

DAN CONOVER

MILK RUN

Where does paranoia originate? How do we address it in terms that might resolve its concerns? And what the hell was I thinking when somebody said to me “I think you’d enjoying being city editor. It’s just a great experience for a journalist!”

The problem was weekends. In almost any other profession, you schedule people five days a week, and you don’t worry about holidays. But this was the news business, and fifteen years of it had elevated Mike Mingus to the lofty status of *He Who Makes The Schedule*, or, more realistically, *He Who Adjusts The Schedule Around The Needs of Everybody Who Is Supposed To Be Working The Weekend*.

Fairness, ethics, quality – these were the things that got talked about at seminars by high-ranking news executives who had stopped doing productive work years before. But Mingus was a city editor, and what really ate up his time was the schedule – namely, Willie’s schedule.

Willie Scranton was the Sunday night metro editor, or rather, he was supposed to be. Most of the time he was the Family Emergency Editor, or the On-Vacation Editor, or the I Have A Bad Back Editor. Willie was almost 60, twenty years past

caring, fifty pounds past overweight, and when it came to actually working the Sunday night shift, he was batting about .550. With the rest of Mingus’s assistants tasked to the limit, that meant that when it came to finding Willie a last-minute replacement, the name that usually got called was his own.

The actual work wasn’t bad. He’d throw on a clean T-shirt over his jeans and shuffle off the elevator into the yellowed-tile newsroom around 3, go through e-mails, faxes and phone messages and have the local news budget together by 4. Sundays were typically slow days, and he’d edited all the stories for the Monday paper before he left on Friday. The news budget meeting could start anywhere between 4 and 5, depending on the whims of the supervising editor and the incomprehensible needs of the copy desk. They’d drone through the paltry offerings from the wire, thankful for whatever violence the Middle East had to offer, and cobble together an A-front around the conference table. When it was over, Mingus would repair to the smoking room, stretch out his thickening but still lanky 6-5 frame and wonder how he got to be 39 years old in the first place.

Dingo the night cop reporter, whose nickname originated so far back that it was lost to the mists

of newspaper history, would wander in from bond court around 5, trailing sunflower seed husks and halitosis. If there was news, Mingus would reshuffle the local front and annoy the copy desk, but usually Sunday crime merited no more than a couple of briefs on 3B.

So it was this Sunday. Mingus got the local stories over by 7, e-mailed his ex-wife about her latest financial crisis (“that’s why they call it ‘*child support*,’ Megan...”), and had reached a practically reclined position by 8, hands behind his head and Chuck Taylors propped up by his keyboard.

CNN said the Justice Department was questioning another domestic terrorism suspect... Dingo tired of computer solitaire and wandered by the desk, dandruff dusting the shoulders of his blue short-sleeved Oxford, nattering about politics and fiddling with his police scanner. Laura the Assistant Managing Editor strolled out of her office, munching on a snack bag of Doritos and asking if anybody wanted to order Chinese.

Mingus let them fade into the background, like the bad light that hung around the place, the plastic plants and the endless stacks of paper that drifted from desk to desk, the pop and scratch of the scanner, the talking heads on TV, the hum of the computers and the gurgling of the coffee pot. This, he thought, was not what he had signed on for.

The edges of his cubicle in the center of the newsroom told his story eloquently. A dancing Elvis clock from Memphis. A star-shaped snow-globe from Texas. A Uruguayan tea filter that looked like a bong. A bungee-jumping sheep from New Zealand, a statuette from Italy that changed colors with the weather, a finger piano from South Africa. The fringes of the city editor’s desk were festooned with mementos from every significant assignment he’d ever sent a reporter to cover, souvenirs from locales both mundane and exotic. Evidence of the world outside the newsroom of *The Argus and Standard* in Charleston, S.C.

It was a world he would have liked to have covered, and his reporters knew it. So when

their boss sent them to Bermuda to check out the competition in the shipping industry, they came back with tacky creatures made from glued-together sea shells. When he got them onto military transports to cover local troops deployed overseas, they brought him cigarettes from Central Asia. Mingus had never intended to be an editor and had started out to be a pretty good reporter. But then one week there was a crisis, and the boss needed someone to fill in on the desk. And then the State Editor had a nervous breakdown. And then the Weekend Editor quit and married a dentist. And then the political editor got caught exposing himself in the public library. And then the previous city editor simply stopped coming in to work altogether. Mingus was an accidental city editor, and it grated on him.

The phone rang at 8:05 p.m.

“City desk, Mingus.”

“Hey Mike, this is Jack from AP. Where’s Willie?”

“Migraine. Slipped disk. Menstrual cramps. I forget which one it is this time.”

The AP desk guy laughed politely and then got down to business. “OK, I’ve got a few things I want you to send up. Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Give me your tax cap story, the kiddie porn story and the sewer leak.”

“You got it.”

“What’s this about the car in the lake?”

“It was a pond.”

“Suicide attempt? Police chase?”

“Stupidity,” Mingus said.

“Skip it,” said Jack.

“Good call,” said Mingus. “What else?”

“I don’t see anything,” Jack said. “Anything breaking?”

“Deader than Hell. Try *The Sun-News*.”

They said goodbye and hung up. Dingo leaned across the desk and a sunflower husk dribbled from his mouth as he ranted to a copy editor about a Fox News piece that showed former President Clinton

addressing an all-girls school in New England. The phone rang again. Jack at AP was always forgetting something...

“City desk, Mingus.”

“Is this the newspaper?” The voice at the other end was nervous, female and Caucasian, about 50 years old.

“Yes,” Mingus said.

“I want to put an ad in your paper then,” the woman said. “How much will that cost?”

“This is the newsroom, ma’am,” he said. “We don’t sell ads. We do stories. You need to call advertising on Monday.”

“You do news stories?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, that’s what I need,” she said. “I’ve got a UFO in my back yard.”

“What kind of UFO, ma’am?” Mingus asked, catching Dingo’s eye.

“A silver one,” she said. “Shaped like a saucer. I’m looking at it right now.”

Dingo stopped complaining about the Clinton administration and grinned. UFO callers were usually whack jobs, and Dingo specialized in whack jobs.

“Where are you, ma’am?”

“I’m in Goose Creek, just above the old Weapons Station, in the Whispering Pines community,” she said, and then gasped. “Ooo, you should see the lights. Can you come up here and make a picture of this?”

“Do you have a camera, ma’am?” he asked.

“A Polaroid,” she said.

“Let me put you on hold,” he said, and punched the red button on his phone. “Guess what, Dingo? You’ve got an assignment.”

“Where?”

“Goose Creek. Whispering Pines trailer park, although she refers to it as a ‘community.’”

“Come on, Mike, why are you giving me another milk run?”

“Because you’re drooling sunflower shells on my desk, you slob,” he said, and punched the red

button again. “Ma’am? Hi, sorry about that. Listen, I’m going to put a reporter on the phone. Will you give him directions? Yes, he’ll bring a camera. Here he is now.”

Mingus handed Dingo the phone and gave the slovenly old reporter a wink as he stood up. UFO callers, he thought as he walked to the smoking room. Freakin’ great...

He didn’t get to finish the cigarette. Becca the obituary clerk leaned into the room about halfway to the filter to tell him he had another call. “This guy says he’s looking at a UFO.”

“Where?” Mingus asked.

“Goose Creek. Says it’s a silver saucer with lights on it. Just hovering over the Little Cricket.”

He stubbed out the smoke. “I’ll be right there.”

“I used to be a flight engineer in the Air Force,” the caller said. “I know what I’m talking about.”

“Are you looking at it now?” Mingus asked.

“Yep,” the man said. “It’s right over the Little Cricket store across the highway, there by the trailer park – what is the name of that place, honey?” There was a pause and the sound of a woman’s voice in the background. The man came back on. “Whispering Pines.”

Mingus’s fingers chattered over his keyboard, tapping out an e-mail to the assistant photo editor as they talked.

TO: STOURNO@argusandstandard.com

FROM: MMINGUS@argusandstandard.com

SUBJECT: CONFIRMED UFO

yo, steve, quit fucking around back there and get larry moving up to whispering pines trailer park off highway 52 in goose creek. I’ve got two callers and they’re both describing the same ufo.

Becca the obit clerk leaned into his field of vision and pantomimed a telephone receiver. Mingus covered his mouthpiece. “Another UFO?” he asked, feeling the first taste of excitement that a good story always brought him.

“Isle of Palms,” she said, her college co-ed eyes brightening. “And there’s another caller from Mount Pleasant who says she’s got one over the

soccer field on Whipple Road.”

By now even the copy desk was paying attention. Perfect, Mingus thought. I finally get a decent story, and I’m alone in a room with an obit clerk and 10 anal-retentive Trekkies.

The calls began stacking up, but Becca handled them like a pro. Mingus reached Dingo on his cell phone, but the reporter was stuck at a DUI checkpoint in North Charleston. “It’s getting dark,” Dingo said. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to get a picture.”

Mingus checked the time. 8:33 p.m., with the midsummer sunset only minutes away. He called up the staff phone directory and found the phone number for Wanda, a sports reporter who lived in Goose Creek.

“Aw, Mike, come on,” she whined. “We just put in a Jackie Chan DVD from Blockbuster. I’ve got popcorn here.”

“You’re about three minutes away and you’ve got your camera,” he insisted. “Get up off the couch, step out on your porch and see if you can spot the thing.”

Wanda sat the phone down and treated Mingus to several minutes of her teen-age sons arguing over the remote control.

“It’s a silver cylinder,” she said, picking up the phone again. “Just over the trees. Swear to God.”

“Did you get a photo?” he asked.

“With my zoom,” she said. Mike read her the addresses of the first and second callers. “I’m on it,” Wanda said.

Laura the Deputy Managing Editor was waiting when he got off.

“More UFOs in the trailer parks?” she said, slurping up the end of a lo mein noodle and leaning back on his desk. She was short and plump and younger than he was, the executive editor’s favorite new fast-track *wunderkind*.

“Not just the trailer parks,” he said, trying to conceal his excitement. “We’ve got calls from East Cooper and the islands, too. It’s a miniature saucer epidemic.”

“Where do you want to play it?” she asked.

Laura feigned nonchalance, but Mingus could sense the resentment in her body language. Being big brass at the *Argus and Standard* meant rotating weekend duty among a small group, and the top editors who came in to baby-sit the Monday editions liked things to run smoothly. Breaking news was a problem because the copy desk typically complained, but beyond that was the issue of news judgment.

“If we’ve got aliens invading Charleston, I’d say that’s 1A, wouldn’t you?” Mingus asked. Laura shook her head and peered over her glasses.

“I don’t think so, Mingus,” she said.

Justin from the copy desk sidled up to her, self-consciously arranging his spindly frame and stroking his goatee. “We’re not talking about remaking the front for this, are we?”

“No,” Laura said.

“I really think you guys ought to give me a few minutes to work this story before you decide anything,” Mingus pleaded.

“We’ve only got one edition tonight, Mingus,” Justin said. He exchanged glances with Laura, who shook her head.

“I’ve got multiple sightings around the Lowcountry,” Mingus said, getting mad now. “I’ve got two reporters on this story, plus at least one photo and Larry on the way. And you wouldn’t have to remake the front – just drop that stupid summit analysis and give me the five-column hole at the top.”

“I’d better talk to Terri,” Laura said, shifting her weight and shoving her ample backside away from his desk. “I don’t think she’s going to like this.”

Justin hung around after she left. “Freakin’ whack-job UFO stories,” he said wistfully. “Back at my first paper we’d have killed for a story like this.”

“Then back me up on this, why don’t you?” Mingus said. Justin held his hands up and backed away.

“Sorry, Mingus. At my first paper we ran front-

page stories on people who nursed orphaned squirrels back to health. Besides, I've already got my art set for 1A. Israeli tanks. Palestinians. You know."

The phone rang. It was Darrell, a reporter from the business desk, with a bar crowd in the background. "Mingus, I'm out here at Dunleavy's on Sullivan's Island and I swear to God I'm looking at a freakin' UFO." By the time the city editor had gotten his information and typed in some bystander quotes, Laura was back. He hung up and looked at her.

"Three B," she said. "Sorry."

"Did you tell Terri what I had?"

"You know how she is about credibility, Mike. We're 'Dixie's Oldest Daily.' Terri's not going to let us make fools of ourselves over something like this." His dumbfounded look unnerved her, but Laura only shrugged and walked away.

He was 10 minutes late for the 3B deadline when he finally filed the story, compiled from his notes and calls to Dingo and Wanda on their cell phones. Mingus gave himself the byline – the first he'd had in more than a year. The entire copy desk grumbled about the blown deadline, and Mingus knew he'd found his way into their nightly complaint e-mail, which would be waiting for his boss, Managing Editor Dick Ames, in the morning. He collected more information after filing, but Laura told him none of it was worth re-plating the press. She left around 10:30, mumbling goodnight with her mouth full of crackers.

Mingus left after midnight, quietly seething, and watched almost all of *Seven Samurai* on DVD before he finally fell asleep around 4 a.m.

The phone rang at 7:14.

"Jesus, Mingus, do you see this UFO stuff Channel 5 is running?" Ames the managing editor said between mouthfuls of cereal. "They've got tape of these nut-cases and everything. How did we miss this?"

"We didn't miss it," he said. "It's on 3B."

"Three B? Jesus. Did we get a photo?" Ames

asked.

"Yep. But there was nobody in the photo department to process it when Wanda got back and Justin said it was too late anyway."

"What a bunch of bull," Ames said. "Did you talk to this Moore guy? The former Air Force pilot?"

"He was a flight engineer," Mingus said.

The managing editor laughed. "I just love this stuff. Sorry I woke you, Mingus. I've got an early tee time. But listen, man, you should have gotten this on the local front. Three B isn't good enough."

"Don't talk to me," Mingus said. "That was Terri's call."

"Freakin' great," Ames grumbled. "Well, I gotta go. I'm playing the Ocean Course on Kiawah with the publisher, so I won't be in until after lunch. Make sure you get a good follow-up on this."

The call had jangled his nerves, and Mingus couldn't get back to sleep. Summer morning light painted the stillness of his empty apartment. He thought about calling his early rising Dad in Atlanta, soured on the idea, then considered watching the end of the movie from the night before. But he knew how it ended. Flags on a hillside.

Mingus showered, bought a 20-ounce coffee at the Speedway and headed up I-26 toward Goose Creek. There was still a little time to check things out before he went in and made up the morning budget, but the day already looked bad. Hot as hell, and Willie would be sick and Richard, his top assistant, would be off from working Saturday. Another day of flying solo.

Archie Moore was watering his lawn, taking particular care of the marigolds around the flag pole.

"That's the second one I seen," Moore told him, lighting an unfiltered cigarette. "Saw my first one in North Africa in W-W-two."

"Which way did it go?" Mingus asked as he focused his 80mm lens on the retired airman and snapped his photograph.

“Off toward Moncks Corner,” Moore said.
“Whoosh.”

Mingus drove that direction, the urban sprawl of Goose Creek giving way to piney woods and cotton fields. It was almost 9 a.m. when the bridge over the canal appeared ahead of him and he noticed a cluster of cars pulled over to the side. Mingus slowed down, but he was already alongside them before he noticed what they were looking at: A silver saucer, with what appeared to be a woman’s erect nipple on the top. His brakes squealed.

It hung as if suspended, perhaps two hundred yards south of the bridge and one hundred feet above the water. Mingus detected no sound other than the mumbling of the onlookers and the whizzing of the cars that swept by.

“Well, *I’m* not going in to work today,” said a woman in a Harley Davidson T-shirt. “This has just blown my mind.”

Ames had come in straight off the golf course, his polo shirt sweat-stained at the armpits and everywhere else the fabric touched his stocky torso. “Let me see the pictures,” he said. Mingus shoved them across the table and sat silently with Terri, Laura, Eddie the photo editor and David Jones the dayside cops reporter.

“Un-fucking believable,” Ames said. “And you took these, Mingus?”

The city editor nodded.

“Terri,” Ames said, “this is 1A stuff.”

The executive editor’s lips remained firmly pursed. She was almost retirement age, but through the magic of chemistry her hair remained the same famous strawberry color it had been during her salad days as a UPI White House correspondent during the Nixon administration. Surgery and botox had given her a disconcerting ageless quality, but there was a sharpened Southern Belle charm to Terri Ravenel, a whisper of mature sexuality, a knowing, well-connected glamour. When she was on she could fill a room, but when she felt beset everything around her slowed to a halt, like atoms

near absolute zero. And things felt very, very still at that moment.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking about not running this,” Ames said to her. Mingus felt his boss’s big-city belligerence rising. He was a Gannett cast-off, a refugee from USA Today trying to remake his career in po-dunk Charleston.

“I’m just saying we need some discussion on this,” Terri said, removing the designer bifocals from her angular nose. If Ames was the barbarian at the gate, Terri was the defender of Lowcountry propriety. “This is *The Argus and Standard*, Dick, not the *National Inquirer*. We have to be *very* careful with this.”

“Careful?” Ames asked sarcastically. “What do we have to be careful of here? Dozens of people have seen this thing. Our own people have seen this thing. Hell, our own city editor took the pictures. What is there to discuss?”

Terri eyed the managing editor coolly. “I have been at this paper for a long, long time, and I can promise you we’ve never run a UFO story on our front page. *Ever*.”

“That’s because we never *had* a UFO story like this one before,” Ames said. “Terri, you’ve got to loosen up on this one.”

“We’ve gotten no outside confirmation that this is a UFO,” she said evenly. “I’m not saying we can’t run this, Dick. I’m just saying we need to report this carefully. We need to talk to the authorities. We need documents. We need credible people who can speak on the record, or... well, I just don’t know. It’s incredible.”

Ames was rapidly descending into jerk mode.

“Well, fine, Terri, do it your way. Let’s just run another freaking Bobbie Jo story on the Republican gubernatorial candidate instead. Would that make you happy?”

A hush fell over the wood-paneled conference room as the publisher appeared in the door, his seersucker suit so crisp it almost crackled. “What’s all this about UFOs?” he asked, sliding his Bill Blass spectacles up his nose and giving his best

imitation of a brusque newsman.

“Emerson, come in,” said Terri. “You won’t believe these photos.”

Erica the dayside newsclerk leaned in the door behind him and motioned to Mingus. “Excuse me,” he said, and slipped out.

“There’s a guy downstairs who says he was abducted by aliens last night,” Erica said. Mingus thanked her and headed for the elevators, but as he opened the glass door to the reception area, Mingus spotted the man and his heart sank. Malik al-Muhammad – old and crazy, a regular fixture under the King Street overpass.

“Yeah, them aliens gave me a close encounter of the third kind last night, man,” al-Muhammad said.

“That’s great, Mr. Muhammad,” Mingus said. “But six months ago you were in here telling me that white speech therapists in the public schools were implanting radioactive devices in the brains of black children.”

“Damn right,” he said. “And these were *white* motherfucking aliens. That’s why they picked me, because I know what *time* it is, you know? That’s why they inserted something up my anus, man.”

Then Malik al-Muhammad turned around, dropped his trousers and bent over to display the aliens’ handiwork.

“See what I mean, man? Do you see what them motherfuckers did to this black man’s anus? That ain’t right, man!”

Mingus motioned to the female security guard and headed back through the glass doors.

“What was that all about?” Laura asked, intercepting him just outside the conference room.

“Just some asshole,” Mingus said. “What did I miss?”

“Now don’t get upset,” she began.

Mingus got upset. “You can’t kill this story.”

Laura rolled her eyes. She was a recent addition to the staff, the protégé of one of Terri’s editor friends in Tulsa, and Mingus was just the city editor she had inherited. “Let’s not turn this into some big ethical drama, Mike. We’re not ‘killing’

your story. We’re just not going to sensationalize it. It wouldn’t be responsible.”

“Responsible? How have I been irresponsible? And who said anything about sensationalizing it?”

He was clearly annoying her. “Listen. No one is criticizing you here.”

“What did you decide while I was out of the room?”

“We haven’t decided anything,” she said, exasperated. “We’ve just affirmed that the guiding principle of news judgment that needs to be established here is caution. If we make a big deal out of this and it’s debunked, which it probably will be, then we’re all going to look like fucking idiots.”

Mingus shouldered past her into the conference room. Emerson the publisher glowered alone at the far end of the conference table, all pretense of casual corporate machismo cast aside. “I don’t care about your arguments, Dick, and I don’t need to sit around a conference table debating esoteric ethical questions with a bunch of holier-than-thou J-school grads. All I know, and all I *need* to know, is that if you or anyone else puts something in this newspaper that embarrasses the board, it’s your ass. Because it’s not going to be *my* ass. So don’t...” He stopped and looked at Mingus. “What?”

Ames pushed away from the table, defeated and furious. “If you will excuse me, I’m going to go do some work. I’ll take my esoteric ethical questions with me.” He grabbed Mingus by the arm as he left.

“We’re hosed,” he said under his breath as they walked through the sports department back toward the metro desk.

“Have they spiked it?” Mingus asked.

“No. In fact, they want Cardona and LePre on it. But Terri made it crystal clear that they’re going to be on an extremely short leash.”

Cardona and LePre, Mingus thought. A fresh set of problems. His two former Journalist of the Year reporters, two think-piece jockeys with egos the size of Fort Sumter, and equally defensive. Two guys who couldn’t stand each other.

“You’re going to have to ride herd on this, Mike,

because I'm not playing this game" Ames said, stopping by the elevators and striking a pose like an agitated fireplug. "If Terri and Emerson and the rest of the blue-blood Mafia want this their way, fine, but I'll be damned if I'm going to get in the middle of it. So you deal with the motherfuckers. This is *your* story. Why don't you take some *goddamn ownership* of it?"

"What do you mean, 'take some ownership?'" Mingus asked. "Jesus, man, I fought for it all night. I went out there this morning. How much more *ownership* can I take?"

Ames glared at him in disgust, turned away, then thought the better of it and jumped in Mingus' face again. The top of his bald head gleamed bronze from his perpetual golfer's tan.

"Here's what I know, Mike. I know that if I were the reporter on this, I'd shake this story until the fleas fell out of it. I know that if I were the city editor on this, I'd stomp around and threaten and push and scream and bust balls. I'd take *ownership*, man. I'd make things *happen*. And so far all you've done is whine and complain about how, '*Ooo, Terri trumped my story,*' and '*Ooo, Justin said it was too late to get the photo in.*' That's not *ownership*, man. That's just 'Well, that's the way we've always done things around here' crap. Why don't you stop making excuses and get out there and do some real journalism this time?"

"Why don't you help me?" Mingus said.

"*Help* you?" Ames asked sarcastically, the top of his head turning redder by the second. "*Screw* you! I've done nothing *but* help you. Do you think it's going to *help* you if I get canned now? Do you think anybody else is going to care about making this place better if I'm gone? And if those assholes are dumb enough to think that I'm going to just step into their tiger trap, well, they don't know me very well. You're on your own, city editor."

Ames waved him off and stalked away.

"Since when did my title change from 'city editor' to 'superman?'" Mingus called after him.

"They both mean the same thing," Ames said

over his shoulder. "They always have."

Word of Mingus' encounter at the security desk had reached the newsroom by the time he got back to his cubicle. "Hey boss," Cardona said. "How's your anus this morning?" A couple of reporters at their work stations laughed with him.

"You're on the story," Mingus said. "You and LePre."

"Me? I'm working on that homeland security story for Ames," Cardona protested.

"Yeah, and LePre is working on Terri's homage to the United Way," Mingus answered. "Screw it. You're both working the UFO story now."

David the dayside cop reporter appeared behind him and sighed heavily. "Here are my notes," he said, handing a reporter's notebook to Cardona. "Knock yourself out."

"You're not bailing on this one," Mingus said to him.

"I'll help out if you need me," the cop reporter said. "But I've got a stabbing in North Charleston and a murder follow on the domestic from Saturday night. I'm booked."

"Mike," Terri called to him as she glided through the newsroom on her Prada heels, "Do you have a minute? In my office?"

"Call LePre on his cell," Mingus said to Cardona. "Get him in here."

Emerson was waiting in Terri's office when Mingus entered. "What's up, guys?" the city editor asked. Terri smiled at him. "Come in and sit down," she said. "And close the door." He shut it and took a seat on the couch.

"Mike," she began, setting her glasses on her polished oak desk. "Tell us what you saw."

"I saw a flying saucer," he said.

Emerson and Terri exchanged a quick glance. "Yes," she continued, "but how do you *know* that's what you saw? Have you ever seen one before?"

"Of course not."

Terri's hands flew up in a "there you go" gesture and her smile broadened. "See, Mike, that's the problem. I don't doubt that you saw something. But

it's a big leap to conclude that what you saw was a UFO."

"It was an object," Mingus said. "It was flying. And it was unidentified. That, by definition, makes it a UFO."

"Let's not play semantics," Emerson said.

"I know what you're getting at," Terri interjected, her eyes engaging Mingus benignly. "But you know as well as I do that when you say the word 'UFO' people think aliens. Little green men from outer space."

"Trailer trash. Abductions. Anal probes," Emerson said.

"Now, when you took those pictures, which direction were you facing?" Terri asked.

"East," Mingus said.

"Right into the sun," Terri said.

"Yes."

"Well, see, there's another thing. That photo could be a trick of light. Sunlight bouncing off your lens."

"Or you could have Photoshopped it," Emerson said.

"I didn't alter anything," Mingus said, struggling to control his anger.

"No one here thinks you did, Mike," Terri said. "But a skeptical reader might. And we have to think about our credibility – not only internally, but externally. What does it matter if we're right and people perceive that we've misled them? Our credibility with our readers would be shot. And not just on this story – on all of them."

"Terri," Mingus said, "what will it take to make you feel comfortable with this?"

"Just good reporting, Mike, that's all." The tone of her voice was engineered to reassure him. "Facts. Statements. Credible, named sources. We need a story that represents both sides."

"I don't have a cell phone number to the saucer, you know."

"Oh, that's not what I mean," she said, her voice betraying a hint of the annoyance that lurked beneath her façade. "We need people who

are skeptical and reliable in this story. Scientists. Government officials. If they think this thing is worthy of study, then I have absolutely no problem running this story at the top of 1A."

"And if they don't?" Mingus asked.

Terri shrugged and held her shoulders there, palms turned upwards, and looked at Emerson, then back at Mingus. "Well..." she said, "that's the whole point, isn't it? I'm not a UFO expert. Are you?"

"What if I got a UFO expert on the phone?" Mingus asked. "Someone from outside the government. Would that count?"

Terri made a face as if she had just taken a whiff of rotten meat and looked at Emerson, who rolled his eyes in weary disgust. The publisher had earned his management stripes in the grocery business and still found journalists both childish and annoying. "I don't think those people are very trustworthy. Do you, Mike?" she asked.

Mingus gave up. "Well, it looks like I've got a busy day ahead. Let me get on it," he said, rising to leave.

"Oh, and Mike," Terri said, handing him a yellow post-it note. "I got a message this morning from the owner of an ice cream shop who says it's not his ice cream shop that had the kiddie porn in it, and people are confusing his with the one in our story. He wants a call."

Back at his desk, Mingus's voice mail had recorded 15 calls. Two subscribers who hadn't gotten their papers, one American Legion member angry about a California court decision on flag burning, Scranton calling in sick and 11 people with something to say about the UFOs. The most recent message, left just before he got back to his desk, came from the Public Affairs Office at the Charleston Air Force Base.

"I just wanted to alert you to the press release I sent over earlier," said Lt. Emily French, the base PAO. "It's on the alleged UFO incidents that TV reported last night. I don't think you had that this morning."

"We did," Mingus said. "On 3B."

"Oh," she said, disappointment creeping into her voice. "Did you get the press release?"

"Haven't seen it," he said.

"I'll send it e-mail," she said.

"What does it say?" Mingus asked.

"That the Air Force has investigated thousands of alleged UFO sightings and has never found any credible evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. As for the matter of what aerial operations we had in the area during the past 24 hours, we're not going to have any comment on that. National security."

"Suggesting, of course, that whatever people saw was one of yours," Mingus said.

"Suggesting nothing," she said dryly.

Cardona was waiting for him when he got off the phone. "I can't reach LePre, but I called this guy I know and he gave me the number to an Air Force source at the Pentagon. He said they'd received no credible radar contacts and have not opened an active file on this."

Radar? Mingus mentally kicked himself and scanned rapidly through his notes from the night before. A callback from the air traffic control tower after the press had started: "*unid rdr cntcts gc 2000 & atl vic si & iop 2100.*" Unidentified radar contacts near Goose Creek at 8 p.m. and near Sullivan's Island and the Isle of Palms at 9 p.m. No credible radar contacts? He called French.

"No comment," she said. "Off the record, this is a milk run, Mingus. There's no there there."

"But a civilian air traffic controller told me after deadline that he had unexplained radar contacts. Didn't your guys pick them up, too?"

"You're wasting your time here."

Mingus called the FAA tower and got the shift supervisor. "Last night I talked to a controller named Prefontaine," Mingus said. "Can you talk to me about the unidentified radar contacts your tower recorded last night?"

"Hold on just a second," the shift supervisor said, treating Mingus to a little Muzac. The phone picked up again.

"FAA public affairs Atlanta," the voice on the other end said. Mingus hung up.

The phone rang almost instantly.

"City desk, Mingus."

"You people are just the worst," a man said over the line. "You've ruined my business with your crappy reporting, and now I can't even get a call back from you jerks."

"Who is this?" Mingus asked.

"This is Perry Tuttle, the owner of Beach View Ice Cream, and I'm one of your advertisers, OK? And I'm going to have your ass if you don't get this right, you got that? You wrote a story that said that my competition got arrested for kiddie porn, and now people are looking at me like I'm the pervert! You're killing my business!"

"How am I killing your business?"

"You said the guy owned Beach Palm Ice Cream, not Palm Beach Ice Cream, and now everybody thinks you meant Beach View Ice Cream. I've got lawyers, you know. I'm..."

The newsclerk caught his attention. "You've got a call from the Air Force." He nodded.

"Listen, Mr. Tuttle, I've got another call..."

"No! You've got *this* call! Screw your other call!"

"If you'll hang on for just a minute..."

"No! You tell them you'll call them back! I've been ..."

Mingus hung up and waited for Erica.

"This is Lt. French," the PAO said, her voice brighter and friendlier now. "Listen, Mike, we've gotten enough calls that we're going to take a look at this, and I hear you've got photos."

"Sure," he said. There was a pause and Mingus could hear her typing.

"Terrific. Listen, we're going to send somebody down to the paper to take a look, OK? You don't mind sharing with us, do you? In the interests of science? And maybe national security?"

"Come on down," Mingus said. "But listen, this is a favor. I need you to come off of some information."

The phone rang again only seconds later. Mingus considered avoiding it, weighing the likelihood that French had forgotten something or that the crazed ice cream parlor owner was calling back, then picked up the receiver.

“Hi, this is Tim Johnson from S.C. MUFON, the Mutual UFO Network in Lancaster. Is this Mike Mingus?”

“Speaking.”

“Listen, we’ve been getting calls all night and morning about an event down your way that started yesterday. I was wondering if you guys were going to cover it.”

“We have covered it. It’s in this morning’s paper.”

“That’s odd,” the caller said. “It’s not on your website. Listen, I wouldn’t waste your time, sir. I think we can safely say that this is the most significant UFO event in state history.”

“It’s certainly the most significant UFO sighting in *my* history,” Mingus said. “I took pictures of the thing this morning up in Berkeley County.”

The line fell silent.

“Hello?” Mingus asked.

“You took pictures yourself?” Johnson asked.

“Do you have them on you?”

“They’re in the computer system,” Mingus replied. “The Air Force is sending someone down to look at them.”

Johnson was clearly alarmed. “I don’t want to frighten you, sir, but if you want to protect those pictures, you need to e-mail them to me right now. There’s no telling what will happen once the Air Force gets them.”

“Sure thing,” Mingus said, calling them up on the newsroom’s digital archive. “I give you a look, you give me an interview.”

“OK, OK,” Johnson said, reeling off his e-mail address. “But send them quick.” Mingus hit the send button and waited as the jpegs uploaded. “You should have them now.”

Johnson hung up to get the photos as an Air Force officer in a blue uniform entered the

newsroom, escorted by the paper’s security guard and two airmen in BDUs. The guard pointed to Mingus, and the military men marched over.

“Mike Mingus?” the blond officer asked, extending his hand. “Captain Derrick Thompson. I understand you took some pictures this morning?”

“Yes,” he said. “Come on. I’ll walk you back to photo.” Eddie the photo chief met them halfway. “I’ve got to get back on the desk,” Mingus said.

“Maybe we can talk after you’re done?”

“Sure,” Thompson said.

The afternoon budget meeting started at 4 p.m., and Mingus came prepared. He waited at his usual spot on the table as the other editors filed in with their lists of stories. His other offerings were routine: More on the property tax cap, more analysis of the gubernatorial race, a correction on the kiddie porn story. The only item that mattered was his UFO piece.

Ames arrived late, with Terri trailing behind. She nodded to him, and he began. “The top story is our UFO story,” Mingus said. “It’s unlike any...”

“Mike,” Terri said, interrupting him and drawing out his name casually. “What do we *really* have on that?”

“Multiple sightings of unidentified flying objects all around the area...” Mingus started.

“Around certain *parts* of the area,” Terri corrected him.

“OK,” said Mingus. “We’ve got a UFO expert that says our photos are an exact match for videotape shot outside Stockholm last month...”

“A *government* UFO expert?”

“No, Terri, a civilian.” The executive editor shook her head and sought out the eyes of other editors for support. “But the government is investigating,” Mingus said. “That’s reportable.”

“Is it? *Really*?” Terri asked. “What constitutes a government investigation? Looking at pictures?”

“That’s an investigation,” Mingus said.

“Oh no it isn’t, Mike, and you know better,” Terri hissed. “Do you have an Air Force

official confirming that they have launched an investigation?”

“No,” Mingus said.

“Then you don’t have a government investigation,” Terri concluded, leaning back in her chair and shaking her head. “People, I just don’t know...”

Mingus looked at Ames, but the managing editor was doodling languidly on the wire budget.

“We’re not going to run this, are we?” Mingus asked.

“Of course we’re going to run this,” Laura snapped. “There’s no conspiracy here. We’re just going to treat this appropriately. There was another UFO sighting this morning. The first sighting was a glorified brief on 3B. That’s where the second sighting belongs. As a brief on 3B. Don’t you think so, Terri?”

“Oh, I concur,” Terri said. “I just really think it would be irresponsible to consider this for 1A. Does anyone disagree?”

The room was silent.

“It’s the truth,” Mingus said.

“And it will be the truth on 3B,” Ames said without looking up. “Why don’t you just drop this, Mike?”

“Because earlier today you told me to take ownership of this story,” Mingus said, his eyes boring holes in the side of the managing editor’s face. “This is the truth. Why are we hiding it on 3B? I thought we were supposed to be *about* printing the truth.”

“You know, you’re about this close, Mike Mingus,” Ames said, turning his head to face him and gesturing with his thumb and forefinger. “Don’t question our integrity just because you didn’t get the story. And don’t lecture us about ‘The Truth.’ Newspapers don’t print ‘The Truth.’ We print *provable* truth. *Acceptable* truth. Truth that meets certain criteria. You can question the validity of those orthodoxies all you like, but they’ve worked pretty goddamned well for a long fucking time. And neither myself, nor Laura, nor Terri is going

to risk the reputation of this paper on your high-minded tirades. Do I need to spell this out any more explicitly, Mingus?”

“No,” Mingus said. The other editors in the room, even Terri, looked down at the table. His rebuke was permanent now, as much a part of the history of the conference room as the paintings of former editors that hung on the walls.

“They’re fakes,” said Emerson, appearing at the door again.

“What?” Terri asked.

“Our UFO photos,” the publisher said. “Captain Thompson has reviewed them and says they’ve all been altered.” All eyes turned toward Mingus.

“I didn’t fake those photos,” he said. “The Air Force is lying.”

“Oh really?” Emerson asked, holding up a screen capture from the MUFON website. Mingus’ photo of the UFO was prominently displayed. “Care to explain this?”

“I e-mailed the guy my photos in exchange for some information,” Mingus said.

“Let me read this aloud,” Emerson said, pushing his glasses up his nose and holding the sheet out in front of him. “Even though these images were taken by an *Argus and Standard* photographer, the newspaper has hidden them from the public. They were acquired by MUFON from an inside source. Obviously, the cover-up is underway, but truth can’t be contained.”

“The cover-up is underway.’ That’s just great,” Emerson said, lowering the page and looking around the room.

“They’re *my* photos,” Mingus said. But the earth was collapsing around his chair.

“Oh no.” Terri said coldly. “They belong to the newspaper. I’m sure there’s no question our lawyer will agree.”

“I’m sure there’s no question that Mr. Mingus is fired,” Emerson said, turning to leave. “I want him out of here in 15 minutes. And the clock on that starts right now.”

Mingus watched in dumb amazement as the

security guards dumped 15 years of his life into cardboard boxes and piled them onto a dolly. A few people waved as he walked out of the newsroom for the last time.

He spent the rest of the afternoon at the Battery by the harbor, watching the pretty silver saucers

come and go above the Holy City. Pretty, pretty little saucers. Mingus wondered why he had never noticed them before, and whether the aliens would need a professional spokesman. He was definitely going to put in for the job.

Definitely.

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