

# NORTH ATLANTIC REVIEW

METROPOLITAIN

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**Number 24 2014 \$15**

# The Last Scattering

Guy Prevost

It was a crazy spring in the Sierra. Mid-April and a winter storm, (call it even a blizzard), was dumping another foot of snow around the lodge, not to mention what it was doing on the ski hill above. Monroe had breezed up to sneak in a couple of days of warm-weather skiing – shirt sleeves, corn snow, and plenty of sun screen. He had come alone.

The top of the mountain was closed. But he was determined to make the most of it. Just two lifts open on the lower hills, snow and wind unyielding, and a blank curtain of white. He felt his way down the first third of the trail – at first an uneasy feeling, then somehow liberating, because he was cruising through the snow, making turns, floating, managing it, without really seeing. Then the pines on the lower trail came into view, the snow still soft and feathery. He started to glide between the trees, making “new tracks,” enjoying the surreal quiet. The foot of new snow absorbed the sound – so the clank of the chairs over the towers was barely audible.

And a strange fraternity. The other die-hards, not many of them, going up and down the same few runs, cocooned in parkas and one-piece suits like astronauts, collars zipped up, goggles covering the top half of the face and a relatively modern precaution, which Monroe eschewed, the safety helmet. (OK, Sonny Bono had died hitting a tree while skiing. And that Kennedy. But Monroe stuck with the ski hat).

Hard to determine gender. He was a bit curious – and even more than lonely. There was the occasional companion on the lift – some garrulous, some not, some local hotshots who seemed to resent Monroe’s intrusion on this, their ceremonial shredding grounds.

“Outstanding!”

“Cool.”

“Hot.”

“I was born for this day!” The hotshots exclaimed. And sadly, Monroe envied their unequivocal joy – and wondered why he didn’t feel

it. How long had it been since he felt like that about anything? Somewhere during the first hour of the day his excited anticipation, the glorious sense of freedom he associated with skiing, had turned into melancholy. But this kind of middle-aged reflection was not seemly, he told himself. Maybe it was the steady grayness – not being able to see the stunning Minarets and peaks that surrounded them, the ones that glistened and rose majestically on the sunny days.

The three-minute “dates” on the chairlift became oppressive. Start with “What a day!” or some other innocuous greeting. The stranger next to him could either nod, or pick up the ball. In this case, it was a female voice – no way to tell her appearance from the ski clothes. The safe subject was explored: amazing weather, still good skiing. The incredible deal at the lodge, lift ticket included. So they both were canny enough to take advantage. And as always, since he was thirteen, Monroe wondered what lay beneath all the clothing.

“I probably have to go back tonight, to work, though I don’t want to.”

“Where is work?” She’d left the opening.

“About twenty miles south of Bishop?”

“Big Pine?” A waitress at a roadside diner, or one of those shops that sold beef jerky, thought Monroe.

“No, before there. The VERITAS. It’s a...”

“The Very Large Array – the radio telescopes.”

“Yes. You’re familiar then?”

Monroe had seen them for years on his way to and from the resort. Big saucers, in the vast high desert of the valley, aimed at the sky, receiving information from billions of years ago. They were visible from the road at the foothills of the eastern mountains.

“You’re an astronomer?”

“I’m a physicist. We’re installing a new set of dishes.” And not the kind used by waitresses. Science was something Monroe loved. A road not taken. Still, he kept up a little bit. He’d taken a sequence of math courses at the city college, and read the latest popular books.

“Are you an astrophysicist?”

“Yes. Well, have a nice run.”

They’d reached the top of the hill and they eased off the chairlift in different directions. The snow had eased up, so Monroe could actually see the slope below him, split down the middle by the spine of the chairlift. Not another soul on the hill, except for the woman. She took off down one side, and he could tell that she was an able skier. Not a great skier, but she

was handling it, and not stopping, trailing contrails of snow.

He took off on the opposite side, soon catching up, and then paralleling her descent. He tried not to be too obvious about it. Midway he was surprised when he had to press to keep up. He wondered if she even noticed. She seemed to ski without thinking, or stopping.

At the bottom he scooted beside her on the lift. The circle was closed.

“You again!” he said. She laughed.

The lift buoyed them up toward the first tower.

“We’re getting the first pictures of light from the most distant galaxies, light that left the source from over a billion years ago, right after the last scattering. My graduate student e-mailed me the first pictures this morning.”

Monroe knew the last scattering was the time in the universe, after the big bang, when matter first formed, coincident with the release of the energy detectable today as the cosmic background radiation, quanta infusing every micro-inch of space. This was one of the great discoveries of modern physics, yielding valuable clues to the origins of the universe. And her VERITAS telescope was measuring the perturbations in that quanta.

That this female skier was tackling these immense questions was more amazing than the spring storm.

“And what do you do?”

“I’m a TV writer.”

“I don’t watch much TV”

“Well, I don’t either. But, the money’s good.” It was the best he could come up with at the moment.

Monroe was also looking for signals from the past, little pinpoints of light or energy that might filter up through the maze of his unconscious. These pinpoints were clearest, most likely, in his dreams. At least that’s what the shrinks had told him. They were like his own cosmic background radiation. He had forgotten – but was “remembering” by reliving the patterns of his childhood, patterns that no longer served him and led to frustration. But, said the shrinks, that was the point. He *wanted* the disappointment. It was familiar. It’s what he assumed he deserved so why should anything change? Wasn’t that why he’d stayed in his marriage? But just as his lift mate tried to decipher those noisy signals from distant galaxies, he was trying to decode the dreams, and make some sense out of what the bearded man with the dyed hair and the samovar was telling him.

Monroe had recently terminated the analysis. Part of the problem was his wife. She had become a therapist herself, rising in the ranks of the Jungians. The more successful she became, the more she ministered to the hang-ups of others, the more remote she became from Monroe. Skiing no longer interested her. At the moment she was attending a conference with colleagues in Switzerland – and made no mention of at least a day's skiing in the sport's most spectacular venue.

That night, in the hotel, after she'd left to check the tolerances on the dishes, after she'd zoomed off toward the rental shop on the last run of the day and when he trailed her there and asked her to join him for an après ski toddy, she politely declined. He didn't catch her name, nor did he even see her face as she still wore the gear. But she'd dropped the name of the college where she taught (only one class she assured him, because her main focus was research).

Later, using the hotel's Internet service, Monroe checked the physics department website at the college, wondering how many female astrophysicists could there be on one faculty? A surprising answer: three. Each had their pictures, areas of research, articles, and scholastic background on the site.

Monroe made his deductions. She didn't sound Indian, though the acronyms for the various telescopes (BEV, Gigi, etc.) made a precise determination impossible. The other candidate had rather obviously omitted the years in which she earned her various degrees – and the skier didn't seem that secretive. So this narrowed the field to Crystal Miller, an unlikely name for a physicist.

And sure enough, when he googled her name, there was a female "escort" working out of Las Vegas who shared it, featuring her body in a thong and bra splayed over *her* website. Monroe wondered if he could combine the two – would this be the supernova of women that all men desired?

Inevitably they met the next day after skiing. They had dinner in the main lodge, near the great stone fireplace, and Monroe's entire sexual phantasmagoria melted away. He learned that in spite of her work, she was unhappy. She was married to a man twelve years her senior, a semi-celebrity in the astronomy world who'd been her thesis adviser and mentor. They lived in an old suburb of Baltimore, an area once the province of DAR families like the Worthingtons or the Dorseys. The husband had lost interest in her in practically all respects – and she had no idea why. They lived in a wonderful old colonial house, but its antiquated charms were now stifling – the coffered ceiling, mahogany balustrades,

ancient polished wood floors. Yet she was devoted to the man, revered him, even needed him to help with her research. She was frank about an affair she'd had with a graduate student. He was Israeli and eventually went back home to Tel Aviv and for that she was actually relieved.

Monroe hid nothing about his own wife.

The next day the sky cleared, at least for the moment. Monroe and Crystal rode the gondola to the top of the cornice above the timber line and after clunking down the steel steps of the lift house they each put on their skis. Then they gazed out at the back of the mountain looking for El Capitan, which, according to the forest service map, was just twenty-five miles to the south. Monroe knew a narrow trail, on the back side of the mountain, one that meandered through glades and steep ravines. He led the way and she followed.

They stopped at a vista above a frozen lake. She said very little and he saw the redness of her cheeks, burnished by the cold. Steam escaped her lips in the chill air.

"When I die, I want to be cremated and my ashes scattered here," she said.

Crystal was only mildly curious about Monroe's work. He'd become a TV writer only by chance, easily falling into something that others wasted lifetimes to achieve. He'd been a helicopter gunman in Vietnam, petrified most of the time there, but he had handled it, just as she handled the Patrolman's run. Most of all he'd listened to his comrades-in-arms, and had absorbed their speech patterns down to a tee. He was hired because of his uncanny ability to write black slang – that's how they put it. And he'd lucked into a hit series about cops battling dope dealers and all kinds of improbable people who Monroe dreamed up – and then layered in the lingo of his Army days. But Monroe himself was about as mild-mannered and non-violent a person as you could imagine.

Crystal had a problem with her boots and that night they took the winding road from the lodge down into the town. The snow was falling hard, and the snowflakes shown in the headlights rushing toward the windshield like so many particles in a quantum wave. The last scattering, Monroe thought, or like tracer fire in Vietnam during the night sieges. They passed the Earthquake fault, and arrived at the store where Crystal decided to buy a new pair of boots. They had dinner in the small uncharming town and stayed up late by the fire in the main lobby back at the lodge.

They were inseparable for the next five days. People assumed they were married, and in the evening sometimes she'd leave him to go check on VERITAS. Then the snow came again and the roads were closed. She

was glad because she could stay by him then, and not have to interact in a professional way, which only brought her back down to some dark vortex of her own loneliness.

The week drew to a close. Crystal had driven to the mountain from San Francisco in a rental car, and now she would return there and fly back to Baltimore. There was one more opportunity to ski that morning. And the sun was shining.

Once again they ascended in the gondola. It was a weekday so they had the cabin to themselves and looked with wonder at the hotshots doing spectacular jumps and tricks on the “half pipe” below them. Monroe could see her mood shift as they passed the first station.

“I feel so guilty, though I know I shouldn’t.”

They spoke on the phone every month in the following year. Neither liked email. Her work was going well, helping to support the Big Bangers and finding new clues for the string theorists. Crystal told him she could wrap her mind around these exotic concepts, and she tried to explain them to Monroe. But she knew she’d never be on the cutting edge of theoretical research. Instead she took pleasure in devising clever ways of measuring wavelength and energy coming from the infinite experiments in the night sky conducted by nature. She complained about teaching, how it weighed her down, and it took away from her work.

They made plans to meet again at the mountain. But Crystal always seemed to cancel at the last minute.

Quite suddenly, Crystal’s number changed. She fell out of touch. Monroe went back to the Internet – and saw that she no longer taught her classes.

He thought about going back to Baltimore and tracking her down. But he didn’t want to intrude.

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Monroe was convinced he’d hear from her again. Each spring he went for a week’s skiing up on the mountain, hoping to see her across the lobby dusting the snow off her parka, or warming her feet by the tall stone fireplace, or carving a set of turns down Patrolman’s run, with that distinctive pole swing to the left. But she never appeared. Monroe and his wife divorced and he was quite content to find a new place to live on the far side of town.

# North Atlantic Review



2014

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