propeller in a cornfield, two counties from the crash site?

And poor Claire and Grace, the simultaneous infarctions as their funeral notices each duly related, that X sent xeroxed on a single page.

You could almost believe and agree that a malign force had tried to break X down, to defeat him with terror and despair, before his approaching discovery of a treasure already waiting underfoot, that perhaps was always calling to him.

(Was the “trove” X Junior’s creation, after all?, I’d thought a time or two. Was the information I’d seen really only “*the tip of the ice burg that sank the Titanic,*” mere fragments X selected haphazardly from seven waiting filing cabinets? Or were the disclosed “facts” the *only facts*, the few passing fancies of a lonely and confused, often

frightened mind?)

– Does the vividly, precisely imagined somehow, sometimes become the actual, as reportedly in Voodoo and other of the so-called “occult arts,” when the mental temperature is stoked and raised to the boiling point? Then who’s the dreamer or the puppet, or the puppet master? Who is it, Terry? Don’t say. ASAP check Andreae’s “Chymical Wedding,” Christian Rosencreutz, for the possible obverse, “the birth of the beautiful.”

It doesn’t matter, the scale of the thing dwarfs the mind, whoever the author(s).

Five thousand individual documents with official seals, signatures that match those of presiding officials – accumulating for years while X Senior worked in branches of government Intelligence – reflect a giant and gifted, a “virtuoso” mania . . . or a real-life nightmare worthy of an ultimate Halloween.

From anonymous locales, I continue to release content that seems most timely and relevant, and likely prophetic, in order of importance, until the day when all of X Senior’s catalogued mysteries are finally public, and we discover at last if after the centuries of self-praise and hoopla America is truly mature and brave enough, to confront and accept truths harder in their way than global warming or the deadliness of the virus, or a worshipped dictator “winning” but losing an election.

Maybe they’re all the same thing, the truths like those wild plants that share a vast connected system of roots and are in fact a single, potentially immortal organism.

It’s difficult, I know, to accept you’ve been living in a dream, but that’s the task, once the shock and panic wear off and the awe begins, to realize all we never knew, though sometimes on a hunch or in troubled sleep we half suspected and maybe caught a

glimpse.

Sad or happy, over time you'll see what was unwinding always before our blindfolded eyes, those things unjustly concealed I bring to light for X, for Claire and Grace, X Senior and what nameless associates he may have had.

“We have met the enemy and he is us,” the cartoon character Pogo said.

Always on the move, I've driven back and forth across the continent six times, in different vehicles for safety's sake. And once to a little town on a lake in Canada, with the “cargo,” my eye locked always to the rearview mirror, worried I was too obvious to any hired asset's x-ray eye or bloodhound-sense of smell . . . suddenly afraid my jumbled license plate – “KISMET” in X's cypher – foolishly proclaimed I carried a hidden Grail or Ark and made me easy prey . . .

Careful, X's collected manuscript would make a volume 10 yards thick, for the covers locked steel doors, each with a small square of bars, the dim window for the prisoner caught peeking.

(“Terry” isn't my real name, but there is a town that has a name that sounds like mine, near where X Senior's plane came down, a coincidence or clue that sparked X's memory of our time together as students . . . before the kind sisters died on their birthday and X remembered my love for Grace. After that I was frequently on his mind, before the Saturday he pulled back the nailed antique rug hiding the trapdoor.)

Legends surround mysterious books, a famous one an illuminated parchment folio six-feet high and completed overnight, tradition says by a monk for the devil, and other odd manuscripts, including ancient maps of our modern world.

And this?

“During the Civil War, at a séance in the White House, Lincoln and his wife watched a female medium go into a trance, and announce the dictator that Lincoln had warned about, in a speech he’d given before his election. The tyrant was approaching, his birth a bare 80 years in the future, his hair and skin of a strange hue, family name ‘Dumph’ but soon to change to a ‘rhyming word.’”

The End

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“What X Found” came from a growing horror of a Cable News/Internet/Social Media menace that runs on rumor and cruelty, fear and hate, spontaneously creating and spreading fantastic authoritarian legends that in their repetition begin to replace what used to be the more-or-less-agreed-upon “everyday world.” (The truth is a lie told 20 times?) Something widely broadcast is hard to forget, even if it’s the purest, most obvious insanity, like a bad tune or Iago whispering at your ear. But then lies are wishes, or anti-wishes. It was my turn to plant my own seeds of myth and paranoia, relatively progressive seeds, crazy enough and yet maybe with the suggestion of a truth just beneath the obvious falsehoods (or are they?). I’m sure I remembered Borges’ story, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” about a trans-generational conspiracy that creates a set of encyclopedias describing an imaginary planet – a detailed, make-believe world which gradually over time, because of its attractions for the great majority, replaces our mundane earth.*

AUTHOR BIO: Nels Hanson grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation’s James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016, and poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review’s 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.